# A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO EVIL

## BOOK 5

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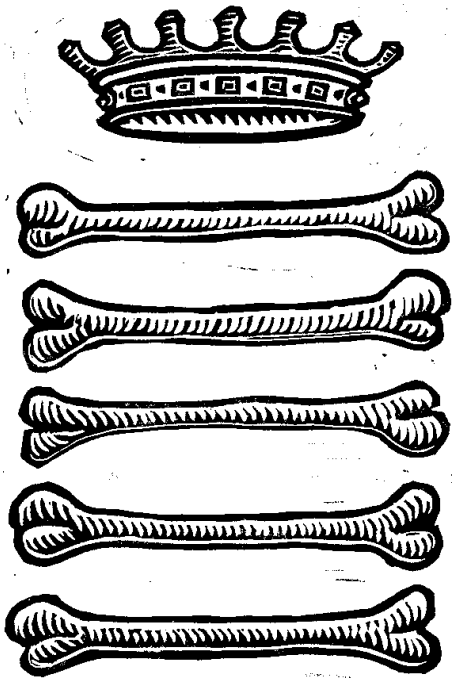

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2021
NO PUBLISHER

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# Bonus Chapter: Prologue

"A horse and fall was all it took
For every last to take the hook
Now the kitchen's full of cooks,
And the pot it is boiling
Crown of this, crown of that
They all chase after the hat
Princess said she has a right
Princess said it'd be a fight
So princesses are all aflight,
And the pot it is boiling
Crown of this, crown of that
They all chase after the hat
The wheel spins us all around
Up and north, south and down
Ebb or flow, we'll still drown,
And the pot it is boiling
Crown of this, crown of that
All of this for a hat,
While the pot it is boiling."

"Too Many Cooks", a Proceran folk song written and grown popular during the civil war

The wolves were at the gate.

Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer, Prince of Rhenia and Princess of Salia, Warden of the same West that was currently burning to the ground, did not wonder when it had all gone wrong. She was not an unintelligent woman, and so believed she'd already identified the point of failure with accuracy: the moment where she'd assumed Keter would remain quiescent. She hadn't, though, not truly. Cordelia had believed there might be an increase in raids coming from the Kingdom of the Dead, perhaps a tentative incursion into the Alamans lakelands. That was the very reason she'd forced through the Highest Assembly the very unpopular taxes that had funded the restoration of all major fortresses north of Brabant, that she'd taken only a meager portion of the armies of the lakeside Alamans principalities and her Lycaonese kinsmen. There would be burning, she'd thought, there would be bleeding. But the bor-

ders would hold until the grim business of pacifying the east was done and full attention could be turned to the evil that lay behind the walls of Keter. In a word, she had assumed the Hidden Horror was a fool.

There was a young man at her Salian court by the name of Gabriel, a commoner who'd had the benefit of an education in letters by the House of Light. He had, several years ago, penned an interesting treatise called *Fulcrums of History*. A repudiation of sorts to the looming presence of *On Rule* over Proceran politics at the highest rung. It argued, rather eloquently, that disaster came to empires by an accumulation of smaller factors that drained the life out of them instead of through failures of will or cleverness, as the author of *On Rule* had argued. It had been, Cordelia felt, an attempt to explain the resounding brutality of the civil war by a scholar who had been born in its aftermath. It had concluded by arguing that the solution to such degradation was 'an injection of fresh vitality', in this case personified by Cordelia herself leading the traditionally aloof Lycaonese south to force an end to the wars. The conclusion was not as well written as the rest, and largely flattery directed at her in hope of an appointment. He had obtained it, though the flattery had not been the reason. Anyone displaying the sharp insight of the earlier chapters could and should be used by her administration.

She thought of that treatise, sometimes. To apply the logic behind it to her current situation, for there had been a clear accumulation of factors over the last few years. Strength and coin spent influencing foreign wars in Callow and the League. Erosion of her authority over the Tenth Crusade, by both Proceran factionalism and the prominent role of the Chosen, followed by the bruising strategic defeats of the Battle of the Camps and the assault on Red Flower Vales. Once the cracks were there, they had only broadened. Tensions within the Great Alliance grew. The Levantines had been less than eager to defend the heartlands of the Principate, even against Wasteland legions. A trail of burnt cities and granaries from Bayeux to Iserre had been the consequence of that, further weakening her standing within the very alliance she had assembled. Further disaster struck at Thalassina, with the Warlock obliterating the better part of the Ashuran war fleets along with the city he'd come to defend. Worse, the Chosen had now decided to buck worldy authority entirely: the Saint of Swords had openly admitted Procer was to be the pyre birthing her *better world*, and now the Grey Pilgrim had refused her order to immediately slay the Black Knight instead of capturing him.

The heroes could no longer be relied on. They would, from now, oscillate between being useful but uncontrolled battlefield assets and major strategic liabilities. The rulers of Dominion of Levant, her nominal allies and comrades-in-arms, were now attempting to twist her arms for better concessions after a war they were currently *losing*. Magon Hadast and the Thalassocracy of Ashur, her sole remaining solid ally, had been inflicted two vicious setbacks in a row. The disaster at Thalassina could have been recovered from, but the League of Free Cities had smelled the blood in the air and finally sallied out. The League's

fleet – essentially the Nicaean fleet with what few ships the other seaside cities could spare – had torched the last war ships of Ashur and sacked the city behind them. The Thalassocracy had effectively been evicted from the sea, and in a matter of months the blockade around its island would start causing major food shortages. There was a very real possibility that Ashur would have to capitulate within the year, else it would simply wither on the vine. Worse, the Hierarch had sent out armies as well, the full muster of the League. Still, had even a losing battle been given by her southern army down in Tenerife, the situation would have been salvageable.

Instead her entire net of spies in the League had somehow missed that the entire host had gone into the Waning Woods, only managing to warn her the army had disappeared off the surface of Creation a week before it reappeared on the outskirts of the Principality of Iserre. Cordelia did not consider herself to be faint of heart, yet she almost shivered at the notion of taking an army through that murderous patch of trees. How much of their army had they lost, passing through? A tenth, a quarter? Half? There was not a single creature of flower in the Waning Woods that was not violently hostile to the existence of humans on Creation. Regardless of the... practicalities involved there, however, the southern Principate had now turned into a strategic nightmare. The First Prince was no great general but even she could see as much. The twenty-thousand strong army she'd stationed in Tenerife to avoid this very outcome was now marching north in all haste, but the map splayed in front of Cordelia betrayed a stark situation. Were the Alliance forces not staggered, not dispersed, they would have held the advantage. Instead it was bloody chaos.

The surviving Legions of Terror, bereft of the Carrion Lord but still under the command of the infamous Marshal Grem One-Eye, had fled into northern Iserre. Their supply situation, her generals assured her, would soon turn dangerous: they were marching through lands they'd already thoroughly pillaged on their way south. They were still around eighteen thousand hardened veterans, including a dragon, led by one of the finest military officers of the age. Behind them, split in two staggered armies, eighty thousand Levantines were in hot pursuit. If reunited, Cordelia believed they could crush the Praesi. But they were not, with a few weeks of distance between them and no way to join up without allowing the Legions to slip the noose. Behind the armies of the Dominion, the host of the League followed. Reports on their numbers fluctuated with every message: fifty thousand, forty, more than a hundred. A brave Iserran outrider had come close enough to find out some of the 'soldiers' were actually scarecrows held up by gargoyles, which had the reek of the Tyrant's scheming. Far behind all these, her southern army of twenty thousand was exhausting its soldiers to collapse trying to arrive in time. The situation in the region was not impossible to salvage, but the dangers were obvious.

Cordelia was unwilling to gamble the fate of the Principate on such odds, and so she had taken action: she'd ordered general conscription in Salia. The bottom of the barrel was being scraped raw, but she'd put together twenty thou-

sand levies. Had she further enforced the decree, or even broadened it to neighbouring principalities, she could have easily tripled that amount. There was, unfortunately, no point in doing so. There were no armaments for the conscripts to use, and dwarven representatives had flatly refused any further sale without even bothering to explain why. Giving reasons to humans was, presumably, beneath their dignity. This entire debacle had the ugly reek of Catherine Foundling's meddling about it. If there was one saving grace to this entire debacle, it was that the Highest Assembly had finally understood how close to the edge the Principate had come: without even need for her prompting, the personal armies of every single royal not already at war had been sent to reinforce her levies. It would still be a month before the last arrived, but her twenty thousand would swell to forty and gain a bevy of princes and princesses along with badly needed professional officers. Strategic considerations now dictated that the moment this army was readied it was so be sent by ship down to the coast of Iserre, where it could reinforce the Levantines against the Praesi and link up with the others field armies before giving battle to the invading League of Free Cities. Cordelia had that very command drafted on parchment and staring back at her from the surface of her bureau, awaiting only her signature. The fair-haired woman watched her inkwell for a long, silent moment. She did not reach for the quill, instead rising to her feet.

The wolves were at the gate, but not only in war-torn Iserre. *Woe, Cordelia. Woe to the north and to the south.* Agnes' words were branded into her mind, the constant reminder that if she made even a single mistake the Principate would end. The First Prince of Procer tread softly until she stood by the tall glass panes of her personal solar, a magnificent view of Salia spread out below her. Frost touched the glass, and the city as well. First snow had already come, though it had melted quickly enough under the sun. The next fall would remain a little longer, and so it would continue until a thorough blanket of pale was draped over the capital. Fingers larger than was considered fashionable in a courtier, much less royalty, pressed against the cold glass. A taste of the north, a taste of home. Rhenia would be as much ice as stone, by now, fresh sets of fortifications being made out of a mixture of frost and gravel. The winds at night would be so loud they'd drown out even the howling of the packs roving the mountains. Her lips tightened, her throat closed up. Pressed against her heart, beneath the Rhenian blue dress she wore, was the last letter her kinsman Friedrich Papenheim would ever write her. She'd had to excuse herself, when she first read it. It would not do to weep in front of even her most trusted.

"I should not," she whispered against the window, her breath blooming in fog.

She did it anyway, once more. Trembling fingers claimed the parchment and she looked upon Friedrich's rough scrawl of a calligraphy. He'd never thought much of letters, not that many of her people did, and the words were as rough as the man had been.

*The dead are coming.*

*I sent the young south. We will hold as long we can.*
*I am sorry. I cannot do more.*
*Dawn is in your hands, Cordelia.*
*We will meet again come the last summer.*

Her eyes burned with tears she did not allow herself to shed. Hannoven had fallen before she ever received the letter, the man who wrote it dead and ash. She'd loved Friedrich, she thought in the same way she still loved her uncle. Trust and comfort and bonds of blood sacred to them both. He could have been the heir to Hannoven, had Uncle Klaus not named her that, and a lesser man would have resented her for it. She still remembered when she'd been fourteen, the announcement fresh, and she'd met him for the first time since. He'd smiled, rough hands pressing a bracelet into her palm. Not a single dark glance, not a single harsh word. Only a slip of leather with ratling teeth affixed, all carved with old Lycaonese blessings. *For luck*, he'd smiled. In the years since then, Cordelia had bought and been gifted some of the finest jewelry in Procer. On all of Calernia, truly speaking. And still, under the dress at her coronation as First Prince of Procer, ratling teeth had dug into her wrist. Gold, gold could be found everywhere in the world. Freely given affection could not. The First Prince of Procer wiped her eyes, grateful she'd already done away with her cosmetics for the day. The letter was slid back against her heart, weighing more than parchment ever should.

Across the rest of Lycaonese lands, cities and towns and villages would empty. The old and the young would flee into the mountains, and the rest of her people would prepare for war. Ploughshares beat into swords, cutlery melted into spears. Tables would be hacked up for wooden shields and lovingly tended-to mail come down from mantles. The Enemy was coming and her people would march to meet it at the passes, as they had unflinchingly since the days the word *Lycaonese* first meant something. Cordelia fingers curled angrily against the glass. Impotently. They could not stand alone. They were brave and they were strong and they were more than anyone had the right to ask of them, but they could not stand alone against the endless hordes of the Dead King. They needed reinforcements, they needed the south to raise its banners and come stand with them. And it was her duty to see to that, wasn't it? There had never been a First Prince of Lycaonese birth before her, and there might never be again. The Dead King had come to wage full war on the Principate of Procer for the first time since its founding, and only now did while a Hasenbach sat the throne. She owed it to her blood, to her home, to her honour to abandon all this southern madness and march north to stand against the horror that would devour all the world.

"And I am going to fail you," she whispered brokenly.

Because victory south meant taking all that remained of the Grand Alliance to fight the Dead King. Because the Chosen had held Cleves until Princess Malanza's army arrived to reinforce them and the principality still stood. Because Hainaut's coast was swarming with the dead, but she had ordered her

uncle to take it back instead of returning to fight for his own home. *And mine*. She'd met the eyes of man who'd been father to her since she was a girl, and told him that if he disobeyed her orders and marched his soldiers home instead she would have to order him seized for treason. There would be no coming back from that, she knew. She'd seen the lay of it in his face. But in the end, all four principalities of her people could be taken by the Enemy without much greater cost than soldiers and mines. If the Kingdom of the Dead broke into the heartlands of Procer, its already ravaged farmlands, the entire realm would starve through winter. Hunger would kill a hundredfold the work of soldiers. *Because even alone, you will stand long enough to save the rest of Procer and the Alamans will not.* She was abandoning everything she had ever loved for the sake of people who still called her a savage behind her back. Who mere months ago had been plotting to destroy her.

"Because we must," Cordelia bitterly said.

Using the words of the line whose duty she was failing to justify that very failure. She was damned, just as the hard-eyed warlord in Callow had warned she would be. *Let me be damned, then*, she thought. The wolves were at the gate, gathering in ravening packs. Summer friends and bitter foes, a procession of the viperous and the apathetic. Heroes who would bring salvation with a torch, villains cloaked in murder and madness. Let them all come, baying for the end of Procer. If she had to war against all the world to save her people, she would. The Warden of the West walked to her desk, dipped the quill and signed the fucking order. Before it even dried she had another scroll unfolded, her feathered quill dancing across. *Dredge it out*, she wrote. *Prepare it. Fire against fire.* The Augur had found a path through, narrow as it was, and it began with a corpse that was not a corpse beneath the waters of the lake at the heart of Procer. The Ashurans, it was said, had called on a masked and hallowed presence at the Battle of Thalassina. Cordelia Hasenbach would call on a lot worse if she had to.

Dawn was in her hands, and she would not let it fail.

—

The Empire was dying a slow, messy death.

Alchemical concoctions had allowed Malicia to resist the call of sleep beyond what even her Name would allow, though she knew there would eventually be a price to pay for that. It was still necessary, for rare was the hour that must not be spent dragging her wayward realm back from the suicide it was so utterly intent on committing. It was grim, thankless work, moreso now than ever before: two blows had come in quick succession, and as a result her authority was thinning. Thalassina had, to her still raw grief, been the first. The woman named Alaya had wept over the loss of her old friend, when she'd heard the news. Wekesa had been dear to her in a way that very few people had ever matched or surpassed – only one, if she was to be honest with herself – and to lose him over what should have been such a simple matter... But while the Dread Empress of Praes could afford most luxuries known to Creation, time to

mourn was not one of them. Not when Warlock's last blaze of vengeful glory had wiped out a city of nearly one hundred and fifty thousand people, along with her realm's largest and most prosperous sea port.

There were survivors, a meager thirty thousand or so. Whatever Wekesa had used affected them, for within a day of fleeing the city ruins they'd begun to wildly mutate. Eyes and cysts growing over skin, teeth turning to stone, even a case of hair turning into straw. Malicia ordered a quarantine for the refugees, uncertain if the affliction would spread, but it turned out pointless. Every last one of them was dead within a week, seemingly cooked from the inside by the fading remnants of Wekesa's sorcery left inside them.

As far as her agents had been able to determine, there had been only a single survivor to that catastrophe: the Hierophant. Young Masego had been observed to walk out of the wreckage in ash-covered robes, and her attempts to contact the boy had not gone well. The first messengers she'd sent on foot, and once they came within a hundred yards of him their heads had simply *caved in*. She'd ordered scrying rituals, after that. Of the ten mages she'd used, only one had survived the backlash. Healers managed to stop the screaming before the vocal chords gave, though there would be no salvaging the eyes that had rotten and fallen out from their sockets. That survivor had babbled about a 'sea of death', not coherent enough for a more comprehensive report, and bitten through her tongue before the night was out. Necromancy had revealed the dead woman's soul to be even more damaged than the corpse, which worried Malicia a great deal. Even Warlock at his peak had resorted to rituals and specialized tools to tinker with souls. His son evidently need not, and was shambling his way back to Callow through unknown means: he would frequently disappear for a few days at a time before her agents caught sight of him again, moving too quickly for it to be purely on foot.

There was going to be a reckoning in that, and the best she could hope for was that it would be Ashur that'd bear the cost of it.

Thalassina alone would have been a crisis. High Lord Idriss had been one of her closest political allies for decades, the wealth of his holdings and his remarkable breadth of indebted of great use in keeping the influence of Tasia Sahelian and the Truebloods at bay. Malicia had never counted the man a friend, but she had respected him and made good use of his ambitions. In the wake of the dissolution of the Truebloods and the marginalization of Wolof, whose latest High Lord she had bound to her too deeply for anything but complete subservience, she'd been preparing to set him up as the natural rival to the Moderates led by High Lady Abreha of Aksum. Competition over court appointments would have neatly neutered both of them and kept them busy while Malicia set to laying the groundwork for what the Empire was to become. Instead Idriss was gone, along with most of Thalassina, and Abreha Mirembe was now the second most powerful individual in Praes. The sack of Nok and the destruction of the only other seaport of the Wasteland had dealt crippling blows to Malicia's prestige, which had already been steadily eroding under the

constant Ashuran coastal raids.

From Wekesa's death, she had inherited the stuff or rebellion: the Thalassocracy was no longer raiding, which allowed household troops and legions to withdraw, and doubts were now being raised as to her ability to successfully defend Praes. If not for her treaty with the Dead King, there would have been a coup attempt by now. As it was, overwhelming pressure was mounting at court for High Lady Abreha to be named her Chancellor. If she did not swiftly act to suppress dissent, the situation would grow out of control. Her most direct tool in this should have been the Legions of Terror, of course, but as things stood Malicia knew they could not be used. Sitting calmly in her seat at the table where the Dark Council was usually held, the Dread Empress of Praes watched the kneeling Soninke mage before her and idly tapped a finger against the wooden table's surface. Ime stood at her side, her spymistress a shadow silent and still.

"It is confirmed, Your Most Dreadful Majesty," the young man said. "Foramen has fallen."

"Of that much I was aware," Malicia sharply replied. "*Elaborate*."

"As of two days ago, a goblin army of imprecise size – at least ten thousand, less than fifty – attacked the city after sending a vanguard of infiltrators over what we now believe to be at least a month," the imperial mage hastily said. "They attacked under cover of night, after having slain the watchmen on duty and opening the gates. The city was fully occupied by morning, after which the goblins seized control of the city wards and cut off our ability to scry."

Not a single bit of news that Ime had not already brought her as of the morning the city was occupied. She truly had been too lax on the contingent of messenger mages directly sworn to the Tower, she thought. While their primary duty was to serve as couriers for orders, they'd also been granted funds to acquire and pass on local information from wherever they were posted. A way to keep a finger on the pulse of the Empire without ever leaving Ater. Yet if the best they could offer her was what half of Praes knew two days after Malicia learned of it, perhaps their funding needed to be reassessed.

"Do you have anything else to report?" the Empress mildly added.

The young mage hesitated.

"Rumours have begun to spread in Okoro and Kahtan that these foreign attacks are being used as a veiled knife by Your Most Dreadful Majesty to eliminate the High Lords entirely," he finally said. "Our branch officers in these cities believe the whispers are too widespread to be of natural provenance."

Malicia's eyes narrowed the slightest bit. That was, in fact, fresh news. Perhaps mere discipline would suffice, then.

"You are dismissed," she said.

The Imperial mage rose only to bow, and retreated from the room backwards with his eyes fixed on the floor. The Sentinels quietly closed the door behind him, and the Empress leaned back against her seat.

"Abreha prepares for a serious challenge, it seems," Malicia said after a moment.

Ime finally stirred to movement, sliding into the seat at her left.

"It was inevitable the moment Thalassina happened," the spymistress said. "Foramen just handed her the opportunity on a silver platter."

They both knew why the rumours being spread were much more dangerous than they seemed at first glance. Ime's agents had obtained greater detail of what had taken place in Foramen after it fell. High Lady Amina Banu had been skinned alive along with every other member of her line in the city before being drawn and quartered before the eyes of the entire city. Revenge for Dread Emperor Nihilis fashioning a leather cloak out from the hide of the matrons that refused to surrender when he crushed the Fourth Goblin Rebellion, or so they claimed. As the leaders of every single goblin rebellion in the last six hundred years had committed a variation of the same empty atrocity, Malicia could note that there had been a great deal more revenge taken than injury done. Unfortunately, the Banu of Foramen and the Kebdana of Thalassina had both been effectively ended as a bloodline. Oh, some distant relatives could be rustled up – the Banu in particular had been a tribe before a line, and were famously more a family thicket than tree – but that thorough an extermination would end them as political entities for generations. More than that, for the Kebdana. Foramen could be taken back, but it was dubious that Thalassina could ever be rebuilt given the toxicity of the former city's emplacement.

Two High Lord lines centuries old destroyed in the span of a year. High Lady Abreha would find many willing ears, when she cast Malicia in the role of one trying to exterminate the highest rung of Wasteland aristocracy.

"She needs to die," the Empress said. "And quickly."

"The Eyes are already exploring possible avenues," Ime replied without missing a beat. "Though she was a viciously paranoid old bat *before* taking a swing at the Tower, so the odds are not in our favour."

Malicia closed her eyes, mind unfolding. Angles, angles, there were always angles. The knife that took the killing blow need not be hers.

"Her agents at court," she said slowly. "Have they been preparing petition?"

"We've confirmed four," Ime said. "I believe the one requesting that she be formally summoned to the Tower to answer for tax irregularities is the one she'll truly back."

Casting herself as being attacked by the throne while ensuring she was in Ater to gather support. Not the most inspired of opening moves, but then Abreha had always preferred boldness to elegance.

"Have our people change the text for one of the red herrings just before presentation," Malicia ordered, opening her eyes. "High Lady Abreha will request a formal mandate and court title, for the sake of stabilizing Praes in the midst of war."

"Overreach would give us an excuse to swat her around," the spymistress reluctantly agreed.

"Swat?" Malicia smiled. "Nothing of the sort, Ime. How does one kill a lion without a spear?"

Her spymistress simply raised an eyebrow.

"Throw a cut of meat," the Dread Empress of Praes said, "halfway between it and a bear."

She drummer her fingers thoughtfully against the table.

"We will grant this petition, for we have great trust in the loyalty of dearest Abreha," she lightly continued. "As the Blessed Isle is still formally an Imperial territory, granting governorship over it is my right. Given the unfortunate refugee situation, it is evident there is great need of a stabilizing influence there."

Ime let out a low whistle.

"That gets her household troops at the Callowan border," she noted. "And nobody else will want to get tangled up there, so support will cool down. The reaction in Laure is the real danger."

"Have the regency informed that its protest over Praesi refugee incursions were duly noted, and I have appointed a governor to remedy the situation," Malicia said. "Of course, High Lady Abreha's mandate ends at the border. Should she provoke the Kingdom of Callow, it is not on the behalf of the Tower and any punishment doled out by the regency would not be taken as an act of war between our realms."

"Should such a provocation be arranged?" Ime asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Prepare one," the Empress said. "I will not pull the trigger unless it is made necessary."

There was a beat of silence.

"My Empress," the spymistress finally said.

"You have doubts," Malicia noted.

"Callow just slapped us across the face," Ime reminded her. "There was a signed royal decree recognizing the independence of the 'Confederation of the Grey Eyries' before the city had even fallen."

With Catherine's own signature, which the Empress suspected had by now been used more often by Hakram Deadhand than the woman herself.

"The Matrons must have reached out to them months ago. And it's only a matter of time until barges carrying munitions and goblin steel start sailing across the Wasaliti to equip the Army of Callow. They're effectively funding a rebellion against the Tower, though Gods only know how they got a loan from the dwarves."

"Given Catherine's continued absence, I imagine an amount of brutal murder was involved," the Empress drily said. "Though that is ultimately irrelevant. The Legions of Terror will move to blockade Foramen. Neither munitions, steel nor gold will flow. The bargain will remain entirely ink."

"We're in no shape to fight against Callow," Ime quietly said. "We are divided, bloodied and beset with a goblin rebellion."

"Callow is in no shape to fight against us," Malicia replied, and raised a hand before her spymistress could object. "Marshal Juniper has raised a significant army, but it cannot move east. If the Black Queen still somehow seeks alignment with the ailing Grand Alliance, it must participate in the campaign against the Dead King. If she seeks to kill Cordelia's grand design instead, it will fall on Salia instead and decapitate the Principate by surprise. Both offensives would be of great scale, and she has neither the manpower nor the resources to engage in war on two fronts."

Silence reigned for a moment after the mild tirade, the other woman refraining from contradicting her. Ime – Lindimi Sahelian, once, before she'd cast that name aside – was aging. No amount of potions, rituals or cosmetics could truly hide it anymore. Her skin was wrinkling, her body losing its spryness. Even a branch Sahelian could expect to live a few decades longer than the average Praesi, but time would catch up eventually. Part of Malicia grieved that. Part of Malicia had to begin considering a replacement. She read hesitation, on Ime's face. No, not hesitation. *Reluctance*. There were very few subjects where she had not given her spymistress to speak her mind fully and openly. Not even Lindimi's participation in the slaughter of Amadeus' kin when still served the Heir was warded subject, though it was one to be approached with care.

"Say it," Malicia ordered.

Ime's lips thinned.

"You have not spoken to the Black Queen face to face since Akua's Folly," she slowly said. "I do not think you truly grasp the woman we're dealing with anymore."

"A crown will not change her nature," the Empress said.

"What happened in Liesse did," Ime replied. "She reminds me. . . "

Reluctance again.

". . . she reminds me of Nefarious," the spymistress finished quietly. "After the Wizard of the West broke his power. There's a sickness in her, Malicia, and it has little kinship with reason."

It had been many years, since Alaya had last thought of Dread Emperor Nefarious. In a way, that'd been a deeper victory than simply killing the wretched man – she had grown *beyond* him, the wounds and the fear and the pain. She'd not hidden from remembrance of him, she'd simply let him disappear into utter irrelevance.

"Winter can be predicted," Malicia said. "Rooted as it is in what she once was."

"She's unstable," Ime flatly said. "And I'm afraid of her. We all should be. She threw a bloody lake at the crusaders, and that was her being *diplomatic*. If that pretence is discarded, what will we be facing? You speak of armies, but I think of a mountain falling from the sky above Ater. Of Okoro drowned by an ocean unleashed. She's not the Carrion Lord's apprentice anymore, Malicia. She'd a vicious, angry thing bearing a fairy court's worth of power and I deeply

mislike the risk of us making her feel cornered. She may yet come out with teeth and claw, damning all else."

*Where was this fear a year ago?* Yet the Empress knew the answer. It had not yet come to fruit, because a year ago Wekesa had still been alive and poorly inclined towards the Black Queen. How quickly slight wounds had turned to mortal ones, Malicia thought. Procer was being smothered by the armies of the dead, Ashur strangled by the fleets of the League and the hosts of Levant were embroiled in the mess that had been made of Iserre, headed for doom or crippling. All three nations sworn to end her, bleeding out in broad daylight. And yet Praes was dying as well, by wounds of its own making. The Matrons to the south, High Lady Abreha to the north. Legions she held only by the barest of leashes, one that could only be tugged by causing mutinous sentiment in the aftermath, and with the coming of winter the Imperial granaries would have to be opened lest there be food riots. The grain would run out, eventually. And to the far west, someone had taken Amadeus from her.

She was alone. There was no one else that would – that *could* – avoid disaster.

Left to scheme on their own, when the granaries ebbed low the High Lords would begin musing war on Callow to acquire its own reserves. The goblins would not end the border of their rebellion at Foramen unless they were *made* to. And the moment collapse seemed inevitable, some clans of orcs would begin eyeing the weakened lands to the south of the steppes for plunder as they had under the reign of her predecessor. Some would stay loyal, but all that would accomplish was civil war among the Clans. She had to avoid reaching the tipping point, whatever the cost. For if she succeeded? If she asserted true control once more? Then she had won this war, and all the wars that would follow. The Grand Alliance would break. The League of Free Cities would either collapse into squabbling or by trying to keep the Thalassocracy contained. And Callow would have a choice: uneasy alliance with the Tower, or standing alone against a Kingdom of the Dead that had just devoured most the west. It always came down to survival, didn't it? Outlasting what you could not beat.

"I am," Malicia said, "the ruler of Praes."

"So you are," Ime murmured.

"Let us teach them once more," Dread Empress Malicia, First of Her Name, "precisely what that *means*."

The Empire might be dying, but these lands were no stranger the walking dead.

—

Somewhere in eastern Iserre, under a full moon, a flicker of flame parted the night. It died quick enough, leaving behind only the cherry-red end of a lit pipe. The young woman holding it breathed in deep of smoke before blowing out a shoddy ring. Pearly white teeth were bared under moonlight, afterwards.

"Let's try this again, shall we?" Catherine Foundling said.

Behind her, streaming out of an ink-black gate, a sea of raised sigils poured out in utter silence. Obsidian and iron, furs and mail, spears and swords and things stranger still.

For the first time in many years, the Empire Ever Dark was at war with something other than itself.

# Chapter 1

# Visitation

> "Even a devil can be merciful once."
>
> Callowan saying

The night was full of shadows and every last one answered to me.

Fairy gates had never been quite as precise an art as I would have liked, particularly when the needle was threaded half-blind, but these days I had more than Masego or Akua adding up the numbers for me. The sisters understood these matters in a way no mortal ever could, and considering it was their – ours, I supposed – army I was taking through Arcadia they'd not balked at charting the path for me. Well, that wasn't entirely true. Komena had complained about being a goddess, not a cartographer. I'd wholeheartedly agreed: after all, a cartographer would have given me an answer instead of petty whining. You'd think finishing apotheosis would have done something for her sense of humor, but instead I'd been given an indignant silent treatment for a few days. Which was fine by me, really. There was only so much croaking I could take from the damned birds they'd sent with me. The night-feathered crow on my left shoulder stirred in displeasure and I snorted.

"Fine, fake birds," I said. "That better for you?"

Indrani cleared her throat, less dainty scoff and more middle-aged dockworker about to spit.

"Catherine, you're talking to the crows again," she said.

I shrugged.

"It's fine as long as I don't expect to hear them talk back, I think," I noted.

"Caw," the crow on my left shoulder drily said.

The word, not actual cawing, because Andronike had developed a taste for the sardonic since shaving off a sliver of her godhood and sending it if off with me.

"Wind's real loud tonight," I said, blithely pretending I hadn't hear anything.

"Well," Archer mused, "it *is* winter."

And wasn't it just? The heartlands of Procer were pretty as a painting, under moonlight. Open fields of driven snow, sparse trees trickling down icicles and the occasional game wandering through the frost. It said a lot about the drow, I thought, than an army of fifty thousand of them hadn't scared off every beast for four miles around it. There'd been some childlike wonderment at first, when the grey-skinned host had first witnessed the world covered in white. Drow centuries old patting at the snow like they couldn't quite believe their eyes, strangers as they were to a surface winter. I remembered that fondly, the innocence of it. There were some things that even millennia of constant bloodshed could not entirely erase. Tonight, though, there would be no wide-eyed fascination. The warriors I'd sent out had moved out across the snow like ghosts, melting back into the darkness they'd been born to.

Indrani had come to keep me company as I stood, watching the small town in the distance. My friend – we'd shared a bed more than once, by now, but lover ill fit what lay between us – was half a shadow herself, the hooded leather coat she wore over fine mail hiding her face away from the light of the moon. Now and then I could see her hand twitching slightly, the urge to reach for the large bow strapped to her back only barely repressed. Archer had never been one to shy away from a fight, which was the reason I hadn't sent her out with the drow in the first place: corpses weren't what I was after. Not tonight anyway. There were a few long years ahead of us, I knew, and there would be blood spilled before they came to a close. *Whose*, I thought, *is the important question, isn't it?*

"What's the place called again?" Indrani asked.

More out of need to fill the silence than true curiosity, I suspected.

"Trousseau," I replied anyway.

Finding a hunter out in the plains had been a lucky stroke, and result in a vague notion of where we were in Procer. Somewhere in eastern Iserre, for one, which was what I'd been aiming for. Unfortunately said hunter had never gone all that far from her hometown, and had little news of what was currently taking place in the Principate. No map, either, but that much I'd expected. Those were damned expensive, and even halfway-accurate ones not usually in the hands of commoners.

"Bit of a shithole, to be honest," Archer said.

Trousseau probably had no more than a thousand souls living in it, most of the time, but these were not that. War and conscription would have thinned the town. I'd decided to charitably attribute how run-down the place was to the removal of so many able hands, though odds were the place was poor enough it looked like this even on a good year. There were as many huts as houses, all huddled around a few streets that were more streaks of cold mud than anything, and what cattle could be seen held in pens around the town was thin and sickly. Though Indrani's gaze had lingered on the ramshackle and no doubt bitingly cold huts, I'd been more interested in something that wasn't there. Namely, walls. I honestly couldn't think of a single town of a thousand in Cal-

low that wouldn't have at least a palisade up, or tall piles of stones without mortar. For my purpose of the night, however, that defencelessness was not unhelpful.

"If it were worth putting on a map, Black would probably have burnt it on his way south," I said.

She hummed in agreement, and only spoke again a few heartbeats later.

"You think rumours about what's happening to will have trickled into here?" Indrani asked, glancing at me.

"Worth a try," I grimly said.

Archer's footing shifted almost hesitantly, and I blinked in surprise when she put a comforting hand on my shoulder. I could almost feel the warmth of her through the cloak and doublet, and my heart beat a little faster. Not because of attraction, this time, though that was never far. That I could feel warmth at all was still a feeling I could only luxuriate in.

"We don't know he's in trouble," she said.

"He should be back from Thalassina by now," I replied. "And still we can't make contact with the Observatory. *Something* happened."

"He could be buried up the neck in some hidden library," Indrani smiled. "Only to remember the rest of Creation still exists in a few months."

The smile was slightly forced, I knew her well enough to tell. I wasn't the only one worried about Masego and the resounding silence from Laure.

"Shouldn't it be me comforting you, anyway?" I said.

"He can take care of himself," Archer quietly said, though her eyes flicked east anyway.

I clasped her bare fingers with my gloved ones, squeezing tight, and she shot me an amused look before removing her hand. Where our conversation would have wandered after that would remain a mystery, for I felt a ripple in the Night headed our way. Mighty Rumena – crow-Komena pecked at my shoulder and I rolled my eyes – *General* Rumena, I mentally corrected, had not ceased in its attempts to sneak up on me even though not a single one had succeeded since I'd become First Under the Night. It was hard to pull a Night-trick on someone who had a finger on the pulse of that very power.

"So, the way you don't leave footprints in the snow," I called out. "Is that an illusion, or are you so feeble and delicate you're light enough not to leave one?"

Grey fingertips appeared out thin air a few feet in front of me, coming down to tear away at a veil of Night and revealing the creased face of the ancient drow. Even stooped the bastard was taller than me, which unfair in so many ways, and ever since it'd been appointed to the command of the southern expedition it'd made a point of looming over me whenever it could.

"Many are the mysteries of the Night," General Rumena vaguely replied.

I eyed him skeptically.

"So where'd we land on whether or not I have power of expulsion from the faith again?" I finally asked crow-Andronike.

"No," she replied.

"Maybe," crow-Komena said at the same time.

The two crow-shaped slivers of Sve Noc turned to glare at each other.

"There can be no-" crow-Andronike began.

"It is necessary that-" her sister interrupted.

I smothered a grin, though not quite well enough. Both turned their glares towards me. That was never going to get old, was it? A heartbeat later I was yelping as a pair of godly crows started flapping around my hair and pecking vengefully at my scalp, though I valiantly managed to shoo them away with only minimal loss of dignity. The two of them flew off, possibly off to torment some poor luckless rabbit. Made of Night as they were they hardly needed to eat, though that certainly hadn't stopped them from toying with the animals they came across. Amusement bled out of me a moment later and I turned my eyes to Rumena.

"Report," I ordered.

It did not bow, not that I'd expected it to.

"The town has been seized," the old drow said.

"Casualties?" I asked.

"Seventeen wounded, no dead," General Rumena mildly said. "Some stubborn souls insisted on resisting confinement."

I chewed on my lip. Too much to hope for this to be entirely bloodless, I supposed. I'd tell Akua to have the wounds healed if she could. And if the people were willing to take healing from the likes of us which was less than certain.

"No priests?" I asked.

"None resided within. There is a moan-haste-ree to the north where servants of the Pale Gods hold court, but they only visit infrequently," the old drow said.

"Monastery," I corrected absent-mindedly. "Good, that would have complicated things."

Priests tended to frown upon dark hordes beholden to eldritch horrors of the night strolling into their backyard, and I'd rather not cut one's throat if I could avoid it.

"Send a sigil up to keep an eye on the monastery road," I finally said. "No blunders tonight, Rumena."

"Ah," the general mildly said. "Will you be absenting yourself, then?"

To my side Indrani shook with a suppressed laugh, the filthy traitor.

"You just wait," I grunted. "One of these days I'll talk the damned crows into letting me write your holy book and there'll be an entire hymn about how much of a prick you are."

I began the trek towards Trousseau immediately, carefully refraining from hearing Rumena's skepticism at my ability to rhyme on purpose even as Archer cheerfully waved him goodbye.

As usual, I was surrounded by insubordinate backtalk and wanton treachery.

—

There were a few houses near the centre of the town made of stone, but this wasn't one of them. I approved, truth be told. From what I'd read, large towns and cities in the Alamans parts of Procer were usually governed by an official appointed by the ruling royal – quite often some toady or relative that could be counted on to keep the coin flowing towards the principality's capital. On occasion, some wealthy landowner ended up in charge instead but given that those occasionally got ideas about who should be the local royalty that was rarer. In smaller towns and villages, though, a degree of freedom emerged. Someone needed to be in charge so the lawmen and the tax collectors would have an arm to twist, but the people were left to their own devices as to who should be picked. Trousseau should be small enough for that to apply, and that the town's mayor was living in a wooden house instead of a stone one implied wealth hadn't been why he was put in charge. Half a dozen drow bearing the mark of the Soln Sigil were keeping a sharp watch on the premise, and if the ripple I was feeling in the Night was any indication my old friend Lord Soln itself wasn't far.

It had amused the Sisters to send what little remained of the army I'd once led against them on the southern expedition. I wasn't complaining: the oaths binding us might have been broken, but they were quicker to obey my orders than most drow. The covenant under Winter had left marks that would not easily be erased. On another night I might have taken the time to flush out Soln from its hiding place and share a few words, but not this one. I had business to finish, and no inclination to delay it. As far as I was concerned, the quicker we moved on from here to undertake our campaign proper the better.

"Want me to come with?" Archer idly said.

I glanced at her, catching a glimpse of her hazelnut eyes under the hood. I read an expectation of boredom there, but still she had offered. I did not fight the flush of affection that brought out in me.

"No need," I said. "Find something to entertain yourself, I'll catch up."

She smirked.

"Bound to be at least *one* tavern in this dump," she mused.

"We pay for what we take," I reminded her.

"Gods," she muttered under her breath. "Between you and Akua I feel like I've joined the most ironic nunnery in Creation."

I grinned and waved her off.

"Don't get too drunk without me," I said.

She grinned back, and promised not a thing. I watched her saunter away for a moment, coat swaying behind her, but before long my gaze had returned the door in front of me and the good mood drained. The two closest drow were looking at me from the corner of their eyes and I offered a nod.

"Restrict interruption to Peerage and my own people," I spoke in Crepuscular.

"Losara Queen," one murmured back, though both bowed.

I left it at that, and knocked at the door out of habit. There was a long beat of silence, before a male voice hesitantly bid me to enter. *Ah*, I thought. The last people to come in would not have been so polite. I pushed open the surprisingly well-oiled door and entered. A man was standing by a brazier, my eyes lingering only long enough to note he looked only in his mid-thirties before they pressed on to take in the rest of the house. One bed, shoddy as it was, but four cots. The table was old but well-maintained, and the roughly-hewn chairs struck me as of recent make. Not much else to see, aside from wooden shelves filled with foodstuffs. When my eyes returned to the man, his face had gone ashen. His hands were still above the flames, but now they were trembling. I wiped my snow-sodden boots on the straw by the door before offering a bland smile.

"I am told your name is Leon," I said in Chantant. "And that you are mayor of Trousseau."

The man drew back as if struck. It was almost comical, given that he stood at least two feet taller than me and was built like a sandy-haired ox. Almost.

"You're the Black Queen," Leon shakily said.

"And so introductions have been seen to," I mildly said. "Take a seat."

Something like anger flickered across the man's face. Not someone used to be ordered around in his own home, was he? But even as his jaw squared, his eyes came to rest on the sword at my hip. Caution won out, and slowly he drew back a chair and sat down. Wiping my boots one last time, I limped across the floorboards and sat across from him. I could have drawn on the Night to chase away the pain for a time, but I disliked relying on that measure unless blades were out. I leaned back against the chair, the Mantle of Woe bunching up as I did, and calmly took off my leather gloves.

"I have questions to ask of you," I said.

"I am the mayor of a half-empty town," Leon replied. "What could I possibly know of import to a queen?"

His gaze was steady, I thought, and his back straight. But he'd not quite managed to hide his hands away from me, and I could see how tightly clenched his fingers were. Afraid, but trying not to show it. I wondered if he expected he'd be dead by the end of this conversation. My reputation in Procer had been less than gentle even before the entire fucking priesthood of the west had declared me Arch-heretic of the East.

"More than you think," I said. "Peddlers come through, even in a deserted town. And peddlers carry rumours."

"I put little stock in rumours," the mayor replied. "And so know little of them."

I glanced to the side, already knowing what I would find. The bed was large enough for two. Some of the cots were too small for adults. The man had a wife and children. All of which were currently under the guard of my drow in a previously house. When my gaze returned, Leon's face had grown tight. The steady gaze was gone, replaced by desperate fear.

"No merchant has passed in months," the Proceran said. "We are not a town with coin to spend. Those few of wealth have already left."

I raised an eyebrow.

"For where?" I asked.

"Iserre," he said. "Walls and safety."

I leaned forward.

"Safety from what?" I pressed.

The man grit his teeth. I could see them war on his face, fear and principle. I was, to be honest, admiring his spine. How many of my countrymen would have it in them to even hesitate answering a question, if a villain of my repute was asking it? I'd not sat in conversation with a human other than Indrani in months, and in some ways this felt fresh to me. I could see the tremor in his arm, the beading sweat on his brow. This was not a drow, I thought. I understood the shape of this one's thoughts, the milestones by which he saw the world.

"Heavens preserve me from the Enemy," the mayor of Trousseau shakily said. "Still my tongue and ward my hand, that I may give it no succour nor relief."

I slowly breathed out, studying him. I might have continued, if not for the knock on the door.

"Enter," I said.

The door opened to reveal Akua Sahelian's silhouette, and closed after she fluidly stepped in. I cocked an eyebrow, meeting her golden eyes, and she nodded. *Good*. She leaned back against the wall without a word and I turned to the mayor.

"Do you see the Heavens in this room, Leon?" I softly asked. "I don't. There's just us, and the consequences of our choices."

"I will not sell out my home, Black Queen," the large man said. "Not an inch, not a league."

The fear had not left, I thought. And yet he'd said it anyway.

"I hold your family," I said.

The tone was casual, as it discussing the weather. I had learned from Black that mildness could be much more disquieting than the most thunderous of wraths. Leon swallowed drily. I had not made threat, and would not need to. My name itself was a threat, these days.

"Even so," he said, tone thick with grief. "Gods, even so."

To do right, even if it cost you everything. That, at least, the Houses of Light on both sides of the border taught just the same. I thought of Amadis Milenan, then, and wondered what such a man had ever done to deserve a subject like this. Nothing. But then that was the whole point, wasn't it? That the underserving so often ruled. That there could be more heroism found in a terrified man sitting across a monster and refusing to answer a question than in an empire's worth of royal lines, or a legion of heroes.

"It's a strange thing, fear, isn't?" I said. "I have known those who rule by it. I have fought those who deny its very existence. And yet I have come no closer to understanding what splits the brave from the mad."

I met his eyes with equanimity.

"But I do know one thing, Leon of Trousseau," I said. "That knot in your stomach, right now? That part of you that keeps your back straight when death meets your gaze?"

I did not blink. Neither did he.

"That is the weight of the choice you made," I said. "Remember it, in the years to come. Learn from it, grow from it. Because one of those days you might find someone else sitting on my side of the table – and unlike me, they might not admire what you chose."

I pushed back the chair and rose to my feet, picking up my gloves and slipping them on. The mayor hesitated.

"That's all?" he said.

I smiled, thin and mirthless.

"Do you know why we praise bravery, Leon?" I said.

He did not reply. Did not dare to, I supposed, when it seemed possible he might survive our little chat after all.

"Because it surpasses our baser nature," Akua spoke from behind me, and I could feel the smile in her voice.

I could see the moment when the man understood, the anger and the sadness and the burning indignation.

"Someone talked," I gently said. "Someone always talks."

I limped back into the cold, and left him to sit in his silence.

# Chapter 2

# Stirrings

> "Everything happens for a reason, and this time the reason is that I godsdamned said so."
>
> Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow

I let Akua trail behind me as we walked through the half-frozen mud.

Archer hadn't been wrong, I thought, to call this place a shithole. But where she likely saw it as sloppiness on their part, a refusal to pull up their sleeves and improve their own lot, to me Trousseau reeked of desperation. Too many hard years, too many taxmen more interested in their tallies than what those cost to the people who made up the numbers. I didn't like it, that she thought that way. I could admit that to myself. There were times where her indifference to the lot of others galled me deeply, because it ran against what I'd been raised to – that when it got dark outside, everyone was in it together. I'd learned, though, to follow that somewhat callous belief to its source. The Ranger. I'd loved the stories about Indrani's mentor as a child, certainly more than those about the Calamities. After all she'd been absent for most the Conquest, and unlike the others she wasn't Praesi. The last specks of that childhood fondness had waned when she'd answered an offer a help by nearly murdering me on a whim. What Black saw in her I didn't know and doubted I would ever understand, but I could make my peace with that. What she'd done to Indrani, though? That was another story.

She'd taught Archer that her fate would only ever be defined by her own hands, and that I could only approve of, but she'd left the lesson half-finished. She'd never told my friend that she was exceptional, that not everybody could be like her. That sometimes people failed and gave up, and that didn't make them *unworthy* in some way. Just tired and hurt and without an answer as to why they should keep trying. It was an easier way to live, I supposed. Looking a misery and believing it was the miserable solely responsible for it. Never aching at the sight. *But I don't think it's a better one*, I thought. Maybe it was unfair to blame the Lady of the Lake for passing down beliefs she seemed to

genuinely hold to, but I wasn't inclined to fairness when it came to the Ranger. She had her claws too deep in too many people I loved, and I could only think of the marks she'd left behind as wounds.

"I don't suppose we have a destination in mind?" Akua mildly said.

She'd caught up to me while I was deep in thought. I could not help but notice from the corner of my eye that her dress of pale and gold was untouched by the mire we were passing through, or that she left no footprints. Not quite alive, not quite dead. As in so many things, Akua Sahelian was straddling the line.

"There's a knot of drow further down the street," I replied. "And I could only think of one reason so many would gather in one place."

The shade kept to silence for a moment.

"She has been getting more rowdy, not less," Akua finally said.

Even with the wind that had me wishing I'd wheedled a scarf out of the drow before leaving, her voice was perfectly heard. Couldn't be sure whether that was just an oratory skill she'd picked up in Wolof or some kind of sorcerous trick, not that I cared all that much. Convenient was the word that came to mind more than anything else.

"We all cope in our own ways," I replied. "It'll run its course in due time."

Indrani had come very close to dying, in the battle for Great Strycht. Not because of a Mighty, some glorious duel she would now be laughing about. When the Sisters had eviscerated my hold on Winter they'd flooded their city with frost. Archer had been out on the edges, when it happened, picking her targets and stirring up the pot. But she'd still been caught in the mess, and Winter unleashed was not something you just walked off. I suspected that in way the brush with death wasn't what had unsettled her. She'd been riding that horse for years now, and enjoyed every moment of it. It had been that when death came knocking, the bow in her hand and the blades at her side couldn't have done anything to stop it. The realization that sometimes a steady sword-arm wasn't enough, even if you were clever and brave and burning with the need to leave a mark on the world.

"And if it doesn't?" Akua said.

"Then we'll deal with it," I calmly replied. "All of us, together."

The shade sighed.

"I don't suppose that a reminder you've not spoken with our informant would be of any use before we get entangled in yet another drinking binge?" she asked.

I glanced at her amusedly.

"Are we pretending you can't recite every answer they gave you verbatim?" I said.

"I can do the intonations as well," Akua casually boasted.

"Of course you can," I said, rolling my eyes.

I didn't bother to knock when we got to the tavern, or at least what I assumed to be that. It was ratty enough it didn't have a sign hung outside, though

I did remember reading somewhere some parts of Procer had put a tax on that. I'd be in a better position to cast judgement on that if some Fairfax who'd seen drinking liquor as sinful and debasing behaviour hadn't put up a bewildering array of punitive taxes on everything alcoholic not even a century ago. *Still*, I thought, eyeing the bare and windowless wall outside. *At least the next king dismissed the measures.* For all I knew, some prince out there was still lining his pockets with this sheer stupidity. The door was unlatched and the mangled carpet in front of it suffered the attentions of my boots for a moment before I entered. Calling what lay at the centre of the dirt floor a fire pit would have been overly generous, I thought, considering it wasn't even lined with stone. The place was cramped in some fundamental way, from the narrow walls to the twisty tables. There was a room in the back which I deduced to be the owner's sleeping place as well as the kitchen, insofar as this place could be said to have one of those.

Akua closed the door behind me, and already Indrani was waving us over. She'd shrugged off her coat and somehow divested herself of her mail, leaving her in dark green tunic and trousers whose tightness were quite flattering to her frame. I glanced back up and saw a smirk touching her lips, so she'd definitely caught that. *Well*, I admitted to myself, *it wouldn't be the first time.* Or likely the last, honesty compelled me to admit. The return to mortality had left me with all sorts of hungers in need of sating, and I probably would have sought her out if she hadn't done it first. I was only human after all, and even now that thought had a pleasurable ring to it. I shot a look around and found no trace of the tavern-keeper, turning to raise an eyebrow at Indrani.

"It got a little too much for the old man," Archer languidly shrugged. "Got some of our minions to bring him somewhere for a lie-down."

"You didn't do anything, did you?" I asked, frowning even as I took off my gloves.

"Aside from empty a bottle in the short span of time since you've found this place," Akua drily added.

My eyes found the cheap bottle of red she was referring to, along with her four still-full sisters lined up neatly to the side. One was already open. The shade passed me without a sound, sliding herself in a stool across the table Archer had claimed. I unclasped my cloak and followed suit, hesitating for the barest fraction of a moment before sitting on Akua's side. The stool there struck me as marginally less likely to break if I moved around a bit.

"Just a bit too much agitation for him, I think," Indrani told me. "What with the drow walking the surface again and the wicked minions of the Black Queen patronizing his humble establishment."

Akua's own comment got as a response a gesture that would have seen me spanked by the orphanage matron if I'd ever been caught doing it in public.

"Temporary eviction would have been necessary regardless," the shade said. "If we are to discuss business on the premises, that is."

"Aw, shit," Archer complained, eyeing me balefully. "Really, Cat?"

"I'd rather do it in here with a fire and an open bottle than out there in the cold," I shrugged.

"Fine," she waved away. "But I'd like to lodge a formal protest."

"Pass it along to my secretary," I drily said. "Triplicate, standard form."

Indrani turned her gaze to Akua.

"Sadly, as a mere spirit I cannot be handed such forms," the shade blatantly lied. "They'd go right through me."

"I liked you better before we taught you to be an ass," Archer complained.

"No you didn't," Akua said, full lips quirking.

Indrani did not contradict her, and neither did I. After what had taken place in Great Strycht it was... difficult to distrust the Diabolist as much as I once had. I wouldn't be taking my eye off her anytime soon, sure, but it was hard to forget that when we'd all reached the end Akua could have chosen to cut and run, and hadn't. That meant something. Given that she was perhaps the most skilled liar I'd ever met, figuring out exactly *what* it meant was the trouble.

"So, someone folded," I said, steering us towards safer waters. "How out of date is what they had to tell?"

"She has a relative in the monastery to the north she sees regularly," Akua said. "And the sisters there are part of the general correspondence of the House of Light, regardless of their relative insignificance. The last direct letter is a month old, one could generously assume the news themselves two weeks older than that."

I raised an eyebrow.

"That quick?" I said. "I thought we were in the middle of nowhere."

"Two day's ride away from the minor city of Rochelant, as it happens," Diabolist corrected. "To the west. In a broader sense, we are skirting the eastern edge of the principality of Iserre."

I drummed my fingers around the table, idly noting it kinda looked like someone had digested it for a bit before it'd ended up here.

"Closer to Callow than I thought we'd end up," I said. "That brings up unpleasant questions, in retrospective."

"Could just be that you traded Winter for crows, Cat," Indrani said. "You and Zeze were screwing about with the stuff for everything, back when the Observatory was raised."

"I was not given the opportunity to observe the arrangements in great detail," Akua conceded pre-emptively. "However, I am intimately familiar with the artefact used at the centre of the array. It should not have been affected by our latest alliance and its..."

She paused, golden eyes taking me in.

"Metaphysical repercussions," she settled on.

I snorted. How delicately put of her. I wasn't truly beholden to the Sisters in any way that could be considered vassalage – that would have rather defeated the point of what I was supposed to be to them – but it remained a fact I'd thrown Winter under the horse and been handed a direct tap to what had

become of the Night afterwards. The power was a lot more volatile, true, and tended to exhaust me physically in a way my mantle never had. On the other hand I'd stopped going raving mad whenever I reached a little too deep and I could enjoy hot soup again. In a lot of ways, I still believed I'd ended up on the better side of that evening.

"So why aren't we able to reach Juniper, then?" I said.

"She's finally succumbed to Hakram's charms and the bedroom door is locked under pain of death," Indrani suggested.

"Sabotage is a possibility," Akua said, more practically. "The Empress will still have agents in Callow, and might prefer your communications crippled. As for why Sve Noc could not reach out directly-"

"I know, you've already said," I waved away. "Masego warded that thing so ridiculously viciously not even they want to risk putting their fingers in it."

I felt a well of pride at the fact that Hierophant had somehow put up defences around the Observatory so harsh even a pair of living goddesses were wary of attempting to force them, inconvenient as it was at the moment. And he'd done it while remaining within allocated funds, too, which was just another feather in his cap as far as I was concerned.

"Doesn't seem like Malicia's style," I finally said. "If you'd said she was listening in I'd buy it, but breaking it entirely? She prefers appropriation to outright denial when she can swing it."

"There are other possible culprits," Akua said. "More with motive than means, but a few with both. The Dead King. The heroic segment of the Tenth Crusade. The royal court of Arcadia. Perhaps even the Wandering Bard."

"That doesn't really narrow it down, does it?" I grunted. "Still, I'd tend to scratch off the Bard from the list. Black's pretty sure she can only meddle through Named, and those we sent back to Laure would know better than to get involved with her."

"Ugh, you two are yammering on about who *could*," Indrani said, pouring herself another cup. "But that's just means, and we got a lot of nasty surprises assuming we knew all about those. Maybe wonder about who *would*, instead? Whose kind of play is this?"

I eyed her cup with a raised eyebrow, and with a put-upon sigh she finally bothered to fill mine. And Akua's, though I was still less than certain if drinking would actually do anything for the shade. I sipped at what turned out to be truly horrid concoction distantly related to wine while actually mulling over what Archer had said. Who would strike like this? The Grey Pilgrim came to mind. He had the brains for it, and the benefits would be obvious. With the Augur still telling Cordelia Hasenbach how the pieces were moving, we'd have lost our eye in the sky while the Tenth Crusade remained largely unaffected. Neshamah had the know-how, but it seemed a little light-handed for him. At the moment he'd have other cats to skin anyway: he should be hip-deep in angry Lycaonese right about now, and that lot didn't know how to die easy. Assuming the Bard wasn't involved, though assumptions were particularly dangerous

when it came to that thing, that left the fae. And unless someone had fucked up real bad back home, they shouldn't have a foothold in Creation that'd allow them to pull that kind of thing.

"The main benefit is confusion," I finally said. "We'll be moving blind out here, and unable to organize with Juniper."

"Someone's putting their bet on riding the chaos better than the rest," Akua murmured.

A disquieting thought, considering for once it wasn't me.

"The room's pretty crowded this time," Indrani said. "All it takes is a few punches thrown, and. . . "

She dropped her palm against the table, the clap ringing loudly in the empty tavern.

"In the spirit of that perspective," Diabolist said, "perhaps one of the rumours I collected needs to be reassessed."

I cocked an eyebrow invitingly while continuing to subject myself to the disaster Archer had obtained as table wine.

"We appear to be entering an all-out brawl between half the continent," Akua said. "The legions Lord Black took into the Principate are currently in this very principality, and being pursued."

My heartbeat quickened. *No*, I told myself. *He'll have a plan. He always does.*

"By who?" Indrani asked, sounding surprised. "These are Conquest officers, you're telling me Proceran scraps actually think they could win against them?"

"The armies of the Dominion of Levant," the shade replied. "Though there's been word of conscription in Salia, so they might not be alone."

"That's not half the continent," I pointed out with a frown.

"The League of Free Cities appears to have joined the fray," Diabolist said. "With a significant army, though the numbers put to it vary."

I let out a low whistle.

"Are you telling me Tenerife has fallen?" I asked. "Because that's not good news for us."

The First Prince had sent twenty thousand soldiers to hold that border, and if the army had been slaughtered then that was twenty thousand men gone that'd have been rather useful up north. The drow exodus would strike like a hammer at the Dead King's back when it arrived, but I knew better than to believe the Sisters had any chance of winning that war if the rest of Calernia didn't get its shit together and move against him too.

"I cannot speak as to what happened to the army garrisoned there," Akua said. "But I can tell you, however, that the League's host is said to have emerged out of the Waning Woods without having given battle prior."

I blinked in disbelief. Indrani, on the other hand, fell into a deep belly laugh. Gods, Vivienne had told me last year that the Tyrant of Helike had been sending agents into the region. Still, I'd assumed it was as way to infiltrate the heartlands of the Principate. Not march an *army* through the place.

"You're actually serious, Shadehelian?" Archer got out, chin still quivering. "Someone was mad enough to take a bunch of soldiers through that?"

"Reportedly," Akua said, unmoved by the hilarity. "One can only wonder at the losses taken. Regardless, the point of interest is that they emerged in Iserre specifically. And they seem intent on giving battle now."

"That's going to get messy," I said, rapping my knuckles against the wood. "Unless Hakram and Vivienne birthed a diplomatic miracle while we were in the Everdark, which I'm not counting on. I really don't want to start a war with the League."

"And it ties in to Indrani's earlier words," Diabolist said. "There is another who prizes chaos as you do."

My lips thinned.

"The Tyrant of Helike," I said.

She nodded slowly.

"While aside from mounting confusion I can ascribe no direct benefit to such a measure being taken-"

"- for an old school madman like him, making everything messier might be benefit enough," I grimly finished. "Shit. I don't like having an army on the field without knowing where we stand with them."

"Kind of the point, isn't it?" Indrani shrugged.

I glanced at her, noticing we were now on the third bottle even though neither I nor Akua had finished our cups.

"The uncertainty, I mean," Archer said. "It's kind of like having a stranger pointing a crossbow at you while you're in a swordfight. Every time they twitch your hackles go up, and the tension will grow until someone does something real stupid to get out of the situation."

Akua's position in her seat shifted by the barest amount. She was, I suspected, actually impressed. Now and then it was good to have a reminder that Indrani was a lot sharper than she liked to let on.

"So whoever's leading that host is fucking with every other commander on the field just by being there," I mused. "That does sound like the Tyrant from the reports. We sure the Hierarch is still alive? He seemed a lot more interested in telling me to hold elections than invading anyone."

"Our informant is simply a relative, and the monastery rather minor," Akua said. "There was only so much to be learned. I suspect the appointed ruler of Rochelant will be better informed."

That still meant at least three days – drow moved fast, but not as fast as horses – of walking around Iserre with no godsdamned idea of what was going on around us. I didn't enjoy the notion, but then I didn't really have a better path to offer. Asking the Sisters to force the wards on the Observatory, assuming I could even talk them into it, was a lot more likely to result in that place collapsing or someone losing a finger than it was in an elightening conversation.

"Then that's where we're headed," I said. "I'll hash out the details with General Rumena. Indrani, you good to walk?"

"Am I ever not?" she drawled.

"You'd better be," I warned. "Because I'm not staying in this town a moment longer than necessary. We all know what happens to the drow at dawn, I'm not losing moonlight I don't have to."

Archer smirked.

"Would you like to race me just in case, Cat?" she said.

I snorted.

"Please," I said. "You're pretty fast, but you can't outrun a gate."

I pushed back the chair and rose to my feet.

"Catherine," Akua said quietly.

I glanced at her.

"You can come, I suppose," I said. "Though why you'd want to talk with the crabby old bastard is beyond me."

"Catherine," Akua Sahelian gently said. "Sit down."

My eyes narrowed, and I brushed back a lock of hair that somehow fallen free.

"There's more," I said.

"Cat, sit down," Indrani said. "She wouldn't ask without a reason."

I felt a flicker of surprise at Archer's comment, though maybe I shouldn't have. I'd told her everything that had happened in Great Strycht, and the barbs she still traded with Akua had a lot less bite to them than they used to. Gingerly I sat back down, keeping the weight off my bad leg.

"Marshal Grem One-Eye is in command of the retreating Legions," the shade said. "The Black Knight is believed to be dead."

I picked up my gloves, fingers closing around the leather.

"So?" I said. "All that means is that some part of whatever the Hells he's after involves people thinking that."

"Not unless he was willing to sacrifice a full Legion detachment for that purpose," Akua said.

The leather stared creaking and I looked back at my hands, finding them squeezing the gloves tight.

"Was a body shown?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"Then he's not dead," I flatly said. "And someone is about to have a very bad day."

"Catherine, the possibility has to be entertained," she slowly said. "It would change the situation significantly."

"It changes nothing. Because he's *not fucking dead*," I snarled. "I'll take his damned head off for not warning me he'd pull this, but he's not going to get killed by some pissant hero in the middle of nowhere."

The shade opened her mouth again, but Indrani raised a hand.

"Akua," she said. "Best let that one go."

She was humouring me, I realized. It stung that Archer of all people, who besides myself and Masego likely knew the most about my teacher, would so casually write him off. Angrily I pulled on my gloves.

"Finish your drinks," I coldly said. "We'll begin the march for Rochelant within the hour."

# Chapter 3

# Orison

> "My son, I offer you the greatest gift a ruler can give another: a widely reviled predecessor."
>
> Extract from the infamous 'Sensible Testament' of Basilea Chrysanthe of Nicae

I'd used to love winter in Laure, as a child.

Sure, once in a while charcoal and firewood prices went up so the matron had to cut corners but as a rule I'd gotten to enjoy the snow in the streets while having a warm house awaiting me after. It took mere hours for the blanket of pale to turn to mush or soiled mess, but before time ran out there'd been a lot of fun to be had. We'd made a fort in the steps of the broken old hatcher's house, once, and pitched snowballs at everyone passing for the better part of an afternoon. It'd ended when we'd accidentally caught some Taghreb legion mage instead of a Liessen merchant. Luckily enough the man had been more amused than angered, and instead of chewing us out he'd used sorcery to lift half the damned fort and dump it back on our heads. We'd all fled shrieking into the streets, soaked in snow and red-faced, while he laughed loudly. Gods, how old had I been? Seven, eight? I barely remembered anything from back then, nowadays, but that one memory of the sunny winter afternoon might as well have been seared into my eyes. The matron had remonstrated us pretty roughly for coming back to the orphanage drenched, but I was pretty sure she'd been hiding a smile.

It'd taken me a long time to realized how lucky I'd been, getting a childhood like that. Sure we had lessons and curfews and the occasional lean week, but Callowan orphanages had been funded by the Tower. The coin had kept coming, and we'd been *protected* in some abstract away. Everyone had known that the orphanages were the Black Knight's own notion, and the shadow cast by my teacher's displeasure had been as a giant's back then. It'd been easier, hadn't it? When it all seemed so large and simple, and all you had to do to change things was climb to the top. Foe and friend, victory and defeat. I'd picked up

the knife that night believing myself clever enough to see through the pretence of black and white, but that'd just been scratching the surface. Sometimes thing happened that were too complicated, too far-reaching, to be called something as clear-cut as a victory or a defeat. Sometimes you could hate the people you most needed to clasp hands with and love those that would be most dangerous to your heart's desire. My eyes flicked to a tall silhouette in the distance, treading the snow without a trace. She had her back to me, so there would be no glimpse of golden eyes, but there was no mistaking her for anyone else.

Sometimes you could grow fond of someone even if you couldn't forgive them and never would.

I let out a steamy breath, watching the vapour rise up. That had me itching for my pipe, though I was equally reluctant to take off my gloves and reach under my cloak to indulge in my little vice. It was a cold night out, and it would be hours yet before dawn rose. I could have drawn on the Night to warm my bones, or more accurately chase away the cold, but some part of me twistedly enjoyed feeling the bite. Not so long ago it would have been nothing to be but another faded colour, another not-sensation washing up against the thing passing for my body. The moon above us was shrouded by the clouds, but light filtered through. Enough that I saw the crows streak across the darkness, feathered frames of Night batting their wings in utter silence. I dipped a finger into the power the Sisters had opened to me, sharpening my eyesight for a heartbeat, and caught a glimpse of crimson on the talons the pair. They'd killed tonight, then. *If all they require for their altar is the occasional rabbit, I can make my peace with that.* Their descent was almost a dive, but they failed to make me stumble when they landed on my shoulders. They'd kept back their talons, and made of Night as they were they weighed near nothing unless they particularly wished to. I tightened my cloak around my shoulders and cast a meaningful glance at the bevy of drow escorting me. The warriors bowed low and scattered across the snowy landscape.

"Rochelant," Komena said, a strangely human voice leaving her crow's throat.

"There will be blood," Andronike said.

Wasn't there always? Stainless victories were not in my nature.

"As little as possible," I said. "We come for knowledge, not conquest."

Crow-Komena's laughter sounded like cawing, which we both knew she was doing on purpose.

"So speaks the roving catastrophe," Andronike said.

I could have gone pithy in reply to that, but my mood had gone sour after the conversation in the tavern and the march in the cold had done nothing to improve it. I simply grunted back wordlessly.

"Fickle thing," Komena chided. "Is this tossing of insults not what you told us to practice? Why do you now shy away?"

"I stand by what I said," I replied. "You want to stay grounded? Talk with people in a way that isn't prayer or orders. My friends were my anchor when I was deep in Winter."

"Friendship," Andronike said, sounding somewhat skeptical. "A human concept, not of the Firstborn. Kinship in interests is ever passing."

"Yeah, I'm not exactly holding my breath you two starting to feel all warm and fuzzy inside," I sighed. "This isn't about that."

"Imprecise," Komena noted. "Elaborate."

"Banter's informal," I said. "It puts you on equal footing with the other person, if only for the duration of that exchange. And for you two it's even more important, because to be hallway decent at it there's a lot of things you have to pick up on: the situation, the timing, what lines you can and can't cross. It forces you to *think like a person* while you do it."

"It will not change what we are," Andronike said.

"None of us can do that," I replied. "What we *can* do is make sure you still understand what a mortal is. That you don't become so utterly removed from reality you march yourself off the cliff."

There was a long moment of silence broken only by my boots creasing the snow.

"You are being sexually promiscuous with your subordinate, which is humorous for unclear reasons," Komena tried.

I closed my eyes and counted to five. *At least she's trying*, I told myself.

"We'll, uh, keep working on that," I muttered.

I flicked a glance at crow-Andronike, but she did not have another drow attempt at humour to throw my way. Well, either that my reaction to her sister had scared her off. The crow-shaped sliver of goddess turned towards me in indignation, much to my amusement. Yes, clearly she was beyond such petty feelings. No, I wasn't thinking that just to appease her. I muffled my chuckle with my gloves. The slight ebb upwards in my mood disappeared the moment the distraction ended. I was in the dark, in more ways than one. And some of the things hidden from my view mattered more to me than others. I hesitated, fingers clenching and unclenching.

"Ask," Andronike said.

"Since you ate Winter," I said. "Your... abilities have grown."

"Beyond your understanding," Komena said. "Though that is not a high wall to clear."

That'd actually been pretty decent, I noted. Insults came much easier to her than humour, which really wasn't much of a surprise. I cleared my throat.

"Could you find out if someone is dead or not?" I quietly asked.

"Yes," crow-Andronike said.

Ah, but would they?

"No," crow-Komena said.

"I know there'd be risks," I said.

"Of which you warned us yourself," Andronike said.

"If you start swinging your apotheosis around on the surface, something a lot older and meaner is bound to start swinging back. That story doesn't end

well for you," Komena said, pitching her voice in an eerily perfect mimicry of mine.

The leather gloves crinkled as I closed them into a fist.

"There are strategic reasons why the information would be important," I said.

"Not enough to warrant the possibility of provoking an entity our match," crow-Andronike said. "You know this."

"Sentiment is unseemly," crow-Komena said.

"Don't do that," I sharply said.

They stilled for a moment. They were not used, I thought, to being spoken to in this way. And we all knew that the part of their power they had sent with me was enough that they could kill me if they so wished – my best defence against it, after all, had been granted to me by their favour. But I would not hold my tongue. That was the whole point of my being named their herald, the First Under the Night: having someone that hadn't been raised to worship them to argue with them, force them to reconsider what they believed. They might not always agree with me, and frequently did not. But entirely separate from our military alliance and the diplomatic authority they had granted me was the real foundation of our accord. *A cat may look at a king*, the old Callowan saying went. Though the unfortunate pun had me gritting my teeth, it was a decent way of putting it. It was my damned purpose to disagree with them without sweetening my words.

"There's nothing wrong with feeling things," I said. "You take that out and all you view is skewed. They're not the only thing to take into consideration, often not even the most important, but they *do* matter. Logic alone leads you to ugly ends because you're dealing with people, not statues. If you remove that element just to feel clear-sighted and superior, you're going to shoot yourself in the foot repeatedly."

"Your tone," Andronike said.

"Is exactly what it should be," I replied, unflinching. "If you are right and correct in your own view, make your argument. If all you can quibble about is my phrasing, maybe you should be thinking instead of trying to chide me."

That didn't please them, but then it wasn't supposed to.

"You provided what you promised," crow-Komena conceded. "Yet the refusal remains. Employ other means."

I would, the moment I could. There was a storm taking shape in Iserre and I suspected Black would have a better idea than most of what it was really about. He was the only person I trusted who'd ever spoken with both the Hierarch and the Tyrant of Helike, strange as the nature of that trust could be. *I trust people to act according to their nature*, Malicia had once said. A Wasteland way of thinking, but there was truth to it. I remained alone with the crows-that-were-not-crows on the long march, buried in silence until dawn came.

—

"It is a dangerous weakness," Akua said. "Though I suppose inevitable in some ways. Power never comes without a cost."

The sun had begun passing the horizon, and with the light of morning something like a shiver had passed through fifty thousand drow. Tents had been hastily raised and my host hid away under them before dawn even finished. The sentinels forced to remain out in the sun did so after boiling water to make herbal concoctions that would keep the awake through the sudden wave of tiredness. Dawn, I had learned, was when Sve Noc's power ebbed lowest. I would have assumed noon to be it, but Akua had offered a complicated explanation as to why that was not the case I'd failed to understand twice before I got her to simplify it into something comprehensible: dawn was the death of the night. As a metaphysical concept, that had more weight than the rest. For some reason that apparently required me to have read a lot of books I definitely had not before it became sound and evident logic. The tent she was keeping me company under was open at the font, but the thick linen walls did cut away at the worst of the wind nicely. It made the wait tolerable, though I was actually debating taking a nap.

"This is an inconvenient one," I said.

"Surprisingly light," Diabolist retorted. "They are still physically able, after all. Simple temporarily bereft of their access to the Night."

"They'll also be out like a light for a few hours," I grunted. "That's a recipe for a morning attack and you know it."

The transition from night to dawn was taxing on drow bodies in a way that led to exhaustion, and effectively prevented the expeditionary force from being truly fighting fit for at least three to four hours. And they'd be tired for the rest of the day as well as being fragile little mortals if I didn't leave them sleeping a little longer than that, though at least that I could push later in the day. It wasn't like other armies didn't have to sleep, of course. But having a fixed time for that was a liability, and there would be no keeping that under wraps forever. The moment we began operating near other armies, there'd be outriders and scouts on us at all times and much as I liked to insult Proceran royalty they were not above basic pattern recognition.

"Hence why joining forces with the Legions of Terror remains a priority," Akua said. "Fifty thousand warriors led by Mighty able to operate flawless in the dark are nothing to scoff at, and a fortified camp held by legionaries would allow us to exploit that advantage relentlessly."

"Until we have allies, it makes occupation of anything concrete difficult," I reminded her. "Taking something at night will be easy enough. Holding it through the day another story."

"Fortunate, then, that occupation is not our intent," Akua serenely replied.

That and I still had a few cards to play if things got bad, though heroic presence would make the whole matter chancy. They tended to do that, as a rule. At least the Dead King should keeping a good chunk of them out of my hair for the foreseeable future. I cast a look back at my bed, which was

essentially a pile of covers and inexplicably flat cushions, and finally gave up the notion of a lie-in. Maybe after I worked out some of the tension in my body. I rose with a grunt, curtly refusing Akua offered helping hand, and buckled my sheath back onto my belt.

"Who has the watch again?" I asked the shade.

"Lord Ivah," she replied.

Ivah, huh. It'd been a while since we'd had a proper chat. Unlike some of the Peerage, who seemed discomforted by how easily they still obeyed me and so made themselves scarce, my old guide had remained at hand. Unfortunately it was also a pathfinder of some talent, and so often sent out ahead of the expeditionary army. Might as well take the occasion today, I didn't know how long it would be until the next. Though was I was higher than General Rumena in the pecking order of the Empire Ever Dark, it *was* in charge of leading the expedition. While I could give orders and dismiss its own, the details of the duty rosters remained at its discretion. I could have intervened, but was reluctant to do as much without a better reason than liking having Ivah around. Akua followed me out of the tent and onto the camp wordlessly. After years of commanding legionaries, the sight of the mess around us had me wincing on the inside. The layout of this place was a bloody maze, all haphazard tents with no real thought given to quick deployment and no chance of a bloody palisade being raised. Rumena wasn't a fool, so it'd been pretty thorough about putting sentinels in place during our vulnerable ours, but it'd admitted to me in private that it could not turn a gaggle of tribal sigils into the kind of army the Empire Ever Dark had once fielded with less than a month before the campaign began.

Assembling a functioning chain of command had been miracle enough, in my opinion, which should count for quite a bit considering I was now the foremost priestess of an entire race.

"Have you considered using a staff?" Akua suddenly asked.

She'd pulled slightly ahead of me, I only then noticed. I could go quicker, in all honesty, but I was in no real hurry and this pace was most comfortable.

"My limp's not that bad," I shrugged.

"It pains you," the shade frowned.

"When it loses its novelty I'll get herbs for that," I replied. "That's what my pipe was for in the first place."

We turned around a cluster of tents, the smallness of the gap rather irritating to my eyes. She resumed the line of conversation afterwards.

"Unnecessary suffering is exactly that," Akua said.

"I'm still fighting fit," I said with irritation. "And if I need a little nimbleness, I'll call on the Night to make it withdraw for a bit. I got the juice directly from Sve Noc, daylight won't stop me."

"It does significantly weaken you," Diabolist retorted.

I rolled my eyes. So the kind of power I could call on went from terrifying to merely appalling after dawn. It was still more than I'd ever had to work with as the Squire by an almost absurd margin.

"Yet that was not my meaning," Akua mildly continued. "I worry more about what embracing this implies of your mindset."

I watched her from the corner of my eye, and she did not meet my gaze. Worry, huh. The words she chose were never an accident.

"Sometimes it's a good thing," I said. "To remember what it feels like for the people who don't make pacts with gods."

"I had thought you estranged with contrition, dearest," she said, tone prickly.

"I won't wallow," I flatly replied. "But I won't lose sight of it twice either. A lot of people are going to bleed before this is over, Akua."

I brought up my fingers to block the sun from my eyes, feeling the shade studying me.

"Now and then it's worth the sting to feel a part of what you're going to dole out," I finished quietly. "It's be a kinder world, if we were all made to remember that."

"Kindness," Diabolist mused.

"Not a Praesi favourite, I know," I drily said.

Not much grounds left to cover before we reached the edge of the camp. Already we were passing drow so wrapped up in cloth the only seen could be seen was their eyes, though those were sharp and peering at the horizon. Ivah should be somewhere within the small thicket of bare trees I could see ahead, by the feel of the presences in the Night. Even when bereft of the power, they still left an impression. I slowed when I realized Akua had stopped. She was looking at me with narrowed eyes. Ah. Irritated her, had I?

"Is that what you think?" she said.

Not irritation, I thought. Disappointment. Fancy that.

"Are you sure, Akua Sahelian," I said softly, "that you want to get in an argument with me about the moral fabric of the Wasteland?"

"I had a great-uncle," she said. "By the name of Thandiwe."

My eyebrow rose.

"Fascinating," I said.

"I found him to be, as a child," Akua casually admitted. "He was, after all, stricken from family records."

"Maybe he used the wrong fork during the cannibalism ritual," I suggested.

Much as I disliked to admit, though, she had my attention.

"My mother would not speak of," she said, "and so naturally I pursued the matter secretly."

A half-smile quirked her lips.

"He was a sorcerer of great promise," she said. "As is custom among our line, as a boy he was brought to the deepest part of the Maze of Kilns. There he was made to sacrifice one dear to him, and for months after remained silent."

*So it wasn't just you*, I thought. Had Tasia Sahelian been made to do the same by her own mother, I wondered? How far back did the wounding of their own children go, for it to have earned the name of tradition?

"The lesson was believed to have been taught," Akua said. "And it was. One the eve of his sixteenth year, Thandiwe Sahelian stole several tomes and artefacts from the family vaults and fled to Mercantis, where he pawned them for a small fortune he used to make a home further south in Nicae."

I snorted.

"I imagine that went over less than pleasantly in Wolof," I said.

"Rage is an apt description," she mused. "Which only worsened when he began to thrive after entering some sort of merchant consortium and became comfortably wealthy even by Praesi standards. Enough to seek the protection of the Basileus, which the Empire sought favourable trade terms with in those days."

"Clever, then," I said. "Though I'm wondering as to your point. The man sounds decent enough, but he *left* Praes."

Akua inclined her head.

"And yet he was also a Sahelian," she said, and even now there was an undertone of pride when she spoke the name. "The blood of the original murder, unhallowed from the cradle. I am told that he kept to the Gods Below even on that foreign shore."

"He grew past his roots," I said.

*And I'm not so sure you have*, I thought. She looked up at the morning sun, her silhouette wreathed in light for a heartbeat, and there was something about her smile that unsettled me.

"You have seen the worst of us," the shade said. "And through that knowing taken our measure. But there *is* more, Catherine. We are not beyond kindness, not even the highborn. If even a Sahelian can have the taste for peace, there is yet something left to be kindled."

"If you want to be known by more than the ugliest parts of you," I said, "perhaps you should show them to the rest of the world. Maybe the capacity is there, Akua, but we don't judge by capacity. It's the choices you make that matter."

"Ah," she murmured. "And how many of those do we really have, in the end?"

*One hundred thousand souls*, I thought. *That was a choice. It's the weight on the balance by which you will be judged, and what could possibly even the scales?* I cleared my throat, uncomfortable the lingering silence.

"Your great-uncle," I said. "What happened to him, after?"

Golden eyes met mine.

"The old Basileus died. His successor refused the Empire's terms outright," she said. "And so my grandfather, a noted alchemist, took to his workshop. If he is so ashamed of his blood, I am told he said, let us relieve him of it."

Neither of us blinked.

"Thandiwe Sahelian sweated out every drop of blood in his body within the year," Akua said.

We finished the rest of the walk in silence.

# Chapter 4

# Reconnoiter

> "I see how it is. We agree to single combat and of course you can still use your enchanted sword, but I bring a single massive flying fortress and suddenly it's 'treachery' and 'against the spirit of the agreement'."
>
> Dread Emperor Perfidious

Ivah wore my colours painted on its face, as did the drow around it.

Silver on purple, a tree with twin incomplete circles under the branches. The Lord of Silent Steps – though the power of that title had waned in weight with the devouring of Winter itself – still stood tall and blade-thin, pale grey features split by vivid eyes that split the difference between silver and blue. The long overcoat and scarf it wore was flattering to its frame, though the face still remained so profoundly inhuman in some ways I could not help but find it unsettling. The drow had been made from a fundamentally different mold than humans, for all the superficial similarities. The colours the first member of my Peerage wore were unsettling in a different way, though, a reminder that as far as the Empire Ever Dark was concerned I still remained the ruler of the Losara Sigil and a member in good standing of the Sisters-blessed cabal making up the southern expedition. That I had left Ivah to rule and refrained from exercising that theoretical authority since we'd left the Everdark seemed to matter little in the eyes of the Firstborn. There seemed to be an assumption that as First Under the Night I simply found it beneath me to meddle too deeply in earthly affairs. The drow knelt when Akua and I arrived, conversation having died out before we even entered the thicket of trees.

"Well, you look slightly less pissy than before," Archer announced.

I squinted at my friend in confusion.

"Why are you hanging upside down?" I asked.

Indrani was currently hanging off a branch by the mere edge of her boots, scarf and coat rumpled by the merciless grasp of gravity. None of the drow

seemed to think there was anything unusual about this, a sure sign they'd been subjected to her presence for much too long.

"It helps me think," Archer sagely replied.

I flicked a glance at the drow and they rose back to their feet.

"You don't have to pretend she's funny, you know," I told them. "Deep down, she also knows that she isn't."

"It is not my place to comment on the wisdom of Mighty Archer," Ivah replied.

There was a beat.

"Should it be granted to me," the Lord of Silent Steps added.

I smothered a grin. Taking well-deserved potshots at Indrani was the sole common ground between all peoples of Calernia. I'd bet even the Dead King would yank her chain if given the opportunity. Archer let out a strangled noise of protest, trying to swat at the drow's head, but instead got tangled in her own coat and began swinging precariously. We all pretended not to see Akua whisper something under her breath just before the branch Indrani was hanging off of suddenly broke and she fell with a yelp.

"All quiet this morning, I take it?" I asked Ivah.

I kept my eyes on it, though even through this careful precaution I could not help but hear Indrani muttering imprecations in half a dozen different languages. For a heartbeat I missed Masego so vividly my heart twanged. It should have been him, forcing her down the tree after she pulled at his metaphorical pigtails one time too many. I hid the sudden shift in my mood as best I could, forcing a smile as I faced Ivah.

"We appear to be alone in the region," the drow acknowledged. "No runner left from Trousseau after we departed, and so one might presume our presence is still currently unknown."

With the Sisters swatting aside everything remotely like scrying headed in our direction, it might not be wrong. I wouldn't presume, though. Not with Above having so much skin in this race, and Choirs having grown so loose-lipped over the last few years.

"We'll see," I replied. "It'd be and advantage to remain in the woodworks until we strike, but rumours could have a use as well. It'll depend on where the others armies are relative to us."

I'd rather avoid a battle in Iserre if I could, given that ever corpse made here was a warm body that couldn't be thrown at the Dead King, but given some of the players involved I might not have much of a choice about it. I fully intended on evacuating the Legions of Terror that my teacher had led into Procer, after all. Which I imagined would be a less than popular notion with some people, given that they'd been merrily burning their way through the heartlands of the Principate until recently.

"Cat," Archer said.

I rolled my eyes, continuing to face Ivah.

"You've seen the lay of the land on the way to Rochelant," I said. "Will it by bloody ice and snow all the way?"

"*Cat*," Archer repeated, and this time her tone commanded my attention.

I pivoted slightly only to realize she wasn't even looking at me. Her eyes were peeled on the horizon, to the south. I couldn't see anything there, but then I was no longer Named. That hardly meant I was without tricks, though. I pulled at the Night, untangling a cool thread and sinking it into my eyes. It took a few blinks to adjust, but after that I could see just as well as Archer. I let out a breath of surprise when I caught sight of what she had. *Riders*, I thought. Nine of them, on tall grey horses with long manes and tails. The soldiers on them were in light armour, though sets swaddled in thick furs and heavy cloth hats. Those were spears at the side, I noted, not lances. And they had blades but no shields.

"Akua?" I said.

"Levantine," Diabolist replied. "Though without colours visible I cannot not tell you from which region."

"Well now," I murmured. "Isn't *that* interesting."

The armies of the Dominion of Levant should be making their way through southern and central Iserre right about now, if the rumours were to be believed. Hot on the heels of Marshal Grem's legions. So what were outriders doing this far out to the east of the principality? They were still about a mile and a half out, but these were flat plains so the chance they hadn't seen the massive army of fifty thousand drow encamped was negligible. They were riding closer, though. Most likely trying to get a read on whose camp this was, which would be difficult to make out from that far out.

"I have questions for them," I said.

I felt Indrani's smile without needing to look at her.

"Thought you might," she said.

I cocked my head to the side, still studying them. With the sun out and the imprecisions inherent to a working at that distance, trapping them would carry risks. Best to tinker with the odds a bit first.

"Archer," I said. "Kill the horses."

A good longbow, the kind the Deoraithe used, could have a range of about four hundred yards. Effective killing range should be about half that. Legion-issue crank crossbows, the finest on the continent, could reach three hundred and fifty yards and could be expected to score kills at around one hundred and fifty. I had just casually asked Indrani to kill nine horses in motion at over ten times that distance, and the grin on her face told me she did not doubt for a moment she could do it. I watched with fascination as Archer strung the almost comically large longbow she usually kept on her back. It'd been crafted in the Waning Woods, I knew, from some sort of magical tree. Then additional enchantments had been laid on it. Back in the old days, Nauk had once tried to draw the string back and nearly broken his arm trying. That the most physically powerful mundane orc I'd ever met couldn't even get that string

to move an inch told me everything I needed to know about the absurd amount of tension there was to her bow.

The thing was, I thought as I watched her work, was that most of this was Indrani. Oh, I felt the whisper of power than was an aspect invoked. **See**. But that just allowed Archer to wield the kind of eyesight and foresight the woman who'd taught her to shoot would have by simple virtue of her elven blood. The strength to pull the string came in part from her Name, which up close and personal allowed to he slug it out with the likes of Adjutant and titled fae. But if Hakram, or I for that matter, had been granted the exact same strength and sight we wouldn't have been able to make those shots. The skills, the part that couldn't be replicated? That was all Indrani. Years upon years of nocking and releasing until her fingers bled, until the movements became such a natural part of her there no longer needed to be thought involved. Indrani could and had made a bloody mess of most everything that came up to her when she had her longknives in hand. But it was when she had that bow in her hand that something about her *thrummed*, that it all came together and I remembered that Archer was more than just a name.

It was Name, and she held it for a reason.

Eyes fixed ahead, she breathed out and like poetry in motion she drew and released. Not a single movement wasted, not a single pause. It was almost hypnotic to watch, like waves on the sea – there was no pause or separation to any of the process. Nine arrows flew, a smirk tugged at her lips and before the projectiles even reached their apex I reached for the Night. My eyes were on the Levantines and I felt talons dig into my shoulders, the Sisters with me even if their crow-forms were not. Whispers sounding in my ear, I held my will into shape and forced the Night to match it. And then waited, watching the riders as the arrows struck home. The first hit between the eyes of the lead horse, sinking straight into the skull and killing it instantly. The ninth arrow went straight through the eye of the horse even as the rider began to realize its companions had been attacked. For every arrow to claim a kill had taken perhaps a single heartbeat, from beginning to end.

Sometimes I forgot how terrifying the people at my side really were.

"And now, for the next trick," I said.

Under the Levantines the ground turned to ink-like darkness, growing from a single small mark to a broad circle. The Sisters held my hand, guiding the needle as I threaded it through the fabric of Creation, and when the gate opened every one of the outriders fell through it. If they'd still been on their horses, alert instead of trying not to be crushed by their own fallen mounts, the process might have been slow enough for them to flee it. Night had won over Winter, in the end, and so dawn had its costs. As it was, though? I let the Sisters guide my hand once more and another gate bloomed in front of our group. Seven heartbeats later, nine riders and their dead horses tumbled through. One was screaming in terror at the fall through the sky of Arcadia he had just escaped, though that ended when he felt an obsidian spear-tip pressing against

his throat. He swallowed loudly as my sigil surrounded the lot of them.

"Good morning," I smiled brightly. "I thought we might have a little chat, just you and me and all these heavily armed people surrounding you."

My gaze swept across the soldiers, most of which were still in shock. Some had pulled muscles or broken limbs on arrival, the poor fucker to the rightmost having his horse right over his leg. Yeah, that was shattered for sure. It was only when I saw the uncomprehending gazes taking me in that I realized the slight strategic mistake I had not accounted for. I looked at Indrani and Akua.

"I don't suppose either of you speaks any of the Levantine languages?" I grimaced.

Twin shakes of the head. So no Lunara, Ceseo and what was the third one again? Couldn't remember at the moment. Well, it hardly mattered anyway. I couldn't speak or understand any of them. I'd been meaning to get around to learning some tradertalk, which tended to be understood everywhere in southern Calernia, but I'd had higher priorities as of late.

"What I understand of Lunara is insufficient, but outriders sent to operate in the Principate's heartlands should have at least one individual fluent in a Proceran tongue," Akua pointed out. "If only to speak with the local inhabitants. I have some knowledge of tradertalk that could be of use, in the unlikely event this is not true."

My eyebrow rose. Made sense, and worth a shot regardless.

"Any of you speak Chantant?" I asked in said tongue.

"Who the fuck are you people?" a middle-aged mustachioed man growled back.

It was a very impressive mustache, I mentally conceded. It was refusing to be cowed by the scarf meant to cover it, defiantly peeking out over the edge.

"And there were go," I smiled, shifting to Crepuscular. "Ivah, go wake up General Rumena if it's asleep and bring it back here. We appear to have gotten our hands on fresh intelligence."

"By your will, Losara Queen," my Lord of Silent Steps bowed.

I nodded back fondly, watching it move out swiftly to carry my orders. I turned back to the Levantines.

"Surrender your weapons," I said, back on Chantant. "And remain seated on the ground. You are now joint prisoners of the Empire Ever Dark and the Kingdom of Callow."

That'd been a calculated move. I hadn't truly needed to bring Callow into it, or mention the freshly revived name of the ancient drow empire – which, given that the region was still known as the Everdark, meant didn't take any real brilliance to be able to put together the identity of the grey-skinned warriors surrounding the prisoners. It told me something useful, though: everyone who stilled or went pale could understand the language I was speaking. Out of the nine, four gave a visible reaction. One did not, save for moving back to learn against a tree, but the calculating look in his eyes told me he'd not missed a thing. *This one's already thinking of how to get out of this mess*, I decided.

There were no visible marks of rank on any of them, but I'd guess he was an officer. Clever sorts could be useful, if inclined to talk, but they could also screw up an interrogation pretty badly if allowed to speak up. Best to separate these before we got into it.

"You're the Black Queen," the maybe-officer suddenly said.

In Chantant, too. Interesting.

"In the flesh," I replied, the irony known to few quirking my lips.

The statement had been the offered opening of a conversation, if I was reading this right, but I remained disinclined to allow the prisoners to know what the others had and had not said. People were always more inclined to fold if they believed someone already had.

"Bring them back to camp after taking the weapons," I ordered the drow. "Leave the one who just spoke behind."

I cleared my throat before addressing the Levantines.

"You were told to surrender your weapons," I said. "They will now be collected. Resist and you will be subjected to force. Obey and you will be treated fairly. I will not warn you twice."

They were soldiers, I thought, but also sworn to a crusade. A warning wouldn't be enough for all of them. One of the outriders tried to reach for his scabbard and got a spear through the palm for it, which had another screaming and struggling until one my warriors decked him in the mouth. Maybe-officer did not resist. I let the drow of my sigil escort the prisoners without a look and gestured at those who remained to step back. It was sunny morning out, the air was crisp and I met the gaze of the Levantine prisoner without blinking.

"Name, rank?" I asked.

"Wasim of Tartessos. I am second in this band," he replied.

Tartessos was... the second northernmost city in Levant, if I remembered correctly, which was for some inexplicable reason built on the edge of the Brocelian Forest. I'd read in some history that the people from there were known to be hardy and ruthless, which considering the boiling cauldron of beasts they lived next to only made sense. I heard Archer unstring her bow before moving to lean against a tree, likely already starting to get bored and paying only the barest necessary attention to this. Diabolist, though, had been studying this Wasim the whole time in silence. I could trust her to pick on anything I'd miss.

"You are an outrider," I said. "In the service of the Dominion?"

"I gave oath to the Lord of Malaga when there was a call to arms," Wasim said. "By the will of the Holy Seljun, he holds command of half the forces of Levant."

"Implying there is no unified command for the armies of the Dominion," Akua noted in Crepuscular. "That could be of use. Levantine nobility rules its lands with only the barest homage paid to their Seljun, so their leaders might chafe at taking orders from anyone else."

I inclined my head in acknowledgement, never taking my eyes off the prisoner.

"Where are the Lord of Malaga and his army, at the moment?" I asked.

*How much are you really willing to tell me when I've made no threat?*

"Marching for the capital of Iserre," he replied.

"Lying," Diabolist said.

I sighed.

"And we were doing so well, until that," I said. "You struck me as a clever man, Wasim of Tartessos."

I flicked my wrist at Archer. A heartbeat later a longknife was buried up to the hilt into the tree Wasim was lying back against. Less than an inch away from his jugular. I met his eyes squarely.

"Clever men don't make the same mistake twice, do they?" I asked.

The soldier swallowed loudly.

"They do not," he hastily agreed.

"Where are the Lord of Malaga and his army?" I mildly repeated.

"When I was sent out, they were preparing to take a defensive position to the southwest of here," Wasim said. "Near the town of Maleims."

"To defend against who, exactly?" I frowned.

"The League of Free Cities," he said. "They march against the Tenth Crusade, led by the Tyrant of Helike and their madman Hierarch."

My frown deepened. I'd been under the impression the forces of the League were much further south. They were either moving much more quickly than should be possible for a sizable army, or I'd been misinformed.

"Could be a detached force instead of the main host," Archer suggested in Lower Miezan.

She'd regained a semblance of interest in this, it seemed. Probably because she'd gotten to throw a blade at someone.

"They came from the Waning Woods," I said. "That means they don't have a supply train. If they start splitting forces, either they split their limited foodstuffs as well or the detachment starts foraging."

And there wasn't much to live off of in this region. Sure they could start sacking towns and small cities for their reserves but even then the Legions of Terror had pretty much picked clean most of the principality. You couldn't take much food from people already only the verge of starvation. It could just be a bad decision someone up the chain of command had done – either incompetence or lack of information – but that didn't smell right to me. If they were that incompetent and ill-informed, they wouldn't have made it through the Waning Woods in the first place.

"If we assume the League force was sent out with sufficient supplies, then something prompted that investment of resources," I finally said. "Something we don't know about, but the League's generals do."

"Wasim," Akua said. "Was your band of outriders sent out with specific purpose?"

The Levantine man grimaced.

"We were to investigate rumours," he said.

"Of?"

"Skirmishes between two armies," Wasim admitted. "Legionaries and the League."

I traded a look with Akua. There was no way, we both knew, that the legions under Marshal Grem could be this far east. But there was another army on the continent that fielded legionaries.

So what the Hells was the Army of Callow doing out here, and why the Hells was the League of Free Cities fighting it?

# Chapter 5

# Consult

> "I inherited not an empire but a house on fire: fall in line, lest we all burn."
>
> First Princess Éloïse of Aequitan

There were few things as frustrating as looking at something you *knew* how to do, had done, and yet did not understand in the slightest. The half-page of equations and formulas that I'd gotten Akua to write down for me was exactly that, when it came down to it. A practical, measurable representation of what I did when I 'threaded the needle' through Creation when making a gate. It'd been gibberish, the first time I glanced at it, but at least I'd thought I knew why. To put it bluntly, I lacked the tools to make the tools that'd give me a *chance* of making the tools that would allow to comprehend what was going on. More than nine tenths of mages were incapable of using High Arcana or even comprehending the principles behind it, after all, so considering I did not have even the slightest trace of the Gift I'd never exactly been in the running. These were numbers, though, so there had to be at least part of them I could grasp. Something that'd allow me to run on more than instinct and power, because neither of those were truly mine when it came down to it and I'd not forgotten my old lessons. Borrowed power always turned on its user.

So I'd buckled down, put away the wine and tried to figure this out from the bottom. The very basics of Trismegistan sorcery, which Diabolist assured unlike most theories of magic out there at least had mostly observable underlying principles. I didn't have a library to ransack, sure, but I had the most viciously distinguished Sahelian in a few centuries around to pick the brains of and two literal goddesses on my shoulders. Both of which had been practitioners of high skill, before they got desperate enough to call on Below. It... wasn't going very well. Not because my tutors were incompetent, they weren't. Much as it pained me to admit it, Akua was better at explaining the magical in mundane terms than Masego had ever been and likely ever would be. As for the Sisters, they could literally *show* me what they meant. I just didn't have the knack for this.

It didn't come naturally to me the way the sword and stories had. Even languages, and Gods knew I'd learned quite a few of those by now, were easier to get a handle on. Not easy at all, sure, but if I put in the work even without the crutch of the first aspect I'd ever earned I could make visible progress.

This, though? I'd finally memorized the classical table of elements and most the relationships involved, but aside from a refresher in all things arithmetic I'd not gotten much out of these new studies. Being able to name the limits of sorcery and a handful of fundamental laws didn't mean I understood them, not truly. I could name past examples of those limits being hit but it was damnably hard to extrapolate as to how other practitioners might hit them in the future. Like having a phrasebook for a foreign tongue, then being asked to write a philosophical essay in it. So much of sorcery was about context, years of learning and studies, and I simply didn't have that. I wasn't sure I ever would, to be blunt, or that trying to obtain it was the best use of my time. Practically speaking, I got more out of a spar with Archer than I did of an hour learning about ritual theory. I passed a hand through my hair – it was unbound, for once – and sighed. The unpleasant truth was that if I'd started these studies years ago, just after becoming the Squire, I might be getting somewhere useful by now. Instead I was stuck depending on the advice and understanding of others.

That wasn't necessarily a bad thing, I thought. Not all the time. But I'd walked into some nasty messes lately by sheer arrogant ignorance, and I couldn't count on my friends to pull me out of them every time. Not with the kind of opposition there was out there. There were some heroes I'd survive blundering against, but that didn't hold for all of them. And the heroes were almost a second thought, compared to the ancient thing that was marching south at the head of undead hordes. I gathered the handful of parchments splayed across my low table and slipped them back into my saddlebag, closing the clasp. I'd been circling the same few paragraphs for the better part of an hour now, there'd be no progress made today. Besides, I'd begun another project. The Everdark had been a wake-up call in a lot of ways: about how I'd been fighting, about who I should be fighting. And there, like in sorcery, ignorance and recklessness had begun to cost me quite a bit. If I was to get involved in the wars scouring the Principate – and I was, it was the only possible way I could see of getting the Liesse Accords signed – then I couldn't just go in like a drunk brawler and swing at everything in sight.

The Dead King was on the march, and that changed everything.

I couldn't keep dropping geographical features on armies when I'd be needing those same armies to take the field against Keter before long. Not only was I weakening the same Grand Alliance I needed to keep from collapsing, there was a very real risk that everyone I killed down here would get up and start fighting for the other side at some point. Burning the dead would greatly limit the spectrum of necromancy that could be used on them, Diabolist had assured me, but not prevent the magic entirely from being used. Even a mass grave filled with ashes could be a threat if the Hidden Horror got his hands on it.

Diplomacy would be the preferable option here, but I'd tried that before and my knuckles were starting to bleed from the amount of times the door had been slammed on them. I'd been named Arch-heretic of the East, and while back in Callow that'd been met with indignant riots the title would weigh a lot more in the eyes of the western half of Calernia. That I'd effectively been made the head of the drow religion would only make it worse, and there would be no keeping that under wraps for long. The only way I'd get the other nations to sit at the table was if they no longer believed they could really win against me without losing everything else.

Which meant I was going to have to kill some very powerful people before the year was out.

The Grey Pilgrim couldn't be one, because if I killed him then the Dominion wouldn't stop before either was I buried in pieces or their country was a heap of cinders. I'd made my peace with that. While not someone I'd ever trust, he was someone I could work with. The Saint, though? I'd need her head on a pike before I got anywhere. Considering I had serious doubts even dropping an entire mountain on that old monster would kill her, I needed to prepare something that would. The voice in the back of my head that sounded like my father kept reminding me that relying on an artefact was the kind of foolishness that got villains killed, but that wasn't what I was doing. Not exactly. I was crafting a tool, in the same way a goblin alchemist would craft munitions. My sword and scabbard had been propped up against my table when I took them off my belt, and I leaned over to grasp them now. No goblin steel blade, this, or shard of Winter given shape. I'd made a request of Sve Noc before we left the Everdark, when my strategy had begun to take shape, and it had been fulfilled.

The scabbard was carved obsidian, a tale writ in runes of some fool girl who'd made an accord with sister-goddesses. The characters were twined around something else, a declaration of intent: *Losara Queen, First Under the Night*. There was power in putting truth to stone, especially when you had been part of the story told. The blade within the sheath had not left it since the first rest, the only visible part being the long handle of onyx and amethyst. I'd learned the uses of those stones well, in the last few months. One to ingest power, the other to facilitate communion and connection to the divine. Closing my fingers around the handle I closed my eyes as well, breathing in deep. The Night slithered through my veins, answering the call, and I felt the weight of the crows on my shoulders. They approved, these quarrelsome goddesses of mine. That was not nearly as reassuring as they believed it to be. I focused, clearing my thoughts and-

-and the folds of my tent were unceremoniously pushed open.

"The Queen of Callow alone in her tent, 'handling her sword'," Archer mused. "There's *definitely* a joke in there."

I bit back an irritated reply, eyes fluttering open. The Night turned to smoke, leaving me, but there would be time enough later. Every hour I could spare, in fact.

"I assume you came in for a reason?" I said.

"There's word from our scouts on Rochelant, so Rumena wants to see you," she replied.

I grunted in answer, rolling my shoulder questioningly. The pop that eventually ensued served as a reminder that sitting on the ground for a few hours had actual physical consequences these days. I put my hand against the table to push myself up before pausing under Archer's bemused gaze. I chewed on my lip, then called on the Night again. Darkness gathered around the sword and scabbard like flies to honey, for a moment emptying the inside of my tent from every speck of shadow. I heard Komena laughing in my ear, before she leant her hand to the shaping: making power stable and solid was always more difficult than just seizing it. I leaned on the long, crooked staff of ebony now in my hand to drag myself up to me feet. Indrani's hazelnut eyes were studying me curiously.

"Gonna tell me what that was about?" she lightly asked.

"There's no point in having advisors," I said, "if I don't occasionally take their advice."

"Ooh, *cryptic*," she praised.

"Well, I am a priestess," I drawled back. "You may now guide me to my humble flock, wench."

She grinned.

"You know, in Alamans romances that have very nice illustrations of what Wicked Priestesses of Evil should wear," Archer informed me.

I rolled my eyes and pulled ahead of her. She was still trying to convince to wear clothes that in this weather would get me frostbite in very inconvenient parts when we got to the mouthy old drow's tent, but that was where the easy mood died. Rumena Tomb-Maker had looked unflappable even when throwing gauntlets down simultaneously at the feet of both the Longstride Cabal's most dangerous Mighty and myself at the peak of my mastery over Winter. That it now looked somewhat disturbed while looking at the map of Procer we'd taken from our Levantine prisoners was not a good sign. Akua was already lounging in the back of the tent, which was deserted save the two of them. Less than surprising, given that it was still daylight out and most drow hadn't yet emerged from their dawn-induced slumber. The general barely glanced at the staff I was leaning on, but I felt Diabolist's gaze linger. I did not meet her eyes, instead limping to sit across from the old drow who had greeted me with a mere nod. Archer unceremoniously dropped down at my side, though given the flask that'd mysteriously appeared in her hand I doubted she'd be paying much attention to the proceedings.

"Report," I simply said.

"Lord Ivah has returned from Rochelant," Rumena said. "The city is already under occupation."

My brow rose, and my wariness as well. Humans stepping on other humans wouldn't wrinkle the Tomb-Maker's brow, which meant there was more to this.

"By who?" I asked.

Akua cleared her throat.

"While Lord Ivah was not familiar with the banners being flown, it offered detailed descriptions," the shade said. "Two emblems are being flown: that of the Hierarch of the League of Free Cities and the personal heraldry of the Theodosians of Helike."

I started in surprise.

"I thought the Hierarch had refused a banner?" I said.

"He did," Akua amusedly replied. "It is blank cloth, and so even more easily recognizable than heraldry from a distance."

I mulled over that. The Hierarch's personal banner would be flown regardless of his actual presence, given that he was in theory the supreme commander of the military forces of the League, so that didn't give us much. Neither did the Tyrant's family colours being up there, unfortunately. The villain was essentially a sack full of wet and angry cats made into a person, so schemes were only to be expected. None of this, though, explained why Rumena was feeling unsettled.

"There's more," I stated, and it was not a question.

"As there were no armies encamped outside the walls and no visible watch in place, Lord Ivah infiltrated the city," Rumena said. "The humans within appear to have gone mad."

"Define mad," I said.

Akua stepped in.

"There appears to be a revolt taking place," she said. "Citizens are forming tribunals and killing officials and prominent individuals after public trials, under the supervision of Helikean soldiers."

I blinked.

"Supervision," I repeated slowly. "They're not being forced?"

"Lord Ivah reported feeling the urge to join these 'trials'," General Rumena said. "And that the urge grew stronger the longer it remained within. This is... unusual. Though this took place under the glare of the sun, such influence over our kind has no precedent to my knowledge."

I felt talons digging painfully into my shoulders and winced. The Sisters weren't pleased that someone might be meddling with minds of one of their own, even one who'd chosen to swear itself to my service.

"Aspect, you think?" I asked Akua.

"Hard to tell without taking a closer look," she admitted. "Large-scale manipulation of minds by ritual is not unprecedented – Dread Emperor Imperious once compelled an entire army to suicide – but the Carrion Lord's scuffle with the forces of Helike should have killed a significant portion of their most skilled practitioners. I am not certain they could accomplish such a working anymore. Not directly."

She paused.

"There is, of course, another path possible," Diabolist said. "Binding an entity capable of such influence would require fewer mages, though it would carry significant risks."

I closed my eyes and counted to ten.

"Tell me someone didn't summon a fucking demon in the middle of a continental brawl," I asked.

"Someone didn't summon a fucking demon in the middle of a continental brawl," Indrani eagerly replied, the slightest of slurs to her voice.

I ignored that, for all our sakes.

"Akua?" I pressed.

"In other times I would wager only the full Stygian Magisterium capable of that tier of diabolism," the shade finally said. "But the Tyrant of Helike has proved... surprisingly well-informed. I would not dismiss the possibility out of hand."

I clenched my fingers into a fist until the knuckles paled. Of all the *violently idiotic* things to do. If a demon got loose with this many armies in the region, the damage could be... Staggering. We could lose the entire centre of Procer in a month, if it went wrong, and by the time the dust settled the final contest over who owned Calernia would between demon-corrupted puppets and the armies of the dead. Where were the fucking heroes when you actually needed them? A whole warband was willing to show up for the Battle of the Camps but this somehow did not require their attention? I forced myself to calm down. Angry thinking was sloppy thinking. We didn't know for sure it was a demon. It could be an aspect or a ritual, or half a hundred tricks I'd never heard about. We'd plan for the worse, but I wouldn't allow myself to get stuck in the perspective it was necessarily what was taking place.

"All right," I said, letting out a long breath. "Our approach needs to be adjusted."

"How so?" General Rumena asked.

"If this is the Tyrant screwing with Procer with sorcery or his Name, we let it go," I reluctantly said. "I'm not starting a war with the League over this, ugly as that reality is."

"If our assumption is correct and the 'legionaries' the League were seen skirmishing with are truly the Army of Callow, we might already be at war with them," Akua pointed out.

"We don't know for sure," I said. "It fits, and my instinct is that Juniper's out there, but I'm not going to act based on just that. It could be deserters from Marshal Grem's army, or a raiding force he sent out. It could be a scheme, if someone knew we were coming, to bait us into starting that very war. And even if *was* Juniper, we don't know the context of those skirmishes – and note they were that, skirmishes. Not a field battle."

"You do not believe that, not truly," the shade said.

"My beliefs are irrelevant," I sharply replied. "There's too much at stake here for hasty decisions, and too much we just *don't know*. Someone out there

set up this game, Diabolist, and until we know who that is I'm not picking any fights I don't have to."

Silence reigned after that, and Akua simply inclined her head in deference.

"And if it isn't?" Archer nonchalantly asked. "Magic or an aspect, I mean."

I put a hand on the low table, feeling the cool polished surface against the warmth of my flesh.

"Containment," I softly said. "Observation. Then, if necessary, we purge everyone inside."

I would not allow a demon to run rampant this close to so many armies and Named. I would not allow the *Tyrant* to wield that dangerous a tool when both those things were so close, as that might even more dangerous. If the city could not be saved, then I would see it burned to the ground. It was the closest thing to mercy I could still offer. The Liesse Accords would ban the summoning of demons any circumstances, I thought with irritation, not that it meant anything until they were signed. *Allowable Use of Non-Creational Entities, And Circumstances Therein*. There was an entire section of the treaty dedicated to this stuff. Considering what it had to say about angels it wouldn't be all that popular with some people, but then others would be less than pleased about the parts pertaining to devils.

I did not mind beginning to enforce the sheerest common sense onto this continent at swordpoint before signatures had been put to the Accords, if it proved necessary.

"Then you would have us prepare for battle," General Rumena said, tone neutral.

"You have your orders, Tomb-Maker," I said.

There was a whisper of power in the tent, and the phantom weight of the crows on my shoulders. The old drow took in the sight of the Sisters manifest and immediately bowed its head.

"By your will, First Under the Night," it replied. "I will begin preparations immediately."

The weight was gone, quick as it had come, and I let the general leave the tent without further comment. My eyes moved to the map on the table, the small stones that had been placed on it. We were a day's march from Rochelant and whatever awaited us there, now. There'd be answers soon enough.

"If it is not a demon," Akua suddenly said, breaking through the silence. "If the Kingdom of Callow is not at war with the League... Then there might be an opportunity awaiting."

I picked up the black stone representing our army and spun it idly between my fingers. My gaze remained on the inked borders and cities of the Principate of Procer. On the few coloured stones marking the forces we knew about. The two armies of the Dominion, the rumoured Proceran relief force coming from Salia. The most likely current operating theatre of the legions under Marshal Grem. Where we'd believed the armies of the League to be, though that would need reassessment. And far to the south, the duped border army of the First

Prince desperately hurrying back towards tactical relevance. The thorough interrogation of the Levantine outriders had wielded more information than anticipated, even if a lot of it was rumours.

"You want to make a deal with the Tyrant of Helike," Indrani guffawed. "Because *that's* going to end well."

"An alignment between Callow and the League alone would force the Grand Alliance to the peace table," the shade pointed out. "The addition of the Empire Ever Dark further tips the balance. We would be as much of an existential threat as the Dead King, in some aspects. The alignment need not last forever for concessions to be extracted."

There was a pattern somewhere in there, I thought. Oh, it looked like sheer bloody chaos at first glance but I'd fought wars before and something about this was raising my hackles. Someone had helped this storm to brew, and that meant someone would benefit from it. Malicia had once told me that when beginning a scheme, one must first consider the desired outcome. She was a lot better at this game than I'd ever be, but I could derive some use from that lesson: what did the players in Iserre want? The Grand Alliance wanted to crush the invasion as swiftly as possible before sending all its forces north. The Legions of Terror, if their march upwards was any indication, wanted to use the northern passage to retreat towards Callow. The League was the entity hardest to predict. It had two heads, the Hierarch and the Tyrant, and it was unclear who was really holding the reins of the horse. *If anyone is at all.* If they'd wanted territorial gains, I thought, they would not have come this far north so early. It would have been sounder sense to smash the Proceran border army in Tenerife then quickly move to occupy a few southern principalities while the Principate was forced to deal with other threats in the heartlands. Instead they'd joined the complicated dance taking place in Iserre.

"See, the problem with that is that at some point we're at a table with the Tyrant," Indrani said. "That's basically throwing jugs of oil at a bonfire, Akua. He's gonna fuck *someone* before that conference is done, and it might just be us."

Remove the League forces from Iserre, and what did you get? Eighteen thousand veterans under Grem, my own southern expedition of fifty thousand and possibly a portion of the Army of Callow. All of which would join up into a single force when faced with external foes. Against that, a relief army from Salia that should be at least thirty thousand to be worth throwing into the mess. Eighty thousand split in two from the Dominion. And maybe, though to be honest the chances weren't great, that army of twenty thousand from Tenerife would make it in time to participate. I doubted anyone from the League would have been able to predict the kind of army I'd come back with, but then they might have just been betting blind on my coming back with *some* kind of force. East against West, to paint in broad strokes, the Grand Alliance had us beat in numbers. We'd have better soldiery, though, and unless the heroes stepped in we'd have the only Named on the field. If truce couldn't be reached

there would be a clash on a massive scale, and one of those coalitions would come out of it shattered. Put back the League onto the field, though, and suddenly the difference was obvious. Like Indrani had mused days ago, neither coalition could commit to that kind of a clash because both ran a risk the Tyrant would come swinging at their back when they were occupied.

This, I decided, couldn't be the Hierarch's game. Unless the man was hiding deep cunning and political acumen behind the rambling letters and had been playing some of the finest minds on the continent – and also me – like fiddles then this wasn't his doing. It would be the Tyrant of Helike, moving through him. *No one can make a deal with the League, because the madman ruling it will refuse to make one out of principle*, I thought. And the Tyrant, if the Eyes of the Empire were to be believed, had been the one to arrange for the Hierarch to be elected in the first place. That did not feel like a coincidence. I closed my palm over the stone I'd been twirling, then absent-mindedly knocked it against the surface of the table.

"But if you're trying to prevent one side from being crippled," I murmured. "Then why are you stirring the pot?"

If the objective was to keep the East and the West from bloodying each other to the extent that no one would be able to stand against the Dead King, it would run against the grain to keep shoving chaos into Iserre. Which he was absolutely doing, if the situation in Rochelant was what it sounded like. *Unless you really don't give a shit about the war*, I thought. *Because the war is just a way for you to get at something so it doesn't matter who wins it, so long as they don't win it too early.* But if that was really the case...

"Catherine?" Akua said.

My head rose. I hadn't realized until now, but silence had fallen over the tent.

"Call Rumena back," I ordered. "There won't be a demon in Rochelant. I'll be heading to the city with a small escort, while the army under it needs to be moving elsewhere. And *fast*."

"And what will be doing there?" Indrani asked.

It had never even occurred to her, I thought affectionately, that she would not be coming.

"Paying a visit to my eternal friend," I said. "To find out what it is exactly he needs so badly from Cordelia Hasenbach."

# Chapter 6

# Furor

> "The words of one sage are wisdom, the words of a hundred a riot."
>
> Atalantian saying

What was it with Proceran cities and looking kind of shoddy?

Rochelant at least had bothered to put up walls at some point in its history, which the Callowan in me could not help but approve of, but those miserable piles of mud and stone looked like they hadn't seen a day's maintenance in the last century. I wouldn't need sorcery to knock those over, just a sapper with a few tools and a pile of firewood. On the other hand, I couldn't help but stare at the size of the place – come winter, and we were definitely there, there must have been at least twenty something thousand people living in there. Rochelant was a goblin's dream playground, all wooden thatched houses and narrow alleys, but by Proceran standards this was considered a *small* city. There would be a handful of those in Iserre alone, with the eponymous capital being significantly larger. Sometimes it boggled the mind how many people actually lived within the borders of the Principate. Sure, these were the heartlands and by far the most densely populated part of the realm, but I wouldn't be surprised if the total population of Procer beat that of Callow and Praes put together. *But the behemoth is quarrelsome, and slow to wake*, I thought. That'd been the sole saving grace of the Principate's bordering nations since the crowning of the founding First Prince. Yet both those flaws would have to be fixed, if the war up north was to be won.

There was a reason I would have peace as set by the Liesse Accords or no peace at all. Procer resurgent, purged of all its weaknesses, might be almost as dangerous to Calernia as the Dead King himself. Cordelia Hasenbach did not strike me as particularly ambitious when it came to acquiring new territories directly – her game had always been a diplomatic in outcome, when she was the one leading the dance – but there was no guarantee her successor would be so inclined. I wasn't going to bloody Callow and its allies just to enable the latest

imperial expansion of the 'Wardens of the West', as the rulers of this realm so arrogantly titled themselves.

"Ivah wasn't making it up," Archer mused. "They really *haven't* bothered to put up sentries. Bold, I've gotta say."

The walls were only about a dozen feet high and I had doubts they were thick enough to resist even a single good hit from a trebuchet, but the part Indrani had focused on was perhaps the most important: there was not a soul patrolling atop them. Or guarding the city gates, which were as wide open as such a narrow gap allowed. The snowy dirt road leading to them had been use recently, though. There were hoof marks leading into the countryside, so whoever held command in there was fielding at least some patrols. I pulled at the reins of Zombie the Fourth, though the dead horse I'd spared form ending up in a drow cookpot to serve as my undead mount instead showed no reaction to the gesture. Necromancy, insofar as I was truly doing that – and Akua had expressed her doubts on the subject many a time – had gotten a little rougher since I'd traded in Winter for Night. Whatever strange spark of intelligence my good little abomination Zombie the Third still held wherever she was – unnecessarily – grazing at grass was absent from my new mount. The Sisters insisted this was a consequence of my raw handling of Night, but I disagreed. There'd been something to Winter that was missing in the Night, even after the latter had devoured the former. Crow-Andronike stirred on my shoulder, displeased, but did not take up the argument. It was probably for the best that her sister had remained with the southern expedition, because she most definitely would have.

"The smoke means chimneys and fires are still being used," Akua noted from my other side. "In large enough amount it cannot be solely the soldiers of the League doing so. That implies some degree of coherent thought remains to the inhabitants."

"Not a demon, probably, unless it is," Indrani summed up.

Diabolist looked deeply pained at the phrasing, but did not disagree. I smothered a smile and urged Zombie forward with a twist of will. The company of drow around us was heavy on Lords, at General Rumena's insistence, though to be fair I hadn't bothered to argue. Ivah, Soln, Sagas and Vadymir: the majority of my surviving Peerage was trailing the three of us, with around four dozen rylleh of mixed sigils following behind them in turn. As long as the moon was out, the power at my back was the equivalent of fielding a small army. In power, anyway, and that was always tricky business. All that was necessary for them to turn into a mere fifty drow was the right ward or miracle. They'd been predators among predators, down in the Everdark, but where the Firstborn had been shedding their own blood for millennia up here the war had two sides. For all their centuries of fighting and deep wells of Night, I often wondered how well my Peerage would truly stack up against a well-trained hero. *We'll have to find out, eventually*, I grimly thought. I shook off the thought and turned by attention back to the present.

The closer we got to the city, the more I became convinced there were eyes on us. There was not a soul immediately through the gates, which made that rather interesting. Andronike's sliver of godhood on my shoulder should be quite enough to make a wreck of any attempt to scry us, implying *something* was actually watching us directly.

"Archer?" I murmured.

Even under the hood and cloth I saw her brow creasing.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Indrani said. "But I'm guessing if these people can't even put together the coin for decent walls they shouldn't have enough to put up gargoyles on them."

Akua stilled.

"Helikeans are fond of animating stone," the shade said. "Though admittedly they've rarely succeeded at anything larger than a dog."

Now that I knew what to look for, I could make out the small silhouettes that'd wedged themselves into holes and fissures. Imp-like sculptures of rough stone, some with the heads of dogs and others more lizardlike. Many had wings, though not all. I'd missed them at first look, I thought, because none of them were moving even the slightest bit. Not even the eyes.

"No sentries, huh," I said. "Looks like our good friend the Tyrant is a little more careful than he lets on."

Ivah slid up to me, head already bowed, but I waved away the apology before it could be spoken. It'd been the kind of detail someone unused to having to consider what people could and could not afford – in essence, not a drow – might have missed. Living in massive ornate ruins could be a blind spot of sorts, and both Ivah and its scouts had spent their whole lives living in the remnants of their old empire. Interesting, though, that the mistake would fit so well. Had the Tyrant gotten lucky, or was there more to it? Regardless, it seemed that my army's last visit to Rochelant might not have been as discreet as we'd previously thought. The Tyrant of Helike, I suspected, would be waiting for us.

"You'll know next time," I simply told Ivah. "Mistakes are to be expected. It doesn't matter, so long as you learn from them."

"As you say, Losara Queen," the Lord of Silent Steps murmured back.

With a bow it retreated, just in time for us to enter Rochelant in lockstep. The gate above us was arched, and I felt petty satisfaction at noting that my earlier prediction of poor wall depth proved entirely accurate. The muddy road into the city ahead of us was probably the closest thing to an avenue there was to be found in here. Broad enough for a cart to go through, anyway, which had probably been the measure it was built on.

"Akua," I simply said.

Diabolist met my eyes, inclined her head and as we passed in the shade cast by a house she vanished into thin air. She had her instructions already. My arguably finest expert in sorcery would be taking a look at the influence taking

hold of Rochelant, though she was to retreat and return to me the moment she started feeling it herself.

"It is here," Andronike spoke from my shoulder. "Like waves lapping at the shore. There is a source further in."

"Not feeling anything," Indrani noted.

"For which we give thanks to the Night," I mildly replied.

I had no intention of walking into a place like this without one of my crow-goddesses serving as a shield.

"My thoughts exactly. Hail the Sisters, all that good stuff," Archer snorted.

She'd never been one to meet a deity and not debate whether to try to stab it, I recognized with a sigh.

"We head for the source," I told the drow. "Andronike?"

"None may hide from me after dusk," the crow claimed.

That might even be true, as I immediately felt a pull in the Night guiding me forward through the streets. Given how narrow they were, the drow had to spread out over rooftops to keep even a semblance of formation. They did so in utter silence, ethereal silhouettes in the moonlight that left no mark and bore no weight. We'd left the main road behind, and with that any semblance of this city not being a nightmarish mess of cramped alleys. Tough sometimes it was so tight that Archer couldn't even stay at my side, our journey through was informative in some ways. There were still people inside the houses, though not nearly as many as there should be this late out. The sounds in the distance told me that Ivah's report of 'tribunals' had not been idle chatter: I could hear shouting in Chantant, the bay of a mob out for a good hanging. The first trial we came across was on the steps of a House of Light, and the sight of a roiling mob of nearly a hundred had me ordering my horse to a halt. The Procerans did not pay us the slightest attention, though the other foreigners did. Watching on passively from a distance, a dozen soldiers in scale armour were standing apart from the crowd. Sword and board men, the lot of them, though the mail beneath the scales going down to their knees was a style of armour known to me. Helikean, though these men-at-arms were missing the javelins their lot was reputed to bear.

The Tyrant's soldiers looked at us, but before long returned their attention to the citizens. *So you knew we were coming*, I thought. *Or your orders are not to care about outsiders coming in.* Gaze returning to the Procerans, I tried to parse out the mixed shouts of Chantant and Tolesian they were using interchangeably and found only mixed success. The man they were attempting to hold a tribunal over was obvious, a brother from the House of Light wearing what had once been very nice robes now ripped and dirtied. Accusations bribery and withheld healing were tossed at him, but my interest lay in the fact that there were other priests among the crowd. Shouting with the others, red-faced and thirsty for blood. Whatever was animating these people, even priesthood was no opponent for it.

"They're not resorting to violence yet," I noted out loud.

"That robe didn't rip itself," Archer replied.

Yes, but she was missing the point. For all the anger and fervour stirring up the crowd, they were not simply tearing the accused apart. The process was rough and loud, but accusations were being laid and witnesses called. Some law, I suspected, was being obeyed. But whose? It was certainly not the laws of Iserre, or even those few that held for the entire Principate. We stayed long enough to see the crowd begin voting on the seven among them that would make up the tribunal and pass the sentence, though I did not remain to witness what would be the inevitable conclusion. There were already headless corpses staining the front of the House that told me the nature of it. The Helikean soldiers parted wordlessly for us when I rode past them, Archer at my side. None of them caught sight of the shadows following me by way of the rooftops. Three more of these trials we encountered as I let the Night guide me further into Rochelant, each headed for grim ending.

"There's something in the air here," Indrani grunted as we passed the third.

"Blood," I flatly replied.

I glanced to the side as she pulled back her hood a fraction, revealing troubled hazelnut eyes.

"This almost feels like a domain, Cat," she said. "Only wrong. Winter was cruel, but it was... clear. This has a fever to it, a sickness. Whatever's at the centre of this, it is *mad*."

I shivered, fingers closing tightly around my ebony staff. I'd heard what she did not say. It was mad, and so it was dangerous – and we were head towards it.

"And still we advance," I said.

Stillness held for a moment.

"Well," Archer said, pulling down her hood. "Not like we ever let good sense get in the way before."

I sent Zombie forward, knowing there was a grain of truth to that. Andronike's talons dug into my shoulder as we made our way out of the alley not long after, a sign we'd reached the source of this bloody dream. The clamour could be heard long before I saw anything with my own eyes, the wave of sound that was hundreds of people talking and screaming and moving. Before us stood what was likely a marketplace, though packed full with citizens as it was that could only remain a guess. Men and women were standing in line in the back, up against a tavern, and I watched as the one in front was dragged to the side and beheaded before the parted corpse was dragged away out of sight. Immediately the tribunal that'd passed the sentence returned to the mob, and voting began on who would make up the next as the second in line in the back was brought to the front. This was it, I thought. Even with the crow goddess on my shoulder shielding me from the worst of this, I could feel something rippling in the air. A steady pulse like a heartbeat. Leaning on the height temporarily granted to me by my horse, I followed the sensation to its source.

There was a table to the side of the proceedings, more a pile of crates than anything else, and at is sat a single man. Tanned in the way of the Free Cities, he was dressed like a beggar in worn robes too loose on his frame. Which was thin, though not the thinness of the heathy. He looked like he'd had too many lean meals, or perhaps like the fire in those grey eyes had eaten away at his body from the inside. The Hierarch of the League of Free Cities, for this could not be anyone else, was middle-aged and balding. His eyebrows were thick and bushy, both they and his sparse beard warring between white streaks and dark brown. One of his boots, I could not help but notice, had been so poorly sown back on the sole was coming off at the front. I looked at him, saw him scribbling on a clay tablet while intently following the proceedings, and felt the slightest bit of fear. He looked like no one, I thought. But coming from his body like an invisible current was some deep and terrible power the touch of which could be felt over all of Rochelant. It was not reaching into my mind, not yet, but it felt as if raising my hand would allow me to feel the unseen ripples.

"That's an aspect," Indrani said, voice hushed. "*Gods*, how can that be an aspect?"

"Andronike?" I asked.

The crow-goddess did not reply for a long moment, until I turned my head to look at her. If a bird could look uncomfortable, I saw, it would be something like this.

"This is... difficult," Andronike said, voice tight. "The pull is strong."

My fingers clenched.

"You're having a hard time fighting him," I croaked. "What the Hells is this, Andronike? He's Named, not..."

"Faith," the crow got out. "This is faith, Catherine Foundling. Pure unadulterated belief, untainted by doubt or hesitation. It *sings*, and the world sings back."

"Faith in what?" I asked.

"Nothing," Andronike hissed. "A snake eating its own tail. It is bleak madness screamed by endless throats, and it would stand tribunal over the Gods themselves."

I swallowed. And the Tyrant of Helike was using this man as a *pawn*?

"We need to leave," Archer said. "We're not ready for this. Not without Masego."

I breathed in, breathed out. Fear was the death of reason. None of the reasons I had come here had changed. If anything, the depths of the man I was still looking at made it *more* important to get a handle on what the League was after. I allowed my staff to slip my fingers and hit the frozen ground. Calling on a breath's worth of Night, I used to support to get off my horse. Indrani sucked in a breath.

"Cat, this is a trap," she said.

"And still I advance," I ruefully smiled. "Andronike, safeguard them."

The crow left my shoulder, a few flaps of her wings landing her atop the head of the eerily-still Zombie.

"It will sing to you, First Under the Night," the goddess warned.

"Ah, but that's the trick," I told her, baring my teeth. "You can't go mad *twice*, o goddess of Night."

Limping against my staff, I slipped into the crowd. The sound and power beat at my eardrums like a ram, in some way intertwined, and it took me by surprise hard enough some man almost elbowed me off my feet. I grit my teeth and shoved back with my staff. It should have stung, but the man was too busy screaming his vote in Chantant to notice. Going straight through would see me trampled, I decided, so I made my way to the edge instead and began circling around. The pounding in my ears was relentless. Again and again it came as I stumbled around half-blind, until I could almost make out words. Almost. I caught my breath against a half-fallen stall, and only then gathered enough attention to notice the woman staring at me. She was, it was almost too absurd to think, aggressively nondescript. There was a muted look to her face, as if her thoughts were halfway elsewhere, though as she narrowed her eyes I felt something brush against my mind.

Somewhere very far away, Sve Noc bared their teeth in displeasure.

The stranger paled, eyes turning bloodshot, and clutched her forehead as scarlet began dripping out of her nostrils. *Shouldn't have done that*, I thought. *In there be monsters, my friend.* I immediately felt dozens of stares settle on me, but I ignored them and began the journey again. Not far, now, and where the Hierarch was seated a gap had formed in the crowd. I pushed the last woman out of the way, though I froze just after. I could have sworn I'd hear someone whisper in my ear, though the words had been indistinct. My fingers clutched the staff and I drew comfort from the sensation of the Night within, letting out a deep breath and putting myself together. The Named, I saw, had not so much as glanced at me. Neither did he bother when I stepped around the makeshift table until I stood behind him. I glanced down at the words being scribbled on the clay tablet with a stone stylet. That wasn't Chantant, I noted. I didn't recognize the language, although at one of the words was very close to the Mtethwa for 'protest' so it might be tradertalk. The second Maleficent had held the region under her grasp for long enough there'd been some bleed into the local tongue, I'd read.

"Will anyone but you actually be able to read those?" I said in Chantant.

I'd meant to speak lightly, but my voice came out rough instead. The Hierarch finally paused in his writing, turning to look at me. There was something calm, almost resigned, to the stare. As if nothing of Creation could truly ruffle his feathers.

"Irrelevant," the Hierarch replied in the same, tone chiding. "Transcripts must be kept of trials held."

I blinked. Huh. Not the answer I'd expected. The power battering at my mind was weakening, I felt, slowly but surely. Did the aspect require concen-

tration?

"I am-"

"You have the look of a foreign tyrant," the Hierarch accused.

"Back home it's called regular tyranny, though," I replied, and immediately bit my tongue.

I'd really thought I was done with the whole taunting dangerous, powerful madmen thing but apparently old habits died hard. The Hierarch's brow furrowed as he seemed to seriously mull over that. The battering ram slowed even further.

"That seems logical," he muttered. "It should be passed on to the Republic for consideration."

Then he turned those dark eyes back on me.

"You do not deny the charge of tyranny?" he pressed.

"You already laid out your stance in our correspondence," I said.

He seemed vaguely surprised, then thoughtful.

"You are Cordelia Hasenbach," the man stated, half-questioningly.

A moment passed, while I was genuinely at a loss for words. *Ah*, I thought. *So this is why the Tyrant thinks he can make a pawn of you.* For a heartbeat I debated actually pretending I was the First Prince just to see if I could make some trouble for her, but discarded the notion just as quick. Best not to roll dice when they had teeth and a noted fondness for biting.

"Catherine Foundling," I replied. "Queen of Callow."

If he felt embarrassed about the mistake, he didn't show it in the slightest.

"There's no such thing," he told me sternly.

"Queens or Catherine Foundling?" I said. "Because one of those debates is a lot more philosophical than I'm equipped to handle."

Behind us the clamour of the crowd had quieted some, but by the sounds of it the trials hadn't stopped. Neither had the aspect, I thought, at least not entirely. But what had been a trumpet earlier was a murmur now, and that I could handle while keeping most of my wits about me.

"Aristocracy Is A Festering Wound Upon The People," Anaxares of Bellerophon gravely informed me. "May Hail Strike It Repeatedly For A Thousand Years."

That seemed a little excessive. There shouldn't be much left to hail on after the first century.

"Preaching to the Choir there," I said. "I've never fought a war against someone who didn't have some sort of title."

"Yet you are a queen," he said, blithely ignoring his previous assertion there was no such thing.

"For the moment," I shrugged. "I intend to abdicate when it's feasible."

"So your kind always claims," the Hierarch said, eyes turning flinty. "Give me the right, they say, give me the laws and the swords. I will keep you safe until the storm has passed. And service becomes rule, rule becomes tyranny until *lovingly* the yoke is fastened around our necks."

Like the hammer on the anvil, the ram against the gate, the dull pounding of his power began to sound in the distance. Slow. Swelling. Implacable. But I would not be cowed that easily.

"Is this why the League has gone to war?" I asked. "To end crowns?"

There wasn't a single thing that changed about him, I thought. He was still a skeleton of a man in ill-fitting robes, a scarecrow with a scowl. Not a single thing had changed, and yet... If I strained the ear, I could hear the chorus. The howls of the mob. Chains ripped apart, palaces toppled and bones being crushed. Torches starting a fire that would spread across the world. A song of revolt, of rebellion. I could feel it, like warm wine running through my veins. It was harsh and unforgiving, but oh how *glorious* it was. How easy it would have been to partake of it and let that warmth swallow me whole.

"We are all of us free or we are none of us free," the Hierarch of the League of Free Cities said, voice like steel. "There is no middle ground. And for the lashes struck at our back, all will be called to account – if gallows must be raised for devils and angels alike, *so be it*."

I almost, out of sheer contrariness, pointed out that devils did not die but only disperse. *But would they really, if it was this man passing the sentence?* Suddenly I was not so certain. My mistake, I thought, had been trying to think of him as either a terror or a fool. Fear had dogged me, wading through his aspect, but it had retreated as we spoke. As the man proved to be so uninterested in his surrounding as to be lost. I'd allowed the cadenced little phrases, the obvious mistakes and ignorance, to lull me into believing him... adrift. Living in his own world. But Black had warned me about people like this, hadn't he? About Named who did not see Creation as it was but how it *should be.* Men and women who embraced their vision so deeply they bent the world around them to match it. My mistake, I thought once more, had been to believe he must be only one of the two. He was not.

The Tyrant of Helike had not sharpened this blade so carefully to cut a mortal empire, I decided. There was a broader game unfolding.

"It's a pretty dream," I said. "A pretty speech. But you ended it before you got to the end – the part where you declare war on the rest of the continent for those same pretty things, and it eats you alive. It's not a fight you're going to win, Hierarch."

The man's lips quirked, his face serene save for the scorn.

"War against Calernia," he said amusedly. "As if tearing down masters was the same thing as warring on their slaves. You betray yourself, tyrant. You think I wage war on them?"

The stylus flicked at the crowd of Procerans. The axe went up, the axe went down. Another dead man, dragged into the alley.

"The old faceless thing bade me to choose a side," the Hierarch said. "And at long last, I have."

My eyes narrowed. The old faceless thing. There weren't a lot of entities out there that would fit that epithet. Anaxares of Bellerophon smiled, crooked

teeth bared.

"You think us outnumbered?" he said. "How many of us are there, tyrant, and how many of *you*?"

I could have wounded him, then. Not with a blade – here and now, even if he did not lift a finger, I did not think that would end well for me – but with words. A reminder that he marched with slavers and monsters, that his own League would turn on him in due time. That he should get his own fucking house in order before tossing stones at mine. Or maybe that power would fail him, in the end, and that like the city-state that spawned him his road would end in blood and whimpering. But there would be a place and a time for that, and it was not tonight.

I had seen the sword, and must now see its wielder.

"It's a lovely song," I said instead. "But it's always easier to break than to make."

The Hierarch's gaze returned to the trial, where the accused was being dragged to the fore.

"There will be one for you as well, one day," he said.

"But not tonight," I said.

"Not tonight," he softly agreed.

I left as the man bent back over his tablet, hand moving anew to write words only he could read.

It was past time I had a chat with the other madman in this city.

# Chapter 7

# Fellowship

> "Fool me once and it'd best be fatal, for my reply certainly will be."
>
> Dread Emperor Vindictive II

"What the *fuck* was that?" Archer hissed.

They hadn't fled the marketplace, of course, because big important bird-goddesses like Andronike couldn't possibly flee – I yelped and slapped her away. If the damned Sisters kept pecking at my head like this I was going to go bald at some point. Fine, they had *redeployed* away from the mob and the madman feeding it. I looked down at the fist bunching up my cloak in the front, which was Indrani's.

"You'll have to be a little more specific," I said.

She scrutinized my face for a moment, before grimacing and releasing me.

"Well, if you can be a heel you probably still own your mind," she said. "That was stupid, Catherine. We weren't even near the crowd and we could still feel it when he got pissed."

"It was necessary," I said, brushing down the folds of my cloak.

"Don't you start with that speech," Archer growled. "If I got a copper for every time you talked about necessity-"

"You still wouldn't be able to afford your drinking habits," I drily interrupted.

The look on her face was thunderous, so I smoothed away the humour from my expression.

"I'm serious," I said. "I needed to take the measure of him. When someone lets a lion loose in the pen, you don't pretend it's not happening – not unless you're ready to lose the whole flock."

"That's what we have Vivi for," Indrani insisted. "The Jacks-"

"Would have been in that crowd, hollering for blood," I flatly replied. "You know that. It was a calculated risk, Archer. Since when do –"

I bit down on my tongue. I knew exactly since when she'd started taking issued with those. I was in no danger of ever forgetting the sight of Indrani

half-devoured by frost, only hanging on to life by a thread – and, I had recently learned, the preservative properties of ice according to the classical table of elements.

"Finish," Indrani quietly said.

"Not a conversation we should be having in the middle of an alley in a city under occupation," I evaded.

"*Finish*," Indrani repeated, coldly.

"Even Akua is worried, Archer," I said. "I know you like to handle things on your own, but it's not getting better."

"I'm fine," she told me forcefully. "Or is disagreeing with you a sign of cowardice now?"

"I didn't say that," I replied.

A year ago we wouldn't have been having this conversation, I thought. But then a year ago there'd been fewer defeats to our name, fewer close calls and wounds that would never quite heal. An emotion I couldn't quite recognize twisted her face, until she winced.

"It doesn't matter if we're in an alley, Catherine," Archer finally said, taking a step back. "Because there's nothing to talk about."

I wondered if she even noticed how her fingers were twitching towards the strap at her side where she usually kept a flask. *Probably not*, I decided. I knew from personal experience that we tended to be blind to the methods we used to bury our fears until they were pointed out to us. Her way, at least, I was familiar with. Some nights I wondered if I might have disappeared all the way at the bottom of the bottle after Second Liesse, if Hakram hadn't dragged me back. I hesitated under moonlight, a reply on the tip of my tongue. I'd had a talk with Diabolist once, about her mother. About the difference between a person and their title, the way Praesi considered them entirely different entities. I still disagreed with what she'd said, the painful contortion of personhood her people had to put themselves through just to live with what they did to each other, but sometimes I could also see a grain of truth to it. The woman in me wanted to find a quiet place, a safe one, and try to soothe what was eating at one of my closest friends in the world. Even if it meant leaving Rochelant. But the queen knew there was still work to be done tonight, that this business was only half-done, and that what lay within Indrani would keep until morning. The queen won, in the end.

Didn't she always?

"This isn't done," I told Indrani.

"It is for tonight," she replied.

Getting back atop Zombie's saddle had the taste of defeat to it. Wouldn't be the last of those, before this was all done and over with. We pressed on deeper into the city, Named and priestess and a crow-that-wasn't surrounded by a pack of silent killers.

A kinsman of sorts awaited us.

—

The place the Tyrant of Helike chose for his lair served as my first glimpse into the man's mind. There would have been a few places in Rochelant royalty could claim to maintain a semblance of comfort: the official quarters of the appointed ruler of the city, the mansions of the influential and the wealthy, a House of Light to empty and desecrate. Instead, Kairos Theodosian had settled in the shop of a middling money changer. Someone whose very trade was the exchange of one currency for another. The entire city block was crawling with soldiers and much more discreet gargoyles, what must have once been a largely unimportant street turned into the heart of the League's occupation of Rochelant. There was no military sense to the location, I thought. It was poorly placed to deploy troops or send messengers, not to mention surrounded by very flammable shops. No prestige to such a choice, either, as money changing was not a profession of particularly good repute. This was a villain making a jest that quite possibly no one would ever get, in defiance of more practical choices, simply because he could. My teacher's lessons, I decided, would not be of great use here. The Tyrant was one face of the coin he'd spent a lifetime melting down so the metal could be put to better use.

Black did not make deals with people like this, did not negotiate. He killed them as quickly as he could to limit the collateral damage, then ripped out what had spawned them root and stem so he wouldn't have to come back and do it again a decade down the line. That wasn't an option for me, so I'd have to handle the madman a different way. I led Zombie in a canter down the street, rows of men-at-arms armed to the teeth watching me carefully. Idly pretending to brush back my hair, I gestured for the drow following from the rooftops to stay back. I didn't know what kind of the defences the Tyrant would have prepared, to know I was coming with the likes of Andronike perched on my shoulder and still feel comfortable allowing me into Rochelant, but it was best not to test them. Archer and the crow-goddess I kept at my side, until a mounted officer approached us at the very edge of the defensive perimeter. She kept her sword sheathed at her side, though by the look on her face she would have preferred otherwise. I halted my horse without needing to be told, my companions following suit.

"Queen Catherine," she called out in crisp Lower Miezan.

"That would be me," I said. "And you are?"

"General Basilia," she said. "You were expected. Safe passage is granted to you by the writ of the Tyrant of Helike."

Her gaze flicked to Indrani and Andronike.

"To you alone," she meaningfully said.

"Catherine," Archer said under her breath. "This is-"

"He needs me alive and on the field," I mildly replied. "It's not that kind of trap."

"You don't know that for sure," she insisted.

"Certainty is a luxury I can rarely afford," I said. "If it goes south, gloat all you'd like. Andronike?"

"Not beyond my reach," the crow stated, eyeing the changing house.

"Good enough," I grunted.

Zombie resumed his advance and I entered the dragon's lair. General Basilia cast me a dark glance as I passed her. Someone wasn't happy I was being allowed in, evidently. Wasn't sure why she was being so ornery – I'd had the man her Tyrant had usurped the throne from shot back when I was still the Squire. Surely that should earn me some measure of fondness? *Apparently not*, I drily thought, feeling her gaze remaining on my back as I rode forward. The heavy and layered wards I could feel washing over my skin with a distinct tingle made it clear that distrust truly was the order of the night. The soldiers parted with silent discipline until I reached the steps of the changing house, leaning on my staff to dismount with a muted curse. A man-at-arms came up to take Zombie's reins, but I clicked my tongue in disapproval.

"I wouldn't recommend that," I said. "He bites."

A twist of will had my dead horse baring his teeth. The soldier stepped back, a glimmer of fear in her eyes. I'd spent long enough idling, though, so up I went the worn steps and through the already-open door. The inside was lit up with torches and magelights, which almost surprised me. I'd half-expected some innocent soul to be serving as fuel instead. A sweeping glance was enough to give me an idea of the inside: a large common room for trade to be held, with a counter at the back in front of twin doors leading to backrooms. A few tapestries in the manner of the Free Cities had been hung on the walls – most of them about Theodosius the Unconquered – but the room had been largely stripped bare. It only made the fresh additions more glaring: two rows of twisted little gargoyles, some bearing trumpets, were wiggling around and chattering like vermin. Between them a red carpet had been set, leading up to a throne literally resting on the back of a foursome of pitiful-looking gargoyles.

On it was the Tyrant of Helike, Kairos Theodosian.

*So frail*, I thought. Curly dark brown hair and olive skin made his ancestry clear, but these were by far the least striking parts of the villain. One of his eyes was deep red, as if blood had seeped into it, and his sickly frame looked like it could be blown over by a stiff breeze. Opulent robes in rich purple, covered in part by a long strip of cloth of gold draped over the front, boasted broad sleeves but not quite broad enough to hide that the arm he kept covered was trembling. No crown was set on his brow, but he was casually toying with an ivory scepter ending in a golden roaring lion's head. I could feel the enchantments wafting off of it even from the other side of the room. The Tyrant took one look at me, good eye widening, and convulsed. For a heartbeat I was worried that the Night had somehow hurt him, but the convulsion erupted into raucous, heartfelt laughter. I blinked, taken aback. I flicked a glance at the nearest gargoyle but it just put out its tongue at me. I discretely kicked it while the Tyrant kept laughing his guts out. Eventually the villain got himself under control, wiping tears out of his eyes with trembling hands.

"Oh, that is a *fine* jest indeed," he said, then peeked at the floor. "You never disappoint."

I cleared my throat.

"I don't suppose you'd care to share," I said.

The Tyrant smiled at me in the way of man for whom smiles came easy and meant little.

"You are so short," Kairos Theodosian said. "It is quite delightful."

He was a good liar, I decided, but I'd known better. Just by looking at me he'd learned something, and I had no idea what. I set that aside for later consideration.

"Bet I could beat you in a footrace, though," I said.

The smile broadened into a grin and he sprawled unceremoniously across his throne. Which was, I was only now noticing, outrageously gaudy. And I'd been in the Tower, I damn well knew what gaudy looked like.

"A pair of crowned cripples running through the streets," he cheerfully mused. "If we charged for seats we could make a killing."

Suddenly he twitched.

"Ah," he said. "But where are my manners? Courtiers, announce our guest."

To my horrified fascination, the trumpet-bearing gargoyles raised their instrument and began blowing into it. Which had mixed results, since assuming they even had lungs they would be made of stone. And that most didn't have lips. After the musical atrocity ended in a whimper, the Tyrant raised his hand regally.

"Black Queen, I welcome you to my humble court," he announced.

"The honour is mine, Lord Tyrant," I deadpanned.

"Please, take a seat," the villain waved away airily.

A waddling gargoyle carrying a plush cushioned seat above its head made its way across the carpet, setting it at my back and bowing with a chittering sound before running away.

"Much appreciated," I said.

I eyed the seat skeptically. No obvious sorcery to be found. I prodded the cushion with my seat, but it did not seem to be filled with rusty razorblades or poisonous snakes. I glanced back at the Tyrant and found him looking at my staff quite intently. Well, only one way to find out for sure. I settled down and found it a little worn, but otherwise not prone to treacherously turning on me. It was a relief for my bad leg to be seated after this long riding, and I let out a little sigh of comfort.

"I wonder," the Tyrant of Helike nonchalantly said, "if you'd consider telling me who that's meant to kill."

I met his gaze, and wondered if it was just my imagination or the red eye had gotten a little redder.

"No idea what you're talking about," I lied.

He chuckled.

"A staff is a sword is a prayer," the Tyrant grinned. "It's clever little bit of work. More patient than your reputation would imply."

I shrugged, keeping away from my face how wary his too-perceptive eyes were making me.

"Well, I did find religion recently," I said. "I'm told it can be a calming influence."

"You seem well on your way to beating people to death with it," he praised.

"You're one to talk," I smiled. "Your man down the road's a lot more dangerous that Night on a stick. I don't suppose *you'd* tell me who that's meant to kill?"

The Tyrant pouted.

"That'd take all the fun out of this," he said. "And why even bother, if we're not having a good time?"

"Huh," I said. "Black must have *really* wanted to kill you."

"There's no need to be so oblique about it," the Tyrant amusedly said. "He's alive and in the hands of the Grey Pilgrim. Somewhere in Iserre, last I heard. The man is of little interest to me."

I *had* been aiming to wheedle information out of him after broaching the subject, true enough. My eyes narrowed. So why was he offering it to me so freely? Even as I forced myself to remain focused, my pulse quickened. He was alive. Gods, he was alive. I'd known he would be, but it was still a weight off my shoulders. *Unless this is cruelty*, I thought. *Unless he's lying.* I kept my voice steady.

"It's a little disquieting, being on the other side of the chaos for once," I said.

"I am but a humble servant of my Lord Hierarch," the Tyrant piously assured me. "And you need not worry, I would not lie to such a close and beloved friend."

"I would never doubt you," I lied. "I think of you as a brother, really."

Did he know I was an orphan? By the way his lips quirked, yes, he most definitely did.

"As your friend," I said. "I wondered if you would answer a question for me."

"Always," the Tyrant swore, hand over heart.

I raised an eyebrow.

"Are we at war?" I asked. "I've been hearing troubling rumours about League soldiers and legionaries."

"Alas, there have been some slight misunderstandings," the Tyrant sighed. "Your Marshal of Callow seems to have mistaken our curiosity for a fully armed battalion trying to assassinate her."

"Mistakes happen," I said, keeping my voice calm.

It took an effort of will not to clutch my staff so hard it creaked. He'd tried to kill Juniper, the smug little monster. *Or he's trying to put me off-balance*, I thought. The Theodosian had a lazy smile on his face, but his eyes had never left me. I had no control here, no real leverage to use against him. That was

the misstep, I decided. Trying to remain in control. There would be no winning that sort of game against the likes of the Tyrant of Helike.

"I see only one solution," I said.

"Do you?" he said, smile expectant.

I smiled back, broad and friendly and just a little bit guileless.

"Would you like to secretly be allies?" I offered.

The smallest flicker of surprise on his face, gone before it could even be fully seen, was the herald of scoring my first blood of the night. His answering grin was gleefully malicious. See? I might have been with only women for the last few years, but I still knew what men liked – you know, shady military alliances that would be discarded at the earliest convenience in favour of wanton betrayal. He twirled his scepter thoughtfully, though that did little to hide the eagerness on his face.

"As your friend," Kairos Theodosian said. "I feel like I should warn you that rumours have long existed – patently untrue, I assure you – that I am a treacherous blackguard, if you'll forgive my language."

I painted surprise over my face.

"You?" I faintly said. "That seems rather unjust. I mean, I had your nephew shot and he seemed like the real villain to me."

"I did hear about that," the Tyrant mused. "Wasn't it under truce banner?"

It hadn't been, strictly speaking, not that the rumours ever bothered about that.

"In my defence," I said, "he *did* call me a witch."

He seemed amused.

"Oh, Dorian," the villain fondly said. "You always did have more lungs than wits."

"I can see why that would make you hesitate, though," I mused. "So let me reassure you, I have absolutely no intention of sharing our secret treaty with the First Prince to try to force her hand into allying with me and crushing you utterly."

He let out a loud cackle, arm shaking uncontrollably under his robes.

"Are you lying?" the Tyrant of Helike grinned, revealing a curved stretch of pearly teeth.

I leaned forward.

"I don't know," I said. "Am I?"

A heartbeat passed.

"I can't tell," he said, sounding deeply pleased.

"A sound foundation for military alliance," I said.

"The only kind worth making," the villain cheerfully agreed. "A bargain made, then, Black Queen."

He gently tapped his scepter against his chin.

"I suppose," the Tyrant said, "that I should ask you who we've allied against."

I leaned back.

"Intercession, you might say," I said.

His brow rose.

"Well now," he murmured. "Someone's been digging up secrets."

"Calernia's full of graves a little more shallow than they should be," I replied. "And I've heard the two of you have scores to settle."

"She has quite the game afoot," the Tyrant told me. "Even I know only part of it."

"I've quite a few glimpses of things she's been up to," I said, "but no bird's eye view, so to speak."

"That sounds," the villain said, "like a trade worth making."

I smiled. Dangerous as it might be to tell this man anything he didn't know, I needed the semblance of a handle on what the Wandering Bard was up to more than words could properly express. Everyone else on the board I could make out at least vague objectives for, but the Intercessor? She was still in many ways an unknown, and one with too many irons in the fire to be left to her own devices. I might not trust the Tyrant of Helike a single drop, but as far as I knew he was the only man alive who'd ever pulled one over the Bard. If anyone could be of use to me, it was him.

"Ah, but before we begin horse-trading," he said. "As my most trusted ally, I have a suggestion to offer you. If I may, Black Queen?"

"Call me Catherine," I said. "And by all means."

"You must call me Kairos, then," the Tyrant said. "Before you leap into the loving embrace of our dear Cordelia Hasenbach, I would have a look at her little scheme down south. You are not the only one robbing graves, in a manner of speaking."

"Curious," I evenly said.

"Something's being dredged out of Lake Artoise," Kairos confided, "that might of interest to you."

"And why would that be?" I asked.

"One does not make war on the same enemy for decades without learning some of their bad habits, Catherine," the Tyrant said.

That was unfortunate, as I could only think of one person the First Prince had crossed blades with for that long. More worryingly, the most recent mistake I could put to Dread Empress Malicia's name was the Doom of Liesse. If Cordelia Hasenbach was intent on going down the same road this war was about to get much, much worse. Not that I'd take Kairos' word for this. Like the fate of my teacher, it was another truth I needed to get my hands on. I fished out my pipe and stuffed it under the Tyrant's disapproving stare, black flame licking at my fingers just long enough to light it. I shook my hand to get rid of the lingering heat, then inhaled deep. The wakeleaf warmed my throat, and I made myself comfortable. I spewed out a stream of acrid smoke as Kairos wrinkled his nose in distaste.

"Now," I smiled. "I believe there was some talk of horse-trading."

When the eye went deeper red, this time, there was no question of whether or not it was my imagination.

# Chapter 8

# Veracity

> "A pleasant lie finds more ears than a sharp truth."
>
> Proceran saying

"Seriously?" I said. "I mean, I know you're with the old guard about this stuff but this is pretty on the nose."

"The classics became such for a reason," Kairos stiffly replied.

He sounded a little miffed, I noted.

"I bet you even have a speech, don't you?" I mused. "Some tortured extended metaphor about the nature of Creation and our role in it."

The Tyrant of Helike glared at me woefully.

"This rook represents the inherent emptiness of moral philosophy," I suggested. "Maybe mention something about how Good is prone to stagnation and therefore fundamentally inferior."

"Do you even know how to play?" he challenged.

I glanced downwards at the shatranj board a pair of his little twisted gargoyles had brought. I picked up a footman and wiggled it a bit.

"This moves diagonally, right?" I beamed.

His eyes closed, even the red one.

"You pain me, Catherine Foundling," Kairos said. "You pain me *deeply*."

I hummed thoughtfully, then took advantage of his distraction to turn the board around. The poor gargoyles it was resting atop squeaked in dismay, though they didn't flinch.

"I'll take black," I said.

I discreetly pocketed the footman from the white side of the board I'd not for a moment intended to give back. His eyes opened just a moment too late to catch me red-handed.

"This is most improper," the villain protested.

"They don't call me the *White* Queen," I pointed out.

"Are you so bound by what others think of you?" Kairos gallantly tried.

"Point for effort," I said. "But I've had better."

I opened the game most illegally by pushing forward a footman.

"I had something for this," the Tyrant muttered. "Give me a moment."

He didn't even bother to comment on my open cheating before moving up a knight. Well, it wasn't like I was going to stop anyway. I was passable at shatranj, but years of being punitively demolished at the game by Vivienne and Hakram had made me aware of my limitations. Vivienne in particular liked to allow me to think I could win before methodically flogging the conceit out of me.

"Weren't we horse-trading?" I reminded him.

I pulled at my pipe and breathed out, letting the cloud of scented smoke waft up. Another footman went up, propping up my centre. The Tyrant let out a little noise of agreement, then snapped his fingers.

"Exactly," he agreed. "Imagine, if you would, that you were a deity."

"Not my cup of tea," I drily replied.

"Evidently," Kairos mused, too-sharp eyes flicking across me. "Yet humour me."

"Done," I said.

He was being a little too slow to move, so I moved again. The Tyrant of Helike raised an eyebrow, and I painted embarrassed surprise over my face. Like I'd thought he'd already taken his turn, which was clearly the only reason I would keep going on. I withdrew the footman with a contrite smile, but only one square of the two it had moved.

"As a deity," the Tyrant said, moving up a footman to contest the centre, "though of unfathomable power you find yourself limited. Unlike the likes of us, who can command – Catherine, why is one of my footmen missing?"

"Desertion is an inevitable part of war," I sagely replied. "So, we can move every piece but the Gods can't. That the gist of it?"

"You're taking all the enjoyment out of this," Kairos complained.

"That *is* my favourite part," I revealed.

One of my knights went up, my opponent staring with suspicion at the legal movement. That was fine, I wasn't going to nudge it up until he was distracted anyway.

"Consider that perhaps one piece in ten can be moved," the Tyrant said. "Exceptional pieces, to be sure, or at least made to be so. Yet they must be sufficient to both carry out your godly intent and influence the other pieces, which sadly move largely according to their own petty desires."

A few moves in quick succession as we traded footmen in the centre and I moved up my priest under cover of pretending to put away the pieces I'd taken.

"That sounds like you don't believe the House of Light is a faithful servant of the Heavens in this earthly world," I chided. "Which would be *heresy*, Kairos. For shame."

"Ah, and so you touch upon the second limitation," the Tyrant said. "That these disobedient pieces not only have the gall to not directly answer your desires, but they also dare to influence the pieces that *do*."

"As a goddess, I am most displeased by this," I blandly said.

"As well you should be," Kairos agreed. "Bloody chaos, not at all the orderly matter you had envisioned. Sadly, direct intervention would be costly in more ways than can be easily understood. A more... elegant solution is required."

"Someone who can dole out the nudges I cannot," I said.

"The proverbial finger on the scales," the Tyrant of Helike smiled. "Of course, such an entity would need to be constrained. It is a tool, after all. It would not do for it to get *ideas*."

"Bindings," I said.

The left side of the board was turning into something of a debacle for me, I saw. My dear friend was a fair hand at the game, and I was now down a priest. That was fine, since as the defender of all things Evil I could boast of a certain talent at necromancy – a reasonable explanation for why said priest had mysteriously reappeared on the right side of the board. And all it'd taken was kicking a gargoyle so it would yelp and my opponent would look.

"Three things she always keeps," Kairos Theodosian lightly said. "She speaks, she sees and she knows stories."

He eyed my returned priest with a degree of skepticism, forcing me to withdraw it from the board. Time for contingencies, then. My fingers closed around the stolen white footman under my cloak, allowing Night to seep inside drip by drip.

"There's two sides to a coin," I said.

The Tyrant conceded to that with a slight inclination of the head.

"Three things she always flees," he said. "Promised death, direct touch and her heart's desire."

Truth, I decided, though cloaked in vagueness. Some things I'd already known – Black had put her in the face of certain death thrice, during the Liesse Rebellion, and she'd been forced to withdraw for a time – other's I'd only suspected. If 'direct touch' really stood for an inability to directly intervene, anyway. It might go a little further than that, though. Vivienne had once mentioned to me she'd never seen the Bard take a wound she was not directly responsible for receiving. As interesting as the Tyrant's words were was the fact he could speak them at all. Where *had* he learned all this? Back when I'd still had him on the list of possible invaders of Callow I'd gone through what records the Eyes of the Empire had on him, and Helike as a whole. There'd been persistent rumours that something was kept under that city-state's palace with oracular abilities, but with the rumour came the restriction of only one question possible. I could think of half a dozen ways to get around that, sure, but if Helike had unrestrained access to that potent a tool they wouldn't be one of the powers in the League. They would *be* the League, their banner flying above every rampart in the region.

"Fleeing her heart's desire," I casually repeated. "You almost make the role sound like a punishment."

The Tyrant smiled.

"I have a theory," he said. "You see, for someone to *truly* make a mess on this board, they would need certain qualities. Perception, affinity, knowledge. A combination thereof. You understand my meaning, yes?"

"An awareness of patterns," I said.

"Exactly so," Kairos replied. "And, plague as I am by a suspicious nature, it occurred to me that these qualities are as rare as they are useful. That neither Above nor Below are prone to waste in such regards."

My fingers stilled over the rook I'd been about to take in hand. Eyes flicking back up, I studied his face.

"An elegant solution, you called it," I softly said.

Poison made into remedy. A trap inherent to the lay of Creation. It made, I thought, a horrifying amount of sense.

"Were someone qualified to be trouble," he echoed. "They would be most qualified to quell it."

I moved up the rook, took a knight I'd been careful to strip of protection.

"And interesting theory," I said. "Though we strayed from our purpose. Should such an entity exist, what would it *want*?"

Kairos' eyes came to rest on me, unblinking.

"Horse-trading, Catherine," he said. "Not horse-*giving*."

My pipe held nothing but ashes, by now, so I leaned back to empty it on the head of one of the gargoyles. I could have garbed what I had to say in vagueness and a touch of the cryptic, but he'd win out if we played that game. No, best to cough up my part in a way that benefitted me as well. There was as much to learn from questions asked as secrets offered.

"She knew the Dead King while he was still mortal," I said, after stowing away my pipe. "And watched his rise with great interest, from as close as she could."

The Tyrant's lips quirked.

"And what was she looking for?" he asked.

Interesting, I thought. Kairos had understood my meaning earlier when I'd mentioned *intercession*, and the only individual I'd ever heard call the Bard the 'Intercessor' was Neshamah. Considering the Dead King had mentioned the Tyrant had reached out to him when we'd spoken in Keter last year, I'd assumed the information came from there. But it seemed he wasn't fully aware of the history between those two, if that question was any indication. Not that I could reasonably assume *I* was, but odds were I knew more about than that most. Including even this damnably well-informed man, looked like.

"How villains are made," I said.

He was good, I thought, but that red eye gave it away. The triumph he was feeling, like something he'd suspected for years had just been confirmed. So, my eternal friend had encountered an application of that knowledge at some point.

I'd heard that entire conversation, including the parts I hadn't mentioned, so I had a suspicion as to what was important here. *I won't solve the riddle with the tools they gave me, so it seems I must learn craftsmanship of my own,* the Bard had said. Her methods were her own, no gift from the Gods. Which meant she was capable of making mistakes. I thought of the madman down in the city, silently recording trials, and wondered if I had not just discovered a very important piece. Kairos had arranged the election of the Hierarch. Kairos had dealt a defeat to the Wandering Bard.

That did not feel like a coincidence.

"Your turn," I said.

I was talking about more than the game, as we both knew.

"War is a messy business," the Tyrant of Helike casually said. "Not at all a precise tool. Of course, it is not without its uses. Sometimes when you need something dead, where a dagger will not do a landslide will serve."

Which begged the question, of course, of what exactly the Wandering Bard had failed to see stabbed. This couldn't be about the Calamities, it wouldn't make sense. They might have been a successful outlier in sustained victory for Evil, insofar as my father really cared about waving the banner, but getting rid of them couldn't be the *point* of this. I didn't doubt for a moment that she'd branded Black in the Free Cities just as harshly as I had branded the Lone Swordsman that fateful night in Summerholm, but there would have been no need for a crusade to hammer that nail fully in. The Doom of Liesse had killed the trust between Black and Malicia, which made it just a matter of time until the partnership keeping Praes together collapsed. She didn't need to start a war, or a Grand Alliance, to send the Dread Empire scuttling back to the old ways.

"A lot of people get killed in landslides," I noted.

"Losses are losses," Kairos waved away. "I suppose it would be more apt to compare it to a fire being lit. One can do quite a bit with a fire, if one can guide where it burns."

My brow furrowed, and I barely paid attention to the move I made on the board. If he was implying the Bard had either started – or, more likely, fed and sped up – a continental war to clean up loose ends, then she'd have a finger on both sides. An argument could be made that by screwing with Black she'd given the East a push, since through him she could get at both Malicia and myself. That sounded horribly risky and requiring an amount of insight and foresight that should be fucking impossible, but we were dealing with an entity that even the Dead King claimed to have never won against. I had to at least consider the possibility. It was where she was guiding the Tenth Crusade through that I was having trouble to understand. The Grey Pilgrim had influence in Levant, sure. But the foremost Ashuran hero was the White Knight, who as far as I knew had no real ties to the ruling class of the Thalassocracy. And arguably the most powerful Proceran hero was the Saint of Swords, someone I very much doubted Cordelia fucking Hasenbach would take political advice from. Which made the

whole theory fall apart, since the First Prince was the mortar of the Grand Alliance and by far, even now, the most powerful member. And since we were operating under the assumption the Bard couldn't just walk up to someone not Named and pull the strings, this put all the rest into question.

"Incomplete," I said. "At the very heart."

Kairos smiled, and it twisted his face into something barely human.

"She has a cousin, Catherine," he reminded me.

My fingers clenched. *The Augur. Shit, I can't believe I forgot about the Augur.* That was a very dangerous angle. It should be hard to manipulate an oracle, but then what we knew about the Augur's power – and the Bard's, for that matter – was limited. Even information about Agnes Hasenbach herself was thin on the ground. It was known, however, that her crowned cousin trusted her a great deal. Why wouldn't she? The Augur had helped her win the civil war that put her on the throne in the first place. Still, it didn't mean that the First Prince was in the Wandering Bard's pocket. Not even close. But it did mean that the Intercessor could get the right words at the right time to end up in Cordelia Hasenbach's ears. I met the Tyrant's eyes and found open amusement in them. He was well aware that even if I went to the First Prince with this she'd just see it as me poisoning the well on one of her most effective advisers. A kinswoman, to boot. *And you're pleased, you little shit, because you know that means actually allying with Hasenbach just got a whole lot more risky,* I thought.

"Assuming you're right," I said, refraining from voicing 'and not feeding me a well-crafted lie to make this war even more bloody than it already is', "then a lot of effort has been expended. She has been *visible* in way she can't often have been before."

If she meddled this heavily every few decades, there would be damned records of it. That implied something was forcing her hand here and now, or she was after something worth the risks. The moment word that something like the Wandering Bard was out there pulling strings, a lot of her influence waned. And these weren't the days of the Kingdom of Sephirah anymore: cleaning up all mentions of her wouldn't be as easy as it would have been back then. Not unless she had some divinely-gifted aspect for that specific purpose, but I very much doubted that. Sparse as they were, there *were* records of her existence. Black had found some, and myself others.

"Indeed," Kairos said. "What makes this age different, I wonder?"

There was no answer following, just me losing my last priest to an unwise trade.

"Yeah yeah, trading and not gifting," I sighed.

I paused, drumming my fingers on the side of the board. What could I get out of him, by telling him this one?

"On at least one instance, she struck a bargain on the behalf of Below," I finally said.

His brow rose, and I got the impression he was distinctly unimpressed.

"The bargain was not struck with Named," I added quietly.

My eyes were on his red one, awaiting a reaction, but I found none. His lips quirked into a smile and I got the distinct impression I'd been played. Had the glint of triumph earlier been a fake out? To hide a lie when I caught it, or to take away my attention this very moment – when something he actually minded me knowing was on the table? *Tricky bastard*, I thought. Getting a read on him was like trying to paint on smoke. That'd been a risk from the start, though, I conceded. It was the questions that were telling the tale here.

"How was she summoned?" the Tyrant pleasantly asked.

*Gotcha*, I thought. He hadn't know that was possible, then. Because this wasn't about specifics – we both knew that even if I'd learn the specifics of the ritual the Sisters had used to reach out to Below I wouldn't share them with him – it was about fresh risk introduced to already existing plans. He needed to know if some pious, desperate soul out there could call out to Above and get the Intercessor a foothold instead. Which meant whatever he was up to, the Wandering Bard could still fuck it up if she got an in. *So is that why you've been sticking to the Hierarch like a leech?* I thought. *He's not just your sword, he's your shield as well?*

"She was not sent for," I said. "She was sent. Audience was bought and paid: desperation, blood and need."

His good eye narrowed.

"And?" he pressed.

"There was a lot to lose," I said. "You could call it *weight*."

Somehow I doubted everyone who slaughtered a priesthood in their own seat of power and prayed got a personal visit from the Bard with terms to offer. Below, the Intercessor had as good as admitted, didn't want to lose the entire Everdark to a catastrophic blunder by the Twilight Sages. I tossed him that last part as a bone, a reassurance of sorts. It'd take more than a Proceran prince losing his holdings to get the Bard an angle. Of course, with our good friend Neshamah on the march the stakes for our little scuffle had been raised rather high. The Tyrant wasn't out of the woods yet, and so I smiled pleasantly at him.

"You dropped this, by the way," I suddenly said.

I tossed him back the footman I'd stolen before the game even began. To my surprise he failed to catch it, and it bounced off his chin and down on the floor. He eyed me with displeasure, and while he bent to pick it up I casually switched the places of my last rook and my queen. That ought to stave off kingtip for a few more turns.

"This has been invested with power to explode," Kairos amusedly accused when he straightened again.

Ah, so he *could* sense that. Good to know. The Night wasn't exactly subtle stuff, but that he could discern the intent I put to it wasn't something I'd been entirely certain of.

"I'm offended you would even say that," I said, hand over heart. "I gave this back to you because of my deep and abiding belief in fair play."

"You really are terrible at this game," the Tyrant of Helike noted. "I can't believe even after so much cheating you're losing this badly."

"It's part of the metaphor," I lied. "Like the whole horse thing."

"Elegantly done," Kairos praised. "I believe we were speculating as to the bounty worth the risks being taken."

I did not reply, half-debating reaching for my pipe again as I watched him.

"There is one element singular to our little war," the Tyrant idly continued. "A common friend, I believe."

The Dead King, was it? Wasn't sure I bought that. Oh, an argument could be made. After the series of disasters that had been the crusades headed into the Kingdom of the Dead, it might have been easier to assemble a coalition of that sort if it was initially headed for Praes instead. But it didn't fit with Neshamah's methods. It wasn't like there'd never before been chaos south of the lakes for him to take advantage of. The Hidden Horror was still kicking around through careful application of the epithet's first part.

"And?" I said, echoing his earlier rejoinder.

"Quite the stage, isn't it?" Kairos said. "A crusade turned to the Tower. The might of the west spent, but not broken. The east eating itself alive, to various degrees. Our friend comes rather late to the banquet."

So that was his story, then. Neshamah had come out to play because he'd been invited, as he had been in the days of Dread Empress Triumphant. The invitation meant he wasn't *the* Enemy but instead *an* enemy. This little continental waltz of death was the Intercessor finally tying up her oldest loose end, having set out her finest bait to draw him out. It was neat and tidy notion, so naturally I distrusted it. It wasn't that I would but it beyond the Wandering Bard to have engineered this butchery over several decades – if not more – just to put down the King in Keter. I had no doubts she'd be capable of it, whether morally or in actual capacity. But the story felt wrong to me. The Intercessor striking out after the arguably most prominent champion of Below, Kairos beginning his scheme with the Hierarch to kill or cripple her before she could. Sure, that would end up counted as a win for the old crowd. Procer devoured, the arbiter of the godly pissing contest losing an eye in the grand old tradition of Evil and what Good nations managed to survive the wreck would be eclipsed by the Below-aligned powers remaining on Calernia. That was the thing, though.

This was too *simple* a game.

Which meant the Tyrant of Helike had fed me secrets, armed me with just enough to interfere, and now intended to loose me into the middle of all these delicate plans being laid down. It also meant he was lying to me, or close enough, but I couldn't find it in me to be offended by that. Might as well blame a fish for swimming.

"Interesting," I said.

Then I shrugged and tipped my king. It was, after all, just a game. And I'd already gotten what I came from. The Tyrant watched me with a smile as I rose to my feet, leaning on my staff.

"I expect I'll be seeing you soon," I said.

"How could I disappoint my closest ally?" Kairos replied.

I only took a few steps before turning, mostly on a whim.

"What would actually happen," I asked, "if you won?"

The Tyrant laughed, the sound of it strangely honest.

"Ah, Catherine, that's the entire point," Kairos Theodosian smiled. "*Finding out*."

I waited until I'd left the changing house to snap my fingers. Enough Night had been fed to the piece for the entire set to be shattered in the explosion. I supposed that, in a way, it could be considered my rebuttal.

If the game got out of hand, I wasn't above breaking the board.

# Bonus Chapter: Peregrine III

"Pilgrim of grey;
Fleet-foot, dusk-clad, the wanderer,
His stride rebellion and stirring ember
In his grasp the light of a morning star
Tattered his throne, tattered his war."

Extract from the 'Anthem of Smoke', widely considered the founding epic of the Dominion of Levant

Tariq's sole remaining brother had not aged well.

Bakri had boasted a warrior's build in his youth, and made good use of it to bring glory to their shared blood. Decades had passed since then, however, and what had once been hard muscle turned to fat and aching bones. Though the Grey Pilgrim was thirty eight years old, he knew himself to look in his early thirties. Bakri was two years younger, but at a glance would have seemed eldest among them. The thick beard of his brother was usually combed and oiled, but being confined to his quarters had apparently robbed the man of the desire for such sophistication. The dark hair was hoarse and wild, Bakri's eyes the red of one who had not slept a full night in too long. Tariq did not wait for an invitation to sit after the door was closed behind him, instead leaning against the doorframe as he watched his brother pour himself wine from a bronze carafe.

"Brother," Bakri greeted him. "Finally you make time for me. Should I be kneeling in thanks?"

Tariq did not reply. He stood there, in silence, and wondered what it was about thrones that made men go mad.

"Am I to beg for my life, *Pilgrim*?" Bakri snarled. "Is this your justice I've heard so much of?"

The Ophanim were silent. Had been, since Tariq had first entertained the thought of using his gifts in anger. For that silence he thought less of them. He might have been changed by his Bestowal, but blood still ran through his vein. There were things beyond the purview of mercy. Still, the loss of the whispers was keenly felt. Without their guidance, he felt half-blind. They had known much, and shared freely. Now all he had to call on was his eyes and his wits.

"Just get it over with, Tariq," his brother tiredly said. "You need someone to hang for this and you've chosen me. What point is there in making game of it first?"

"You did not act," the Grey Pilgrim finally said, "like an innocent man."

"And that is enough to make me guilty?" Bakri mocked.

No, Tariq admitted to himself. It was not. Confining Yasa's husband and isolating their nephew was the blatant premise to a grab for the Tattered Throne, but it was no proof that Bakri had a hand in their sister's death. All it was testimony to was ambition and poor character.

"You always did love her best," his brother bitterly said, drinking deep of his wine.

He wiped a trickle away from his chin.

"And she you," Bakri continued. "There was never any room for anyone else."

"I loved her best," Tariq said softly, "because she was the best of us."

"Mother was a fucking vulture of a woman," his brother smiled thinly. "But at least she never played favourites in her disregard. You two, though? You threw us the scraps of what you held for each other and expected your feet licked for it. I didn't kill her, Tariq. But I will not weep for a woman I shared only blood with."

It was a stranger he was looking at, the Pilgrim understood. A man he barely knew. A few childhood memories were no compass to the roiling sea of bitterness and frustration that stood before him. For the first time in many years, he felt adrift. Unable to tell truth from lie, black from white. He could not see into the soul of men: like everyone else he was groping blindly in the dark, hoping he would not stumble into a chasm.

"Our nephew, Bakri," he said. "Caged and left to fade. Yasa's son. Does even that really mean so little to you?"

The other man sneered.

"You sanctimonious prick," he said. "You traipse around the world following stories, and now you've gone and convinced yourself that's the truth of Creation. Like there's never been killing within the Blood. Like a bit of red in the veins means we really owe each other all the oaths we break. Look around you, Pilgrim."

Bakri opened his arms, jeering.

"Did you really think *meaning well* was enough?" he said. "That it stopped being a throne because the first man to hold it was a hero? This isn't one of your pretty adventures, it doesn't end with everyone smiling and coming home. Sometimes it ends with a Seljun being a little *too* good and getting an arrow in the fucking throat for it. We don't all get to leave when we feel like it, Tariq. Some of us have to live where the Heavens don't look too closely."

For a moment, he thought of killing his brother. It would be easy as making a fist. Light would lash out, burn through the man's throat, and that would be the end of it. But that was anger, that was blood. It was the same ugliness in

Bakri's voice, only with greater power behind it. *Please*, Tariq thought, closing his eyes. *Help me.* Sometimes, all you could do to beat back the night was light a candle. *Please*, he prayed, *help me see. That I might do more than add suffering to suffering, injustice to injustice, grief to grief.* He prayed, and was answered.

The Grey Pilgrim opened his eyes and knew it was his gift to **Behold** the truth of was what hiddem.

He saw in his sole remaining sibling fear and rage, and ambition like poison. Grief, too, however slight. But deep beneath it all he saw guilt. A hand offered and taken.

"Tell me," Tariq said, voice like stone and steel. "*Tell me who you sold our sister to, Bakri*."

After that he saw fear, mostly.

It did not stay his hand.

—

When the lords and ladies of the Dominion came to Levante for his sister's funeral games, the city felt as if a shroud had fallen over it. Until the first of them had arrived he had spent his hours with Izil, keeping the fragile flame remaining in his nephew from dying out, but when the greats of Levant arrived Tariq was forced to leave the boy's side. There would be an election in the Majilis, when the games came to a close, and there was only one result he would brook. Yasa's son would be the Holy Seljun, his father holding regency until the boy came of age. Yet for all that none denied him audience, and instead made great pageantry of receiving him, the answers he received were evasive. These people, he thought, had professed loyalty to Yasa. Followed her with eagerness, with pride. And together with her they had served Levant well. And yet now the loyalty had waned, replaced by guarded eyes and cautious tongues. What had been granted to the mother would not be inherited by the son.

"They're afraid, Tariq," Sintra told him.

That much he had known. He could not fail to see it, now that his eyes had been opened by Above. He had stolen a moment with his lover in a tucked away corner of the old city, where none would see them. Much as he would have preferred to speak only between Tariq and Sintra, they were not only that. The Grey Pilgrim and the Lady of Alava need speak as well.

"Bakri died at my hand," Tariq acknowledged.

"Died?" Sintra murmured. "There were only cinders left. That is more than death. And for all that, fear is not what the act earned you. You passed judgement as the Grey Pilgrim, and none would deny your right to end a traitor. It is those that clasped hands with Bakri that still tongues."

"I am the only man alive to have heard his confession," the Pilgrim flatly stated.

"We're not fools, Tariq," Sintra sighed. "Your brother might have greased a few palms in the harbour, but it was not one of ours who loosed the arrow.

There are only two who could have given the order, and neither is to be trifled with."

"Procer," he said. "Ashur."

He turned to look upon the love of his life as the silence lingered, and what he beheld filled him with pride. There was iron in this daughter of the Champion's Blood. Fear as well, but it did not bend her spine as it did so many others he has spoken to.

"Which was it?" Sintra quietly asked.

That was the question, he knew, plaguing the thoughts of every person of influence in Levant. Was it their protectors in the Thalassocracy that had seen a Dominion resurgent, less eager to take instructions from committees on an island across the water, and acted to smother the insolence before it could grow further? Or was it the covetous packs of royalty past the Red Snake Wall who had struck the blow, wary of a Levant that would not retreat at the mere hint of the First Prince's displeasure? Neither were enemies anyone could truly afford.

"The Prince of Orense," Tariq finally told her. "Bakri believed it was with the tacit permission of the First Prince himself."

Sintra let out a sharp breath.

"Prince Alejandro Trastanes," she murmured. "Do they plan to invade?"

"No," he replied just as quietly. "It was a petty thing, Sintra. That is, perhaps, the most absurd part of it. We have silver veins of our own, now, and no longer rely on his for coinage. His treasury thinned as a result. Worse, he foresaw that the Ashurans would rather use our silver than his for their own mints."

Bakri was to declare those very veins as having run out, after a few years, and quietly the old sales would have resumed. The Levantine silver would have gone to the treasury of the Seljun instead of the mints in Levant and Ashur. A stupid, petty waste. And for that Yasa had died.

"There are some who'll say electing Izil to the Tattered Throne would be sending a message," his lover said. "That we will not desist."

"That we will not bow to fear," Tariq mused. "I can see how this would not be popular, as so many of us wish to do so."

"They've never been shy about sending knives south," Sintra darkly said. "They know Ashur will only stir against invasion. And that's always been the unspoken guarantee from Salia hasn't it? Do not be a threat, and you will not be troubled. We became a threat. Trouble found us."

"It doesn't matter," Tariq said. "When the games end, Izil will stand before the Majilis as candidate for the Tattered Throne."

"You don't have the votes," his lover told him. "One of Bakri's children will be raised, it is almost a certainty."

"You misunderstand," he said. "They are bowing, Sintra, to fear."

"And?" she frowned.

"When Izil stands, I will stand with him," the Grey Pilgrim said.

He met her eyes, and smiled thinly.

"Alejandro Trastanes is very far away. *I am here*."

Nine days later, Izil Isbili was unanimously elected the Holy Seljun of Levant. His uncle stood in silence behind the seven-year-old boy as the votes were cast into the large brass cup, but for once the pale stones meaning support made no sound as they fell.

The cup, after all, was already filled with the ashes of Bakri Isbili.

The following dawn, Tariq began marching north.

—

Orense was prosperous.

The principality as well, he had seen while treading the roads and fields, but the capital of the principality stood above the rest in that regard. Traders from all over southern Calernia could be found haggling in the streets in a smattering of tongues, be it the fluid tradertalk of the Free Cities or the elegant Ceseo of the southern Dominion. Colourful cloths and elegant furs, ripe fruit and vivid painted slates: the markets of Orense were a thriving throng, a centre of commerce. And among them, all was traded for the silver of Prince Alejandro Trastanes' mines. It was the fortune of the Trastanes line to own these, it was said, but also that of it subjects. The city would not attract so many if not for the remarkable purity and quantity of its ore. Tariq had not known it was possible to hate the bounty of the earth before then, but he had learned. Pieces of metal glinting in the sun could take a life months of riding away, even if they were not spent for the purpose. All they needed to do was *exist* and men would do horrors for the purpose of owning them, or keeping them, or even ensuring other did not have them.

He had spent most his life shielding people little different than these from the wickedness of the world. Divested himself of the right to be bound to his lover in the eyes of any but each other, of having a home for more than a summer's length and even of half the name he had been born to. And yet, blind to anything but the coins that saw the wheels of their existence keep turning, they had killed his sister. Tariq could not hate them for that. No, he could. He would not allow himself to. He had made sacrifices, but not with the expectation of reward. That exceptions would be made for him and those he loved. If a good act was done only at the condition of recompense, then it was not that – it was a mere transaction made with the Heavens. Yet it would have been dishonest to say it did not infuriate him, deep down, that Yasa had died and it was not so much as a ripple in the sea that was Creation. All were as specks of dust, in the eyes of Above. All were as the entire world, in the eyes of Above. The Lanterns had long taught this and Tariq knew more of the truths of the Heavens than most, but never before had he been forced to look that particular truth in the eye.

For days he walked the streets of Orense, taking the measure of the people and through them their ruler. Prince Alejandro was well-liked, he learned. The man leant the weight of his name and influence to the charitable enterprises of the House of Light, and after a string of sicknesses had ordered the sewers

beneath the capital fully cleaned out for the first time in many years – at his own expense, without raising taxes to fill his coffers afterwards. He paid his watchmen and soldiers well, better than his mother had, and always on time. The prince favoured the merchants of his land above others, but did not do so egregiously and did not use the livelihood of others as means in his disagreements with other royalty. Some said that he spent too much time in Salia, at the court of the First Prince, but others argued that Orense had benefited from his influence there. There were less flattering rumours, of paramours entertained even though he was wed and duels fought for frivolous purposes, but these were old and looked upon with a forgiving eye.

Tariq was not certain what he had truly expected. Few men presented themselves as devils, even when keeping covenant with their kind, and it was said Arlesites were more attached than most to their repute. It still filled him with dismay, that priests from the House of Light could sing the praises of a man who had ordered murder. The people could be fooled, and often were. Yet he had believed, in some way, that those wielding the light of the Heavens would not be so easily taken in. It took him days, forcing himself not to act before having fully seen what there was to see, before he admitted to himself that perhaps the people of Orense had not been fooled at all. That the prince *did* behave well towards them. That the priests did not condemn the man because they had not been given reason to. It was a strange thing, coming to the understanding that a man could be both wicked and kind. That one did not chase away the other and claim the whole of the person. Strange and displeasing.

After twelve days, Tariq had assuaged his conscience and he set out once more. For a man of his talents, it was merely tedious to slip into the towering palace that belonged to the Trastanes. Even without the guidance of the Ophanim neither soldiers nor watchmen caught sight of him moving under cover of night, and the sorceries pervading the grounds were no true bar. The nature of the wards was sister to miracles, in some arcane way, and there were few even among the Bestowed who understood miracles as Tariq did. Whispers opened cracks to creep through, Light blooming and fading as he passed through gardens and climbed a tall trellis. From there he reached a balcony, a brush of fingers unmaking the locks and allowing him to enter unseen the private study of the Prince of Orense. Tariq closed the doors behind him, and settled in a fashionable sofa to wait until the man arrived. Servants came first, to put the study in order and leave a tray of fragrant tea and assorted spice cookies, but he moved where they were not looking and so they did no see him.

The Grey Pilgrim was sipping at a perfectly-brewed cup of Thalassinian black leaf when the man who ordered the murder of his sister entered the study. He waited in silence until the prince sat at his beautiful redwood desk and reached for a cup that was not there. Calmly, he set down the tea.

“Alejandro Trastanes,” Tariq said. “There will be no point to shouting.”

His advice was ignored, unsurprisingly. The Prince of Orense was still in good shape, for a man his age, though Tariq ruefully admitted to himself that

the royal was likely younger than himself. The healer was no longer so young as to be able to casually pass such a judgement. Once shouting proved fruitless, the man drew a thin blade.

"You will not find me easy meat, assassin," Prince Alejandro snarled in Tolesian,

"Not assassin," Tariq calmly corrected in the same. "Pilgrim."

From the beginning he had beheld what lay at the heart of the man, fear and pride and anger, but not he saw the second of the first of these begin devouring the others. The tipping point, he thought, was when Alejandro Trastanes realized he was alone in a room with a Bestowed whose sister he'd recently had murdered. The man was not without bravery, but few among even the most crazed of villains would care to try odds such as those. And this was no villain, no champion of Below. Only a man, with all the evil banality of that stature.

"You know not what trouble you borrow, Levantine," the prince said.

How mundane it was now, to see through bluster. Neither tone nor posturing could hide the cold fear spreading through the soul of the man. Tariq wondered if he should enjoy the sight of that, for he found he did not. Even Yasa's death was not enough to whet his appetite for cruelty, it seemed. He almost wished that it had been. It would make the accusations Bakri had laid at his feet echo slightly less.

"Sit down," Tariq said.

"And then?" the prince asked.

Hope, the slightest bit of it.

"We will have a conversation," the Grey Pilgrim said. "And when it ends, I will kill you."

# Chapter 9

# Patient Knives

> "No man is an island, Chancellor. We've tried the ritual, the result is mostly screams."
>
> Dread Emperor Malignant III

We were an hour out of Rochelant when Akua returned to my side. The night was still young – I knew that better than most – so we'd not wasted moonlight by lingering on the outskirts of the city until she finished. The sooner we caught up to my drow army the better, as far as I was concerned. Still, after she returned in a whisper of power on frost I called a halt. My Peerage took the following dismissal gracefully, and why wouldn't it? They'd not stood in my deeper councils even when I was still their sole mistress, not even Ivah. It would have been convenient if there'd been a log or rock to sit on as we spoke, but Creation did not seem in an indulging mood tonight. At least getting off the damned horse for a moment was a relief to my calves and arse. I'd forgotten how irksome the cramps coming with long rides could be, when you weren't used to horsemanship. Winter had seen to those, before, and my Name taken off the edge before that. Gods, at least it wasn't as bad as the return of my monthlies. The surprise had been more than slightly unpleasant, when I'd had my first moon blood in years down in the Everdark. That Archer evidently found my discomfort hilarious had been no help at all.

I stretched my legs out carefully, leaning on my staff, and my 'war council' assembled around me. A bird, an archer and the shade of a dead woman. There'd probably been Dread Emperors in the old days that had more reliable-seeming councils than mine, and wasn't that a troubling thought? The shade bowed with exquisite precision, but neither crow-Andronike nor Archer took it upon themselves to add even a semblance of ceremony to the affair. A sad day indeed, when the Doom of Liesse was the best behaved of my companions.

"Lay it on me," I said.

Usually that would have prompted a dirty joke from Indrani – whose occasional evening in my bed had done absolutely nothing to curb the racy com-

ments of, to my mixed amusement and despair – but tonight she kept her mouth shut. I had to force myself not to look at her. This was not the place, now was not the time. The thought felt like a betrayal of sorts, true as it was. The people in the stories threw aside little details like this in the name of friendship all the time, didn't they? It'd been a long time since my story had been that clean or pretty, though, and sometimes I doubted it ever had been.

"There are at least eight thousand Helikean soldiers in Rochelant, though no more than twelve thousand," Diabolist reported. "No soldiery from any other of the Free Cities could be found."

I chewed on that for a moment. Old reports from the civil war in the League had the total muster of Helike at twenty thousand, but that army had sieged three cities since and stormed two of those three. The Tyrant might have recruited since, of course, but green troops wouldn't have the discipline I'd noticed in the soldiers holding Rochelant. And they'd marched through the Waning Woods a few months back, anyway, so further losses were to be expected. Assuming the Tyrant hadn't stripped Helike itself bare, inside that little Proceran city was the majority of the army his city-state could field. Considering Kairos Theodosian was the presumed general of the League's united armies, that held interesting implications. Who was giving out orders, if not him? Whatever reports I'd read about the League's military commanders were likely out of date by now, but unless someone had been hiding a very skilled general under a rock there should be no one of staggering competence. The other reputable professional army in their region was the Stygian slave phalanx, but while the Spears of Stygia had officers their orders ultimately came down from the ruling Magisterium of that city. Powerful warlocks, but not necessarily the most able of generals.

"The League's going to be a fucking mess if it gives battle unless the Tyrant returns," I bluntly said. "Which he shows absolutely no sign of doing right now."

"Good news, then," Archer shrugged. "Either they'll be thrashed or they'll stand back and let us settle the mess."

I frowned, not so sure about that. Kairos wouldn't be crippling his own army this early in the dance, it was his most valuable avenue of pressure on everyone else. If anything, he'd want to preserve its strength while the Grand Alliance and my own hodgepodge coalition bloodied each other for a bit. If he held command of the only mostly intact host on the field, everyone else would have to step carefully around him. On the other hand, if I was reading him right, he couldn't just stay out of the melee either. He had to prove to be *some* sort of threat, if his way to victory involved both himself and the First Prince at the same negotiation table. The Hierarch was a forest fire in the making, sure, but the man alone wouldn't be enough to have the likes of Cordelia Hasenbach flinching. *Unless he stops haunting small cities and stirs up larger pots*, I mused. Which would be difficult to implement, since the Hierarch should need to be in whatever city he stirred and the Helikeans didn't have fairy gates to quicken their advance. As far as I knew, anyway.

"We'll see," I finally said. "Akua, you studied the Hierarch's... pull?"

Diabolist nodded, face calm but gaze visibly unsettled.

"I am nearly certain this was an aspect," she said. "And absolutely certain this was not the result of using some entity bound and bargained with."

Archer spat into the snow, and I shared the sentiment.

"No one gets that strong a boon from their Name without a cost," I said. "It's not a city-killer he's wielding, not exactly, but it's almost as bad. William had to put his life on the scales and call down a bloody Choir to attempt something in the same league."

"Contrition's touch was stronger than this, practically speaking," Akua dispassionately noted. "Closer to absolute in its effect, a result of the Choir's own nature. The Hierarch's influence seems to be closer to a nudge than a decree – I would wager it relied on grievances already existing."

"Useful, but not what I'm asking you about," I said.

Diabolist inclined her head in concession, then hesitated.

"This is not fact, only supposition," she warned.

I simply cocked an eyebrow. Her suppositions were usually rather solid, as they should be. Even before I'd ripped out her soul and bound it to Winter, broadening her horizons, she'd had an education in matters eldritch that likely less than a dozen people on Calernia could boast of surpassing. And even then, not in every subject.

"The nature of the aspect might be extremely situational," Akua said. "That is usually the case with more powerful aspects – either that or they are outright uncontrolled."

My lips thinned. Uncontrolled did seem possible, since I doubted Anaxares of Bellerophon had done much experimenting with his abilities. But when I'd spoken with him, the pull had lessened while he engaged with me. Until I'd irked him, anyway. Reaction to emotions, maybe? That was hardly unusual with Named.

"Situational," I repeated, implicitly inviting her to elaborate.

"I saw more of the city than either of you, I believe," Akua said. "It struck me that, aside from the tribunals, there seemed to be no unnaturally-driven actions taking place."

Archer snorted out a laugh.

"So his trick is only good at making trials?" she said. "Takes all sorts, I suppose."

I was a lot less amused. Considering Kairos was the hand behind the Hierarch, I didn't believe for a moment that even an aspect so narrow couldn't be used to birth a hellish mess. There were a lot of important people – important entities, even – that would leave a disaster in their wake if they ended up getting behead by an alleyway tribunal. By now I was nearly certain the First Prince's neck wasn't what the Tyrant was after, but if I entertained the notion that it *was* for a moment? Using the right pivot, civil war could be sown in the Principate just as the Dead King started making gains up north. There was

no need to expand on what kind of a disaster that would be for the rest of the continent.

"Judgement," I said, honing in on what I considered the important kernel. "You think his aspect is bound to the concept. Stronger when he's standing in judgement, or inciting others to do the same."

Akua nodded.

"I am not certain how much you know of Bellerophon," she delicately said.

Unlike Masego, she was usually more diplomatic than to outright call me ignorant to my face.

"They rule by popular vote and appoint officials by drawing lots," I replied. "Terrible at war, though their city-state is too much trouble for anyone to want to seriously attempt annexation. They hate Penthes to the bone and they've got some sort of mage order that suppresses internal rebellions. Like to execute each other a lot, so I can see where the Hierarch gets it from."

I knew more than that, but little relevant to our conversation. It was mostly anecdotes from histories which as a rule tended to take an amused, tolerant and slightly condescending view of the city. Good for a laugh, but not people to take too seriously. The rest of the League seemed content to leave them to their own devices in their dirt-poor holdings, only intervening for a cursory slap on the wrist when they agitated at the borders.

"It was not a city my education covered in great detail," Akua admitted.

Which was pretty damning, since the Sahelians would have gone out of their way to thoroughly brief her on any nation of importance.

"That said, there is one detail to their democracy that my tutors found of interest," Diabolist continued. "While it well-known that all citizens of Bellerophon have the right to cast a vote in the city's popular assembly, not so that the Gods Below have one as well."

I cocked an eyebrow, reluctantly amused.

"One vote," I said. "For the whole lot of them?"

"Indeed," Akua replied, without a speck of humour to her voice. "A droll detail, in most situations, though the Hierarch's abilities change matters. You see, this makes the Gods Below honorary citizens of Bellerophon according to their own laws."

A heartbeat passed.

"You can't be serious," I said. "They think their laws apply to the Gods?"

"Half of them, anyway," Indrani snickered. "Wonder if they ever took the bastards to court?"

"Archer," I hissed. "*Think* about this. The Hierarch's mad as can be, but he believes in that tripe. Believes it hard enough it ripples across a whole city – and he's under the impression he has a right to put even Gods on trial."

I bit my lip, glancing at Akua.

"If he made an attempt," I said. "What would happen?"

The shade looked dismayed.

"I have no idea," she admitted. "There has never been a precedent as far as I know."

*Ah, Catherine, that's the entire point*, Kairos Theodosian told me. *Finding out.* Would he turn on Below like that? He might, I grimly admitted to myself. Akua herself had told me that when the Hellgods had taught the Wasteland about 'sacred betrayal' they hadn't excluded themselves from the chain of treachery. I had no reason to believe their teachings in Helike ran along different lines. And if the man truly bought into Evil, he might not even see it as a betrayal. Or rather, he'd think about betrayal very differently: a holy thing, an act of worship. Which didn't mean in the slightest that the Gods Below wouldn't answer it by making a crater wherever the offence was given. The size of that possible crater, though, was the part worrying me most. A city, a province, a realm? A *continent*? It was one thing to make a play of the alleged purpose of Creation, as the Liesse Accords were meant to but quite, another to take a swing at the Gods who'd actually created the world. I wasn't opposed to the act in principle, to be honest, but if all it took to end Above and Below was a pair of bold madmen we'd be long rid of them.

"Well, there's a new name on the list," I finally said.

"Which one?" Archer drily asked.

"The one with the people we need a solid plan to kill," I said. "Akua, I want a record of everything you observed of the Hierarch and his abilities. We'll start from there. He might be like Malicia, a Named with little combat weight. That hardly means he'll be easy to kill, but at least he's away from his seat of power. That ought to make it possible, at least."

*Unless*, I suddenly thought, *he's carrying his damned seat of power with him*. Did he just need to be near a mob, any mob? Was his aspect really that versatile, for all its apparent narrowness? I set that consideration aside for the moment. We wouldn't get a proper assault plan done standing out here in the cold anyway, and preferably I'd want more than just us contributing to it. It'd be best if the full Woe could be involved, it'd rather broaden the toolbox we could call on to get it done. This was still speculation anyway, I reminded myself. It might be the Tyrant and the Hierarch would settle for some lesser madness behind the headsman's axe they'd be swinging. But expecting the worst was only good sense, at this point, and you could never have too many plans to kill dangerous madmen. Oh Gods, I was starting to sound like Black. Which reminded me...

"I'll see it done," Diabolist replied with a nod.

"Speaking of dangerous madmen," I said. "Black's still alive according to the Tyrant."

My two companions held their tongue, but I caught them sharing a look.

"*Yes*, he could be lying," I sharply said. "But Kairos also mentioned him to be a prisoner of the Grey Pilgrim, which strikes me more as an attempt to send me after the man than dangled false hope."

"It could be both," Indrani bluntly said.

"We know there's no heroes with the Levantine armies," I pointed out. "Which, if the Pilgrim was in Iserre to intervene in this fight, is where he would attach himself. If he's actually in the principality – and the Tyrant wouldn't send me on wild goose chase when he could send me into actual danger instead – then there's a reason for it. Escorting a dangerous prisoner to Salia would fit. Unless either of you has a better explanation?"

"Speculating with this little information is rather pointless," Akua said. "The Pilgrim's schemes run deep."

I was a little impressed that she, of all people, had the gall to say that about someone else.

"Still not sure why the old man wouldn't just slit the Carrion Lord's throat, to be honest," Indrani said. "Not like he's been shy about that sort of thing until now."

"Bait," Diabolist suggested.

"We're already here," Archer snorted. "We have to be, to get anything done. I guess he could be after the other Calamities, but why borrow a torch when the house is on fire?"

I couldn't disagree, though I really wished it were otherwise. Especially if the Pilgrim was actually headed for Salia, which was the only destination making sense if they were traipsing through Iserre. Sure the Principate's capital was massive and well-defended, but it was also the most populated city on Calernia bar none. Somehow I doubted Warlock would care all that much if he had to incinerate a few hundred thousand people to get my teacher out of a cell, but in principle the Grey Pilgrim *was* supposed to care. I supposed a funeral pyre of dead innocents by the thousands might set in stone the story of those who'd committed such a massacre being righteously slain by heroes, but that was a damned dark way of going after an end that could be reached through other methods.

"Indrani," I hesitantly asked. "If he was killed, how would the Lady of the Lake react?"

She grimaced under her hood.

"Can't be sure," she said. "Odds are she'd cut whoever wielded the knife, at least, but she's not his keeper. If he sailed his ship into the reefs on his own, and it sounds like he did, she might not see reason to take revenge. She's not a Calamity anymore, Cat. She didn't go after the heroine that killed Captain either."

That might have been because she considered the remaining Calamities to have a better claim to that death, I had privately thought, but if anyone would know the truth of this it was Archer. It irritated me a little that the Ranger could band with people for years and then leave those bonds behind when it suited her, but then she'd not struck me as a woman dripping with tender sentiments.

"Which leaves diplomatic leverage," Akua said. "The Empress' deep fondness for her right hand is no secret. Neither, to be frank, is your own attach-

ment. Hostage-taking to secure the left flank of the Principate while war is waged against the Kingdom of the Dead would be a gamble, but if successful then well worth the costs. And if a single individual could be used for that purpose, it would be the Black Knight."

"He burned through quite a chunk of the Proceran heartlands not a year ago," Indrani whistled, sounding impressed. "If Hasenbach thought up that scheme, she's got ice in the veins and no lack of nerve. Her people are going to be howling for his head."

The First Prince did have both, I silently conceded. And this was the best explanation I'd heard so far, assuming this wasn't actually *Black's* plan and we were all swinging at mist – which I wasn't quite ready to discard as a possibility yet.

"We'll find out sooner or later," I said. "Regardless, if the Pilgrim is in the region you should know what that means."

Akua's face was the picture of serenity, but she did not speak and that was telling. Indrani had been with me for longer, though, so she followed the thought to the conclusion.

"We'll run into the old man at some point," she mused. "And with blades out, most likely."

"Vivienne figured out one of the quirks to his Name," I said. "We confirmed it at the Battle of the Camps – to put up his stronger stuff, likely to avoid getting killed, he needs to intervene on someone's behalf. Assuming we manage to assemble all our forces in the field before we run into him, the weak link is obvious."

Andronike, still on my shoulders and interested enough in the proceedings not to interrupt so far, stirred with displeasure at the thought yet unexpressed. That made it, I told her silently, no less true.

"The drow," Akua said. "The consequences of dawn are a dangerously exploitable weakness."

"If he knocks out the southern expedition we lose a lot of fighting power," I said. "The Legions have held ground against him before – at a cost, but we held. If he wants to cripple us, he'll be going after the drow."

"That means he'll take the offensive," Archer mused. "Or at least, his soldiers will. That way he has people to save."

And it might just be that the more people in peril there were, the greater the power granted to save them would be. He'd been no pushover at the Battle of the Camps, when he got going. Considering the amount of troops running around Iserre that was not a pleasant notion to entertain.

"He's a tricky sort," I said. "But his arsenal isn't endless and we're not without backing of our own. If he strays too far from his Name we can slap that down. I'll pit Night against Light any day, when we've got our lovely goddesses along on the field."

"Aspects, then," Indrani frowned.

"He's not going to blast an entire drow army into oblivion in a storm of Light," I agreed. "I don't care how much miracle wine the Gods make him drink, no one can stomach that kind of power without burning out. So he'll hit us where it hurts, with something he's personally strong in. And back at the Battle of the Camps, when he got all miraculous on us he was using a very specific kind of light."

"We cannot kill him without ending chances of any diplomatic agreement with Levant," Diabolist reminded me.

"No," I agreed. "So that's not what we'll go after. The opposition isn't the only side with miracles, these days, even though ours need to be bought and paid for."

I met the shade's golden eyes.

"Make me a well, Akua Sahelian," I ordered. "I don't care how many Mighty you have to rope in, get it done and *quick*."

Diabolist flicked a glance at the silver of godhood on my shoulder, but found nothing there to fear. She wouldn't, I thought. After all, Andronike's crowing laughter was echoing in the back of my head with no sign of ceasing. She *would* be amused by that, I supposed. There was a degree of irony to my plan being, in essence, the first teaching of the Sisters. I rolled my other shoulder, limbering the muscles in an attempt to distract from the dull of throb of my bad leg. The staff could only help so much.

"All right, that's enough for now," I said. "Let's get moving, I want to cover as much ground as possible before dawn catches us. If I'm not wrong, we'll be joining General Rumena just in time to kick the hornet's nest."

"That's why good boots are important," Indrani laughed.

I was gladdened her mood had shifted, though I had to wonder how long that'd last.

"Also crushing one's enemies," Akua seriously said, then paused. "For justice, of course."

I rolled my eyes and left them to it, heading back to my horse. I slipped onto the saddle, then waited for the sounds of their bickering to fade as they pulled ahead.

"Andronike," I said. "If I needed you to look south for something. . . "

"Not until my sister is at my side," the crow said. "Something clouds my sight."

Yet another reason to reunite with the southern expedition as fast as possible, I thought, spurring on Zombie to catch up with the others.

If Cordelia Hasenbach had gone grave-digging, I needed to know what she was digging *for*.

# Chapter 10

# Capture

> "The key to popular reign is to blame the previous ruler for your every blunder and claim ownership of their every success, while avoiding the opposite. As a sign of my abiding love for you, my son, I have simplified this process by leaving you to inherit only a large amount of blunders."
>
> Extract from the infamous 'Sensible Testament' of Basilea Chrysanthe of Nicae

We ran into the scouting party about half a bell before noon. Fifteen drow all wrapped up in furs, covering the grounds with admirable speed even though in the light of day they must feel half-blind. We saw them before they saw us, as this was a long way from the Everdark and it was a hard business keeping out of Archer's sight while on open field. I urged Zombie to pull ahead, leaving my Peerage and companions to catch up. I did not call on Night to sharpen my gaze, disinclined to begin exhausting my body when there might very well be trouble ahead. General Rumena was a veteran, though the host it commanded now had little to do with the once-professional armies of the Empire Ever Dark. More importantly, I'd sat on its councils when it tossed duties and responsibilities at sigils like one would toss a bone to a hungry dog. Aside from the weary contempt for the Mighty under its command it did not hide quite well enough, I'd taken note of how it usually disposed its scouts and lookouts.

We weren't close enough to have run into spotters keeping an eye on the back of the southern expedition, and these weren't spread out enough to hold that duty besides. They weren't numerous enough for a full-on scouting party, though, and that was what had me riding hard. Fifteen was plenty enough to have good odds the band wouldn't miss anything moving, and few enough they'd be able to travel fast. No a scouting party, no. But if I had to canvass a fairly broad region for a small group, I'd send one or two dozen of those groups in staggered order to get the job done. General Rumena, it seemed, was looking for us. Hailing the drow confirmed as much. They'd been sent by the Tomb-

Maker with the suggestion that my group hurry, since events to our south were unfolding at an even quicker pace than I'd wagered they would. An attempt to infiltrate the camp had been made last night, and prisoners taken.

I bid the scouts – dzulu one and all, by the looks of them, from the Brezlej Sigil – to spread out and recall the other bands, waiting just long enough for the rest of my escort to catch up. Akua and Indrani were the only ones in my company both curious and willing to ask answers of me. I indulged them willingly enough.

"The hornets are already out of the nest," I told. "Someone tried Rumena's camp. I'll be riding full tilt, I need eyes on this as soon as possible."

"We could gate," Diabolist suggested.

"I'm not lighting up a beacon of our location for everyone looking," I said, shaking my head. "Archer, don't spend your strength too much trying to keep up. If there's trouble I'll want you at the tip of the spear."

She slowly nodded and my gaze moved to Akua.

"My orders for you haven't changed," I said. "It'll have to wait until nightfall, but prepare the necessities."

"It will remove the Mighty of use from the field for days," Diabolist said. "It might be more sensible for me to serve on the field until the situation is less... delicate."

She was useful in a scrap, true enough. I still turned her down without a moment's hesitation.

"Make me a well," I calmly said. "That is your priority, bar none. There's no point in deploying you to wipe out a few companies if a week later we're caught unprepared by heroes and lose a hundred times that number. If you've time on your hands, assemble a schedule for the Mighty who will contribute. Take measurements, give me options. If you've still hours to waste after that, consult with the Sisters. We'll get only one shot at this, Diabolist: if we miss it's going to cost us something fierce."

She didn't argue any further after that. I suspected she rather wanted to, though there was no trace of it on her face, but she knew well enough by now not to push when my heels were fully dug in. Not that she knew why they were dug. I'd shared a lot of my suspicions with my companions, during our journey to catch up to the army, but not all of them. There were some I'd rather keep to myself until I had more information to go on. I rode on after that, straight south as the Brezlej scouts had told me. I kept to a quicker pace than them, on my latest Zombie, though that should be no surprise. I kept to a quicker pace than even riders whose skill made a mockery of mine simply because my horse would never tire. I was willing to damage the corpse a bit, if it got me there faster. It was a little past Afternoon Bell when I found the southern expedition's army. On the way I'd run into another band of scouts, which I sent out with the same duty as the Brezlej, and then three successive screens of lookouts. Rumena had tightened the watch now that we'd entered troubled waters, I noted with approval.

Andronike had flown away in silence long before I got anywhere near here, and I couldn't feel either her or her sister in the labyrinth of tents. There was a pulse I could barely make out further south, though. It sang to me, cool and comforting like a good night's sleep come autumn. I rode into the camp, noting this late most drow had wakened, and ran my gaze along Rumena's layout. It was a lost cause to get the southern expedition of the Empire Ever Dark to behave anything like a proper legion, with a carefully laid out camp and raised palisades before sundown, but since I'd left my general had forced some form of structure onto the chaos. Sigils raised their tents together, by the looks of it, with the larger ones on the edge of the broad circle the entire lot of them formed and the smaller ones filling that outline. Two clear paths, one facing north and the other south, had been cleared out – though I noted while riding down the northern one that it was hardly straight. Wobbly was a generous assessment, but it was already better than the utter lack of arrangements the drow had kept to until now.

Mighty Brezlej met me in advance, introducing itself as the appointed *islneravce*. It meant 'keeper under the glare of the sun', more or less, if I'd understood the emphases correctly. I took that to mean commander of the watch when it was daylight. Broadly muscled, short and a little thick around the waist the Mighty was strikingly unusual for a drow but I had no time to spare on the matter. I was informed that General Rumena was currently at a forward position, preparing a detachment to take the nearby town of Lancevilliers if it proved necessary.

"I was told there was an attempt to enter the camp," I said, staring down from atop my mount.

"That is so, Losara Queen," Mighty Brezlej agreed. "Twelve enemies, nine of which still live. They have been separated and we identified the one we believe to be the leader."

"You've interrogated them?" I asked.

"Though questions were asked, they have refused to answer them," the drow said. "It was spoken under Night that they should not be touched."

Brezlej murmured prayers under its breath after saying the last sentence, under my steady stare. Well, at least Rumena wasn't getting up to the torture of prisoners of war while my back was turned. Still, 'spoken under Night'. That meant one of the Sisters had meddled, which was unusual to say the least. Who'd be important enough for them to speak? Maybe some bold Proceran royal with spirit but little brains to match had decided to gild the family name by taking a look at the foreigners, I mused. Prince Amadis was a cunning enough intriguer, but the Principate's royal bloodlines tended to be large and many-branched. If a tree bore enough apples, one of them was bound to be inbred enough to try sneaking up on drow at night. I ordered Mighty Brezlej to prepare a full report of the ways the situation had changed in my absence, and to send the Mighty Archer directly to me should she arrive. I would, meanwhile, be having a chat with the officer among our catches of the night.

Drow, sadly, were not used to taking prisoners – it was simply not the way they were used to waging warfare. Night was best harvested from corpses, and when it wasn't the insult was meant to be dealt to a living foe sent back into the wilds as a sign of contempt. That meant they had little experience holding captives, or raising structures to keep them. So far tents had been the makeshift solution, with the isolated prisoners tightly bound inside, but that wouldn't work forever. It was all well and good when we only had a few, but if a few companies laid down their arms we just wouldn't have enough spare tents to keep them. Four Soln dzulu were keeping guard at the corners of the tent where the officer awaited, looking bleary-eyed but attentive, and I met their deep bows with a nod before parting the flap and going in. I froze in surprise. Hanging down from the wooden frame holding up the dome-like tent of leather and linen, a small form was sleeping. I recognized regulation-issue undershirt, the skinny frame it was on and even the cast of the face covered in part by a too-large blindfold. *Robber*, I almost said, but then stopped. The leather and rope bindings were too loose to really keep someone from a race as flexible as his in place. And given goblin hearing, my entrance should have wakened him. So why was he still pretending to be asleep? A torturer wouldn't-

I rubbed the bridge of my nose and forced down a sigh. It was a good thing I hadn't walked further into the tent. Leaning against my staff, I crouched down to take a better look. Robber did not stir, but I felt him tense. Took me a bit, but I found what I was looking for. A thin, dull metal wire covered by snow leading up to a hook cleverly set into a sharper, barely peeking out from a pile of furs. No doubt the other end of the wire, which I couldn't see, was anchored solidly and the wire itself tensed for a hair-trigger. One step on it and the sharper would blow, then he'd pop out of the bindings while the enemy was stunned. Knife to the throat, and off he went to try his hand at a getaway. Drow clearly needed better schooling in looking for hidden armaments, I decided, if they'd missed both a knife and a sharper trap while stripping him. I pushed myself back to my feet, then carefully picked my angle and positioned my staff. With a quick hand I lobbed the sharper through an opening in the tent flap, calling out *scatter* in Crepuscular, and turned even as it blew in the muddy snow outside. I was a little impressed he tried to knife me without even taking off the blindfold or fully slipping the bindings, I'd admit. My Special Tribune had been keeping sharp. Not sharp enough I didn't catch the wrist under the hand holding a slender blade, though.

"The wire's new," I mused. "Won't shine under light like the old stuff would, and something must have been done to make it more sensitive. Pickler's been busy, I see."

I grinned even as Robber went stiff as a board. I took a moment to yell out at the guards not to come in.

"Boss?" he hissed out.

"I'm not seeing a salute, Special Tribune," I mildly said. "Do you really want to find out what's *below* Lesser Lesser Footrest?"

The knife immediately went over his heart, which was the closest to an actual salute he'd given me in years, and deft green fingers hiked up his blindfold.

"Well I'll be damned," Special Tribune Robber said, large yellow eyes blinking. "It *really* is you. Wait, you could be an impostor. Tell me something only Catherine Foundling would know: what is my official salary as Lesser Footrest?"

"That I don't let Indrani put ribbons in your hair, you adorable little princess," I drawled.

"I don't even *have* hair," he complained. "And you know she'd glue on really coarse stuff just to spite me."

For all that he was leaning into the exchange, I did not miss the way his eyes flicked towards my bad leg and then towards my chest. Since I was pretty sure he wasn't looking at my tits – not that there'd been much to look at – that meant he was checking if I breathed.

"Leg's back," I agreeably told him. "So's the more-than-decorative breathing."

"There's actual colour to your cheeks, Boss," Robber bluntly said. "Like being out in the cold did something."

"That's a long story," I said.

"Did you murder another demigod?" he mused. "Does doing that twice, like, cancel it out?"

"Oh, stop hanging like a bloody gargoyle and put that knife away," I sighed.

My eyes narrowed as I remembered Mighty Brezlej's full summary of how he'd ended up here, though. I waited until he'd deftly landed in the snow and taken off the blindfold before pressing the subject.

"You tried to infiltrate the camp with just a tenth," I stated.

His mouth parted to reveal a short flash of hungry, needle-like teeth.

"That what the greyskins told you?" he said. "We only tried the outer perimeter, not the camp. Then it was all sorcery everywhere, and Sergeant Slicker's flesh melted off his bones. Another two of my crew reached for blades and they had holes in the head before they could draw."

I grimaced.

"Gods, Robber, what took you to even try?" I said. "Hakram and Vivienne knew where I was headed – it should have been envoys sent, not scouts."

"We didn't even know it was the drow," Robber admitted. "Just an army and not a small one. And there's been, uh, instructions from up top even if we run into the greys."

"Instructions," I repeated blandly.

He grimaced.

"We couldn't know if you were still alive, Boss," he said. "And if you were, that it'd be you in charge. And even if you looked in charge, that it was really *you*."

He paused, then squinted at me.

"You *are* in charge, yeah?" he asked.

"Some," I said. "It's an alliance with limits to it. But I've got the ear of the people running the show, you might say."

"Thank the fucking Gods," Robber muttered. "That you're back more than for the greys, I mean. This campaign is turning into a bastard mess, Boss. It'll be good to have your hand holding the reins again."

"Then you'll have answers," I flatly said. "About what Juniper's doing campaignin here in the first place. I distinctly remember leaving my army on the *other* side of the Whitecaps."

His lips quirked, sharp and mean.

"Well, Lady-Regent Dartwick got invited by our good friend the Prince of Iserre to 'clear out bandits and foreign agents from his lands', y'see," Robber told me.

My brow rose. I honestly couldn't imagine Vivienne willing to risk the Army of Callow at the say so of a Proceran prince, which likely meant Prince Amadis' arm had been twisted until he gave said invitation. Might not be Thief's notion at all, I decided. Hakram? What would he think we could gain from intervening here?

"What are we using Amadis as a pretence for?" I bluntly asked.

"Taking out the Carrion's Lord legions from here with a semblance of clean, the way I hear it," my Special Tribune said. "They were on the edge of a wipe, and no one wanted that. Plan was to prop him Amadis as a banner to force Procer to give us room, pop in, pick up Ol' One-Eye and his people then then pop out."

"By fairy gate," I slowly said.

Which meant either Masego was back, with a titled fae bound, or the Wild Hunt had not been freed of its oaths when Winter ended up in the Night's belly. That was a relief, to be frank. I was bound by oath to Larat aside from the Hunt's own terms – seven crowns and one, still to be delivered – but I'd not been sure that would be enough. The sooner I could have a good look at the fae the better.

"Yeah, the Hunt's been all darling since you sent them back," Robber said. "Which is suspicious as all Hells, if you ask me, but apparently putting that to verse and having a choir sing it to Marshal Juniper is 'reprehensible' and 'a flagrant breach of regulations'. I mean, it was only the middle of the night."

I smothered the smile, though not quite quickly enough for him to miss it. The humour waned, though, when I remembered what we were speaking about.

"But you're still here," I said, stating the obvious. "What happened?"

"We gated in just fine," the goblin said. "Ran into a League force two days in, but after they missed taking the Hellhound's head they mostly kept their distance. Made contact with Marshal Grem when the scrying block shut down for a bit-"

"The scrying block," I said. "Wait, more important – you can still scry sometimes?"

"It's like rolling dice," Robber said. "Kilian says the block is something massive already using the sky, but once in a while it looks elsewhere – then there's a short window where we can use the old rituals. And I do mean the old ones, Boss. Dunno if you noticed, but the Observatory went the way of an orc with the key to a liquor shop. No one can get it do to anything, and when we left Callow the pools were starting to evaporate."

I clenched my fingers. Shit. Someone had definitely targeted us, then. If it were just Iserre being screwed with I could put that to a ritual or miracle we ended stumbling into, but the Observatory wouldn't get in that bad a way if someone hadn't aimed for it. And just like that, Kairos was back in the running for the prick most likely to be responsible. It seemed very much like his kind of play – he might have planned the ritual in Iserre first, then gone after the Observatory because it'd allow my forces to bypass it. If there was anyone who wanted everyone in this principality blind, right now, it was the Tyrant of Helike.

"Marshal Grem," I said, setting that trail of thought aside for now. "He's also still in Iserre?"

"We tried to pull him out," the goblin told me. "The Levantines were starting to catch up when we arrived, too close to risk it, so the Hellhound had us gate in between their armies to force them to retreat. And it worked fine – the Legions gained a few days of lead while the Dominion got really angry at us being there. But then we tried to gate out, and on the other side was a godsdamned sea of boiling pitch."

My fingers tightened around my staff.

"That doesn't sound like Arcadia," I said.

"Best we can tell, it was one of the Hells," Robber snorted. "No one went in to check, you know, on account of the *sea of boiling pitch*."

"And it's all been leading there since?" I asked.

"Worse," the goblin said. "It changes. Mostly Hells, so far, but once in a blue moon we get Arcadia again – not that we can travel it, since no one's sure we'd be able to leave after entering. Hakram ordered an end to the attempts after we almost let out a horde of devils into the camp."

"What has Masego said?" I frowned.

"*Shit*," Robber said, eyeing me warily. "You haven't heard."

My stomach dropped.

"Tell me," I ordered.

"The Lord Warlock blew up Thalassina sky high trying to hold it against Ashur, himself included," the goblin told me. "Place is a graveyard, even those that fled got some sort of magic sickness and cacked it."

"Masego?" I softly asked.

"Word from Praes is the warlock's get made it out," Robber said.

I let out a shaky breath. Thank whatever Gods were listening for that.

"Empress had people looking for him, anyway," he continued. "No one knows where he is though. I know Deadhand and the general staff kept some-

thing about him under seal just before we gated for Procer, but I haven't managed to ferret it out yet."

"We'll find him," I grimly said.

His fathers were dead and he'd likely fled through the Wasteland alone with Malicia's agents hounding him every step of the way. He must be a wreck of grief and exhaustion, I thought. I didn't like this talk of magic sickness at all, either, considering he must not have been far from Thalassina when this all happened. I reluctantly forced myself to focus on more immediate concerns. There was little I could do for him right now, much as I hated to admit it.

"Juniper's stuck between the Levantine armies, then," I said. "Is she close? For that matter, is Marshal Grem backing her?"

Robber's wide eyes thinned with sudden alarm.

"I never reported back," he said. "Boss, we have a problem. If Nauk still thinks your greys are a Proceran army, then he won't leave his dug-in positions. Which means you're about to lose a quarter of the Army of Callow."

Well, I darkly thought, it *had* been that kind of a week so far. Why stop now?

# Chapter 11

# Forced March

> "A hundred battles, even victories, will always lose you the war."
>
> Theodosius the Unconquered, Tyrant of Helike

When I'd been told that General Rumena was at a forward position, in my mind's eye I'd envisioned a Legion outpost: neat palisade with a dry moat in front, raised tower to serve as a better vantage point. Stone for everything instead, if it was meant to be a long-term outpost and funds allowed. I should have known better, by now, to expect more than a pack of tents and heavy screens of scouts.

"Your people are sloppy, Boss," Robber said. "Nettles me a bit they caught my boys at all."

The tone had been casual and the words mild, which was a telltale sign he was considering knifing a few drow to even scales the goblin way – which was to say, inflicting twice as many wounds as you'd received and then rubbing dirt in to make sure infection took. I might have taken it as face value, the posturing and the easy cutting lines, if I hadn't seen him raw after losing people right before the beginning of the Battle of Three Hills. For all that Robber liked to put himself up as a goblin's goblin, much like me he'd never quite learned how to make losses stop bruising. Juniper had always disapproved of that. Soldiers died, and it should not be taken lightly or misused but that was the nature of being a soldier. She'd always had the knack for keeping it distant. There were some people who had that in them, I supposed – Hakram did, and once upon a time Ratface had as well. Akua acted as if she belonged among those, but sometimes I did wonder. *Is that who you are, or what you trained yourself to be?* I didn't turn around to look at him where he sat side-saddle on my horse, all bunched up behind me, but I pitched my voice to be well understood.

"I'm not happy some of ours got killed, Robber," I said. "But there will be none of that. Like it or not, you came in quiet and ran into a watch that acted exactly as a watch should."

"They don't see so well in the day, though," the goblin mildly said.

"About as well as humans," I said, then dipped my tone towards a warning. "And I could warn you they've got entities behind them the sun doesn't blind but I won't have to, will I? Because I gave you an *order*."

His teeth clicked softly as his mouth shut. He wasn't happy about this – neither was I, even though I knew the fault did not lie on the side of the drow – but he knew better than to push. Legionaries baring blades on drow was the very last thing I needed right now. As Special Tribune, the goblin had the standing to sit in on most war councils: he knew better than most how precarious the situation was for the Army of Callow right now. Juniper had done well, in all fairness. Being stuck between two hostile armies that together made up near the double of your forces was no easy mess to squeak out of, if the enemy generals weren't fools. And they were not, in this case. But her carefully laid plans had failed to account for one of the madmen on the stage, and now a crippling blow was coming. If we didn't move fast enough to prevent it, anyway, which was the opposite of my intention. We'd get there in time even if I had to march the drow until they collapsed. I had absolutely no intention of losing ten thousand legionaries and the general that was the finest vanguard in Callow bar none.

There'd been a time where I would have been more effusive in describing Nauk, but the man under assault to the south wasn't the same one I'd shared meals and fires with. If anything, the occasional similarities made the whole situation more disturbing – they put in relief everything that had changed when the Warlock had 'healed' him. *I might not have to stay this way*, I thought. Hope was always dangerous, but the thought refused to leave me. Warlock, for all his power and learning, had been a mage. Healing was an academic matter to them, a thing of physicality and measured energies. Most of what Summer's fire had taken from Nauk was not anything the Sovereign of the Red Skies could bring back. I was no mage, and the more I learned the more I realized the endless depths of what I did not know. But these days I had goddesses at my back, and miracles in my hands. What sorcery had failed to return might not be beyond the reach of the Night. Winter had been match for Summer, hadn't it? And Winter had been consumed. But hope was dangerous, and so I had kept my own council.

I rode into the camp at a brisk pace, having barely slowed from the gallop that brought me there, and ignored Robber's malicious cackle at the splashes of muddy snow that drenched warriors too slow in getting out of my way. There was no missing where General Rumena itself would be: at the heart of the camp, within a tall pavilion, twin heartbeats of power whispered to me. The Sisters had known of my coming for some time, though conversation was difficult if we strayed too far from each other. They should have felt the urgency of my purpose, though, and Komena at least had served as a high-ranking officer many years ago. Between her and Rumena, I was not beyond hope that the six sigils whose banners I'd spied had prepared for immediate advance upon my arrival. I reined in Zombie with a thought when we arrived in front of the

pavilion, sending a shiver of Night down my bad leg to make leaping down into the snow tolerable. It would ache later, I knew, but what patience I had left was better spent on other matters. Special Tribune Robber followed suit in his freshly-cleaned leathers and mail, shortsword at his side and crossbow at his back. The sapper's bag hanging off his other side was still full, the drow not having bothered to paw at the munitions after making sure there were no maps or papers.

The goblin swaggered at my side as I entered the tent, baring his needle-like teeth at every warrior eyeing him. Well, he wasn't one of the candidates I'd had in mind when I'd considered how to establish friendly ties between Callowan forces and the southern expedition. Maybe I should even consider this a good thing, I mused. The sooner the drow learned that trifling with goblins tended to end up in bear traps and mocking laughter the better, and who could get that point across faster than Robber? The war council awaiting me inside had few familiar faces aside from Rumena's, as it turned out. Mighty Jindrich was the only one I knew even remotely – he'd apparently survived the mess in Great Strycht largely on account of being too angry to die – though names were hardly impossible to know considering their sigils spelled them out. Room had been left at the low table of obsidian and granite for me to join them down on the carpet, but instead of moving to do so I cast a look around. In the shadows of the upper pavilion I caught sight of a pair of crows. Their dark eyes rested on me, but they did not speak either in thoughts or words. The Sisters, it seemed, were currently disinclined to meddle. From the corner of my eye I caught Robber looking exactly where I was, though from the way his gaze swept over the goddesses without slowing I suspected he'd not been allowed to glimpse anything.

"General Rumena," I greeted, leaning on my staff. "Many Mighty. At my side stands Special Tribune Robber, an officer in my service. He will be seated with us for this conversation."

A few of the Mighty seemed displeased, but they stowed that away when my stare moved towards them. There was a reluctant bit of shuffling about until room for two was made. The sole goblin present's amused smirk was a nearly physical thing. He might not speak Crepuscular, but he knew how to read a room.

"Losara Queen, First Under the Night," General Rumena pleasantly greeted me in Crepuscular. "And... company. Please, claim seat at this table."

"Our nice drow friends invited you to sit, Robber," I translated in a mild tone. "And you're going to be nice to them in return, aren't you?"

"I will offer them every diplomatic courtesy you've taught me, Boss," he smoothly agreed.

Well, there had to be at least one or two of those. Right? Not willing to take the plunge of thinking too deep about that, I sat myself down at the table and silently declined an offer of *rodleva*. While a few of the drow were sipping at polished cups of the brownish, warm mixture I'd never taken to it. That it

involved butter made from the milk of a creature that looked cousin to a lizard would have put me off even if the liquid didn't smell like cheese sent to the gallows and left for a week under the sun. Given the finer nose of goblins, no doubt Robber was taking it as torture.

"I won't waste time on idle talk, given the situation," I said. "I've had a fresh report from the Special Tribune including the location of an army in my service that it less than a day's march from here. I assume our scouts have already found it?"

Rumena inclined its head.

"That and more," it replied. "There is a force of horse-riders in the area that has been hunting our warriors."

I frowned. If the Dominion already had cavalry this far behind Nauk's back, his situation was worse than I'd been given to understand.

"Levantines?" I said.

"They do not bear the sigils as drawn by the Mighty Shade," Rumena said.

Akua had used charcoal and skins to draw everything she remembered of Levantine heraldry, which was largely the great bloodlines but still much better than the previous nothing we'd had. I flicked at a glance at Robber, who was currently engaged in a staring contest with a very pleased Mighty Jindrich.

"Special Tribune," I said. "When you left, did the Dominion have cavalry at the army's back?"

The goblin let out a whistling breath.

"No," he said. "But it might not be them, Your Majestic Terribleness. The riders, did they have bows?"

I almost translated for Rumena, until I remembered it spoke Lower Miezan just fine. It nodded when I met its eyes.

"Helike cataphracts," I said. "*Shit*."

I'd had a conversation with Juniper, once, about which Calernian cavalry was the finest. It'd been the knights of Callow in my eyes, of course, and the Hellhound had conceded that on open field and charging that was the case. She'd noted, though, that there was one other mounted force on the continent that would be able to take my countrymen apart. Helikean *kataphractoi* were more lightly armoured, as a rule, and unlike Callowan horse rarely used lances. They were, however, exceedingly well-trained in the use of curved bows meant to be used while mounted. There'd been no war between the League and Callow that would see the two forces conflict, and Helike as a city-state certainly couldn't afford to field as many cataphracts as there'd been knights in the heyday of Callowan chivalric orders. But with matched numbers, Juniper had been of the opinion that given room to manoeuvre the Helikean horsemen would be able to slowly whittle away at Callowan heavy horse while taking minimal losses. And considering no other army on Calernia fielded mounted archers, there was no mistaking these for anyone else no matter the banner.

"Let me guess," I sighed. "Less than four thousand overall, no infantry with them?"

"That is so," General Rumena agreed.

Well, there was the rest of the Tyrant's army. I'd suspected it wasn't the full muster back in Rochelant, but I'd expected what remained to stay with the the League's armies. Silly me, not anticipating Kairos would send his city's entire cavalry contingent to stir up the pot as much as physically possible.

"All the more reason to link up with General Nauk's forces," I finally said. "If we want to drive them off on foot, we'll need Callowan crossbow companies."

Come night, it was true, a few packs of Mighty could probably tear through the Tyrant's horsemen. But then somehow I doubted they'd risk that. They'd raid during the day, harass the expedition and retreat before a counterattack could be mounted. The drow didn't have proper companies, after all, they had tribes. Some of those had archers and javelinmen, but getting a cohesive volley fired at the cataphracts would take too long – unless we took all the archers out of their sigils and made companies of them, which would be difficult. Not even a year ago most of these people had been at each other's throats, and they weren't used to taking commands from anyone but their own Mighty. Who'd be quite infuriated at having their warriors taken from their command, besides. I could see it done, of course. I had the Sisters at my back and General Rumena commanded respect from all but the most stubborn. But they weren't trained to fight this way, and I was wary of eroding my goddess-given authority by using it too much. It was one thing to follow a high priestess to war against the contemptible surface peoples after the enterprise was blessed by the Night itself, another to remain all nice and supportive when said high priestess started chipping away at your subordinates. Proof, I supposed, that not even open divine favour was enough to get me out of fucking politics.

I needed the Mighty supportive, if I was to get steer this war to the right kind of ending.

"How soon can we set out?" I asked.

"Seven *pridnis*," Genera Rumena replied without missing a beat. "Though we number only six thousand, Losara Queen. Fighting under pale light will carry risks."

About two hours, I thought. We still had most of the afternoon until the sun set, but we wouldn't get there today so that wasn't what he meant. Our destination was past the town of Lancevilliers to the south. Even accounting for the second wind the drow would get after nightfall, the lethargy coming with dawn meant we wouldn't be able to both arrive at Nauk's position in Sarcella and be in fighting fit before at least Noon Bell. Unless I used a gate, which would get us there in hours but also light up the destination for anyone looking. I wasn't ready for the Saint and the Pilgrim quite yet – if I drew them to that battle, I might just end up losing more than just the ten thousand under Nauk.

"We'll have to regardless," I said. "I ordered Mighty Breznej to send reinforcements our way before leaving, but we can't afford to wait for them. Send back runner with an order to catch up as fast as they can, with a warning about the Helikeans."

In a silent flutter the crows landed on my shoulders, and there was no further talk after that. Open divine favour, I mused, did have its perks.

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We got to Lancevilliers before nightfall, not that it made much of a difference. The town was half-empty and there was no one in there remotely inclined to get in the way of an army. I would have preferred to avoid Proceran eyes entirely, but even a snowed-in road made for a quicker march than the countryside. I left behind a hundred drow led by Mighty Sudone to – *gently*, I made very clear – interrogate the locals for anything they might now. The southern expedition itself had standing orders not to a lay a hand on anyone but soldiers unless they were attacked, and to refrain from looting. The first one had been a hard sell, though the second surprisingly not. The Firstborn were amusingly skeptical that anything of human make could ever rival the works of their own kind, and centuries of barter economy meant they put little stock in silver and gold. Furniture and furs turned out to be the main temptations: both wood and furred creatures were a rarity underground. I'd leaned on Rumena to allow for supply requests to be lodged with the Mighty when it came to furs, given the weather, but for the furniture I had no sympathy. We weren't going to start dragging around nice Alamans *bureaux* anytime soon, no matter how nice they looked in tents. I'd also laid down a rule against rape, though that'd mostly been a formality. Drow hardly even slept with their own kind, sexual interest in humans was nonexistent.

Ivah had once informed me that its kind considered the most visible characteristics associated with men and women – beards, breasts – to be somewhat vulgar. It had said that in a tone implying it was paying me a compliment, which when I'd grasped why had achieved something of the opposite effect. Sadly, Archer had yet to tire of talking about it.

Our pace significantly quickened after dusk, even dzulu moving at a pace Robber found impressive. Well he'd compared them to goblins, anyway, which in his eyes probably counted as a compliment. Not many non-goblins would agree, I suspected. Mighty Sudone and its hundred caught up a few hours in, bearing wild rumours but nothing of any real use. I used our time to brief General Rumena and its cadre of sigil-holders on the military happenings of the last few months in Iserre as related to me by Robber. How the Army of Callow had ended up stuck between two hosts of forty thousand Levantines I covered only the broad strokes of, focusing on their current inability to gate out. What had followed was, in essence, my marshal trying to pull the wool over the eyes of the enemy commanders and partially succeeding. The Dominion had moved to crush Juniper, the army to the north throwing a delaying force in the way of Grem's legions before sending the rest of its number after her own forty thousand legionaries. The southern Levantines had not bothered with such subtlety, marching in full battle array towards the Army of Callow. The idea was, by the looks of it, to end the Callowan army before turning against the other forces in the principality: Grem and the League. The Hellhound wasn't

that easy to end, though. She'd decisively marched south and forced a minor battle against the lower Levantine army before she could be stuck in a pincer.

Reluctant to risk an all-out battle before the northern reinforcement arrived and their numbers grew overwhelming, the southern Levantines had given ground after the day's battle. My soldiers did have something of a reputation, when it came to facing rough odds – and the Levantines had not boasted that. Juniper had then split the Army of Callow into four columns of ten thousand and fled under cover of night. Two columns had gone eastwards, to slip around the northern Levantines, while the remaining two had gone westwards and made sure they were loud about it. One of those columns was under General Nauk, the other General Bagram. The latter had taken a moment to place – he was an orc, once General Istrid's second-in-command. Until recently he'd been tasked with holding Summerholm, but evidently he was moving up in the world. Nauk had been tasked with baiting the southern Levantines into following him, while General Bagram was to serve as reserve and guard his back in case the northern army wanted to try assaulting the western columns. It was classic Juniper, I thought when Robber first told me about it. Depending on enemy action, she could redeploy and put the hurt to them however she wanted.

If the northern Levantines went after the Hellhound's two columns, she only had to keep them marching until Grem's force could hit them in the back and the pincer manoeuvre became Callow's. If they continued marching to join up with their southern comrades, the four columns would escape the noose and join up with Grem's host. If the southern Levantines went after Nauk and Bagram, they'd be led in a merry chase until Juniper and Grem came down south together to relieve the western columns. If they marched east or north, instead, once again the four columns escaped disaster and linked up in northern Iserre. It'd seemed to work, at first. The last Robber had heard of the eastern columns, they had the northern Levantines after them. The problem had come when Nauk's column was hit from the back even as the southern Levantines came after them. Helikean cavalry had ambushed his rearguard, slowing his advance just long enough for the Levantines to gain grounds and begin their own cavalry raids. Messages from General Bagram had ceased, presumably because cataphracts were killing the messengers, anf his column had never come to reinforce Nauk's. What followed was a ragged retreat, eventually tumbling into the minor city of Sarcella which fell to the column without a fight.

Sarcella had no walls, most its people had fled because of the roving armies in the region and the city garrison had apparently 'retreated towards a more defensible position' the moment they saw an enemy host approaching. Knowing he was in a bad position, Nauk had raised field fortifications in Sarcella and held the grounds against a probing attack by a Levantine vanguard of around sixteen thousand – which didn't want to commit to more before the full forty thousand were there. He'd planned to start the retreat once more after forcing

an opening, but rumours of a large force marching towards his back had forced him to delay and send scouts lest he blunder into a battle he could not win. Said force was my drow, which was biting irony. Taking reinforcements for foes might very well see a quarter of the Army of Callow slain in the heartlands of Procer.

There were still things unaccounted for. No one knew where the Hells the column under General Bagram was. I doubted even Helike cataphracts could tie down *two* forces over twice their size, but the Tyrant might have more tricks up his sleeve. I'd been inclined to think that between reports of my drow army – an unknown – and the *kataphractoi* it might just be that General Bagram had written off Nauk's column as done for and begun full retreat, but Robber had given me the first bit of good news in a while when explaining why that was unlikely. Adjutant was with the column, nominally as an observer but in fact because he was keeping an eye on the two western columns. Tyrant or not, I'd put my faith in Hakram coming through. If he wasn't backing up Nauk there was a good reason for it. That, or he was on his way already. Gods, let it be the second. Even assuming Nauk's forces hadn't been mauled too badly holding Sarcella against a second assault, I was only bringing six thousand drow as reinforcements. And one goblin, I supposed. None of us could be sure whether or not the entire Dominion force of forty thousand had arrived yet, or if it was still only the vanguard, but if it had… Well, under the light of day the Firstborn were disorganized light infantry with poor armour and disparate weaponry. Six thousand of those in addition to what remained of Nauk's army might not be enough to see us through to the night and the accompanying swing of the balance.

Dawn cost us four hours, to my seething impatience, but I used the time to nap and get my hands on a decent steel longsword. I'd fed my sword-within-the-staff throughout the night, but I had no intention of using it yet. I could wield it as a staff, but polearms were hardly my specialty and I was a lot more fragile than I used to be. Best to put the odds on my side in every way. We moved out the moment it was physically possible to, and by Morning Bell we could see Sarcella.

It was hard to miss it, what with the way it was on fire.

# Chapter 12

# Relief

> "After Isabella the Mad was appointed to the command of the hosts of Procer to turn back the forces of the Tyrant Theodosius, the First Prince asked of her when she expected the war to be brought to a successful conclusion. 'It should take,' she famously replied, 'about a hundred battles.'"
>
> Extract from 'The Banquet of Follies, or, A Comprehensive History of the First League War' by Prince Alexandre of Lyonis

It was around half an hour before Noon Bell that we got close enough to Sarcella to get a decent idea of what was happening inside. Well, aside from the fire. That one had been pretty obvious even from miles away, which in my surprisingly extensive experience of setting fire to things wasn't a good sign for the people in the area. As it turned out the city of Sarcella itself was, well, almost offensively Proceran. How anyone could bother to shell out coin for an elaborate ring of ogre-tall statues and arches around their city but not a proper curtain wall was beyond me. Oh, sure, whoever that tall bald man in furs with a sword was might be nicer to look at on a sunny day, but that was the kind of thinking that got you invaded by the Legions of Terror. The damned things were granite, too, which I vaguely remembered being one of the cheaper stones floating around Principate markets. Bastards hadn't even been able to afford marble or limestone, had they? There was still a tax on granite back from the days of House Fairfax, I was pretty sure, though it wouldn't have been applied in over forty years – trade with Procer had understandably hit something of a low point after the Conquest. I supposed the saving grace of the whole affair was that granite statues would at least take more than a single glancing trebuchet shot before breaking.

Still, for all that at least Sarcella was slightly more defensible than I'd expected. It'd been raised on a few lazily-sloped hills, so there was some incline to work with, and unlike the flammable nightmare maze that had been Rochelant this city had a few paved and relatively straight avenues for troop deployment. Some parts of the outer city had houses of wood and stone clustered so tightly

together they were impassable, a wall in fact if not in name. I couldn't quite get a look at the furthest reaches of Sarcella, but it looked like it'd been the same parts of it burning for most of our march: with a little luck, the flames had run into row stone houses or a ditch of some sort. I really hoped it'd been accident, to be honest, because if it wasn't odds were it'd been Nauk giving the order and if that was the case I might be responsible in a broader, metaphysical sense. Well, it *was* my army, but aside from that I doubted Rat Company officers had been so prone to tactical arson before they'd come under my command. Aside from Robber, anyway, who in these matters did not count since he was both a goblin and a sapper – the moment he'd chosen that career track at the War College he'd grown beyond saving. Regardless, most of the southeastern corner of the city was a hellscape of flames and smoke but it wasn't spreading much further out. Which had done absolutely nothing to prevent the inhabitants of Sarcella from fleeing in a panic.

That was even more obvious than the fire, in a way, because the Procerans were crowding the road out Sarcella like a massive flock of startled birds. There were at least five or six thousand civilians streaming out of the city, with more behind, and they were moving at a slug's pace. Few of them had carts to carry their possessions, and those that did got stuck on the muddy road out more often than not. The overwhelming majority were carrying everything they could of what they owned in bags or tied on their backs, a roiling exodus of people and goods. Some were even dragging furniture, with a least one very nice *armoire* put on planks and dragged by two middle-aged men. Probably the most expensive thing they owned, I mused. The river of fleeing Procerans filled the road in full, moving forward sluggishly, and as my gaze lingered on the *armoire* I realized why they'd been allowed to drag even furniture out of the danger. General Rumena caught up to me after I reined in my horse ahead of the first fleeing civilians, our six thousand warriors still further behind.

"This is madness," the old drow said, eyes contemptuous as it watched the civilians. "Why was this allowed to happen?"

"Because Nauk's tactical acumen has improved," I replied. "Watch the city's sides, Tomb-Maker."

He caught what I had quickly enough. Levantine light cavalry out in the snow, at least a thousand on either side. Not massing for an assault, at the moment – if I had to guess, there'd be crossbows and spikes awaiting them at every street large enough for a charge. But if I were the enemy commander, I'd keep them there to force those crossbow companies into remaining there where they weren't shooting at my soldiers. Maybe strengthen the cavalry numbers when things got heated on the main front enough that a simultaneous charge on both sides could serve as the killing blow for the entire Callowan army. Having to watch both sides as well as the city's back, where the avenues where the largest and most open, would have been a waste of soldiers. So I was thinking Nauk had encouraged the Procerans to flee with their possessions, neatly filling that space with scared civilians the Levantines couldn't ride down

without starting the kind of major diplomatic incident that'd send cracks going down the Great Alliance. I was honestly impressed with my general. He'd never been a fool, but his cleverness had always been a military one. It now seemed his thinking had expanded to other theatres. Unfortunately, at the moment his clever trick was also preventing us from reinforcing him quickly. I weighed down my options in silence.

I could probably scatter the crowd with some application of Night, but should I? That'd be leaving a hole in Nauk's defensive perimeter, most likely. There'd be enough of a risk I'd have to leave drow behind to hold that territory, and considering the size of those cavalry contingents it would have to be at least two thousand warriors. Light horse or not the Firstborn just weren't used to facing down cavalry charges, and they lacked the bows, pikes and discipline to be naturals at turning them back. Slipping in through one of the flanks would take longer, though. Maybe an hour or so, and I wasn't sure I wanted to take that risk without a better notion of how the fight for the city was going. There was no point in arriving neatly if the delay cost us the battle. And that the fight *was* going, there was no doubt about that – I could make out the command horns and the faint sound of screams and steel even from where I sat. There was nothing quite as catastrophically loud as a hard battle, was there? Clenching my fingers, I spit to the side.

"Rumena, pick out two thousand warriors," I said.

"Will you be spitting on them as well, First Under the Night?" the old drow drily asked.

"That one's a bit of a stretch," I replied without missing a beat. "Careful with those, you know your back's not what it used to be."

"At least one of us should live to reach old age," Rumena smoothly retorted.

Damn it. Was it really too much to ask to get the last word against it even once? The fact that my bloody goddesses were quite literally crowing in the back of my head at this most recent of defeats only made it worse. My eyes flicked ahead. It wouldn't be long before the first fleeing Procerans arrived in shouting distance, but I'd have the drow at my side before it came to that. I yelled at Rumena to fetch me Robber while it was at it, watching it stroll away to carry out my orders. I looked up at the noon sky, that vast spread of blue without a single cloud to temper the glare of the sun. It was good fighting weather, I thought. Mild for a winter day, and the snow might thaw a bit if it kept up. Twin shadows flickered into sight, gliding down with lazy grace, and I turned my eyes back to the Procerans as the crow-shaped slivers of godhood landed on my shoulders. They ran their metaphysical fingers down the spine of my thoughts, partaking of my intent.

"First time I ever saw Black use the trick, I wasn't sure it was one," I mused. "The second time, though? I promise myself I'd make it my own one day."

"Not a subtle tool," Andronike said.

"Yet versatile," Komena opined.

We left it at that, for now. General Rumena came back holding a wiggling Robber by the scruff of the neck – impressive, considering it was day and my Special Tribune still had his armour on – before offering him up like some kind of furious green cat.

"Get on," I said, cutting in before the goblin could complain. "There's a war on, Tribune. Rumena, tell our warriors to stick close to me and not spread out."

"As in all things your guidance is paramount, Losara Queen," it replied.

I detected the faintest hint of sarcasm in that, due to my unparalleled courtly sentivities.

"Wait, you speak Lower Miezan?" Robber hissed out. "You prick, you pretended you-"

I cleared my throat, and with ill-grace the goblin scampered onto the back of my mount. I patiently watched until my six thousand drow formed into a rough column. The vanguard of the fleeing civilians had finally noticed our presence and distant shouts in Chantant and Tolesian sounded. Some angry, some curious, some afraid. I could have tried to engage, but to be frank I didn't have the time to be gentle about this.

"Follow," I called in Crepuscular.

My staff of ebony rose, and I reached for the Night. The Sisters helped me shape it, refine my intent and cut away the impurities until all that was left was *fear*. I felt Robber stiffen behind me, then almost defiantly loosen his limbs and grip. Zombie started at a gallop without further ado and the drow followed behind me.

With screams of blind terror, the inhabitants of Sarcella parted like the sea.

It was a simple enough working that maintaining it wasn't too much of a strain, especially with the guidance of the Sisters, but I was noticeably tired by the time we reached the tall arch that was the broadest entrance into the city. There'd been a few incidents making our way down the road, civilians who reacted to even supernatural terror with aggression, but they were beaten down and thrown to the side without any deaths involved. One drow was nicked by a wildly flailing sausage knife and was loudly mocked by the rest of its sigil for the rest of the walk, but that was the closest thing to a casualty we incurred. To my approval, the sight of my army approaching by the largest road into the city was met with hastily assembled palisade and at least half a hundred crossbows. From atop my horse I could even see messengers running further in to ask for reinforcements. I rode up ahead of the drow, allowing the fear to die and my shoulders to loosen. I felt like I'd run a footrace – in a metaphysical instance where both my legs were still in good shape, it should be said – but I was tired and not exhausted. Tired I could work with. It was old hand to me. The Sisters took flight before we were hailed, more interested in taking a look at the killing than staying around for the formalities.

"Close enough, stranger," an officer called out from atop the palisade. "Identify yourself. This city has been seized by the Kingdom of Callow, in the name of Her Majesty Catherine Foundling – are you friend or foe to her?"

I cocked my head to the side. A mop of blond hair could be made out from under the helmet, and that was definitely a Liessen accent tainting the hail spoken in very shaky Chantant.

"Yes, Boss," Robber murmured, sounding utterly delighted. "Are you friend or foe to *Her Majesty*? I think a case can be made for both. Tough call to make, really."

"You're talking to her, lieutenant," I called back in Lower Miezan. "Split those palisades and take me to General Nauk."

"Come off it," the Liessen laughed. "You're way too short. If you're the bloody Black Queen then I'm Empress of Procer."

Blowing up the palisade was not an acceptable response, I reminded myself. It was *my* palisade, technically speaking, so it was doubly beneath me to do so. Robber shook convulsively behind me, trying not to cackle out loud. There was some talk coming from out of sight, behind the palisade, then a goblin's head popped over the edge. I squinted. I'd seen that one before, though I couldn't put a name to the face. He was one of Robber's officers.

"Captain Borer," the ingrate gargoyle behind me provided, still snickering.

"Open the way immediately," the goblin ordered. "Your Majesty, welcome back."

I inclined my head in thanks. The Empress of Procer turned white as a sheet. I barked out orders in Crepuscular for the drow to follow me in good order, then put Zombie to a trot as the wooden fortifications were dragged open. Captain Borer, unlike his commanding officer, snapped a textbook-perfect salute when I approached. There were less than a hundred soldiers here, most of them crossbowmen, though I suspected with the runners I'd seen move out earlier that was about to change. I glanced at the still-pale Liessen lieutenant, who'd joined the throng of officers gathering around me, and cocked an eyebrow.

"Your Highness," I drily said. "What a surprise to find you here."

He forced out a shaky laugh, but ended up choking on it for trying to swallow nervously while keeping it up.

"Who's in command here?" I asked.

There were lieutenants and sergeants here, but no one any higher up the ladder. Unusual.

"That would be me, Your Majesty," Captain Borer replied. "I am the sole captain of this front."

*Not a good sign*, I thought. Not only was the goblin a sapper, he was part of Robber's cohort – which was detached from the usual chain of command, by my personal authority. Sappers were usually passed over in favour of the closest same-rank officer when it came to combined commands, which was hinting at a severe officer shortage.

"You're relieved, Captain," I said. "Behind me are foreign troops from the Empire Ever Dark, to be considered auxiliaries for the duration of this battle. They'll be holding the area in your place. Robber?"

The goblin leapt down with unnatural agility, landing with a flourish.

"Boss?" he asked.

"Gather your full cohort, then join me wherever the general staff has set up," I ordered. "Captain Borer, I'll need you to appoint a liaison to the drow. At their head is General Rumena, who'll be advancing deeper into the city with four thousand infantry. Have it led at a location allowing for easy deployment to the fronts."

"I'll see it done, ma'am," the goblin saluted.

There was a shudder of whispers through the assembled officers, looks were cast at the grey-skinned warriors still advancing towards the arch. The drow in the front ranks were looking back, looking distinctly unimpressed by the first human city most them had encountered.

"Merciful Gods," a tall, dark-haired man with sergeant stripes said. "*Drow*. I thought they were stories."

"Stories start from something, sergeant," I amusedly said. "And our friends came out from the Everdark to fight on our side. Do pass the word along that they can be rather touchy, though. It'd be best if a little distance was kept."

The stares I got at that made me rather uncomfortable. It was just a handful of officers, I thought, already part of my army anyway. And still I wondered if there'd be as much awe on their faces, if they knew how badly botched and misguided my journey into the Everdark truly had been. I doubted it. All they saw was old stories with strange weapons and eerie eyes come to swell our ranks. Shaking my head, I dismissed the thought.

"I'll need someone to guide me to the general staff," I said. "Is General Nauk holding command from there, or has he gone to the front?"

The awe was gone, whisked away in a heartbeat.

"Ma'am," Captain Borer quietly said. "General Nauk no longer holds command. He was killed last night when the assault began. Legate Abigail is the current commanding officer."

I was in front of my soldiers, I couldn't show weakness. And still I closed my eyes. *Breathe in, breathe out. Control. You can grieve when the city's no longer burning, when your people are no longer fighting.* He'd not been the same man I had called my friend, but I'd come to hope... *Hope is always dangerous*, I remembered. My eyes opened and my voice came out calm.

"I will need a guide, regardless," I said. "Let's get to it."

I pulled my hood over my head, then Zombie impatiently stepped into the avenue and away from my officers. Thirty heartbeats later, I had my guide and I rode the city with dried eyes.

Pittance that it was, it was all I could afford to spare.

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The high command for what I'd been informed was currently being called the 'Third Army' – presumably Juniper's four separate columns each having been granted such a number – was clearly buckling under the weight of its responsibilities. It'd been a mansion, once, though clearly a wealthy merchant's and not a noble's as it was near the heart of Sarcella and not one of the more

rarefied quarters. The location had been well-chosen, close to most of the arteries of the city and so easy to get messages to and from. I was ushered through a parade of wide eyes and gasps, until I reached what must have been the war room. It was at the very highest of the mansion, with broad windows overlooking the parts of the city either currently fought over or burning down. My attention, though, lingered on the fact that there were too few people here. A few aides, a few messengers, mages and hornblowers. But the actual officers? Less than ten. There were more tables loaded with scrolls and maps than there were people above the rank of tribune in here, which was stark statement as to the state of the Third Army. The presumed commanders saluted tiredly when I entered, obviously warned in advance, but I noticed the gaze of several brighten at the sight of me. I offered a smile, and turned to the only person in the room wearing a legate's insignia.

Legate Abigail, I realized with a start, was younger than me. Barely twenty, by the looks of her. I'd come across her once or twice before Akua's Folly, and later Juniper mentioned her to me before as the woman who'd drowned the incipient riots in Laure through strategic use of the royal palace's cellars. She'd had a field promotion to legate after that, so she'd have the authority to keep the capital in order, but I was surprised the Hellhound had chosen to confirm the promotion afterwards. At most I'd expected her to move up from senior tribune to commander, after an actual legate relieved her. Were we really that hard up for high-ranking officers? I set aside the worry for now, looking over the younger woman discretely. Her black hair was slightly longer than Legion regulations allowed, but acceptably so for a foreign campaign. Sunburnt cheeks, watery blue eyes and a delicate nose. She had dark rings around her eyes like she hadn't had a good night's sleep in much too long, quite visibly exhausted. She was taller than me, I noted, but then who wasn't?

"Your Majesty," the legate croaked out in that thick Summerholm accent. "Gods, am I glad to see you."

The general staff around her really was absurdly sparse, and what remained was in rough shape. There was a senior mage – Soninke, it'd be years before any Callowan was fit for that command – with a face whose rosiness betrayed recent mage healing and a staff tribune missing her right arm up to the elbow, but that was it. No senior sapper, no kachera or supply tribune. Two commanders, and one large orc tribune, but that was no proper general staff. What the Hells had happened here?

"Legate Abigail," I replied with a nod. "Our drow allies found Special Tribune Robber's tenth, and I hurried a march here with a first wave of six thousand reinforcements. I'm beginning to suspect the situation is worse than what was described to me."

A few mirthless smiles bloomed at that.

"It's a bloody mess, Your Majesty," Legate Abigail said. "General Nauk swatted their first probe on Sarcella and the vanguard drew back, so we figured they were waiting for the rest of the army. But then they attacked last

night, completely out of the blue. We think some noble showed up, riled them up for it."

"Are you saying Nauk and the rest of his senior officers were lost on the frontlines?" I frowned.

"Them Dominion priests hit a meeting of the general staff," she replied. "Lanterns, I think they're called. One moment it's night, then it's bloody Light everywhere and most the room is dead. I was looking into a supply discrepancy so they didn't get me and Oakes-"

"Legate Oakes," the orc at her side provided in a gravelling voice.

"-Legate Oakes was walking the perimeter, so he didn't get hit either," Legate Abigail seamlessly adjusted.

I hid my amusement at the interaction, and the habitual ease it had come with.

"You're senior to this Legate Oakes?" I asked.

"By a day, ma'am," the woman ruefully replied. "Marshal Juniper said we were to serve under General Nauk and Legate Jwahir for proper blooding."

She paused.

"I guess we did get that, in the end," she darkly said.

Well, wasn't this a mess. It wasn't like I had another commander to pull out of my sleeve – Rumena was arguably the most veteran, but it had not familiarity with Legion tactics and was needed to keep the drow orderly besides – so she'd have to do. I could take command myself, sure, but if this was as bad as it sounded like I'd be needed in the thick of it.

"Then you've just received a field promotion, General Abigail," I grimly replied. "Congratulations. Now tell me how deep into the dark we are and, while we're at it, why the Hells this city is on fire."

# Interlude: Beheld I

"Necessity's children are sometimes clever but always bloody."

Queen Yolanda of Callow, the Wicked (known as 'the Stern' in contemporary histories)

Godsdamnit, somehow she'd still ended up stuck in charge.

Legate – no, General now, because clearly someone Above was out to get her – Abigail had counted her blessings when she'd gotten word the Black Queen had come out of nowhere to save the day. The queen could take command, and she could go back to being as far as physically possible from the fighting while also not being expected to make any decisions that actually mattered. That was the trap, Abigail darkly thought. They lured you up the ranks with the promise of better pay and less people shooting arrows at you, until you got dragged so high you had to watch out for the noose instead. And she knew damn well what *field promotion* meant, thank you very much. It meant 'do the work, Abigail, but we'll only pay you what your last rank offered, and also best not fuck up or the Hellhound will eat your liver'. But she couldn't exactly say any of that out loud, so General Abigail smiled all pretty for the very dangerous woman holding a staff that made people panic if they looked at it too long.

"I'm honoured, Your Majesty," she lied.

Queen Catherine's lips twitched the slightest bit. Abigail hid her flinch well. Could the Black Queen actually read thoughts and look into souls? Surely that was just a rumour. Still, best not to risk it and change the subject. You never knew with Named.

"The fire wasn't our fault," Abigail immediately said. "Wasn't us who started it, either. I swear. The Lanterns ran out of the city after hitting the general staff and our people went after them. The chase ended up going through a grocer's shop and there wasn't no food in there, but there were candles and oil jugs."

The Black Queen arched an eyebrow, saying nothing.

"It wasn't us," Abigail insisted. "I have five official reports showing it was some big Levant woman who broke into the room and tipped over the candles. We can't be blamed for this, we even tried to stop the spread!"

Catherine Foundling's lips twitched once more, and she patted the Abigail's shoulder with open sympathy. She tried not to tremble at the touch. You were always less likely to get your blood frozen solid if you smiled.

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" the queen mused. "But I've been saying that for years, and no one ever believes me."

The – temporary, if she had anything to say about it – general paled a little at the notion that she could end up getting a reputation like the Black Queen's. Abigail had been in Summerholm when entire quarters burned green because the Squire needed to flush out a hero. Hells, she'd never have been dumb enough to enroll in the Legions if her family home and shop hadn't been part of the cinders. Too late to bail now, though, she admitted to herself. She wasn't sure if even temporary generals were allowed to retire. Maybe she could get herself thrown out, she mused. Might be time to consider getting 'accidentally' pregnant. The queen's amusement passed quick enough, and Abigail straightened her back to look like she hadn't been thinking of what was technically an attempt at desertion.

"How many Lanterns struck?" Her Majesty asked.

"We believe twenty," Abigail said, comforted to be back on practical matters. "Twelve managed to escape the city, most of them killed while running."

Only one of them had died during the attack, though it'd been a Hells of a kill. The Callowan wouldn't forget the sight of Nauk Princekiller's fangs having snapped straight through the neck of a priest anytime soon. Not when Light had melted his plate before he even got moving, drips of molten metal leaving a trail of how he'd leapt for the kill even dying. The general had been a bloodthirsty bastard, no two ways about it, but no one had ever called him a coward. Her thoughts stalled. General Nauk was supposed to be an old friend of the queen's wasn't he? From the War College, and the early Fifteenth. Abigail really hoped the Black Queen didn't ask about the body, since she'd have to admit there was no splitting the corpse from the melted armour and no fire at hand would burn hot enough for both – the matter had been put aside for now, since there were more important things to take care of. It was odd, Abigail though, that something mattering to her mostly because it'd gotten the three veteran Legates that should be standing in her shoes right now killed could actually be tragic to someone else. Especially to the likes of the Black Queen, who had burned and buried dozens of thousands. Even monsters had friends though, she supposed.

"Is a second strike by them likely?" Her Majesty asked.

The Queen of Callow was staring at the battle map even as she spoke, dark eyes tracing the lay of the cohorts and fortified choke points. Abigail had done what she could. There'd been no keeping the Belles Portes quarter after the disorder of a decapitated general staff had allowed the Dominion to take the bridges and secure a foothold behind them, but she'd had houses collapsed on the outskirts of the quarter and kept them contained in there by her own jesha of two thousand until a better defence could be assembled. The Levantines

had since driven the Third Army back to the outskirts of Beaumontant quarter and mounted a push that took Couteau D'Or, pretty much claiming the entire middle-southern and south-western partss of Sarcella. Since then it'd been a nasty slugging match, since the Dominion had run into the raised defences and goblin traps she'd ordered set up at that line.

The two fronts had quieted some, but that was just preparation for a serious assault in Abigail's opinion. And if the next one passed her defensive lines? The Third Army was fucked, to put it bluntly. She'd been forced to send the reserves to the frontlines to slow down the fall of Beaumontant until the sappers were done, and with companies still stuck keeping an eye on the cavalry to the city's sides there just weren't enough soldiers left to take back grounds if they were lost to Levant. If the lines broke, it was all downhill from there. Or that'd been the situation an hour ago, anyway, Abigail of Summerholm thought with a hard smile. Now the Black Queen was back, so it was time for lakes to start dropping. It took Krolem clearing his throat to realize she still hadn't answered the question Her Majesty had asked.

"We, uh, don't believe so," Abigail hastily said. "Senior Mage Dastardly has trip wards in place she believes will warn us if they do, but our priests say if they try anything that large again so soon they'll burn out."

The Queen of Callow blinked in surprise and tore her gaze away from the map. It was a pretty human gesture for some immortal evil-fae thing, Abigail decided. With the long, unbound brown hair and the lightly coloured cheeks, Catherine Foundling looked more like a young woman who hadn't slept in a while than the infamous victor of Second Liesse and the Battle of the Camps.

"Our priests," Her Majesty repeated. "We have *priests*, now?"

It was the temporary general's turn to be surprised. Had she really not heard?

"The House of Light split after it came out what you did in Keter, Your Majesty," Abigail said.

The Black Queen's face went blank as a wax mask. The Summerholm girl pressed on with haste.

"After it was outed you went to the Crown of the Dead to kill the Dread Empress and prevent her making a deal, they called for a Callowan conclave," she said. "They split over whether or not to name the entire Tenth Crusade graceless. About two thirds went against, but the Salian conclave's decrees were declared heresy by unanimous vote. Wasn't enough for some, though: the last third walked out and pronounced the Tenth Crusade to be godless Proceran intrigue. Nowadays they call themselves the 'House Insurgent', Your Majesty. Hundreds enrolled in the army as healers."

For a moment the silence in the room was thick as oil, then the Queen of Callow glanced to the side. There was a half-empty bottle of wine at the edge of the table, leftovers from when Abigail had taken pity on Dastardly's pain at having an entire cheek and eye grown back. It was her last bottle from Callow,

too. The Black Queen grabbed it, sniffed at the rim and visibly brightened before taking a long swallow. A little sigh of pleasure followed.

"Oh, that's the stuff," Queen Catherine muttered. "Been way too long."

She shook her head, afterwards, and got back to business. *So no one's going to die*, Abigail mused. *That's nice.* Tanners didn't have to worry about things like that, she knew. *No, Abigail,* she thought, *think of the ferret-faced cousins. Stick the course, how long can we really be at war anyway?*

"Well," the queen said. "You've had an interesting year, I see. We'll set that aside for now, General Abigail. Your reserves aren't marked on the map, how many have you held back?"

"They, uh, are, Your Majesty," Abigail replied.

She leaned over and tapped her finger near the five cohorts holding the grounds between the fire and the edge of Beaumontant quarter. There was nothing held back because the reserves were on the front. The queen grimaced.

"I was afraid of that," she said. "That's going to get messy. These, are they paved roads or bridges?"

The Black Queen was pointing at the four grey streaks representing the bridges going into Belles Portes, and Abigail told her as much.

"How broad is the river?" Her Majesty asked.

"At the bridges, around twenty five feet," the temporary general said. "It's broader further west, going towards the source. Stays about the same going east, though a mile downriver it'll start splitting and narrowing."

The queen frowned at the map pensively. Abigail cleared her throat.

"If you're thinking of using munitions on it, ma'am, we've already tried," she said. "General Nauk had our sappers take a look, wanted to use that to repulse the first attack. It's frozen too deep, though, took an entire cart of demolition charges and it didn't spread all that far."

"Munitions aren't what I have in mind," the Queen of Callow calmly replied. "General, if we hold until sundown our retreat is assured. Cracking the river will buy us that breathing room, but only if you can push the enemy out of the city first. We need a moat, not an obstruction."

Abigail tried to think of a very polite, professional way of saying that this couldn't be done but it wasn't her fault. While she was considering what would work best, the Black Queen pressed on.

"I'll be taking five hundred drow and Special Tribune Robber's cohort with me," Her Majesty continued in that same even tone, eyes remaining peeled on the parchment. "That grants you three thousand and a half fresh warriors to break the deadlock."

"They're dug in good, ma'am," General Abigail said. "Unless the drow can scale walls barehanded-"

"They can," Catherine Foundling casually said, like it was nothing out of the ordinary. "While light infantry and currently no more physically able than humans, they have extensive training in raiding tactics. I'd suggest you send a number of them here-"

The Queen of Callow's finger tapped the boundary line between Beaumontant and Couteau D'Or, which by Abigail's reckoning was a line of tightly-packed merchant homes facing outwards.

"- to split the Levantines up, then thin your right flank to reinforce your left," she mused. "A hard assault on this 'Couteau D'Or' quarter will have them packed tight in the open when they draw back into Beaumontant, and a few sapper companies can bloody them into retreat from there."

General Abigail squinted down. The right flank had better hard defences, it was true – she'd had a guild house's lower level barred and turned the flat rooftop into a shooting galley for her crossbowmen – and it would hold against attack for a while even if thinned. With the recommended distraction and enough forces moved to bolster an assault on the left flank, this could possibly work. That'd still leave a pack of very angry Levantines with their blood up holding Belles Portes, though, and that quarter was the door to Sarcella. As long as the Dominion had their foothold there they'd keep bringing in troops. If the Levantines mounted a hard counterattack after the Third Army had left its defensive positions, the quarters it had taken might be just as soon taken back – and it wouldn't stop there, Abigail knew. With the kind of losses that the assaults would bring, the Third Army might end up driven out of Sarcella entirely. That'd be the end of them, with the Levantine cavalry hacking them to pieces as they retreated into the plains.

"That's only workable if the river is cracked," General Abigail finally said. "And unless you intend on taking less than a thousand light infantry out onto plains where the Dominion fields at least that much in cavalry, to get to the river you'd need to go through Belles Portes – which we can't take, until the river is cracked."

The Black Queen smiled, thin and sharp and just a little mad.

"There's another way through, as it happens," she said.

Abigail followed where the gloved finger was pointing on the map. She choked.

"That's the part that's on fire, Your Majesty," she said.

"So it is," Catherine Foundling cheerfully said. "Get ready for the offensive, general. I'll want it beginning within an hour."

The Black Queen patted her shoulder once more and limped out of the war room, humming what Abigail was pretty sure was the opening notes of the *Lord of the Silver Spears*. She was also, the leader of – temporary leader, Abigail corrected – of the Third Army noted, still holding that half-empty bottle of Vale summer wine.

"Tribune Krolem," she whispered. "I need you to looking into something."

The orc leaned forward eagerly.

"Find out who you can lodge a protest to, if the Queen of Callow steals your wine," General Abigail said.

—

The cattle-dwelling reeked.

Everything about the Burning Lands was mad, Mighty Jindrich decided. This land had never truly known order, not even in the days before the Tenets of Night, and while the Firstborn sought enlightenment through sacred strife – *the worthy take, the worthy rise* – the cattle had grown fat and insolent for that absence. The Mighty bared its teeth at small eyes peeking through a shuttered window, pleased at the squeak that sounded from inside the house. The shutters were wood, Mighty Jindrich saw. Most the house as well. How disgustingly decadent, that these Prokeren could afford to make a city mostly of wood. Even sigils of the Inner Ring were not so wealthy: it had taken an effort not to beat the cattle that had found it fit to *burn* wood, of all things. The Tomb-Maker had said that the Prokeren owned many forests, and that even if they allowed their wooden houses to rot and break they could afford to make new ones. Madness, waste and madness. Mighty Jindrich might have taken from the cattle what it knew not how to appreciate, had the First Under the Night not forbidden it.

The sigil-holder of the Jindrich let its eyes stray from the cattle-things trembling in their dwellings, instead turning to Losara Queen. Honour had been given, when the First Under the Night had picked Jindrich and many of its sigil to accompany it into battle. More so than could be truly grasped, for Losara Queen was the voice of the Night and so honour given by it was honour given by the Night itself. What more esteemed accolade could there be? The presence of the *gobberin* marred the situation some, but not so much that it grew beyond enjoyment. The green creatures were not true cattle, having many years ago warred against the *nerezim* with great fury and viciousness. They were being made to bear strange packs and drag carts, but no beasts of burden they. The leader of the pack, this Robber, it had spirit. If Losara Queen was to have servants from the Burning Lands, worse stock could be drawn from than a being that would mock Mighty at their own table. The pack following the Robber was just as dauntless, and already Losara Queen had ordered warriors of the Jindrich and the Cohort to sheath their blades thrice. This was pleasing, for sharing purpose with the weak and cowardly made for a weak cabal.

Mighty Jindrich threw back its head and hollered when their promised destination was reached, the sharp calls sounding out in defiance of the pale light. Its sigil answered in kind, approaching the heat and smoke of the blaze storming ahead without a speck of fear. The Mighty strode forward, elbowing some *gobberin* wearing strips on its shoulders and laughingly slapping aside the knife it pulled. The First Under the Night stood first before the blaze, as well it should. Even in the pale light of the sun Losara's silhouette seemed shaded, soot and ash falling at its feet as it watched the flickering flame. Jindrich bowed respectfully before approaching. It had bargained with this holy one when it was still but a strange curiosity, a creature borne by these lands yet capable of slaying Mighty. It'd also intended to betray Losara as soon as the Rumena were dealt with, as was only fitting. Since then, Mighty Jindrich had been taught the extent of its foolishness. What could a Mighty hope to do,

against the very herald of Sve Noc? Some ill-made things calling themselves Firstborn still murmured of Losara Queen being *human*, but this was crass ignorance. What human could possibly bear Sve Noc on its shoulders, speak for the Tenets?

No, Losara Queen was the get of Night itself. It would return the Firstborn to these lands and wrest a realm out of the hands of the Pale Gods, usher the Empire Ever Dark born anew. And Mighty Jindrich would be there to share in that glorious thing, drenched in the blood of those that dared to test the Tenets of Night.

"Losara Queen, we stand ready for war-making," Jindrich said. "We will tread this blaze, should you wish it so."

The holy one smiled, white teeth flashing like ivory in shade.

"Miracles don't come cheap, Jindrich," the First Under the Night said. "And there are only so many I can bear. Fortunately, I have something almost as dangerous to wield."

The Mighty smiled, pleased at the sharing of wisdom.

"What may this be, Losara Queen?"

The holy one's eyes crinkled in amusement, and it inclined its head behind them.

"Madmen, Jindrich," the First Under the Night said. "Never underestimate what a few of those can accomplish when told something is *impossible*."

Behind them the *gobberin* had opened begun empty the carts, to work with wood and steel to raising strange wooden structures and nail them solid. Skins reeking of vinegar were taken out from the bags, and boxes of snow prepared. Long staves of metal and wood, some with broom-like endings and others not, were prepared and made wet with a strange concoction kept in bottles.

"Prepare yourself, Mighty Jindrich," Losara Queen said. "We'll pass where the blaze is weakest, but to hesitate is death."

"It was ever thus," it laughed, and raised its fist to the sky.

*All is Night*, Mighty Jindrich yelled out, and its sigil echoed in kind. For a moment, it thought, that prophecy drowned out even the roar of the fire.

—

"I missed this," Special Tribune Robber admitted.

There'd been some good laughs, since the Boss had gone underground to take over yet another nest of vipers in order to throw it at one of the other nests of vipers. He'd gotten to hunt Imperial agents in the streets like animals with the Guild of Assassins, stuck it to the Matrons while negotiating for munitions in Thief's name and even gotten to see what happened when you sent back a High Lady's threatening envoy by trebuchet. There'd been deaths, too, but no anyone he cared too much about. Well, Hakram had somehow managed to lose another hand but sad at was Robber was looking forward to the truly legendary amount of sarcasm the Boss would inflict him over it so it could be called a draw. Pickler was still both mind-blowingly lovely and completely out of reach, especially when putting shady dwarven gold to nefarious purposes,

but that was just the way of life. Robber of the Rock Breaker Tribe, also known as the Lesser Footrest to Her Majesty the Queen of Callow, had started to figure he'd seen it all. He'd been to more places most goblins ever would, killed people in most of them and participate in the strategic arson of not one but *several* cities. He was no longer young, by his people's standards, and he'd wondered if it might not be time to start thinking about a glorious death.

Then the Boss had come back, and she was as superbly mad as ever.

She'd left as some sort of bastardly immortal fae thing and come back breathing and smelling like a mortal, with an army of bloodthirsty treacherous magical dark elves she'd somehow become a religious figure for if he'd picked up on the chatter right. And she was going to use them to wage war on half the continent, so she could make it sign some sort of treaty then use that to attack the Hidden Horror as a united front. She also had in stand a blackwood staff that felt to his senses like some sort of silent, monstrously large predator and she was talking shit to some possibly god-like crows that no one but her seemed to be able to look at directly for more than a fraction of a heartbeat at a time. Robber had been close to those things for hours, and even avoiding to look at them he'd since been plagued with some of the most horrifying nightmares of his life. Gods, it was just like coming home. And now she'd decided that the best way to use tactical surprise was to attack through where no one had positioned troops, which had happened because the place in question was on fire. So he'd casually been informed that his cohort was to build several examples of a lighter siege turtle so that she could stuff seven hundred soldiers in them and run through a city fire, in order to crack a frozen river. All the while and enemy army and several larger cavalry contingents were on the prowl.

No one did crazy like the Boss. There was a *reason* goblins volunteered to enroll in the Army of Callow, and it wasn't the Hellhound's winning personality.

"You know, sometimes I wonder if there's something in the water back in the Grey Eyries," Catherine Foundling drawled. "It'd explain a lot about goblins. Isn't lead supposed to make people go mad? How likely is it that there's some in your wells?"

"I wouldn't know, I've only ever drunk the blood of my enemies," Robber shamelessly lied.

"That sounds rather unsanitary," the Boss said. "Zeze says there's all sort of humours in that."

The inside of the modified siege turtle was stiflingly hot, even with all the preparations. Skins soaked in vinegar and water, boxes of snow to cool the air coming from the slight openings above and poles coming out of the shuttered panels that allowed enterprising drow to push down anything still on fire that came too close. Beneath the bottom rim, still-burning embers could be swept with broom-like poles when they were layered too thickly or skins of water used to put out open flames – though the smoke and vapour from that was wicked, and had already scalded a few unwary goblins. Each of the shells allowed for fifty people to hide under, fourteen brave turtles having tried the blaze. One

had been struck by a falling beam barely twenty feet in, and less than ten of those inside had managed to crawl screaming back to the safety of outside the fire. The outer ring was the most dangerous part, though, they'd know that from the start. The fire had begun somewhere deeper in, and spread out more or less in a circle depending on where stone and space obstacles could be found. Past that part there'd been progressively less flame and more smoulder, though that hardly meant there was no danger. More than once the lack of air or the heat of what was left to breathe had made soldiers pass out.

The lucky ones fell inside the shell when there were enough in shape left to carry them. The others were left behind for the fire to take. The Boss had made it clear she couldn't start calling on her tricks without putting the river work at risk, and there was no point in trying this at all if she exhausted herself trying to keep everyone alive. Another turtle was lost when its warriors misjudged what they were stepping on under the ash layer and got themselves over red-hot stone, a chunk of the drow immediately dropping with screams as their thinner boots got torched through and the turtle fell for lack of enough people holding it up. The structure turned into an oven within moments, and the four survivors only lasted long enough to make it out in the open – which wasn't any more survivable than inside. Robber had been blessed enough to share a shell with the Boss herself, and she'd been utterly nonplussed the whole way through. Her face had darkened every time a turtle was lost, but they'd pressed on anyway. Everyone inside was sweating like a pig, including her. Robber watched the Queen of Callow pat down her cloak while hobbling forward and cleared his throat.

"Looking for something?" he asked.

In front of them a pair of drow shifted the panels open, knocking down a wooden wall half-devoured by flames and almost entirely blackened. The panels closed, and the turtle came forward. Soon they'd reach the last crucible, the second part of the outer ring – and after that, out onto the snow.

"Would you happen to have matches on you?" the Boss casually asked.

"Sure," Robber snickered, reaching for his sapper's bag.

Sadly all the munitions delicate in the face of heat had to be removed, but he still had a few goods left to peddle. Including a set of pinewood matches, which he handed to his queen. She let out a noise of appreciation then shoved her staff into the crook of her arm, produced from her cloak an already stuffed pipe and struck the match. Within moments it was lit, filling the turtle with the acrid scent of wakeleaf. She carelessly dropped the match on the ground, where it fell on embers and almost instantly began burning up.

"That is *cruel*," Robber admiringly said.

And yet when he flicked his eyes, he caught most the drow smothering grins. Gods, they actually enjoyed the Boss being like that didn't they? Kind of an asshole, and utterly indifferent to the fact that they were strolling through a bonfire of a city if it got in the way of her petty pleasures.

"I waited until we were on the last stretch," the Black Queen defended herself.

She added something in the drow tongue afterwards, and the drow roared and sped up. Robber was pretty sure, by the tone, that it was along the lines of 'put your back into it, I haven't got all day'. After that it wasn't long until through the thin openings made into the wood he was able to glimpse the silhouettes of tall granite statues, and a mostly open way to there. Which was for the best, given that some of his minions were starting to slow down and only kept from passing out by biting their lips bloody. There was a sudden crash behind, and the Boss called out in drow tongue: the porters at the back opened the shutters there, revealing a large wooden plank had scythed through the middle of the turtle right behind them. Catherine breathed in sharply at the sight, then cast a look in front. *Not out of the woods yet*, Robber thought. Another call in drow-tongue. The shutters were shut and the advance resumed. Eleven turtles made it out onto the snow, out of the fourteen who'd set out.

There were some, Robber thought, who'd call that a miracle.

# Interlude: Beheld II

> "A good sword will find a use, or make one."
>
> Levantine saying

This was to be an iron day, Captain Elvera could feel it in her bones.

Twenty years she'd served as an officer under the Lord of Tartessos, then a further eight under his daughter the Lady Aquiline – and before that she'd been part of a Brocelian band, as both spearwoman and striker. It was the last of those experiences she drew on now, trusting the instincts that had seen her survive iron days ranging from chimeras maddened to an entire flock of ensorcelled drakes. Something nasty was about to come for the army that had been under her command until yersterday's dusk, and they were not prepared. Elvera might be old and slow, these days, but she'd seen more bloodshed than the rest of this army of pups put together. They thought a few honour feuds and sanctioned hunts had them prepared for war, but it had not. The Army of Callow had spent most of a night and day making that viciously clear to anyone with eyes to see. It was just her luck that Razin Tanja, of the Binder's Blood, had been stuck with blindness for want of glory. *Just a fucking boy*, she thought, not without bitterness. Some eighteen summers youth who saw a way to hallow his already hallowed line in sending soldiers charging to their deaths at Callowan hands.

Bones creaking as they would not have twenty years ago, the captain walked the streets of Beaumontant quarter with her twenty sworn swords at her side. A trail of smoke from the east, the quarter still aflame even now, marred the blue sky like stroke of charcoal. Under it the soldiers of the Dominion of Levant clustered behind thick planks of wood and half-broken houses, never daring to look across the divide for long. Callowan crossbowmen had proved to be mercilessly accurate from their distant perch, the sallow-eyed goblins never hesitating to put a bolt in any soldier out of cover for too long. Elvera saw no need to tempt such a fate by advancing too close, having already taken a good look when she led the assault that failed there that very morning. While red-clad legionaries had slowly retreated under the charge of the armsmen of Malaga and Tartessos, the damnable Callowan sappers had torn down two streets' worth of structures and raised palisades between the houses standing behind – leaving

an open killing field of stone and wood trapped with blasphemous munitions and vicious steel traps. Elvera had lost three hundred men trying to force a way through before she called a retreat under crossbow volleys and spellfire.

The Callowans knew war, these days, in a way few soldiers of her homeland did. Captain Elvera was old enough to have fought in the Sepulcher War, when the Barrow Lord rose from the depths of Brocelian Forest and struck out with his host of bespelled beasts, barrow-spirits and Blood traitors. She'd taken a hammer blow to the arm that never quite healed right dragging Lord Romeran away from the onslaught, and for that earned both captain's rank and the suit of plate she still wore – enameled with the colours of the Slayer's Blood, a rare honour. She'd even fought in the thick of it at River's Bent, holding the shore sword in hand until the Bestowed slew the Barrow Lord in honourable combat and the Peregrine freed his soul from its earthly prison. That'd been war, but Levant had not known its like in the many years since. The Kingdom of Callow *had* and its soldiers carried those hard lessons with them. There'd been rumours, of course, fanciful tales that made it even as far as Tartessos – of fairies riding on wings of flame, of a city aflight and spewing out armies of ravenous dead, of a gate opened into the very Hells that unleashed endless hordes of devils. Elvera had not put much trust in these, knowing how stories grew with telling and miles, but now she wondered.

The captain had breached shield walls, under morning light, and seen under the helms more than just Callowans. Greenskins and Wastelanders standing elbow to elbow with warriors born to the Kingdom of Knights, striving and killing and dying together. Singing those harsh, bitter songs the Callowans were so fond of. Ten thousand of these without a speck of horse, their commanders slain by the Lanterns in the dark of night, had turned what should have been a rout into a bloody and costly stalemate. There was spine in that army, Captain Elvera thought, perhaps more so than in her own. She'd seen too many green boys and girls empty their stomachs in the mud when they came across the butcher's yard in Belles Portes quarter, where the wounded and dying had been brought for what healing could be had. The stink of shit, death and bile had not sickened Elvera's nostrils in many years, but at least she had known it before. The eager young captains and their just as young warriors had not, and it had made them flinch. Not that Razin Tanja, heir to Malaga, had been moved by the wails and spilled entrails. No, the boy was already ordering preparations for another push against Callowan defences.

The Tartessian slowed her walk when she reached the outskirts of Beaumontant, near the streets leading into Couteau D'Or. The Tanja boy would be holding council with captains there, but she was in no mood for exhortations and castigations from some pup of a southern Blood. Instead she spoke with the soldiers she'd led into the jaws of the jackal that very morning, preparing them for what was to come. Those officers had broken their bones on Callowan defences earlier, and so were more willing to listen to an old woman's advice than most. They gathered around her, the sworn swords of captains that were

attending to the noble boy who'd taken command from her.

"A simple shield wall will get your people killed," Captain Elvera said. "The sappers prepared the grounds to break up tight formations, and their mages will use fire to batter at what holds."

"It's the traps that have been bleeding us the worst, Red Ella," a middle-aged man with a heavy Malagan accent replied. "They've sown caltrops everywhere and the spikes go straight through leather soles."

Elvera let the use of her old sobriquet pass without comment. She wasn't so long in the tooth as not to slap the insolence out of a soldier's mouth if need be, but these officers had never known the sobriquet as the insult it'd been meant to be – just a name other old soldiers called her by, when the ale was plentiful.

"Better those than the buried explosions," a young girl in heavy scale grunted. "Those'll shred a man up to the waist, and sharp pieces shoot out to carve at those near. I'll call anyone a fool who says we've seen the last of those."

If they had the mages or the war hounds of the Lord of Malaga's host with them, the Callowan killing field could have been taken apart slowly but surely. But the vanguard had been ordered to attack without them, and so soldiers would die instead. Dark as the thought was, there was nothing Elvera could do about this and she would not further darken a dark day by speaking ill of the boy commanding this host. Even if he was a glory-thirsting Blood throwback from the least reputable of the founding lines. Command of the army had already been taken from her, she would not take an axe to morale or risk being sent away from the front by speaking out of turn.

"I'll speak plain," she said. "Whoever you send in front will likely die. We'll have to bridge the gap with corpses before we can get to them with blades. Split in smaller bands with shields above the heads and move fast, that ought to thin the costs. But make no mistake, this will get bloody."

The talk did not please them, though they had expected no salvation from her. Elvera had made no mystery of it that she thought it foolishness to attack the dug-in Army of Callow inside a city with so slight a numerical advantage. Even without walls. If they'd had a three or four thousand warriors more then encirclement and assault would have been a sound scheme, but they did not.

"We should wait for the Lord's army," a voice called out from the back.

There were mutters of agreement. For all that the captains were attending to Razin Tanja, they were not all so certain of his scheme to press the attack and this had bled into the lower ranks. The Malagan captains would follow one of their native Blood through Crown and Tower, but there were Tartessos captains as well – furious still at her removal from command – and those captains who had answered the call of the Holy Seljun, not the Lord of Malaga. The latter of these would not easy throw aside the notion of a patron meant to inherit a title, but neither would they destroy their own companies without concrete promises made. The boy's initial strokes of brilliance had earned him some renown, it was true. Using Proceran smugglers who knew of secret tunnels into Sarcella to bring a war-party of Lanterns into the city and kill the enemy commanders

had been inspired, Elvara would freely admit, and not a risk she would have taken in his place. Lanterns were powerful, but few and precious. Striking at Belles Portes while the Callowans were in disarray had been good sense, and if not for a sudden enemy delaying action might well have won the city.

Pressing *now*, though, when the enemy was ready and waiting? The heir to Malaga was making his inexperience plain for all the captains to see, and it would win him no friends. And yet this kind of talk would not do at all, for an army without a leader was just a mob bearing arms.

"We have bled the Army of Callow harshly with our attack," Captain Elvara replied. "Let none gainsay this. That is worthy feat, and with wisdom we may yet accrue greater honours."

If her plate was not enchanted, she would have died in the heartbeat that followed. The barbed javelin struck at the hollow of her throat, where only a leather collar protected her, but Elvara had years ago paid a binder to make the material strong as iron. The bone tip of the javelin broke, though it still took her breath. Even in her surprise the old captain followed her instincts and ducked behind a fence – just in time to avoid an adeptly thrown sling stone that would have caved in her forehead.

"Attack," she roared out. "Back to your soldiers! Tartessos, follow my lead."

A score of officers were already dead by the time she finished speaking, and a few of her sworn swords with them. More were slain trying to flee, though the clever broke into houses to avoid that fate. Elvera risked a glance over the edge of the fence and caught sight only of grey-skinned silhouettes in furs stalking across rooftops before another javelin had her ducking back down. They were seizing the roofs between Beaumontant and Couteau D'Or, she realized with dismay. That'd be throwing away soldiers unless it was the prelude to a strike on one of those quarters, which meant that in defiance of all common sense the Army of Callow was back on the attack. Cursing under her breath, the old soldier prepared to make a run for it. Someone needed to get the Tanja boy out of the way before he got himself killed and the army's spirits dropped into the pit, and who else save her was there? It was going to be an iron day, she'd felt it hours ago, and now that the iron had been in the fire long enough it'd grown red and burning.

Captain Elvera traced the Mark of Mercy with wrinkled hands, then steeled herself and ran out of cover.

—

Edgar was kicked awake, none too gently, and blearily rolled over.

"I was just resting my eyes, I was," he immediately claimed.

A heartbeat later he remembered he'd been allowed his rest, captain's orders, and his fear turned to resentment. The legionary pushed himself up, leaning against the wall, and began to glare at the source of his pain. Just as quick, resentment turned back to fear.

"Get up," Sergeant Hadda grinned, baring twin rows of fangs. "The war's back on, boy."

Edgar counted himself lucky that after the hard fighting of the night and morning he'd been exhausted enough to pass out in his armour, aches in the back or not. Sergeant Hadda was not the kind of officer you ever wanted to keep waiting when she gave an order. He fumbled for his sword-belt under the orc's amused gaze, and after slipping it back on ended up going through the pile of straw that'd been his bedding in order to find the helmet he could have sworn he'd set down to his left. The old sergeant took pity on him eventually, pointing it out, and Edgar hastily brushed aside the last of the straw inside before slamming it on.

"Thought we were pulled back until Afternoon Bell, sarge," he said, warily eyeing her as he pulled the clasp together.

Depending on the orc's mood, questions would either lead to pretty heavy-handed mockery or a fount of useful information. A sergeant was low as an officer could be, in the Army of Callow, but Hadda been in the Legions of Terror long before she took oath under Queen Catherine so she had all sorts of old friends in places. She tended to know more about what was going on than even Captain Pickering, to the man's frustration.

"Everyone's called back to the fronts," Sergeant Hadda said. "Including us poor, exhausted souls. We're about to teach Dominion meat why you don't pick fights with the Legions."

Like a lot of soldiers who'd been in the legions that were brought into the fold after Second Liesse, Hadda tended to speak of the Legions and the Army of Callow as the same thing. As far as they were concerned, Edgar had been told, the Black Queen was the Carrion Lord's anointed successor so there was no distinction to be drawn. As a proper Laure boy he'd found that to be a mite unpatriotic, but then he supposed greenskins were new to the fold. Hadda had been good to him, anyway, for all the rough edges. She'd looked out for her tenth, taught them the little things like 'don't gamble with goblins', 'not all Soninke are warlocks' and 'if you fight a Taghreb the entire family comes after you'.

"Merciful Gods," Edgar muttered. "Everyone said Legate Abigail was planning a retreat, not an assault."

It'd been a shame the Princekiller got killed by them heretic Dominion priests, but he'd thought it nice that a Callowan was leading the Third Army now. It'd been a point pride, when he'd talked with other Laure enlisted. Sure enough the Legate was from Summerholm, and the folks from the Gate of the East tended to be prickly and proud as cats, but they'd all agreed Summerholm stock was good at warring. And Legate Abigail was a true veteran, he'd heard, from the days of the Fifteenth – she'd fought in the Arcadian Campaign and at Akua's Folly. Heavens willing, she might end up confirmed by Marshal Juniper as the general of the Third Army if they all got out of Sarcella alive. Sergeant Hadda's scarred, leathery face split into a nasty little grin.

"*General* Abigail, now," the orc said. "But that's not the real treat of the day. Put some spring to your step, legionary – the Black Queen's back, so we're

about to turn this fucking battle around."

Edgar let out a low whistle. It was always a mixed bag, hearing about Queen Catherine. She'd filled a lot of graves since she'd appeared during the Liesse Rebellion, and no small amount of them had been Callowan ones. But she'd also smashed to pieces all the scavengers that came after the Kingdom, after she wrested it out of the Tower's hand, and it was hard not to take pride in that. Edgar still remembered the sharp satisfaction he'd felt after hearing them sorcerers who'd done the Doom of Liesse had gotten crucified one and all. The queen might be a bit of tyrant, but the Fairfaxes hadn't been all sweetness and light either. Sometimes you needed a hard hand to get it done, like Jehan the Wise hanging seven princes and one. But all that was back home, and before the fucking *Procerans* had declared her Arch-heretic of the East. The Principate tried the Vales and it tried the north, and when it got whipped like a dog it pulled the same trick it had in the old days. The Callowan House had called it 'perverse service to earthly powers', and that sounded about right to him.

Aye, there might be a time where the Black Queen got a little *too* black and Edgar found himself joining the rebel cause. But if the fucking Procerans thought their fucking princes and their fucking priests could unseat an anointed queen of Callow then they were in for a rude awakening. Maybe this time they should hang fourteen princes and two, and then another one too for Old King Selwin they'd done in at the Red Flower Vales. Edgar kept to the Heavens, as all Callowans should, but he kept to the long price as well and this one had been a *very* long time coming. One of these days they'd get around to evening the scales with the Wasteland too, for the Night of Knives and older slights as well, but that could wait some. The greenskins had been done in by the Tower too, bastards as they could be, and they should get their due along with the rest. Edgar did not mind at all the notion of sharing a fire with someone like Sergeant Hadda where the Tower used to stand. He didn't speak out none of that, of course. He was just a legionary, so he ate his slop with the rest of the tenth and joined up with the rest of the cohort to march up to the outskirts of Couteau D'Or quarter. He'd been worried, when going to sleep, that they might all get caught in the city and killed. Edgar wasn't worried anymore, though.

Say what you would about the Black Queen, she'd never lost a battle.

He clutched that knowledge tight as the cohorts gathered behind the defences, ranks and ranks of legionaries in red. It was all right to be afraid, he knew. On the other side of the killing grounds there would be warriors waiting, and Edgar had seen enough of his fellows die to learn that being clever or good with a sword wasn't always enough to save you. He'd seen better fighters than him die because they'd been a little too slow raising their shield, because they'd slipped in the mud or even just because they'd been on watch when the Helike cataphracts struck. You couldn't own that, you couldn't force it: it was in the hands of the Gods Above. But he wasn't just Edgar of Laure, a boy in armour

in the third rank from the front. He was a legionary in the Third Army of the Kingdom of Callow, and in this strange city in this strange land they were going to *win*. He could feel it, and the others felt it too. It was in the air, the harsh taste of retribution in the making. He could see in the eyes of the orcs, burning red. He could see it in the way the soldiers from Laure and Ankou, from Vale and Summerholm, they were all standing like they wanted to lean forward. And the Wastelanders they had it as well, the Taghreb and the Soninke, with their calm faces and their hard eyes – like they knew how this would end and they were already savouring it.

He didn't know who started singing, but Edgar did not hesitate to join his voice to it. There were times when the old rebel songs, the likes of *Here They Come Again* and *Red The Flowers*, they were what needed to be called out. But here, slowly beginning to advance against the soldiers of the Dominion? They'd give the Black Queen her due, just the once, for this song was hers and no one else's. The tune of *In Dread Crowned* swelled up, as crossbow bolts flew and legionaries raised their shields. Step, step, step: the beat was in his bones, the rhythm of it. They advanced through the flat grounds, arrows and stones harmlessly glancing off. Edgar unsheathed his blade, smelling the scent of magic unleashed.

*"Be they high or resplendent our oaths stand taller still

And in the west do quiet lie graves we have yet to fill-"*

Balls of flame detonated against the enemy, and the Third Army charged into the chaos with a roar.

—

It was madness.

The Callowans were on their last rope and everybody knew it, but they might have held on to some part of the city until nightfall and spared themselves slaughter if they'd remained in their hiding holes instead of sallied out. Razin did not know whether to be delighted or infuriated they had not. He'd had plans in the making to land another crushing blow, and had been talking the most recalcitrant captains around to backing it: another push against Callowan lines accompanied with cavalry raids on the side, all to mask another strike by the Lanterns against the high command of the heretics. There would be no recovering from *that*, discipline or no. The war leader of the Lanterns had been most willing to send her warrior-priests into the fray, and the heir to Malaga had been slowly squeezing the Tartessos captains into silence when the damned Callowans struck instead. Some few thousand grey-skinned devils had been summoned and sent to disrupt his positions in Beaumontant and Couteau D'Or, though too few to truly be a threat. He'd immediately ordered them chased out from the rooftops they were skulking on, loyal captains heeding his calls and arranging for archers and slingers to disperse the abominations, but no sooner had the exchanges began that the Army of Callow attacked. It had been... grisly.

Razin Tanja was of the Grim Binder's line and inherited her famous poise even if he had not been graced with her equally famed sorceries, so he'd not let the horror of it reach his face. But it would be a long time before her forgot the sight of it: those implacable rows of steel shields advancing in tight formations, heretics of all stripes singing their strange songs as they slew. The way crossbow bolts had fallen like summer rain, punching through all but the finest scale and plate. Foul eastern magics of flame and lightning arcing over ranks to blacken stone and sweep aside men like kindling. All the while whistles were sounded by their calm-faced officers, calling lines of legionaries forward or back like it was a parade ground and not as hellish a fight as this city could stomach. The strange devils had waited until Razin's soldiers were on the backfoot before leaping down the rooftops and fiercely charging into the men of Levant, and that'd tipped the vase over the table's edge. A rout had followed, Razin himself only escaping unscathed because that old dog of the Resafa, the one they called Red Ella, had him seized by her sworn swords before ordering them so slay any warriors impeding their way out.

Beaumontant was no safer, he'd soon learned. The Callowans had begun an offensive there as well, and the streets were packed tight with soldiers whose captains had died in Couteau D'Or or were still struggling to reach their companies. The chaos reached its apex when the Army of Callow reached the outskirts of Beaumontant from the side of Couteau D'Or as well, having wrought great slaughter. Panic spread at the realization that the Dominion's force was now surrounded on three sides: on two of them red-bladed Callowans, and the third the blaze the heretics had started trying to kill the Lanterns during their retreat. Only behind them, in Belles Portes, did the Dominion still hold ground. But many of the wounded had been set there, for lack of an easy way to carry them out of the city after the assaults of the night and morning, and the makeshift infirmaries made did it difficult to get reinforcements through. It'd been a disaster in the making even before the Army of Callow began tossing its munitions – and Razin swore would see those declared blasphemy by Lanterns and House if it was the last thing he did – into the disorganized soldiers.

The second rout was even bloodier than the first. The heir to Malaga left the city in haste, passing the duty of holding Belles Portes to the doddering Captain Elvera in his absence, and went to stir up the rest of the army. The Callowans had struck a hard blow, he would give them that, but with that vain gesture they had doomed themselves. Their legionaries would be exhausted, their mages on the edge of burning out and their stocks of munitions running low. This had been a harder-earned victory than Razin would have preferred, but it would be a victory nonetheless. Father would forgive his impetuousness in seizing command of the vanguard without permission if he returned with the destruction of a Callowan army to honour their Blood. The wounded would be brought out onto the plains, to rest in the army's camp, and then he would muster the might of Levant to crush these heretics. There were still seven thousand kept in reserve, and order would be sent to the riders probing the east and

west to strike when given the proper signal. Razin was about to send summons to the Lanterns, to offer them the privilege of leading the counterattack at his side, when he was accosted by one of his lesser captains.

"Honoured Son, there is trouble," the old man said after a cursory bow.

His mail was old and the leather lacking luster, which betrayed the nature of his soldiery where lack of an accent failed to provide. One of the captains who had answered the call of the Holy Seljun, not the lords and ladies of Levant. Razin forced himself to be courteous and offer back a nod of respectful acknowledgement. He already knew that after this battle was won the captains from Tartessos would seek to sully his name, and that support from those unsworn would do much to help his reputation. If all but the captains of Lady Aquiline sang his praises, the condemnations of her soldiers would be seen for the base defamation that they were.

"Have our captains of the horse sent word?" he asked.

"No, it was our camp watch," the man said. "An enemy force has emerged from the southeast of the city."

It took a moment for Razin to grasp what was being said, and just as long to fully disbelieve it.

"Through the *fire*?" he said. "Have the men been drinking?"

"I thought the same, and so sent trusted armsmen of my own to look," the old captain replied, but shook his head. "The Callowans passed through using strange wooden engines covered in skins. There truly is a force of nearly six hundred, goblins and devils. They are led by a human, however."

"A warlock from the East," Razin frowned. "It would explain the appearance of these grey-skinned devils. The mage must be slain, it might make the abominations still in the city turn on the enemy."

The old captain hesitated.

"Honoured Son, this I did not see with my own eyes," he cautioned.

Razin almost gestured impatiently, before remembering himself, and so instead forced a smile.

"Speak, captain," he encouraged.

"Some of my men say the human wore a cloak," the old man said. "One of black cloth, but with strips of many colours."

Razin Tanja of the Binder's Blood paled. There was only one villain known in this age to wear such a strange garment.

"Ashen Gods," the boy croaked. "Gather your men, captain. Gather *everyone*. We must slay the Black Queen before she pulls her foul tricks."

Fear pulsed in his blood, but as Razin had his servants saddle his horse he found there was excitement buried deep beneath. If he could kill the black-hearted Queen of Callow, it might just break the back of her armies for good and sent the lot of them scuttling back across their borders. What an honour to the Blood *that* would be. It would not do to be reckless, he reminded himself: he was of the Binder's line, not the Champion's. He gathered two thousand men before setting out, the rest assembling behind with orders to catch up,

and horns were sounded for the captains of the horse in the eastern plains to join battle as well. Razin was informed that the Lanterns were already gone to the fight for Sarcella, but messengers would fetch them. Better to share the glory than make a bold corpse. The Black Queen's goblins and abominations had already slain a few brave outriders, by the looks of it, but the march of her warband was otherwise unimpeded. Captains riding at his side, summoned in haste, Razin watched the few hundred fools keep advancing even in the face of his superior force.

"It may be a distraction," one of his officers mused. "Just some Callowan forced into a cloak, meant to delay us reinforcing the city."

"Or she has gone mad in her arrogance, as her ilk often does," Razin idly replied. "Perhaps she thinks her warriors will be enough to defeat us."

"We so sure they won't be?" another captain said. "I mean no disrespect, Honoured Son, but we've all heard the rumours about the Battle of the Camps. The sky falling, the dead rising with blue eyes and fairies riding across water. . . "

There were calls of cowardice, which Razin tacitly allowed to quiet the naysayer through shame. The heir to Malaga would put no stock in such stories, especially not ones so fanciful. First the tale was that the Black Queen had warred against the fae, now that they warred *for* her? Powerful necromancer as the villain might be, she could not raise corpses that did not exist. As for this tale of the sky being brought down, it could be no work of hers. Perhaps some Wasteland ritual she simply claimed to be her own effort, the scale of it inflated with every telling. Procerans always excused their defeats by making giants out of gargoyles, it was well-known. A splatter of laughter spread across the captains, commanding Razin's immediate attention. It was not directed at him or the yellow-bellied naysayer, he saw, but at the Black Queen's foolishness. She'd called a halt and now her warriors were spreading out in a circle around her, taking up defensive positions.

"Mad indeed," one of the captains mocked. "Shall we order a charge, Honoured Son?"

Razin's eyes narrowed at the sight of her. The cloak was well-known, but never before had he heard of the Queen of Callow wielding a crooked black staff. Especially not one so. . . unsettling to look at. Perhaps she did have a trick left to pull.

"Battle lines," Razin Tanja ordered instead. "Our force will take the centre. Send word to the captains behind us that they are to split and flank the Black Queen's warriors."

He glanced into the distance, where the thousand cavalry he'd sent out at dawn was slowly making its way. Yes, this would do. No matter the dark magic, near seven thousand footsoldiers of Levant followed by a cavalry charge at the back would be enough to end this. Razin would not lead from the front, just in case, and allow one of these eager captains the honour instead. It mattered not who slew the goblins and devils, so long as the heir to Malaga was part of

the warriors who slew the villain queen. The soldiers spread out as ordered, battle-prayers on their lips, and the assault promptly began. Razin remained with the second wave of the centre, listening to the hurried march of the rest of the troops behind him. Stride after stride the warriors closed the distance, and he watched victory in the making with bright eyes. The grey-skinned devils tightened their lines in front of the villain, the bloody goblins taking cover behind them, but it was the Black Queen he was staring at. Loose hair unbound and toyed with by the wind, she was staring at his soldiers and leaning against her long staff. Eventually she looked up, and Razin followed her gaze. There were shadows in the sky, two of them. *Crows*, he realized with a start. Corpses would draw carrion, but these were no such birds and flew with graceful purpose. They dove, and like twin blot of night landed on the Black Queen's shoulders.

There was something surreal about the sight, he thought. The smiling, slim woman whose hair cascaded behind her, the cloak of story around her. Those ink-black and terrible crows on her shoulders, feathered out of shadows. Razin watched the crooked staff rise, then fall with a thunderous crash. Shadows whispered across the snow, until the sound of cracks scuttling across a river drowned out even that.

Razin Tanja of the Binder's Blood had just sent the better part of two thousand men to drown, and in that stroke he had lost the Battle of Sarcella.

# Chapter 13

# Following

> "It is fortunate that virtue is its own reward, as it does not tend to accrue others."
>
> Theodore Langman, Wizard of the West

The world had become as an oil painting and the Night was boiling in my veins.

Goddesses on dark wings claimed my shoulders, insolent shards of darkness refusing the ascendancy of the afternoon sun, and they said nothing. They didn't need to. The expectation bloomed in the back of my mind like a swelling river: I'd offered them faith before they ever named me priestess, but now they required that purpose of me. Night still ran deep in the veins of the drow, however changed its nature, but none of their ancient favourites had been granted my office. *First Under the Night*, I thought. To others it might speak of supremacy, some perilous boast of standing closer to these quarrelsome goddesses than any other, but I knew better. I was first in that I was charged with the treading of unbroken grounds, as much a scream ringing into a dark tunnel as a priestess bearing their mandate. I was to stumble for them, make the mistakes and pay the costs so that my successors would not. These were still fair terms, by my reckoning. Alliance and the means to carry out my designs, for what I had freely given before they formally claimed it. But if they expected reverence of me, respect more than had been earned, then they would be disappointed.

"I never took well to prayer," I murmured. "Either the secret whispers for help or the worn-down words they taught us to recite in the House. So I won't offer you that."

The sun above was searing, blinding. Fire from above none of us were meant to look in the eye. I breathed out and let the wind thread its fingers through my hair. The power came easy to me. It was holding it that was the trouble, for it was as temperamental as its mistresses: I'd ruled Winter, by the scavenger's virtue of being last to hold sway over it, but the Night was not my domain. If

I wanted the crows to smile upon me, I would have to swing them as sweet a song as I had it in me to sing.

"But that's not what we're about, is it?" I said. "The three of us. If you wanted someone who'd know your pretty rituals, you had thousands to raise. If you wanted devotion, or unquestioning faith, there just as plenty. You went through my mind mercilessly, that night, so you know exactly what you picked."

My eyes left the sky and fell to the charging Levantines. Thousands in mail and leather and scales, steel blades and hide shields. Their faces painted with vivid strokes of colour, as true a language as the spoken tongues of their faraway land. They were close now, treading river grounds. I had chosen the broadest bent of the water for this, instead of where my armies had once tried to shatter winter's work with the cleverness of the Grey Eyries. I raised my staff and let the darkness pulse with me.

"Here's my prayer, Goddesses of Night," I savagely smiled. "The three of us, together – *let's break something*."

Komena's raucous, delighted laughter sounded in my ears even as the bottom of my staff struck the snow-covered ice. The oldest sister might see further, weave and scheme with cold judgement, but the younger one was my kindred in some ways. Even the span of millennia had not entirely faded the remembrance of what it felt like, shattering arrogance and host with the same single stroke. The soldier-goddess leaned into my intent more strongly than her sister, harsh and domineering where Andronike was skillful and subtle. The Night spread with a whisper before sinking its claws in the iced river, rending it mercilessly. Cracks tore open the frozen grounds, cold water sloshed out and hundreds of screams filled the air. Komena roughly withdrew her will from mine, leaving me gasping and leaning on my staff for reasons deeper than a bad leg. My sight swam, the glare of the sun failing to pierce through, and I had just enough presence left to hear Robber hesitantly stepping towards me. I warded him off with a raised hand. Gods, I thought. I felt like throwing up, like my veins were about to boil and melt. I'd never wielded a miracle this large during the light of day, and I wouldn't do it again anytime soon if I had my way.

"Boss?" Robber called out.

"Took a bit out of me, that's all," I croaked out.

Too many breaths passed before I was myself again, but with eyes no longer rebelling I steadied my back spat to the side. The river had become a deep grave, I saw. There were chunks of ice floating in the water, but among them bodies were strewn. Fewer than had died, though that was no mystery: those with weightier armour had sunk straight to the bottom. The floaters had been savaged by broken ice. Some Levantines were still swimming and screaming, but I had little worry of survival. Taking a swim this deep into winter was as sure as death sentence as a swinging sword, unless some priest intervened. My last memories of the charge were vague, almost dreamlike – there were consequences, to calling upon that much Night and the aid of a goddess – but now I could more accurately assess numbers. Around two thousand had sallied

out towards my little company, and less than half that died. Their mistake had been going into battle order, I mused. That'd broadened their line, turning the loss of a few hundred into something closer to a thousand. There were still a mass of soldiers mobilizing behind the survivors of the ill-fated assault, almost the full Levantine reserve, but I had no fear of that. They were on the wrong side of the river, after all.

The cavalry in the distance that had been heading for us earlier has slowed, and there seemed to be argument between its officers. They were on our bank, sure, but then they'd just watched me turn around a mile of ice into a deathtrap. And there'd be no reinforcements, if they tried their luck. I suspected they would be disinclined to find out if I had anymore tricks up my sleeves, which was for the best. I might actually fall unconscious, if I attempted to use the Night again, and not necessarily *after* I'd let loose a miracle. I wouldn't risk it, not when anything capable of hurting the horsemen would be just as capable of ravaging my own soldiers if lashing out uncontrollably.

"That one wants your head on a pike," Robber said, calling my attention back to the footsoldiers.

Or close enough. On the other bank, a rider stood surrounded by panicking captains. A young man, in beautiful plate that must have cost a fortune. He couldn't even be twenty, I thought, though the ferocious-looking facepaint of iron grey and crimson made it hard to determine. He was looking at me with hatred and fear. The enemy's commander?

"Might be able to end him with a volley," my Special Tribune offered. "Best not to let snakes grow longer fangs."

"So young," I quietly said.

"You were younger, when you took your first command," Robber shrugged.

Seventeen, and so sure I was ready to mend my little corner of the world. Gods, how lucky had I been to have the likes of Juniper and Hakram at my side? All of Rat Company, really, and those others handpicked by then then-legate Hellhound as well. *But it wasn't luck at all, was it?* I suddenly thought. Heroes might have providence to furnish them with the tools of victory, but I'd had something of my own just as valuable. A patient man with green eyes, lending his weight where mine did not suffice and pulling a thousand strings to ease my way forward – so many of them I could not believe I'd found half, even after all these years.

"We learned our lessons quick," I said. "We had to."

Not always the right ones, I knew, but we *had* learned. We still did. The moment you stopped, Creation buried you.

"He'll remember today, Boss," Robber said. "You can count on that. And next time he comes swinging, he'll be wiser about it."

The warning was clear. It ran against goblin nature, to let a threat escape. And there'd been promise in this one, if he'd really been in command. Going for the general staff was a tactic that would have worked against almost any army on Calernia. He'd run into Grem One-Eye and Black's reforms instead, the

forced redundancies shaped by the knowledge that you couldn't count on high command surviving a battle if heroes were on the loose, but the Dominion had never fought the modern Legions of Terror so the mistake was understandable. Pressing the offensive, as he'd obviously meant to, had not been unsound either. It would have been costly, but if General Abigail's defences broken on even one front her army would have collapsed in short order. If he'd been slightly luckier, if I'd arrived a day later, he might very well have broken the Third Army completely. *If you'd had maybe another ten years of seasoning*, I thought. *If you'd been trained better, learned to temper the bold with some patience...* He could be a general of some talent, one day. No Juniper, mind you, but thankfully there were very few generals of that skill around. And if I gave him those ten years, one day the hate I saw might be turned on me with a wiser hand to wield it.

"Let him go," I said.

Yellow eyes considered me carefully.

"This isn't a victory, Robber," I sighed, gesturing at the river full of dead. "It's a waste."

"Not like you to weep for the enemy," the goblin said.

"Weep?" I mused. "No, hardly that. But every corpse we make today is a gap in the ranks when we turn to the Dead King."

I sighed, then glanced aside. In the distance, I saw the cavalry had decided to ride around the river and return to the camp. Good.

"Come on," I said. "Time to head back. General Abigail should be wrapping up inside the city."

I began limping back to Sarcella, leaving ice and death behind. The hateful stare of the boy I'd spared followed my back, but what of it?

He wouldn't be the first, or the last.

—

With the enemy riders away, there was no need to risk anything as foolish as trying the blaze a second time. Most the turtles were wrecked beyond use, anyway, and while Belles Portes had been under assault when we moved out I judged my forces too weak for a strike at the back of the Levantines still holding it. We took the long way around, the threat of the horsemen having removed itself, and long was no exaggeration. Though my drow tread snow like stone and goblins could scuttle through anything, I was exhausted beyond words and very much limping. It turned out that victory outpaced us: when we reached the eastern side of Sarcella, we were greeted by rowdy cheers. Word of the river's break had spread faster than I could walk, and more besides. The cohort positioned to hold the eastern streets crowded us to deliver accolades, or at least tried to – I sent Robber ahead to have a quiet word with the captain about not approaching the drow. They looked a little stunned by the welcome, nonetheless, almost like children seeing the sea for the first time. The Everdark did not breed the kind of comradeship that the Legions and my armies used as

mortar. Mighty Jindrich was strutting like a peacock and its sigil followed suit, which amused my legionaries to no end.

I left them to it, and took aside the orc captain in command of the cohort. The news were better than I had expected. General Abigail, it seemed, had vigorously prosecuted her offensive and then taken a gamble as well. She'd recalled the two thousand drow I'd left holding the north of the city and sent them to climb the ring of statues and arches around the city, to suddenly drop down at the back of the Levantines in Belles Portes. That'd neatly cut off both the bridges that still allowed a trickle of Dominion reinforcements to come through and the last way out of the force inside Sarcella. The enemy commander, facing annihilation, had been forced to surrender. I suspected the casualty rate for the drow who'd taken the climb and been forced to fight Levantines on both sides was a lot less sunny than the official version implied, but regardless I did not disapprove. Simply by ending the fighting early, General Abigail had likely significantly lowered overall casualties. The wary-eyed Callowan I'd promoted to the head of the Third Army had accepted the surrender as soon as it was offered, and Sarcella was now entirely ours. For now, anyway. There were still Dominion soldiers beyond the bridges, and the losses we'd taken during the offensive must not have been mild.

But it was only a few hours until sundown, now, so I had no fear of what was ahead.

After we advanced deeper into the city I sent Mighty Jindrich and its warriors back to the rest of the drow with a message to General Rumena, ordering it to pull back to the now-unguarded north of the city and away from the rest of the Third Army. It'd cover our bases, just in case, but that was only a side benefit. The longer my army and the Firstborn remained in close quarters, the higher the chances of blood being spilled rose – especially if I wasn't there to supervise. The survivors of Robber's cohort I relieved with my compliments, free to sleep or whatever no-doubt-against-regulations activity they got up to when they weren't on duty. Robber himself wanted to stay at my side, but I had something else in mind and so refused.

"You keeping me away from the Dominion prisoners, Boss?" he pouted.

It was even odds, I mused whether or not he knew that make him look like a particularly horrid gargoyle. The amusement the sight caused was slight, though, and did not linger long. It wasn't amusing at all, what I needed of him.

"No," I softly said. "I need you to find out what happened to Nauk's body. If they've burned it yet, if they had time for a Legion burial."

The pout vanished, leaving behind a grim visage of wrinkled green skin. They'd had a complicated relationship, those two: adversarial and often petty, tainted by their largely one-sided competition for Pickler's attentions, but there'd also been more to it than that. It's been a comfortable kind of dislike, the kind so old and well-worn it had some kinship to friendship. And beyond that, Nauk had been Rat Company. He'd been with us from the start, the War College and

those heady first days of the Fifteenth. That mattered, to those who'd been there. There weren't as many of us left as I'd like.

"I'll see to it," Robber said, and for once his voice was completely serious.

"Please," I said. "If the body's still there..."

"I'll arrange something, and send for you," the goblin said.

It wasn't a sweet parting, but this wasn't sweet business. I ran into officers sent by General Abigail on my way to the Third Army's headquarters, and learned the surrendered Levantine captains were being kept in the repurpose goal of Sarcella closer to the north, under heavy guard. The Dominion soldiers themselves had been disarmed, and while under watch had been provided healing by priests of the House Insurgent. I made my way to the headquarters as quick as I could, my leg was aching like someone had shoved an iron spike through. It was an effort not to visibly tremble from exhaustion, now that the miracle's wake had fully settled over my shoulders, but I couldn't show weakness in front of my soldiers. At least my shoulders were bare, now. The crows had left when I began the trek back to Sarcella earlier, presumably to look for fresh amusements. In this city full of corpses and ash I had no doubt they'd find something to their tastes. The merchant's mansion that served as the location of the Third Army's high command was a great deal fuller than the last time I'd swung by. It was surrounded by legionaries, and even inside soldiers were aplenty. The mood was celebratory, but while I offered smiles I did not linger. I was too tired to keep up the pretence of haleness for long, and I still had duties to discharge.

I made my way up to the war council room, finding what remained of Nauk's general staff there and surrounding his successor. The general was the first to notice my arrival, rising up her seat looking like she would very much love to be halfway through a good night's sleep right now. I could sympathize.

"Your Majesty," she greeted me.

Huh, she'd done the salute perfectly even this exhausted. Whoever had drilled her at the recruitment camp must have left quite the impression.

"General," I replied. "And all of you – you should be proud of what you've accomplished today. You went above and beyond my expectations."

I was unsurprised to notice it was the orcs who were most pleased by that, demurely flashing fangs in a signal of humility.

"There will be another war council later, but for now I'll need the room," I calmly said. "I must speak with your general."

Being sent out didn't seem to dent their good mood all that much, and I smiled to take the sting out anyway. It wasn't long before we had the room to ourselves, though I waited until footsteps could no longer be heard. General Abigail, I noted, seemed to be willing to look anywhere in the room except at me. I wondered whether she was always jumpy as a cat, or whether it was the result of days of march under harassment followed by battles and a spectacular assassination of her direct colleagues. She was a cagey one, this Abigail of Summerholm. Her eyes never quite stopped moving, as if always looking

for a threat, and I'd yet to see her let her guard down entirely once even this far behind our defence lines. I would have thought her generally inclined to prudence, but the way she'd used the drow in the battle ran against that impression.

I'd been solid thinking, if risky, and raised my opinion of her as a tactician. It would have been safer to stick to a steady push, but overall casualties would have been higher by the time the dust settled. Add that to the clever trick she'd pulled using civilians to guard the back of Sarcella, and I had to admit she was one of the more promising commanders who'd risen over the last few years. Not yet enough to remain a general, maybe, but she had the potential to get there after a bit of blooding. Which Juniper had assigned her under Nauk to get, I remembered with a touch of rue. It seemed the Hellhound and I were sharing an opinion without needing to share a room. I dragged myself to one of the seats at the table and plopped myself down, brutally suppressing a sigh, and invited her to do the same. She did after the barest of hesitations.

"You did well today," I said. "The river trick would have meant nothing if you hadn't pushed them out beforehand."

The black-haired woman forced a smile and a nod while muttering her thanks. I didn't begrudge her that in the slightest. She'd sent quite a few of her soldiers to die, today, legionaries and officers she likely knew quite well. It never quite felt like a victory, when the butcher's bill came in, did it?

"You'll be remaining in command of the Third Army until we join up with the other columns," I told her. "Possibly until we make contact with Marshal Juniper, if there's no suitable replacement for you."

She winced.

"Ma'am, I'm not sure that's a wise decision," Abigail said. "I went up the ranks fast, and I didn't go through the War College. All I got was the officer training in the camps, and it didn't cover a general's duties."

My lips quirked.

"If a few years at the College were enough to make a general, my life would be much easier," I said. "I'll be handling the drow, and a few other forms of trouble as well. I can't run the Third Army as well. You've acquitted yourself well, and you have the instincts for it. It'll have to do."

Her face fell, and once more I was struck with how young she was. I wasn't all that older, truth be told, but it'd been a long time since I'd felt my true age. *Gods, were we ever really that young?* We must have been, when we fought in the Liesse Rebellion. I wondered if we'd looked as fragile to old generals like Istrid and Sacker back then as Abigail now looked to me.

"A lot of people could die, if I make a mistake," she muttered. "That would be on my head."

*Doubt*, I thought. She wasn't so difficult to read that I could not pick up on it. *And resentment at being thrust into this role*. Both things could turn out dangerous, if allowed to fester. A lighter touch would be needed here, or maybe a personal one. There were times when twisting the arm was in order, but not

here. An entirely unwilling general was of no use to me, and likely a liability to the soldiers she'd be commanding. Doubt and resentment, huh. I was no stranger to either, and in my experience they tended to have a common source in fear. We'd begin there. Propping up my staff against the table, I leaned back into my seat.

"In my first serious fight, I was beaten within an inch of my life by a procession of strangers and afterwards eviscerated by the Lone Swordsman," I told her quietly. "I still have the scar from where he opened me up. I was close enough to death I managed to use necromancy to get myself moving."

The other woman's eyes widened, with both surprise and disgust. The latter was at necromancy – most of my countrymen still considered the practice disgusting and dangerous – but the former was not. It wasn't common knowledge, how badly William had trounced me during the first part of our encounter. I watched curiosity seep in after the words sunk in, so I pressed on while the iron was hot.

"I ended up kicking him off the ramparts and into the Hwaerte, after catching him by surprise," I said, "but it was a very, very close thing. There are some who'd call it fate, the way it all turned out. I tend to think of it as luck."

"You were Named, even then," General Abigail said.

Like that said it all, explained everything. I supposed it might, to someone who'd never slipped into a Role. It was a lot more eye-catching the way some of us scythed through soldiers like wheat stalks than the way a single story misstep might kill you in truth an entire year before the blade actually opened your throat.

"I was green," I corrected. "Scrappy, good at some parts of what I did, but dangerously arrogant in my approach and I nearly died choking on a floor for it. But it did teach me a valuable lesson."

I smiled mirthlessly.

"You'll get eviscerated too, Abigail," I said, and she didn't quite manage to hide her flinch. "Not literally as I was, but one day you'll make a mistake and it'll be costly. You can't avoid that day, no one can. And it's good that you're afraid of it."

I met her eyes, brown to blue.

"Take that fear and use it," I said. "To make yourself *think*. About how it could go wrong, what you could do to avoid it or survive it. And from there you plan so that you don't end up in that pit in the first place. You do that well enough, and you'll push back the day some."

I paused, just a heartbeat.

"It'll still come," I frankly said. "It comes for everyone, Abigail. But if you can ward it off for a year or two, you'll still have done better than half the generals on Calernia."

A grimace split the other woman's face.

"I could have been a tanner," General Abigail mournfully said. "No one ever expects anything from those."

"I served drinks in a tavern for years," I told her, reluctantly amused. "And I ended up with a crown on my head. You're getting off light."

She paled, which made her sun-tanned cheeks look rather blotchy, but gathered herself with remarkable alacrity.

"I don't suppose I am dismissed for rest, now," she cautiously ventured.

I snorted.

"There's no rest for the wicked, General Abigail," I said. "Find us a bottle of wine and come back. We'll be going over the orders you've given since you took command of the Third Army, and why you gave them."

The black-haired woman let out a sound that might have been a whimper. I raised an eyebrow and she rose to find us something to drink, while I let out a sigh at the relief that was no longer standing on my bad leg.

Much like her I'd rather be sleeping, but if she was to be the first Callowan general in my army then she needed to be *taught*.

# Chapter 14

# Expedience

> "The art of negotiation is, in essence, convincing the other side of the table that you are very reluctant to part with the house full of rats while they are in dire need of it."
>
> Prince Louis of Brabant, later eighth First Prince of Procer

I woke up an hour before nightfall.

It was one of the more useful oddities caused by my association with the Sisters, that I could in some eldritch way feel the approach of dawn and dusk. I still had the taste of a passable Harrow red in my mouth from the talks I'd had with Abigail, the same sort of patient decision dissection I'd learned from Black and the War College. *She seems willing to learn, at least*, I thought as I groaned and forced myself to keep my eyes open. Exhaustion was lingering alongside the wine, and the handful of hours of sleep I'd squeezed in were nowhere enough to get me back on my feet. I drew on the Night a lick, not to wield it but to let the sensation of holding it pass through my frame. Like sticking your hand in a bucket of cool water, it woke me right up. I could probably rustle up some minor miracles now, I decided. It no longer felt like I'd melt myself from the inside if I did. That was instinct talking, but like it or not I'd had more experience drawing on eldritch powers than most people ever cared to go through. My instinct were rather well-informed, when it came to things like this. Getting my bad leg over the edge of the legion cot I'd claimed, I allowed myself the luxury of grimacing at the sensation. No one to put up a front for, right now.

I'd kept a shirt on in deference to the weather, but my fingers found themselves sliding under to find an old friend. The scar the Penitent's Blade had left still naked across my torso, nowadays more pale than pink but never to disappear. A testament to the costs of what had seemed like a victory, that night in Summerholm. The Lone Swordsman spared and branded with purpose, loosed like an arrow to start the rebellion that would see me rise up the ranks. A necessary evil, I'd told myself. What was one more wound on Callow, when it was

already bleeding from imperial rule? When that wound would lead to a mending. I could only be grimly amused at how disgusted I'd felt by Black ordering three death row prisoners slain so blood magic could be worked to save my life. In a sense, I'd done the same thing on a much grander scale before he ever gave the order. I withdrew my fingers and tugged down my shirt. It was done, and there was no unmaking it. I was strangely glad for Sve Noc's returning of the scar when they struck me back down to mortal coil. What was I, really, without the reminders on my skin of what my choices had wrought?

I got up with a hiss of pain and hobbled to a chair to have something to lean against when putting my trousers back on. It made me miss Indrani, in a strange way, and Hakram as well. It was different with my lover when she helped me with my clothes, sensual in a way that would be blasphemous to associate with Adjutant, but I wasn't sure I could honestly say there wasn't more intimacy in having Adjutant help me with my armour than in the woman I shared a bed with buttoning up my trousers. The business of dressing myself was finished with only minimal pain, and I grabbed the Mantle of Woe on the way out. It settled on my shoulders comfortably, the worn dark cloth warm against my back even as the outside boasted a riotous mix of colours all speaking of a foe beaten. There was a metaphor in there, I idly thought. Black's sombre gift whole but only out of sight, the visible sown over by all the fields I'd bared my blade on. Amusing as the thought was, I set it aside. Staff in hand, cloak streaming behind me, I got back to work.

The abandoned mansion I'd claimed as my resting place was swarming with drow and legionaries eyeing each other with wariness. I caught sight of a black eye on a young Callowan boy and a carefully cradled wrist for a Miklaya Sigil warrior, which prompted a sigh. The drow had never been taught to play nice with others, and my own people could be... touchy. At least whoever'd drawn up the roster had been farsighted enough not to assign greenskins. Goblins would carry the grudge until it could be answered for more safely, but it someone socked an orc in the face there was going to be blood on the floor before all was said and done. There was a tribune in command and I wasted no time in getting news from her. The city was still quiet and the Dominion hadn't tried an offensive since their last beating. An envoy from the Levantine camp had been sent, but they were being made to wait. General Abigail was 'planning the coming march', which no doubt meant she was sleeping like a log. Special Tribune Robber had come for me, but declined to wake me up when he learned I was out of it. The last I took most notice of, and asked the tribune to send someone to fetch him.

"Will you be here, ma'am?" the Soninke officer politely asked. "Or should I message for him to be sent elsewhere?'

"The Dominion captains are being held separately from their warriors, right?" I frowned.

"As per Leg – as per the Army of Callow's protocol, Your Majesty," she hastily adjusted.

The tribune looked afraid she'd offended by her lapse. Early thirties, at a glance, so odds weren't bad she'd been one of Istrid's or Orim's before Second Liesse. Fresh to my service, after decades in the Legions.

"Calm down, Tribune," I reassured. "I know well how much we've borrowed from the Legions. The Army of Callow as it now stands could not exist without them and all they taught us."

That took the edge off the fear, and she nodded in nervous agreement. I hummed, considering my options.

"I'll be headed to speak with our Levantine prisoners," I said. "I'll need a guide. Have it passed to Robber he should join me there."

It was done with brisk efficiency, and I was provided an escort of legionaries to head out. The drow would have done the same, but a few words in Crepuscular had them headed back to General Rumena instead. I wasn't having the wander around a crowded city full of humans if I could help it. As it turned out the captains of Levant were being held in Sarcella's own gaol, a nice little touch of irony. The tribune in charge of the legionaries keeping an eye on our guests was well-informed of them, and told me what I'd wanted to know: we *had*, in fact, captured the captain commanding their holding action in Belles Portes earlier. She'd taken a sword the shoulder while fighting, but accepted healing by the priests of the House Insurgent and was now merely tired. It would do: after all, so was I. A cell better fit for holding thieves than what had to be one of the highest officers in the enemy vanguard awaited me, cramped and bare save for a rough bench and a chamber pot. Some kind soul have found her a blanket, which seemed for the best considering that she was apparently quite old. Built like an orc and obviously in fighting fit, true, but there was only white left to her hair. One of the legionaries at my side unlocked the cell while the other brought out a folding chair for me to sit on. I sure as Hells wasn't standing any more today unless I had to. The Levantine rose to her feet before the door was even open, and I greeted her with a sharp nod.

"Captain Elvera, I believe," I spoke in Chantant.

Her face tightened. I thanked the orc who'd brought in my chair and eased myself into it before dismissing my pair of escorts. The door remained open, and the Levantine's blue eyes studied the sight before warily returning to me.

"Yes," she replied. "You are the Black Queen."

He accent was thick enough the words were near unintelligible, and she spoke very slowly. My officers had already established she spoke no Lower Miezan, though, so it was about as clearly as this conversation could be held.

"I am," I agreed. "I am here to discuss the logistics of your surrender."

Her brow creased, and I repeated more slowly after changing 'logistics' for 'details'. She nodded.

"Your general promised no killing of prisoners," Captain Elvera said. "Or torture."

"I will hold to that," I said.

The issue here was that, according to Abigail, we had the better part of three thousand Dominion warriors on our hands. Stripping them of armaments and dispersing them in Sarcella meant they were unlikely to be an immediate problem, but that changed nothing about the long-term noose around our neck they'd be. The Third Army was decently supplied still, but dragging that many prisoners around would eat into the reserves at a harsh rate. And while the southern expedition still had piles of dwarf-provided rations as well as what had been brought from the Everdark, the Herald of the Deeps had made it clear the Kingdom Under would only supply the drow exodus headed towards the Dead King. Any force sent south was on its own. Add on top of it all that the drow had no facilities to hold prisoners, that the Third Army had been bloodied raw by fighting and that we need to move quickly before this turned sour on us? We couldn't keep the Levantines, it was as simple as that. Even if my general hadn't offered them their lives with the terms I would not have countenanced a massacre of prisoners of war, but neither could I just let them loose with a slap on the wrist.

"I cannot simply release you to fight me in a few weeks," I bluntly said.

"Captains will have ransom," Captain Elvera said. "If I am sent out to camp, I will gather coin to buy freedom of as many soldiers as I can. Then return as prisoner. I will give oath."

*Even if coin was enough to move me, I could not trust you to deliver it. Your own priesthood had me declared Arch-heretic of the East*, I thought. *You have a holy justification to consider all oaths made to me as null and void.* I had not been well-inclined towards the Lantern because of that, even before some of their own had killed Nauk. I breathed out slowly. I would not stoke the embers of anger I felt at that. He'd been a general, and this was war. I had struck similar enough blows in the past, and would perhaps do it again. *But this is the wrong war, not the one we should be fighting, and for that stupidity you killed my friend. What was left of him, anyway.* I forcefully pushed the thought aside. I would not add waste to waste, simply to even scales that could not be evened by blood.

"Coin is not what I want," I said. "You have offered me an oath, Captain Elvera. There are some of your people who would say those mean nothing, when offered to me."

The old woman's face darkened.

"I am not Blood," she stiffly said. "But not a dog. Even oath to devil should be kept. *I* have honour, even if Hells do not."

I studied her closely as she spoke. The indignation was genuine enough, I decided. And those of the Dominion did have a reputation for being straightforward, as concerned with honour and reputation as the Arlesite princes they so often squabbled with. But the reputation ascribed to a people living so far away from mine meant very little, in the end. It was like calling all orcs bloodthirsty savages, or all Callowans obsessed with grudges. Having a warrior's build and displaying valour on the field did not necessarily mean she was not deceitful.

"And you have the authority to speak for all the prisoners currently in my hands?" I pressed.

She nodded after taking some time to parse out my words. I'd spoken a little too fast.

"Then we can bargain for release," I said. "I want an oath from you."

Her wizened face hardened.

"I will not fight against Levant," Captain Elvera said. "Better death."

I shook my head, almost amused. I supposed I did have a reputation for making old enemies fight my fresher ones.

"None of the prisoners are to make war against me or my allies for three months," I said. "I want your oath on this."

The old woman looked wary.

"That is all?" she asked. "No ransom?"

*From you, yes*, I thought. *But I've every intent of selling your freedom twice. I have an envoy from the camp waiting, and concessions you cannot give me.* I refrained from smiling, well aware that a villain offering lenient terms with one of those would in all likelihood be taken as a trap.

"That is all," I said.

I'd considered keeping their arms and armour, but what point was there? It would slow us down on the march, and in six months it would be a lot more useful in their hands than filling my army's supply carts. Captain Elvera watched me in silence for a long time.

"Why?" she finally asked.

"You are under the command of the Lord of Malaga," I said.

She made a disgruntled noise.

"I serve Tartessos," the old woman said. "Lady Aquiline fights with him."

Akua had been right in her assessment, I mused. The Dominion's armies were not without internal squabbles. *That's what happens when nobles command instead of officers with a clear chain of command.*

"Then take this message back to her, and to him," I said, and my eyes hardened. "There is only one war that matters, and it is being fought up north. Not here. I come with an offer of peace for the Grand Alliance."

I paused, waiting to make sure she'd understood me well. She nodded, eyes hooded.

"If you refuse that peace, I will have to fight you," I said. "And I will not have the luxury to be *nice* about it, because we are running out of time."

I coldly smiled.

"So take my peace," I said. "Or we'll have to do this the hard way."

Silence filled the cell.

"Threat," Captain Elvera said.

"Promise," I corrected.

Leaning on my staff, I rose to my feet.

"You have my terms," I said. "I will leave you to consider them. Tell the guards when you make your decision."

The old woman hesitated.

"Agreed," she said. "I will give oath, and message."

I left Sarcella's gaol not long after, with the first of the two oaths I wanted, and Captain Elvera's cell was locked anew.

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Robber was waiting for me outside, lounging atop a wrecked street stall and looking oddly vulnerable without his armour. The shadows were lengthening outside, like they were slowly devouring the world, and in the back of my mind I knew we were not long before twilight began in earnest. I limped through the snow, my earlier escort of legionaries resuming their duties before I gestured for them to stay back for this. The goblin nimbly leapt down and I caught sight of a few glints of steel scattered over his body. Hidden knives, I thought, or other murderous accoutrements. He didn't salute, and his yellow eyes were without the usual malicious glee.

"And?" I asked.

"He wasn't burned," Robber replied. "His corpse… It's bad, Catherine. They melted his plate with Light. It's cooled down since, but you'd need to butcher the flesh to get him out. If we're giving him a Legion funeral, we'll need more than just the usual pyre."

My fingers clenched around my staff. Molten steel, Gods. What an agonizing death that must have been. Summer's flames had changed him, and Warlock's sorcery failed to bring back the orc I'd known, but he'd still felt pain. And there'd been enough of the Nauk who'd been my friend left that I felt a clench of rage. The Lanterns had done this. Killing, killing I could stomach. Had to. It was war, and if I ordered deaths I must be able to withstand them as well. But this was… He'd deserved better than that. I closed my eyes, and thought of the night after Three Hills. Green flames taking Nilin, who had been a traitor but beloved by many of us even after that. And now his closest friend was following him. I'd never told Nauk, that his second and good-as-brother had been passing information to Akua. I'd made the decision he was better off not knowing. How presumptuous that felt, now that he was dead.

"The part of the city that's on fire, it's almost out?" I said, eyes still closed.

"Near enough," Robber said. "Took all of the quarter they call Lanteria and some of the outskirts, but the firebreaks contained it and it's dying out."

I let out a misty breath and opened my eyes. The shadows had grown longer still.

"Speak with General Abigail," I said. "We'll be holding a Legion funeral for all our losses in Sarcella tonight. Work out watch rosters so that as many people as possible can attend. I'll speak to the drow myself."

Yellow eyes considered me, though the question went unasked.

"What else can we still give him?" I whispered. "Or any of them. It's a fool war, but they died fighting it. They'll have a pyre and the only kind of farewell we learned."

He inclined his head in approval, then hesitated.

"He went out hard, you know," Robber said. "Fangs red."

I breathed out shakily.

"He was Rat Company," I replied. "How else could he have gone?"

We parted ways, knowing we'd next meet to burn a friend. My legionaries followed me into the city in silence. In the end, all my grief could be was screaming in the dark: a harsh cry, followed by silence ringing of absence.

I had tricks to ply, and duty did not make exceptions for funerals.

—

We'd won the day, or close enough, and that meant I could dictate terms.

To an extent, anyway. Asking for more than I was costing them might see the Levantines write-off their own with cold eyes. They wouldn't know how badly I didn't want to be keeping prisoners, so it would at least look like I was the one with the good cards in hand. Much as I'd prefer not to be fighting the Levantines at all, I wouldn't delude myself into thinking they in any way shared that sentiment. The enemy commander would be out to screw me as badly as he could, while clawing his way back into possession of the troops I'd captured. I could play that game, truly, and win it a lot easier than he could. A word on my part would have the Tomb-Maker leading a party of Mighty to assault the Dominion camp after night fell, and unless the Pilgrim was hiding in a tent in there that would lead to a bloody massacre. But I would not compound waste with yet more of it, not even if my enemy was itching for that very tussle. No, neither corpses nor coin could be my aim here. There was going to be a battle in Iserre, soon enough, and I needed to get all my munitions in place before someone dropped a torch: this would be a part of it, nothing more and nothing less.

The Levantine envoy was a middle-aged man with a fine mustache and stripes of blue and green crisscrossing his face, speaking Lower Miezan with an elegant polish. He got to use it just long enough for me to send him back to camp with an offer for the enemy commander to meet on the bridges in front of Sarcella. He left under protest, which I ignored with the ease of someone who'd been pushing paperwork on Hakram for years, and I gauged how long was reasonable to wait before getting atop Zombie and making for the bridges. The boy would come, if it was still the one I'd seen during the day that was in charge. No one with eyes that raw would pass on an opportunity to confront someone who'd bled them. My escort was tripled in size when I informed the Third Army of what I intended, but I paid it little attention. Belles Portes quarter was entirely ours, now, and it led directly to the bridges going over the river. I'd not specified which one, so on a whim I picked the leftmost one – and ordered my legionaries to remain behind. I wondered what it said about my reputation that none of the officers looked pleased, but none actually argued.

My dead horse's hooves cut against the icy stone, sharp sounds like flint being struck. The day's warmth was fleeing the coming of night, and the wind was picking up. Far in the distance the sun was drowning in a sea of purple and red, tinting the snowy fields with enough blood and ichor for a thousand

wars. My mount eased advancing, halfway through the bridge, and my staff struck stone with a dull sound. I could hear crows, in the distance, though there was nothing godly about those. Just beasts, drawn by the day's corpses. I stuffed my pipe carefully, and passed a palm over the wakeleaf with just a hint of Night. Inhale and exhale, and then I watched smoke rise up into the sky as I waited for the boy who wanted my head to come treat with me.

It was not long. Riders came, five hundred armed to the teeth and a few among them who reeked of something anathema to the Night. Lanterns, I assumed. Those I allowed my gaze to linger on, taking in the faces painted in black and white and wondering which one had killed Nauk. If it had been only one, or a working of several. Argument erupted, but in the end youth and pride won out. Razin Tanja, of the Grim Binder's Blood. That was the name our prisoners had given. Soldiers were soldiers, in the end: offer warm food and booze, and there was always one in a company willing to sell out their own mother. The boy rode up, on his beautiful white horse wearing his beautiful red and grey plate. The patterns of paint on his face had changed from earlier, now mere stripes of iron and blood on the cheeks. It revealed handsome enough features, sharp-boned but bearing the kind of edge you wanted to run a hand against. What little I could see of his hair was a dark brown, but most was hidden by a tall helmet bearing red feathers. The sword at his hip, I could not help but note, had a very pretty wrought steel pattern to it. Swirls and vines, in a vaguely arcane pattern. No leather bands over it, though. It would get slippery if he got blood all over it, become an unwieldy ornament – and wasn't that nobility put in a sentence? He reined in his horse at the foot of the bridge, just close enough we could talk without shouting. There was a banner in the colours of his paint, held by a clever wooden contraption on his back, that jutted up above even his plumage.

"You begged audience of me, Black Queen," Razin Tanja announced. "Speak your piece."

I pulled at my pipe and said nothing, only breathing out. The smoke went up and I admired the play of light and shadows on it.

"Is this a riddle?" the boy said through gritted teeth. "Are you making a game of me?'

The anger was out, pouring out of every pore. It could be useful, anger. It'd gotten me through some very bad scraps, and should mine ever go out I figured there wouldn't be much left of me. But there was a trick to it: you had to learn when to keep it sheathed. It was like a sword, if you just swung it around night and day it would grow dull. *You* would grow dull, and someone who'd learned the trick would cut out your throat. Tanja was letting his anger dull him, right now. I'd let him keep swinging as long as he wanted, because behind that anger there was fear and shame. The longer he swung and hit nothing, the more harshly those would bite.

"Have you become a mute, villain?" the noble sneered. "Or is it fear of my father's army that stills your tongue?"

Another stream of smoke, and then finally I replied.

"It stings, doesn't it?" I mildly said. "Knowing that after all this, all you have to threaten me with is your father's shadow."

His fingers tightened into fists, his face flushed.

"A single battle does not win a war," Razin Tanja said. "Tricks will not save you twice."

I hummed, considering him.

"I'm not going to threaten you," I decided. "There's no point, is there? When you have enough hate, it becomes a kind of courage. Madness, too, but that line's always been thinner than people like to admit."

"I will not be condescended to by a heretic," the boy snarled. "If you have called this meeting only to mock me-"

"You mock yourself," I gently said, "by pretending today did not happen. It did. Learn from it, or die in a ditch somewhere blaming everything but yourself. But that's not my burden to bear, Tanja, and I've no inclination to try. You're here because I hold your people, and you want them back."

"There are treaties pertaining to the treatment of war prisoners," he said. "To break them would-"

"See the Grand Alliance declare war on me?" I drily said. "Perhaps lead your priesthood to declare me something of a heretic, even."

There was a moment of embarrassed silence.

"That's the problem with turning the screws early," I said. "It doesn't leave much room for escalation."

"I will offer the appropriate ransom for the captains," Razin Tanja said.

He was reaching, and knew it. The tinge of desperation in his voice was making that much clear. *Ah*, I thought. *We both know you fucked up today, but it looks like you might actually be held accountable for it.* I wondered if it'd be his father, or the other noble Captain Elvera answered to. *Are you worrying you'll be the sacrificial lamb to make peace between Malaga and Tartessos after your mess cost everyone steeply?* Victory had a thousand fathers and mothers, but defeat did tend to be attributed to a single pair of hands. I wondered if he might actually be killed over this. Levant kept to Good, it was said, but it was rough country. I might have more leverage than anticipated, then.

"I've no interest in coin," I said. "What I want from you is an oath."

"An oath?" he said. "I will not serve Below, villain, in this life or any other."

"I've not asked you to," I said. "You hold command of the vanguard, Razin Tanja. It will stay camped outside Sarcella for three days and three nights – on this I require your oath."

"And you would return the captains, for this?" the boy pressed.

The wakeleaf filled my throat and lungs, burning pleasantly. It left me tingling when it passed my lips.

"I'll return every Levantine soldier captured today, including officers," I replied.

"Agreed," he immediately said.

He had absolutely no intention of keeping his word, did he? I sighed. After dealing with Praesi and fae, the Levantine was almost painfully transparent.

"I'll want the oath made to the Heavens and on the honour of your Blood," I coldly said. "Made in front of every remaining captain in your army."

"You dare question my honour?" he replied, puffing up.

"You test my patience," I calmly said, as if we were discussing the weather. "Do not mistake my restraint for vulnerability. If there is no fair bargain to be made, I will put your fucking head on a pike and use it as a warning for your replacement."

Hate and fear, I mused, watching the war in his eyes. The sun was more dead than dying, by now, and I think that was what settled it – the shadows winning out, the same kind that I'd wielded to drown his soldiers even under afternoon sun.

"You will pay for this, Black Queen," Razin Tanja said. "All of it. The Heavens will see to it that your horrors are given answer."

I grinned around my pipe, face wreathed in smoke.

"They'll take their swing," I said. "Watch. *See where it gets them*."

Night fell before I got my oath, but I did get it.

# Chapter 15

# Bereavement

> "To two deaths we are born: the first in the flesh, the second in the memories of those left behind."
>
> Sherehazad the Seer, Taghreb poet

The Lanteria quarter would burn twice, that'd been my decree.

It was a good thing Sarcella was mostly abandoned by now, or it might have been necessary to expel people from their homes to get our hands on enough lumber for the pyres. As it was, the Third Army's sappers only had to tear down empty homes to raise the night's work: heaps of wood large and tall enough for near six thousand corpses to be consigned to burning on them. Not all the dead bodies would be legionaries – not even most, as the addition of the priests from the House Insurgent had done much to improve the survivability of our wounded – but the soldiers of Levant would share in the farewell. I wasn't leaving a few thousand corpses lying around when the Dead King was on the loose, no matter how far from the battlefield he was supposed to be. I watched in silence, pipe in my mouth, as companies of goblins methodically cleared out a space in the burn-out quarter and filled it with long rectangular piles of wood. They looked almost like giants' graves, I thought, though the bodies would be laid to rest over and not under. There'd been talk of requisitioning oil and charcoal from the locals to help the blaze burn hot enough, but I'd put a stop to that.

There was no need for it, when I had Mighty under my command.

It was already night out when the strange procession began. Carts and stretchers bearing the dead, some covered with the thin bashfulness of a sheet. Some, but not all: there were too many dead, too few sheets of cloth. I'd heard a story once, back in Laure, about the elaborate funeral processions of the Fairfaxes. How the dead kings and queens were taken through the streets of the capital on a bier of bronze and iron as the bells rang in unison, until all the people of Laure had seen the remains with their own eyes. It'd take hours, the heads of the knightly orders and every other Fairfax walking along the cadaver

as the people threw red carnations before them. The same flowers that grew in long swaths by the shores of the Silver Lake, though some said it was tradition as a nod to Selwin Fairfax's death in the Red Flower Vales. The procession would end where it had begun, at the palace, and the ruler would be buried in the crypts below. *A Fairfax is dead, a Fairfax reigns*, the people would say, and the world would go on. No one threw flowers for my dead soldiers in the distance below, nor the Levantines so far away from home. Instead they had ash and embers, and the blackened husk of a district that might have been beautiful before we came to it.

The burial of kings and queens took the coin of a thousand soldiers', and so a thousand soldiers were buried without a sound. That'd always been the way of the world, hadn't it? The small died quiet, the great with theatre and oration – as unequal a bargain in death as it had been in life. It was a morose line of thought, but it paired well with my mood. The drow that had become my second shadows when shadow claimed the sky stood half-hidden and still as statues, not even stirring when the ashen path was stirred by careful footsteps. I'd not summoned General Abigail, though neither was I surprised she'd come to me. The latest arrangements I had made would cause most to cock an eyebrow. I didn't turn to look at her, and repressed my amusement when I heard the Summerholm girl curse under her breath before climbing up. The two story house I'd claimed as my perch was now little more than a twisted up stone floor held up by load-bearing walls that let the wind through, but there was a path to take if you looked properly. I wouldn't have made it up without a smudge of Night to chase away the pain in my leg, but with the coming of darkness miracles had come back to me through the turn of that astral tide.

There was a dull thump and louder cursing as the general of my army slipped halfway up and fell down on her ass, so I took pity on her and called out in Crepuscular. Mighty Miklaya leapt down and picked up the loudly protesting Callowan by the back of her neck before leaping up to my side and dropping her like a sack of cabbage. I nodded my thanks to it, and after a bow it vanished into the dark without a trace.

"They weren't anywhere near that sprightly earlier, the pricks," General Abigail muttered.

I turned to look at her and picked up on exactly when she remembered who she was on her belly in front of, complaining about allies. Abigail blanched and skittered up with the horrified haste of a cat near a goblin cookpot, saluting promptly. I wondered if she was aware that her armour now had tracks of soot all over it.

"General," I said. "Sit."

My pipe had long run out, though I was now officially out of herbs to stuff it with anyway. Robber had more important duties than to find me wakeleaf at the moment, though I'd send him out on the prowl before we left Sarcella. It was either that or actually trying the dried underground lake algae that Ivah had suggested, and I wasn't nearly desperate enough to go for that. I suspected

that drow tasted, well, *tastes* very differently than humans. It was the only reasonable explanation for some of the things they subjected themselves to eating and drinking.

"Your Majesty," General Abigail said. "I'm not sure that's, uh, entirely appropriate."

I glanced at her amusedly. Court etiquette while on campaign? Besides, field promotion or not holding the title of general put her among the ten highest military officers in the kingdom. Technically she even outranked Grandmaster Brandon Talbot, though she wouldn't have the authority to give him orders in most situations.

"I could make it a royal decree, if you'd prefer," I said.

"Please don't," she said, then a heartbeat passed. "... Your Majesty."

Very warily she sat at the edge of the floor as I had, legs dangling. My eyes returned to the procession of corpses, noting it had turned from a flood to a trickle. The preparations would be finished soon enough. I felt her hesitating at my side, but didn't come to the rescue. If she was to continue working closely with me she'd have to find it in her to actually ask me questions without prompting.

"Ma'am, I meant to ask," General Abigail said. "About the redeployments you ordered..."

It was enough of a step forward to deserve reward, I decided.

"You think they leave us vulnerable, now that the prisoners are being returned," I completed.

She cleared her throat.

"I don't mean to impugn the abilities of our allies," she said. "But there's a lot of Dominion grunts out there, and our captures marched back with their weapons. If they hit us by surprise when almost the entire army's at the funeral, three thousand drow won't cut it. They'll catch us with our trousers down."

Not an unwarranted assumption, for someone who didn't know the Firstborn like I did.

"I did extract oaths from both Captain Elvera and the highborn boy that commands the vanguard," I said.

General Abigail began to spit over the edge, before remembering once more that I was there and hastily stopping. I politely pretended not to notice the choke and coughing fit that ensued.

"My Da always said anyone that makes more than you do is probably out to get you," Abigail solemnly said. "Double so for anyone not from Summerholm, triple if they're Wasteland get."

There was another pause, followed by an almost physical spike of fear.

"That wouldn't mean you, Your Majesty," she hurriedly said. "You're a – I mean, everyone knows – he's just an old drunk, didn't mean nothing."

I pondered that. I didn't get a salary from the Tower anymore – Malicia was such a cheapskate, I'd only rebelled and tried to kill her the once – so in a sense

I *didn't* make more than my general. Unless you counted taxes and tariffs, or the kingdom's treasury. I doubted telling her as much would actually help any, though, so I discarded the diversion.

"Razin Tanja might go back on his oath, even after what he swore it on," I agreed. "He could be desperate enough he'd roll the dice on a victory washing his slate clean. Captain Elvera, I'm not so sure. Honour matters a lot more when it's your own on the line instead of someone else's."

"Honour didn't stop them from sneaking in at night and offing our general staff," General Abigail bluntly said. "Beg your pardon, ma'am, but what do some Levant muckabouts know about anything like honour? They were quick enough to roll over for Procer and join up, after all that hard talk about them being deathly foes."

"Akua's Folly scared a lot of people," I mildly said. "And honour doesn't mean abandoning solid tactics."

And they had been that, regardless of the personal cost to me. The other Callowan shuffled uncomfortably.

"Aren't they your enemy, Your Majesty?" she asked.

*Your*, I thought. Interesting choice of words, and more telling than she probably realized. More so than the unspoken assumption: *if they're your enemy, why are you defending them?*

"They won't always be our enemy," I said. "And even if they were sworn to stay one, it serves us nothing to lower them in our eyes. The moment you dismiss an opponent outright you stop understanding them. That's dangerous thing, in our position."

I threw her a bone after the lecture, wondering if Black had once done the same for me. If so he'd done it skillfully enough I hadn't noticed.

"Most the three thousand drow are decoration," I told her. "Defending bridges, like they are? I could have sent only two to stand guard with much the same effect. I just decided to temper the temptation for our friend Razin."

General Abigail went still. I was pleased she picked up on the implications of that so quickly.

"Named?" she said. "Or just warlocks?"

"Priests, in a way," I mused. "Though the kind even Lanterns wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley."

The other woman breathed out sharply. I doubted she would be the last, when the scope of what the Might could do became clearer.

"How many of those are there, ma'am?" she croaked out.

"An empire's worth," I said.

*And sometimes I fear even that might not be enough, for what's to come*, I thought.

"You and I – Callowans – we were taught to fear the monsters on the other side of the river," I mused. "The hordes and the sorceries and the things that go out after dark."

I clapped her shoulder, ignoring the flinch.

"But not this time, Abigail," I said. "Tonight, you see, we're looking at the river from the other side."

I felt my honour guard of drow stir through the Night. People were approaching us, and not a moment too soon. I dragged myself up after reaching for my staff, turning to my shivering general.

"Time to go," I said. "The dead have waited long enough."

—

Once lit, the torches turned the darkened wreckage of Lanteria into a sea of fireflies.

It'd been some time since I last stood for a vigil. There'd been others after the one that followed Three Hills, grim heaps of ash made across Callow wherever my armies fought and died. Marchford, where the grim necessity of killing everyone touched by Corruption had made it even uglier business than usual. Liesse and Arcadia, Dormer and the blood-soaked fields of the Folly. Far north, after the Battle of the Camps. Had there even been a year, since I first gained command, without some of mine being given to the flame? Sometimes it felt like I'd been at war from the moment I had taken up Black's knife, without ever a moment to catch my breath. But this wasn't about me, not really. I owned a part of it, but so did every single of the almost eight thousand legionaries and officers standing in Lanteria. So did the Levantines across the river, though they might not see it that way. We'd bared our blades and wrecked all around us, each convinced that we were right, necessary, that the other side was damned and blind. I almost smiled at the thought. Had anyone ever gone to war believing they were in the wrong? I could not help but wonder at the people who'd once lived in this city, and watched it torn apart by foreign armies engaged in a war first started by a woman far away in Salia. They should not be forgot, even if they were my enemy's people and not mine.

They too tread the same grounds that had my leg throbbing, whispering with every limping step: *do not forget, that this was never a game. Do not forget, that you make mistakes. Do not forget, that there must be more than ruin. Do not forget.*

These weren't drow, so the crowd below spoke in murmurs that lapped at the platform the sappers had raised. I did not stand alone on it, did not have that gall when I'd come so late to the battle for Sarcella. General Abigail stood at my right side, cheeks reddened by the old Callowan remedy for chilly nights. She cut a good figure, in her polished armour freshly marked with the wings of a general glimmering in the glow of the magelights surrounding us. Bareheaded, her black locks brought out the sharp blue of her eyes. Spreading out from her right, the surviving general staff stood with us as well: the last remaining legate, a heavyset man by the name of Oakes, her Senior Mage and Staff Tribune. At my left I kept Robber and Mighty Jindrich, the latter of which was looking at the proceedings with strangely innocent fascination. Never before, I thought, must it have seen so many torches. The purpose of this had been as strange to it as its fascination was to me: drow did not have funerals

the way the people of the surface did, not since the coming of Sve Noc. Corpses were just rotting meat that could not be eaten, nothing to be given any particular attention beyond disposal to avoid diseases. I'd waited long enough, I eventually decided. All the torches that would be lit already were.

I raised my staff, and a single horn was sounded by an officer below. The sound echoed across the district, and left silence in its wake. I'd been offered sorcerous help by the Third Army's mages, but I had no need of it: the Night coiled in my veins, and when I spoke it was in a voice that resounded across all of Lanteria quarter.

"The first time I met Nauk of the Waxing Moons clan," I said, "he called me dead weight and I nearly slugged him in the face."

The officers standing next to me looked appalled, save for Robber who was grinning like a gleeful imp, but a ripple went through the crowd. There were greenskins who'd laughed outright, and many more soldiers who looked like they were feeling guilty about smiling at a funeral.

"It wasn't even half a year after that the Fifteenth Legion was raised," I continued. "And by then it didn't even occur to me he wouldn't be part of it. That was the kind of man he was, long before he put an arrow in a prince and got another name out of it."

Grief and guilt, hand in hand. For the friend I was burying, in a way, for the second time. For what had remained of that friend in my general and I'd cravenly looked away from. Another regret for the list that would never, could never, be expiated. It always seemed like there were more pressing things to see to, didn't it? Until the bells rang and you realized it'd become too late.

"He was brave," I thoughtfully said. "We always say that, about those we bury, but he truly was. Kind, to those he owed kindness to, and always cannier than he let on. But most of all, when I remember him, I remember that the same night we met he marched most of a mile on a broken leg without a word of complaint. It's a small thing, but it stands for more. There was not an ounce of *give* in him."

My voice turned rueful.

"But then I speak to nothing you don't already know, do I? Everything Nauk Princekiller had to give, you have made a part of you."

My lips quirked, because this was a fool's war but how could I not be proud of how they had fought it?

"The Third Army marched across the span of Iserre, pursued by fourfold its number and ambushed by Helike's finest," I said. "Yet when I found Sarcella, your banner flew. They rode you down, they burned you out, they stormed every single wall you raised – and the Third Army did not break."

The last part rung louder like a rest, almost deserving of echo. There was a sea of faces splayed out below me: old and young, Praesi and Callowans and greenskins. Old Legion veterans come under fresh banner to ply the same harsh trade, youths who'd put on the armour with that burning need to do something that would *matter*. Some had joined for coin, some for purpose, some

for having nowhere else to go. Some had put on the mail for their country, and among those there were hard-eyed Soninke and Taghreb who I thought might yet *make* that country after they went home with a blade in hand. Once you'd drunk from the cup of defiance the taste was not easily forgot, and they had all drunk deep. How many of them had sung on the march to Dormer, I wondered, joined their voices to that chilling song Nauk had penned? I had taken the armies of the east and told them they were owed better, that they could *do* better, and they had believed me.

Since that day they had been sharpened on bloody fields every bit the match of the Conquest's, marched victorious through a gauntlet of horrors. And they'd done it without High Lords, without Dukes and Baronesses, without any of the old banners above their heads. One day those soldiers would go home, and those who would be their masters would not find them so easily bent to the old order. *I've borrowed the strength of an empire and the godhead behind it, bared it at my foes like a blade*, I thought, *and some fools will tremble at that alone. But you, all of you. Oh, how they would tremble if they could look at you now. What you are and might yet do.* In the golden glow of the torches they all seemed tinted by the same dye, as if they had shared some strange rite that left the same mark on all of them. Maybe they had, this lone column in the snow surrounded by foes. I saw all that and one thing more, a reflection of what I felt in my bones when looking at them: pride.

"I could praise you," I said. "But what could I possibly speak that would ring louder than your record? Instead, I will say there are faces here that I recognize."

It was true. More greenskins and Praesi than Callowans, who had come later to my campaigns, but more than a few of those as well. Legionaries and officers both, some who'd been under Nauk as far back as Three Hills.

"From the two thousand that charged Summer, at Five Armies and One," I said. "From the first into the breach, at Dormer. From those who took the hellgate at the Doom of Liesse. From the Battle of the Camps, holding against three to one and hero's wroth."

I laughed.

"Have you ever fought a battle where you were not meant to lose?"

Laughter answered, harsh and grim and heartbreakingly proud.

"In the crucible of the Conquest," I said, "names were granted to honour the greatest deeds of Legions. *Cognomen*, they are called. You have gone through crucible harsher still, and so this honour is long overdue."

My voice rose.

"You are the Third Army of the Kingdom of Callow," I proclaimed. "You have been the vanguard of our every victory, never once flinching nor breaking – and for that I name you *dauntless*."

For a moment there was only silence, and my stomach dropped, but then roar drowned out everything. Thousands of throats screaming out into the night, a chorus of stomping feet and blades striking shields. Dauntless, I

thought, letting the sea of noise wash over me. That had been impulse, but I did not regret it. I would see it put to the rolls, and I would see Nauk's name written as the first general to command it. It was the only kind of grave marker he would have cared for, I suspected. The Third Army howled its approval, long and loud, and when the sound thinned General Abigail's own tribune approached me with a torch, passing it to my hand. For the pyre, I knew. It was my right, as Queen of Callow, to throw the first one.

"We'll all put friends to the flame tonight," I said. "And there will be others, on other fields. So weep for the lost, but know that I can promise you this: in the end, they will *remember* us."

I wanted to throw the torch. For the friend I'd loved, the memories I would still clutch now that he was gone. But this wasn't about me, not really. I owned a part of it, but so did every single one of them. So instead I limped to Abigail and passed her the torch.

"Send them home, General," I said.

Blue eyes met mine, unreadable, and slowly she nodded.

The torch flew, and the sea of fireflies followed.

# Chapter 16

# Adverse

> "Let neither queen nor prince rule over our dominion: for while crowns may devour honour, one's blood is not so easily gainsaid."
>
> Farah Isbili of the Pilgrim's Blood, second Holy Seljun of Levant

Midnight Bell came and went.

Part of me itched to leave this place, to watch Sarcella disappear in the distance and let Nauk sleep in his tomb of ash. The rest knew that it would be absurd to ask that my beleaguered Third Army begin a night march after a hard day's fighting. Even if I'd been willing to push them that far, logistics would have forbidden it. We had wounded still hovering between life and death, equipment to mend or replace. At least another dozen crucial preparations that must be undertaken before we left, if the advance was to be organized in the slightest instead of a rout in a vaguely appropriate direction. Truth be told I should be sleeping myself, but with the night a second wind had come to me that made it unlikely I'd be able to slumber even if I tried. The drow were the same, nocturnal in a way they would never have truly understood in that sunless ruined empire of theirs. It wasn't anymore, of course. Theirs. My bargain with the Herald of the Deeps had seen to that and more. The lowering of the Gloom and a fallen realm, in exchange for the chance at a fresh one. In practice, supplies for the massive exodus marching on the Dead King's northern borders along with departure unmolested from the old Empire Ever Dark. Unmolested if on reasonable schedule, anyway. The dwarves had made it clear that *lingering* would be taken as a breach of the terms.

There was slightly more to it, another bargain made with a dying foe to strike together against one at the peak of its unlife, but that would have to wait. The Kingdom Under would not lift a finger until the rest of us had died in drove for its advantage, and not send a single soldier past the line of its interests. It didn't matter, though. If well-timed, our last arrangement could be made into a very effective blow. And be used as highly usefu; diplomatic leverage with the First Prince, I admitted to myself. This couldn't be won by slapping everyone in

the face until they agreed to my terms, that'd make the Liesse Accords barely worth the parchment they were written on. I had to make it in everyone's interests to sign. There would be nations that'd never even consider it – the Dread Empire, the Kingdom of the Dead – but the one I worried most about was the Dominion of Levant. I was beginning to understand, slowly, exactly how much Names meant to their people. How essential they'd been made to the fabric of their ruling class because of the way they lent legitimacy. I didn't and wouldn't have the kind of clout or justification to uproot that entirely, which would force me to rely on someone I *really* rather wouldn't: the Grey Pilgrim. Not only could I not kill the old hero, as the consequence of that would be a nearly Callowan degree of spite, I had to get him to back the Accords.

It wasn't impossible. But in all likelihood it was going to come at an unpleasant price.

My legionaries were long gone by now, save for a handful of weary sappers keeping an eye on the pyres to make sure nothing got out of hand. It was no longer mortal flame burning the wood and bodies, which at least allowed them to see something interesting for their trouble. A funeral pyre, after all, wasn't just about burning wood and flesh: it had to see to the bones as well. Save for some specific kinds of sorcerous flame and the much riskier goblinfire, there wasn't much that could do that for human and greenskin ossature. Legion custom was to grind the bones after the rest was ash and spread them on the battlefield, should time allow. It was one of those grim duties that soldiers didn't like to talk about, and usually ended up passed on to sappers or whatever company had last irked the commanding officer. There wouldn't be any need for that tonight, though. From the beginning it'd been clear that we might not even have enough wood to burn all the flesh, not without hacking apart another section of the city entirely, but mundane flame was not my full arsenal. I'd put my restless Mighty to work. Flames icy-blue and pitch-black had lit up the night, spreading through the pyres, and behind those I'd ordered something more discreet. Uses of Night, acidic and corrosive, that would see to it no bones were left come dawn. It would have been horrifying for soldiers, I knew, to wake in daylight and see the gnarled and darkened bones of those they'd fought to the side of strewn across the remains of the pyres. So instead the dead burned black and blue, and a little else too.

It was still watching that eerie spectacle that General Rumena found me. Not that the old drow would have encountered great difficulty in that: I was surrounded by an honour guard of Firstborn that might have been good as invisible to humans but was a glaring sign for those of their kind. Resting on a half-broken bench of stone, back against a soot-slashed oaken door delivered there by my drow, I kept my gaze on the flames even as it came to stand by my side. The ancient creature tread light as a feather, and I could feel a flicker of Night under its skin that would make it nothing but a shadow among shadows to the naked eye.

"They did not attack," General Rumena said.

On my lap a sword of obsidian sat sheathed, and my hand had been tight around it– filling the artefact, slowly, with the purposeful Night I would unleash when the time came – but at that obvious announcement my fingers began drumming against the sheath. It did not reply, tacitly inviting it to elaborate.

"The Dominion leader called for assembly of its captains when those captured were returned," the old drow continued. "They have been at this ever since. Debate is loud and bitter. Blades were drawn at least once, and not sheathed before reddened."

I knew better than to ask how it knew that. After nightfall, with the Sisters flying somewhere above? I was almost surprised I wasn't getting a full transcript of the conversations.

"Not unexpected," I said.

The general said nothing, though I felt its presence pulse in the Night. Surprise, maybe? Hard to tell, drow felt emotions so differently than humans and this strange... sense of mine was highly imprecise anyway. I could measure impact but not grasp its nature, and guessing at the thoughts of the Firstborn was always chancy business.

"You've never been shy before, Tomb-Maker," I said. "Out with it."

"It was my understanding that you meant for the Dominion cattle to try the city," Rumena replied. "So as to slaughter them with pretence of mercy. Is this not a disappointment?"

I leaned against the door that had been made into the back of this makeshift throne of mine, cloak held tight against my frame to ward off the creeping cold. The blue and black flames still danced in the distance, the silhouettes of the few goblins out there lending the sight the appearance of some strange tribal ritual.

"I have a friend who's no stranger to thievery," I said. "She did a lot of learning with unsavoury crowds, in all manners of theft. One of them is called confidence tricks."

"Humans have exceedingly little to be confident about," the Tomb-Maker noted. "What manner of trickery is it?"

"Usually, it's a lie that preys on the greed or credulity of someone to get coin from them," I said. "But Vivienne, she once told me that in her home those tricks were split in two kinds: dapple and pearl. After horse coats, she said."

Rumena's silver-blue stare stayed on me, and it did not speak.

"A dappled horse," I said, "is one that's flecked pale and grey. Those are the tricks that prey on the naïve, Rumena, and her guild frowned if those were used on anyone save nobles and foreigners."

Neither of which, I thought, most Callowans had been inclined to weep over during the decades of Praesi rule.

"The other kind, though, the pearls?" I said. "It's a kind of horse that's pale all over. Those tricks prey on greed, and they were fair game on anyone. The unspoken part of that, Rumena, is that if someone acts wickedly there's no

shame in doing them the same turn. A pearl trick doesn't work at all, if the mark acts decent."

"A pearl trick," the old drow repeated. "As you played on the Dominion cattle."

I nodded slowly.

"They gave oaths," I said. "If they keep them, no one bleeds. And they've proved they can learn, that they can be trusted in the war up north. But if they break their oaths. . . "

"There is no shame," Rumena thoughtfully said, "in doing them a wicked turn."

A strange notion to it, no doubt. The drow did not think it shameful in the slightest to turn on each other over without a reason – or, rather, being stronger than the other was enough of a reason in and of itself. But it wasn't the way things worked, up here, and if they were going to stay among us they needed to learn. It mattered, how you went about things. I'd learned that much too late in my rise, believing what counted was that you got there at all. And the moment I'd begun extending a hand outside the borders of Callow I'd run into one closed door after another. Best they learn from my mistakes, as the Sisters meant them to.

"You are pleased, then," the general said. "That they are holding to their oaths."

Silence stretched. I looked at the flames, and thought of the orc burning among them who I had called my friend.

"Am I?" I murmured, wondering. "Ask me again come morning, Tomb-Maker."

I tightened the Mantle of Woe around me once more, and was still looking at the fire when Rumena left.

—

I slept fitfully, never leaving my seat, and it could not have been more than an hour or two when someone's approach had me immediately awake. A drow – it'd been the ripple in the Night that warned me – though not one of the sigil-holders. By the looks of the paint on its face it was of the Svatuk Sigil, higher than dzulu but low in the pecking order of the Mighty. A messenger, then. The thickly-muscled drow bowed, silver tresses sweeping down as it did, and only straightened when I flicked my wrist in permission. Exhaustion was lingering in my bones, but my mind was mostly awake and that was what mattered.

"Losara Queen," the drow said. "I bring word from the General Rumena."

"Then speak," I said.

"Our reinforcements have arrived, under the command of Lord Ivah," the Firstborn said. "Twelve thousand, now in sight of this cattle-city. A warband came ahead, led by the Mighty Archer."

Indrani had caught up as soon as she could, looked like. Must have tired herself out hurrying regardless of my request that she not – though I supposed my taking the drow vanguard ahead without a word had invalidated that in

her eyes. My grip closed around the ebony staff propped up at my side and I dragged myself up, catching the sheathed sword on my lap before it could fall and fastening it on my belt with fingers made clumsy by the cold.

"Is that the whole of the words you carry?" I asked.

"The Tomb-Maker says that the pot of the Dominion no longer seems in risk of tipping," the drow said. "Both pillars still live."

The strife in the camp had come at an end, then. Hard to know whether the blades coming out earlier had been over Razin Tanja's ill-fated offensive and the ensuing losses, or an attempt at oath-breaking that was ended steel in hand. Both he and Captain Elvera were apparently still alive, regardless, so whatever the truth they'd come to a truce. I suspected that the moment the sharper would blow was when the rest of the forty-thousand strong army arrived, including Tanja's lordly father and the lady Captain Elvera answered to. Didn't intend to stick around to watch that from up close, though: I'd already sown the seeds of discord with the oaths, I'd let them either grow into something thornier or die out on their own. Having two of the four most powerful nobles in the Dominion at each other's throats instead of pursuing my armies would be damned useful, but pushing too hard risked them banding against me instead. We'd see if Akua's suspicions about the fragility of the Levantine command structure bore out.

"Good," I said. "Tell it to keep watching until the Third Army is rested enough to relieve the sigils."

"By your will, First Under the Night," the drow replied, bowing again.

I considered sending it after Archer to tell her to meet me, but ultimately discarded the notion and left it slink back to its duties. If Indrani was in Sarcella there was no need to look for her: she'd be finding me soon enough. I should probably be looking for somewhere comfortable to talk instead, since it had occurred to me we had a conversation long overdue. Two, I then thought, considering what Robber had told me about Masego. Claiming the mansion that'd been turned into the Third Army's headquarters for a chat with Indrani struck me as something of an abuse of my authority, when so much of this city was already empty, so instead I hobbled my way towards Beaumontant quarter. Much of the district had seen heavy fighting, but it was only around the edges that it'd gotten brutal enough houses and shops were brought down. Deeper in there was only mud and blood marring the snow, and the fresher tracks of legionaries on sentry duty. There wasn't a soul to be seen in here, not a Proceran one anyway. There were a few drow out there on the rooftops, and my own honour guard of Firstborn was dogging my shadow, but aside from that the streets were eerily empty.

The fighting had long driven out anyone who lived here, which considering the empty plains out there and the roving armies in Iserre likely meant hunger or cold would kill most of the civilians who'd fled and not made it to a city to take refuge in. I forcefully set the thought aside, as there was nothing I could do for them. Even if Black hadn't put the principality's granaries to the torch

on his way south, the war would have made it a lean year – after he had, the death warrant of thousands had effectively been signed months before the first snow fell. Twice over, with their ruler being a prisoner in Callow. Winter and starvation would strike much harsher a blow to the heartlands than Legion blades could have, dealing out death in that atrociously efficient way my father had always preferred. I could almost imagine the cogs turning behind his eyes as he measured how best to cripple the Principate with the limited amount of resources at his disposal. The thought was not fond. There were some things that could not be admired, even if skillfully done.

I found a halfway decent tavern and decided to settle myself in there for Indrani to find me. I didn't bother glancing at the sign hung outside before touching the locked door and pressing Night into the lock. It clicked open, and a gesture had my guards staying outside as I entered the cold common room. Closing the door behind me, I set myself to making it somewhat inhabitable. A flicker of power had dark flames roaring in the fireplace, without lumber to feed them, though after digging around for some time I found a bundle of charcoal to toss in there and the flames turned mundane in nature. The place had been mostly stripped clean by the owners when they left, but from the back I rustled up a jug of wine bad enough it'd been used to prop up a shelf and a pair of torches already partially burnt. Those went up on the walls, and the room had warmed enough for me to take off my cloak and try my luck with the wine – no cups left, so straight from the jug – when Indrani arrived. Pulling down her hood and lowering her scarf, she hastily slammed the door shut and turned to me with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, this is oddly domestic," Archer mused.

"I even made your favourite," I drily replied, holding up the jug. "Wine."

"Ah, just like my mother used to make," she breathily said.

It didn't stop her from tossing her cloak at my head before worming into a seat, but by now that was only to be expected. I slapped it aside, then ducked under the gloves that followed with practiced ease. They fell close to me, so in theory I could have picked them up, but she was never going to learn to stop throwing things at me if I did that every time. She wasn't going to learn anyway, I grimly admitted to myself, but that wasn't any more of a reason to do it.

"So," Archer said, deftly stealing the jug from my hand. "I see part of this place burned down."

"It was already on fire when I arrived," I replied, a tad defensively.

She grinned over a mouthful of wine, then passed it back after swallowing.

"It figures that after holding it in so well at Rochelant you'd have to cut loose," she sagely said.

"It was Levantine priests that started it," I insisted.

"Priests that, in your heretical wickedness, you ensorcelled to start the fire on your behalf," Indrani said. "That's twice as bad, Catherine. Heresy *and* ar-

son. Maybe even heretical arson, we'd have to ask someone about the theology of that."

"No one's going to buy that," I said, sounding a lot more confident than I felt.

"You're right," she conceded. "You'll just get blamed without any of the frills added on."

I drank from the jug and sighed. She might be yanking my chain, but that didn't necessarily mean she was wrong. Best to change the subject before I lost any more feathers.

"Ivah came with you?" I asked.

She smugly smiled at my pivot, the wretch.

"It's about an hour behind," Indrani said. "Sent a few Mighty with me to speak with either you or Rumena about where the sigils can set up to sleep."

Rumena could see to that, I thought. Later I'd need to speak with it and Abigail about lodgings and supplies but it could wait for a few hours still. Odds were the reinforcements would be put up in the northern quarters with the rest of my drow: it wasn't like we'd be running out of room anytime soon.

"Good," I said, handing back the wine.

No two ways about this, so I just went in sword bared.

"There's news about Masego," I said.

The jug stopped halfway to her lips. Something like fear passed through her hazelnut eyes, though it was mastered swiftly.

"You wouldn't be so calm if he was dead," Archer decided. "Missing or hurt?"

Her voice was even, but the kind of even you could see the strain of maintaining.

"Missing," I said. "Maybe hurt as well. The battle at Thalassina went south, 'Drani. His father blew up most of the city and the aftermath was bad enough even those who fled died from the sorcery he called down. We know Masego survived and left, but not much more than that."

Her face tightened.

"The Empress is after him?" she asked.

"Was," I said. "He made it out of the Wasteland heading west. No one's been able to track him since. Nauk might have known more, apparently the army's high command had a closed council before leaving Callow, but he was dead when I arrived."

This time it was me who kept my voice steady. It came easier now that we'd had the Legion burial. The worst and rawest of the grief I had already voiced, and pangs that'd follow were not so consuming.

"Shit," Indrani softly said. "I hadn't heard, Cat. I'm sorry."

"It's done," I said. "Picking at his grave serves no purpose."

"Don't do that," she said, shaking her head. "I know you hoped that with the Night-"

My fingers clenched.

"It's *done*," I repeated, harshly.

She met my gaze, not cowed in the slightest.

"You can't lock grief in a trunk and open it back up when you've got the time, Catherine," she said. "That's not how people work."

*It's how Black works*, I thought. But then so was the way thousands would die starving across Iserre before winter ended, wasn't it? So I bit my tongue, and let a moment pass before replying.

"I just put his body to the flame, Indrani," I finally said, sounding as tired as I felt. "I don't want to talk about it."

To that she nodded, and did not pursue. I passed a hand through my hair watching her drink from the jug belatedly. At this rate we'd run out of wine before we ran out of words.

"There's another army under Hakram that shouldn't be too far," I said, returning to the thrust of the conversation. "Adjutant will know more."

"So we find Hakram first, then make our plans," Archer mused. "It's a start."

I inclined my head in agreement, taking back the jug when offered. She rose to her feet a heartbeat later and stretched out with a groan. Named or not, she'd been on the move for long enough it'd take a toll.

"Well, night's still young," she said. "I hear Robber's in town, and I'd say it's been too long since someone woke him up by throwing him off a roof. Let's see what can be done about that."

I set the jug on the table softly enough it barely made a sound.

"Indrani, sit down," I said.

She eyed me up, then cocked an eyebrow salaciously.

"I guess we've got time to visit one of the rooms first," she said. "There even any sheets left in there? Wait, don't say anything. It'll be a surprise."

"Indrani," I repeated quietly, "*sit down*."

The amusement slid off her face, just like that. It'd been forced then. She was skilled enough at the pretence I honestly hadn't been certain.

"A friend is dead," she said calmly. "So I was going to hold my tongue. But are you sure you want to do this, Catherine, after you just dropped me and Sahelian to charge into *yet another danger*?"

"Let's," I said.

Before I was even finished speaking, she punched me in the face.

# Chapter 17

# Cloaks

> "Trust in yourself and no other is violence upon all the world. Trust in others and not yourself is violence upon the soul."
>
> Eudokia the Oft-Abducted, Basilea of Nicae

It'd been a while since someone had decked me in the face and I'd actually *felt* it. Indrani wasn't an amateur, so instead of landing a glancing blow her knuckles buried themselves into my jaw and I was jarred off my feet. The throb of pain began before I would have hit the ground, if I had – instead my arm snapped out and my staff smacked into my open palm. Years of training in the yard made that enough I was able to turn the tumble into a step back. An agonizing one, as my bad leg was less than pleased by the sudden movement and I'd not numbed it with Night before moving. Straightening my back, I turned back to my friend and casually raised an eyebrow.

"That stung a bit," I admitted. "Are we actually going to talk now, or do I need to tie you up first?"

Indrani's eyes hardened. Not at the threat, though – we used those on each other at least once a day with utter nonchalance. Something about my tone had raised her hackles even further up. Silvery mail glittering in the fire's light, she clenched her fingers into fists before forcing herself to breathe out.

"You don't even realize it, do you?" Archer said. "A year ago, you would have caught that. Snapped my arm twice on the way there if you felt like it."

"We're not a year ago," I said.

I did not bother to inject regret I did not feel into those words. The Night was not panacea to all my ills, but to rid myself of Winter's costs I would have settled for much, much less at my fingertips.

"I know that," Indrani said. "So why the fuck are you acting like you are?"

Fear. Under the anger, the indignation, it was fear lay at the heart of that reaction. I didn't tell her to calm down, I knew better than that. We had too much in common, and nothing had ever excited my anger quite like being told

I had no right to it. This was a wound to lance, not hole to patch over. So I'd give her what she needed to get the venom out.

"I took necessary risks," I calmly said. "Not without reason, or out of pride. If I'd waited longer the Third Army might have been lost."

"*Then you should have lost it*," Archer hissed. "How many of these gambles do you really think you can win, Catherine? Nine out of ten, ninety-nine out of a hundred? At the rate you're taking them we'll find out soon enough."

"I won't leave any of mine to die if I can do something about it," I said. "You've known that since the day we met, 'Drani. Marchford wasn't a battle I was forced to fight. It was one that needed to be fought."

Archer's hand lashed out and the jug of wine flew, shattering against the wall with a wet sound. The last mouthfuls of wine there'd been left spilled down in red rivulets.

"Was walking up to a Named whose aspect scared even Sve Noc *needed* as well?" Indrani harshly asked. "Or putting yourself at the Tyrant's mercy, not even an hour after? You're still going around like if you lose a limb it'll grow back, but it won't. You can't jump down every pit you find and tell yourself you're strong enough to crawl out after, Catherine. *You're not strong enough anymore*."

We were having, I thought, a very different conversation from the one she thought we were. If Vivienne was a creature of the unspoken, the unsaid, then Indrani was one of shrouding aggression. You could get a much better read on her fears through what she reproached others than what few crumbs she willingly offered up about herself. I no longer had Winter, and so these days I was a great deal more fragile. That was half of the circle, here, and only that. The other half was Indrani's shivering near-death in a mausoleum of ice that she could have done absolutely nothing to get out of, if she hadn't been helped. Help, that thing her savage beast of a mother had taught her was always weakness. Thread that with the knowledge that there was nothing she could have done to avoid that position except not being there, not fighting, and you got a rope tight enough for Archer to hang herself with. She could rage and accuse all she wanted: all I saw and hear was my friend choking slowly, now that she'd been stripped of the flawed foundations she'd once stood on.

"It was never a game, love," I gently said. "I'm sorry you had to learn it that way."

She laughed, brittle and sharp.

"No, don't you think that'll work," Indrani said, stepping up to the table. "You don't get to play the sage's role when you just marched a pile of wet kindling through a burning district. You don't get to tell me it's not a game when you still act like it is. Who the fuck do you think you *are*, Catherine?"

"Tell me," I said.

There was barely a flicker of her Name's power before she put her bare fist through the table. Wood splintered and flew, the entire thing collapsed under the sheer weight of the blow.

"That's your skull, if you run into the Saint on your next lark," she conversationally said. "So don't pretend this is a favour you're doing me, that you're letting me rage on your shoulder until my blood's cooled. Because this is real, Catherine, so you'll give me a godsdamned answer."

She brushed a few splinters off her hand before pointing an accusing finger down at the wreck. None of the prickly pieces, I idly noticed, had broken her skin.

"Who do you think you are?" Indrani repeated, in that same deceptively calm tone. "Some favoured child of Below, somehow exempted from dying when you get in over your head? Because Triumphant thought she was that, had an actual Name still and terrible armies besides, and she still fucking died."

She shrugged.

"Is it the Black Knight's legacy you think make you invincible?" she asked. "Where is he now, Catherine? And let's not pretend you didn't pick and choose what you learned at his knee. If the authentic article got had, what makes you think the bastard get will make it through unscathed?"

I matched her gaze without flinching as she advanced, carelessly kicking aside the broken table between us.

"Or is it just that you alone of all the world were born under a victorious star," Indrani said, distance closing between us. "Fate's got plans for you, eh? Catherine Foundling can bleed, can scar and lose limbs, but she can never fucking die."

She leaned in, ochre-brown face mere inches from mine. I could almost feel her breath against my lips.

"Where was that victorious star down in the Everdark, then?" she asked. "When Sve Noc had your neck in their grip and a little *twist* was all it would have taken to bring an end to the road? All but for the mercy of goddesses, and you had no right to expect mercy of those two."

Indrani bared her teeth.

"Answer me," she demanded in a snarl.

I caught her wrist when she raised her arm to push me back. The staff I left there, and it stood still as if perfectly balanced.

"I don't have any of those things," I told her quietly. "You know that too. One day I'll be a little too slow, or not clever enough, or it'll just be a... bad day. And I'll die. Just like that. It's always been the end of this story. And there's no guarantee I'll complete my work before that day catches up to me."

Archer ripped her wrist free from my fingers, cradling it with her other hand like my touch had been enough to burn her skin. She took a step back, though I doubted she even realized it.

"You can't expect us to care when you treat your life like Creation's kitchen rag," Indrani said. "I might as well get attached to a mayfly."

"If I was always careful," I said. "If I was all prudence and planning, hiding behind my people and leaving every battle to be fought pass me by – if I did all those things, Indrani, would we even be having this conversation?"

I saw the moment where the part I'd not been cruel enough to speak sunk in. *If I was all that, would you even care about me in the first place?* She flinched, and it brought me no joy, but to bind a wound it must first be cleaned. And this particular one had been left to fester for much too long already. That, more than all the rest, shamed me. Because I'd known it would hurt more for the waiting, and I'd chosen other needs over it anyway. A queen would not have felt guilt, I thought, for choosing queenship's duties over family. But it wasn't the queen that reached out to Indrani just to have the hand batted away.

"That's not fair," Archer said.

"That doesn't make it any less true," I gently said. "You don't get to define the people you care about."

I thought of green eyes, and of the starving realm around me. No, it was never quite so easy as that, was it? That lesson had been long and harsh in the learning, but I had learned it nonetheless. This time when I reached out she allowed me to take her elbow, and it was like that simple touch had cut the strings out of her. Her legs folded and with a grimace of pain I slowed our fall until we were both slouching on the ground, sitting like children surrounded by the remains of their tantrum. And we were, I thought. Children still, in some many ways. We'd been taught at the knee of Calamities, and those teachings had made us sharper than our years should allow – but for all that, no older than our years. Perhaps even younger than those, truth be told, for the stuff of the women we'd become had been thinned in places so it could be used to strengthen others. With my arms wrapped tight around her, I could not shy away from the truth that for all we had done we were still so very small.

"We can't keep doing this, Cat," Indrani tiredly said, resting her chin against my shoulder. "If we're all born with a single yarn of luck to spin, we used up ours too young. On too many stupid fucking fights that we learned too late we shouldn't have fought. We're bare, now. And the worst monsters still lie ahead."

"It's all right to be afraid," I whispered into her ear.

She tried to pull away, but I kept my grip tight and she understood the unspoken – if she used the strength of her Name, I would use that of the Night. Neither of us, I thought, were quite ready to allow those powers foothold in this moment.

"I used to think my first fight with William was when I really got it," I said. "I know better now. I woke up bleeding out, gutted like a fish, but I became the Squire. It was all still in the game, even that. He had his angel's feather, and providence. But I had instincts, and something better than golden luck."

Indrani breathed out shallowly.

"So when was it?" she whispered.

"The day I woke up, Black hung about fifty people," I whispered back. "Made sure I saw. A lot of what happened that afternoon took me years to really deal with. But I still think of them sometimes, even after all the darker days there's been since. Because I looked them in the eyes, and what looked back was the

truth that it was *larger* than me. That I was just a small part of it, even with all that was already meant for me."

I smiled bleakly, remembering the utter silence in the Court of Swords and twice the sound of necks snapping. Two rows and two drops, dead briskly to the gallows.

"It was never a game to them," I said. "They just died, because… they were caught, I suppose, because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. But the reasons behind that were years older, and those reasons caused by some even more ancient – links in a chain no one can see more than a few pieces of. So they died not knowing, because of something larger than them."

Indrani chuckled darkly.

"That's your lesson?" she said. "That one day we'll die too, blind and lost and not really understanding why?"

"Everybody else does," I murmured. "Why should we be different? We have powers and clever tricks, but how different does that really make us?"

I let out a breathy laugh.

"That's the thing. The first time a story happens, it's not a story at all. If it comes again we tell ourselves it's become something else, but it hasn't. Not really. People bleed just as red the twelfth time as the first. The tears and the deaths don't become any less *real*, 'Drani. The courage doesn't matter less because some corpse in a grave made the same stand a hundred years before and won."

She leaned back, still in my embrace, and looked at my face questioningly.

"We're Named," Archer said. "That makes it different."

*But it doesn't*, I thought. *We've seen it, you and I. That when all there is holding up the choice is a story and the prediction of victory, the story fails. Because if all you do is pretend, go through the motions, then you've already lost what could have made it a victory in the first place.*

"A choice is a choice," I replied, shaking my head. "Black cloak, white cloak – that's the game, thinking the cloak says it all. That the choices are already made for you."

"It's a pretty thought," Indrani said. "But it won't keep any of us alive."

"Nothing will," I smiled. "But that's the point, isn't it? What do we *do* with that?"

I met her eyes, once more.

"Be afraid," I said. "I am, Indrani. All the time. Be afraid, then make your choices."

Her fingers balled up against my side, clutching at the cloth.

"And that's who you are, the choices you make," I murmured. "Not your Name. Not your mother. Not where you were born or what they made you do."

"It might not be enough," she softly said. "Just making the choice."

I nodded, because I wouldn't lie to her.

"It might not be," I agreed, just as softly. "And for all that, there's only one thing that matters."

I threaded my fingers into hers, warmth against warmth. Oh, there were few prices I would not have been willing to pay to get that back – and Winter's fade was not one of them.

"Who do you want to be?" I asked.

She did not answer, for a very long time, and when she unthreaded our fingers it felt like failure. There were some things that couldn't be fixed with words, I thought, no matter how earnest. But then she leaned forward and rested her chin against my shoulder again.

"I don't know," Indrani said.

Her hands returned to my sides, fingers digging in too tight. It would have been petty to wince. What I'd done to her tonight had been brutal enough in some ways that even noticing this felt miserly of me.

"I don't know," she repeated after yet more silence. "But not *this*."

"Then we'll find out," I said. "Together, all of us."

She nodded against me. A pause, as I felt her consider whether to keep speaking or not.

"I think I might hate you a little," Indrani finally said.

My throat tightened but I would not argue or beg. It was fair, and her right. I nodded back against the crook of her neck, staying there and breathing in the scent of leather and steel and warm skin.

"I never learned how to do this gently," I admitted, the apology hanging between us. "Some nights I'm not sure I learned to do it at all."

"That I could forgive," she said, then hesitated.

She sighed.

"Will," she corrected, firmly. "Will forgive."

"Then?"

"You took a part of me," she softly said. "By being who you are, you took it in hand. Claimed it. And I won't get it back even if I try."

I felt her tighten against me, like a bowstring gone taut.

"It's a little like being a prisoner, isn't it?" she said. "Loving someone."

Indrani laughed, and at my silence the tension in her shoulders loosened.

"Every time we speak raw, I understand the Lady a little better," she said. "Why she *left*. I wonder if that was what she figured out: that if she lingered, she'd end up never leaving at all."

She wasn't speaking of being in love with me. That would have been... it wasn't who we were, to each other. Skin didn't change that, I knew it for certain since the months we'd taken to that kind of intimacy. Wasn't sure she could be like that, even with how she looked at Masego – though much of what lay there was still veiled to me, it was true. Sometimes I wasn't sure I had it in me either, to be like that. I thought of Kilian and what had been shared there. What hadn't, too. Even now the compromises that would have kept us tied were nothing less than abhorrent to me. Not a brew I would ever be willing to drink. How strange it was that you could care so much for someone and yet find them to be such a stranger in the end. No, it wasn't that kind of

love. But for the two of us, I wondered if what she was speaking of wasn't more precious. She'd called the Woe wild animals, once, that I'd let into my home. She'd done it while castigating me for being unable to see past my part of our story – but she'd done the same, in her own way. Assuming that there'd been anything to me but plans before I met them. Like I'd not been just as much of a stray, starved for everything they had to give. Being in love, it was a fickle thing. Fragile. And skin only ever meant what you let it. I'd never felt either of those things in a way I wasn't willing to lose. I closed my eyes, letting Indrani's warmth seep into me.

This, I was not willing to lose. Not with her, not with any of the others.

"Sometimes I think you're trying to die," she said, the words shaking me out of my thoughts. "Second Liesse... well, you're not running from it anymore. But I figure you might be running towards it instead, and that's not much better."

"I wouldn't," I said.

"You won't," Indrani said, and it wasn't a question. "You don't have that right, if you do this to us."

"'Drani, I'm not trying to get myself killed," I said. "I –"

"Your leg," she said. "The limp. You telling me Sve Noc couldn't have fixed that?"

I bit back on my first answer. Flippancy was less than this, than either of us, deserved. There were ways, not so different from the ones Black had once offered me. But none of them led to places I wanted to go.

"That's different," I said.

"It's a weakness," Indrani said. "And I don't mean because it slows you down. You think you need the pangs to keep you grounded, I'm guessing."

My fingers clenched.

"Yeah," she sighed. "That sounds about right. There's nothing noble about that, Cat. It's just pain, it has no *value*."

"I can still fight," I said. "And it forces me to *think*, Indrani. Before I act, how I'll act. To no longer jump in every pit, trusting I'm strong enough I'll be able to crawl out afterwards."

The echo of her own words had her smiling, I could feel it from the way she shifted against my shoulder.

"If you trusted yourself, you wouldn't need it," she said.

"Maybe I don't," I murmured.

"Is that really," Indrani said, "who you want to be?"

I didn't have an answer to that. She didn't ask for one, either. We stayed there in silence, and for once let the world go on spinning without us.

It wouldn't last, but what did?

# Interlude: Congregation I

> "Eighty-four: the only sensible solution to a maze is to not enter the maze."
>
> "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

His son's back was already a raw, bloody wound but Akil Tanja did not allow his arm to slow or weaken. Lady Aquiline was watching with those cold Slayer eyes, and would take even the slightest hint of mercy as an excuse to cast doubt on the validity of the punishment. The five-tailed whip – Blood's Scourge, men called it, one tail for every founding line – no longer ripped wounds when it struck Razin's back. All there was to be ripped open had been, by now: the Lord of Malaga only sent blood spraying, coating his own arms and face. Only three more, now, until the last had sounded. Fifty one in total. *Ten for the Pilgrim and ten for the Champion, those who stood closest to dawn. Ten for the Binder and ten for the Slayer, bloody hands joined in prayer. Ten for the Brigand, warring alone, and one more after that to atone.* With each old verse his hand struck again, until at last it was done. Razin remained kneeling in the snow before the eyes of every captain in the host, half-naked and bleeding. Akil's eldest son had not wept nor screamed, and for that the Lord of Malaga felt a twinge of pride. That he'd remained conscious as well spoke well of his mettle, for the lord had seen older and harsher been break under the scourge.

Much had been lost, failing to take the streets of Sarcella waiting on the other side of the river, but perhaps some things gained as well. Razin could learn, if he lived, and through the savagery that'd just ended the Lord of Malaga had ensured he would. He glanced the Lady of Tartessos, standing surrounded by a ring of steel-clad captains, and she inclined her head in concession after matching his gaze. The undeniable harshness of the flogging had ensured she could not further contest the affair, as he'd meant it to. The Lord of Malaga, Akil Tanja of the Grim Binder's Blood, raised the bloodied scourge he'd tormented his heir with to the sky and a hush fell over the assembly.

"Fault was incurred straying from the light of the Heavens, and from that light no succour will be given," he called out. "Through the flow of ancient blood, let this dishonour be washed away."

Shouts of approval came from Akil's own captains, for Razin's grit in suffering the scourge had redeemed him partly in their eyes, but from the officers of Tartessos there came only cold silence. Those captains sworn to Holy Seljun – in practice, to no one at all – offered only sparse cheers. Too many of their fellows had taken hard losses fighting the Army of Callow for them to be willing to lean towards Malaga over Tartessos openly. Akil passed the red-slick whip to his attendant and resisted the urge to wipe his son's blood from his hands. Razin, brave to the end, tried to rise to his feet and walk away on his own terms. But pain and blood loss had robbed him of the strength and he immediately stumbled. The Lord of Malaga quickened forward just in time to catch him, resting his heir's arm on his shoulder and holding him up.

"Father," Razin croaked. "I-"

"Silence," Akil ordered. "Rest."

He passed on his son to his sworn swords, knowing they would lead him away to a tent far from prying eyes. Honour and law dictated that no priest could tend to wounds inflicted by Blood's Scourge, and no doubt Lady Aquiline would keep watch on Razin to see if either was bent to ensure his son lived. In this, at least, she had been outplayed. Akil had in his service a binder who had studied with the mage-healers of Ashur, and there was no dictate concerning the works of sorcery. An invitation would be made for one of Lady Aquiline's own sworn men to observe the proceedings, to ensure she could not even strike through rumours without dishonouring herself. Akil watched his son being carried away and mourned for the fool of a boy. He had other children, some who like him had been born with the Gift and so held true chance to inherit the Bestowal of their honoured ancestor the Grim Binder. Yet he'd named Razin heir over them even if he was blind to sorcery, or rather *because* of it. His eldest son felt that absence sorely, and it had lit a flame in him to always seek to achieve more. No other of his get shared that fire, no matter their other talents. But the need to prove himself had made the boy exceed both his authority and capacity, in Sarcella. The scars that would mar his back for the rest of his life might be the lesson he'd needed never to do so lightly again.

Or the failure might break him, and the Lord of Malaga would have to look to a new heir.

"He was not without courage."

Lady Aquiline Osena, of the Silent Slayer's Blood, strode past his sworn swords without a second look and stood by Akil's side to cast a cool gaze at the same boy she'd tried to have killed today. The Osena were reputed to be a taciturn lot though Aquiline had the forked tongue of snake when she put it to use, which was often. The cleverness of a serpent as well. Before the assembly of captains she'd feigned mercy and offered for Razin to be punished only by the rod, pretending it mercy when it was either scheme or murder. Three blows by a wooden rod would have been the due of every captain in the host, if Akil had not instead grit his teeth and himself requested the Blood's Scourge. The captains of Tartessos would have beaten him half to death by themselves,

regardless of his private entreaties. And the consequence of making those entreaties to his own captains and those sworn only to the Holy Seljun would have been... dangerous. Forbidding his own officers from striking blows would have been the same as saying the lives of Tartessos soldiers were worth more than theirs, and the unaligned captains would have required either heavy bribes or rough intimidation to agree. The choice would have been, in the end, between effectively surrendering command of the army to Lady Aquiline or letting his son be beaten to death in broad daylight.

And now the same woman who'd schemed this would bandy words with him, when Razin's blood still flecked his father's beard.

"My tolerance has limits, Osena," Akil harshly replied.

"As does mine," Lady Aquiline said, tone cold as ice. "Your whelp lost near four thousand soldiers flailing at the Third Army and nearly got my right hand killed after stealing the command from her. Do not pretend this is of my doing, Tanja. The boy should have died for this outrage and the thorny oaths he passed on to us."

In Levant, it was an old story that the enmity between the lines of the Silent Slayer and the Grim Binder found its source in the hatred those two great heroines had held for each other. Some even said that hatred came from their struggle over the affections of the first Grey Pilgrim, though Akil did personally believe that piece of the tale. The truth was that the bad blood came from over a century of fighting over who should own the lucrative orchards and mines in the valley of Lusia, which was located at the edge of the dominions of both Malaga and Tartessos. The last time there'd been longer than a few months without an honour feud being fought over the valley was under Yasa Isbili's reign, and in those days Akil's grandfather had been young. The Lord of Malaga had not been please to know his own soldiery would fight alongside Lady Aquiline's, but there'd been no other choice. The Marave of Alava took orders from no one, those fucking blustering madmen of the Champion's Blood, and the feuds between the Ifriqui of Vaccei and the Osena of Tartessos made those of his own line look like playful tussles. The Brigand's Blood saw no dishonour in poison or ambush, as Lady Aquiline's two younger brothers had learned the hard way.

"Honour was restored," the Lord of Malaga briskly dismissed. "Why do you seek me out, Aquiline?"

"Trouble," the hard-eyed woman replied. "I have word from further south."

"Then speak it," Akil said.

The Lady of Tartessos gave their surroundings and meaningful glance, and Akil conceded the point with a nod. To his own tent they moved, leaving swords sworn to either idling in the snow. He made certain to formally offer her hospitality and have her accept it, lest honour allow her to use any words spoken here to her advantage.

"There was a battle in southern Iserre," Aquiline said, once the rituals were seen to. "Hasenbach's twenty thousand marching up from Tenerife met the

Spears of Stygia on the field."

Ill news and boon ones, all at once. Akil had never counted on Procerans fools enough to be duped by the League to truly be of use in the battles to come, and that the Stygian phalanx was not following his army was pleasing to hear. Slaves they might me, but the Spears of Stygia had a daunting reputation. If the First Prince's southern army had been crushed however, the situation in Iserre was fast worsening

"Whose victory?" he asked.

"Draw," Lady Aquiline said. "The phalanx bloodied the *fantassins* but Arlesite cavalry routed Stygia's skirmishers and struck at the back of the Spears. They both limped away with losses but in good order."

Akil would have asked her how she knew this, if he considered it even remotely likely she would tell him. The amount of detail offered was impressive, nonetheless.

"Where are they limping *to*?" the Lord of Malaga said.

"And there is the trouble," she said. "The Procerans are now two weeks' march behind us. They broke through the Stygian defence."

Akil did not believe that any more than she truly did, by her tone. Procerans were not unskilled at war, for all that his people liked to diminish the worth of their blades. Their foot was match for any of Levant's save perhaps heavy armsmen led by Blood, and as a rule their cavalry made sport of the Dominion's if not outnumbered. Which Procerans very rarely were. They were hardly helpless babes, even facing Spears of Stygia, but cracking the slave-phalanxes would have been a bloody toil for anyone. If the twenty-thousand had been in shape for an orderly march this soon, either the Heavens had smiled or the Stygians had *let* them pass.

"The Tyrant," he said, "is about to turn on us."

This was not unexpected, for the Bestowed ruler of Helike was a dangerous lunatic, but the swiftness of that betrayal was inconvenient. The secret missives detailing the movements of the League's armies and the assistance of the Helikean cataphracts in hunting down the Army of Callow had been well worth what was given in return – reports on the situation in Salia and the war against the Dead King – but it now seemed the offered 'secret alliance' was to come to an end. Of the bargain being revealed, Akil had little worry. He would not have accepted it otherwise. The Tyrant of Helike was breaking the most fundamental of the League's laws by treating with foreign powers, as it was the sole prerogative of his Hierarch. His own allies would turn on him like hungry dogs, if it came out: he'd been at war with most of them a year ago, and that kind of slaughter was not easily forgot.

"We had our bargain's worth," Lady Aquiline said. "We've avoided battle with the League and the cataphracts slowed the Callowan columns. If my second had been left to her command, the Third Army would still be contained in Sarcella instead of days away and –"

"Enough," Akil said. "Razin acted dishonourably, and for that was scourged. But if you intend to insist your Captain Elvera would have beaten the *Black Queen*, we will settle that claim blades in hand."

The Lady of Tartessos smiled sharply.

"Can the Binder's Blood afford another disgrace so soon?" she said, hand falling to the pommel of her blade.

Akil was unimpressed. She might be over a decade younger, but he was no steel-swinger to be made less by such a thing: he was a binder, first and foremost, from the line of greatest practitioner of that art there ever was. Age was power gained, not lost.

"Test me, Slayer whelp," he smiled back, just as sharp. "See what comes of it."

"A poor host, to offer threat," Aquiline mocked.

"A poor guest, to give me cause," he said.

A moment passed, and if not for the laws of hospitality he thought she might have drawn on him. But honour demanded truce, and so truce held.

"We cannot pursue the Callowans," Lady Aquiline stiffly said. "We must first extricate the Procerans, lest the League kill them all."

Neither of them had seen the need to plainly speak what they suspected. If the twenty-thousand soldiers of the Principate had been allowed to pass, it was so that the armies of the League of Free Cities could encircle all the other hosts marching across Iserre. Such a strategy would have been weakened, if the Proceran host remained behind it and able to strike at its back.

"I would not test the Black Queen without Bestowed at my side, regardless," Akil admitted. "The Peregrine himself sent warning of her power."

The Lady of Tartessos discreetly made the Mark of Mercy with her fingers, as he did, for while she might be vicious wretch even she knew the respect due to the living breath of the Pilgrim's Blood. Even out on the outskirts of the Brocelian Forest it was known that the man who should be the Holy Seljun of Levant was not the one sitting the Tattered Throne.

"Then battle is delayed," Lady Aquiline stated. "Lord Marave must contain the remainder of the Callowans up north and join with the reinforcements from Salia. After we've secured our own Procerans we can all of us together force a decisive clash."

In northern Iserre, Akil Tanja of the Binder's Blood thought. It would end in the furthest reaches of the principality, near the border with Cantal.

"Soon," the Lord of Malaga said.

"Soon," the Lady of Tartessos agreed.

—

The sun was setting over the battlefield, and the Army of Callow was once more victorious.

*Parts of it, more accurately,* Marshal Juniper thought. The First and Second Army had been reunited under her overall command, along with the Order of the Broken Bells, but the other two columns she'd sent off had yet to arrive.

Fortunately, the Legions of Terror under Marshal Grem had bolstered her numbers to the extent that the forty-thousand strong of the Lord of Alava would be reluctant to clash with their allied commands. And this Lord Marave had been, at first, which made the last fortnight of continuous skirmishes rather interesting. In the distance, barely visible now that sunlight was dying a slow death, Levantine archers and slingers were withdrawing in good order. So were the companies of crossbows and regulars that the Hellhound had tasked with simply driving them back, knowing by now there was no point in trying to force a larger battle with the Dominion army. One day out of three, over the last two weeks, the Levantines had aggressively initiated a skirmish and refused to withdraw unless either heavy casualties or a large deployment by the Legions and the Army forced them into retreat.

The Levantine cavalry had attempted a few raids, at the start, before Marshal Grem nailed them with a munition-sown field and Juniper wiped out half their exposed skirmishers with a swift charge of the Order of the Broken Bells. Since that blow the Dominion riders had remained to guard the flanks of their skirmishers. Until today. Grandmaster Talbot had sallied out to turn back a charge that very nearly caught Juniper's supply train by surprise – she now suspected the Levantines had used a last night's snow storm to sneak a few hundred horse ahead of her army and hidden it behind low hills until she approached. In practice there'd been little fighting, for the moment the knights of Callow hit the Levantine horse it had scattered without giving much of a fight. But getting the columns in marching order afterwards had taken most of the afternoon, which she suspected was what Lord Marave had been willing to trade around a hundred cavalry for. This was not a strategy of attrition, she'd made the calculations. In both skirmishes and cavalry clashes, her force came out ahead in casualties by a moderate but noticeable margin. Which meant, she thought, that the Dominion was willing to bleed to slow her down.

*Interesting*, she thought once more.

The orc began the short trek war council tent she'd left to have a look at the battlefield herself, knowing she would be awaited inside. Banners flew above the cloth pavilion, more than there would have been a year ago. Catherine's own, the silver balance on black that soldiers had taken to calling the *Crown and Sword*. Yet also the cracked bronze bells of the Order, and the gold Miezan numerals set on Fairfax blue of the First and Second Army. Lone among those, like a crow among birds, Lord Black's personal banner flew the wind. Sheer dark, not a speck of anything else. It was telling, Juniper had thought, that alongside their own banners the Legions in Procer flew the Carrion Lord's and not the Tower's. The inside of the pavilion was warmed by braziers and illuminated by magelights, and for now emptied of the usual swarm of officers that would usually buzz around seeing to one task or another. Inside were seated two people, at the long table covered with the map of central Procer, the only other two who could be considered alongside her to have a real say in how this campaign was conducted now that the Deadhand had gone with the Fourth

Army.

Marshal Grem One-Eye glanced up at her entrance and inclined his head the slightest bit. No a tooth bared, of course. As Marshal of Callow she was a peer, not an inferior or a superior, and Grem was famously disinclined to the kind of subtle posturing many of her kind fell into when jostling for dominance among assembly of equals. Mother had spent years trying to get a snarl out of him and never got more than a rare disapproving flash of fangs, Juniper remembered, and the pang of sorrow lingered beyond the span she allowed the memory. The other's eyes remained on the map, the Lady-Regent of Callow frowning as she tried to match words on a letter to some marked location in Iserre. Vivienne Dartwick brushed back a long lock of hair and sighed, the royal seal of the Kingdom of Callow that hung from her neck moving as she did. Juniper moved the chair across the table from her and lowered her frame into it, ignoring the moaning creaks of the wood.

"Milenan must be using a different name than the one our own maps use," the Lady-Regent said. "Otherwise it makes no sense."

"Proceran cartography is famously imprecise," Marshal Grem said.

"Particularly on the subject of borders," Dartwick drily commented.

The other orc's lips quirked, though Juniper was less than amused herself. Dartwick might be convinced she could squeeze Prince Amadis Milenan for information as long as the right prize was dangled, but the Hellhound had doubts on how reliable what they got out of him would be.

"I take it the walk cleared your mind," the Lady-Regent suddenly said, looking up.

"It did," the Hellhound grunted. "I don't think this is about our columns anymore."

One-Eye leaned forward with interest, but it wasn't him Juniper needed to sell on this. Vivienne Dartwick was the one with the last word, these days, much as it irked the orc to even think it. The fact that Adjutant had looked to the Callowan for the final word when Juniper had come forward with the proposal for the Proceran campaign had driven that nail in hard and loud – whatever it was that'd lost the Deadhand yet another hand, it had changed things. And not just, the Hellhound thought, that she was nearly certain Dartwick no longer had a Name.

"Then what is it about?" the Lady-Regent asked, eyes considering.

"This isn't attrition," Juniper said. "They're not winning that fight, not at the casualty rates we're trading."

"They're exhausting us," Marshal Grem noted. "The Legions have been on campaign for most a year now, even for veterans morale is fraying. And a lot of your soldiers are green, Marshal Juniper. They won't hold up as well as Levantine foot under that kind of pressure. It might not matter they have less soldiers, if they have more in fighting fit."

"I considered that," she said. "And there is a sense to it – delay giving battle until they've brought us to the brink, and engage only after my other

two columns have been dismantled by their other army."

"But," Dartwick said.

"They're taking too many risks," Juniper said. "That strike with the cavalry, today? That was an escalation in recklessness. I believe we'll see the pattern hold up the longer they're in pursuit."

"The only gain from that was slowing us," Marshal Grem calmly said.

There was a pause.

"You believe there's a Proceran army headed our way," One-Eye concluded. "Through Cantal, most likely, descending toward us following the lakes. We're being softened up before they pincer us."

"I believe they want to win the war in Iserre before the Grand Alliance moves north as a whole," Juniper said. "And to do that they need to force a decisive battle, soon."

"The Tyrant of Helike passed information indicating that most of the principality of Hainaut has fallen to the Dead King," Dartwick frowned. "And the Lycaonese are steadily losing ground."

The boy-king of Helike had been willing to cut a deal offering quite a bit of useful information, after failing to kill Juniper. Mostly useful in how to remain out of the path of the League's armies, but the latest reports out of Salia and the war against the Dead King were of some importance. That he'd asked for detailed assessments of the Proceran and Levantine armies in exchange had been judged an acceptable price by Dartwick, and Juniper agreed. Anything making him more inclined to attack the Great Alliance than them was of some benefit.

"Procer can't afford a long war down here," Juniper agreed. "Attrition, defeat in detail – they'll take too much time. If they're not done here within two months, there's a decent they lose the northern Principate. So they need us crushed, quick."

"And large enough an army to intimidate the League into a truce, if not a treaty," the Lady-Regent murmured.

Marshal Grem peered down at the map, and his face tightened.

"Not one decisive battle," he gravelled. "Two. They smash us up north, smash General Bagram and the Princekiller further south and then link up to face the League."

"We can't keep marching north, then," Juniper said. "We're giving them exactly what they want."

"Then what do you suggest?" Dartwick said, head cocking to the side.

Marshal Grem One-Eye grinned.

"We march back south," he said. "And find out who'll blink first, between us and the First Prince."

# Bonus Chapter: Peregrine IV

> "Justice is not the end of a road, the closing of a tale. One cannot be just, one can only act justly: it is a struggle from cradle to grave, not a prize seized and kept."
>
> Daphne of the Homilies, best known for ending hereditary rule in Atalante

"You are not, I think, an evil man," Tariq pensively said. "I have seen those among your peers who have allowed desire to master all else, and you fall well short of that depravity."

Prince Alejandro Trastanes of Orense hid his fury well, though it was a paltry effort in the face of the sight the Gods had granted the Grey Pilgrim. Tariq was still learning the subtleties of the aspect despair had led him towards, the answer to his frightened prayer. To behold the truth of someone was not as paging through a manuscript, all to be found laid out in neat calligraphy. It was more akin to exposing a raw nerve, seeing what made it tense and flinch. Deeper natures could be learned from such a thing, the needs and beliefs that drove men like men drove carts, but to grasp truths less primal his own wit was needed. The Prince of Orense, for example, did not feel fury untainted. It was woven along the thread of pride, both arrogant and earned. Alejandro Trastanes was furious, Tariq decided, because a man he considered his inferior was passing judgement over him.

"Yet," Tariq continued, "it cannot be denied that you have done an evil thing."

Regret tightened in the man's soul, but it was threaded too deep with fear to be genuine. It was the regret of one caught and facing consequence, not any true repentance. Pride pushed aside the rest, hand in hand with something more resolute.

"Good things as well," the Prince of Orense said. "No true judgement, that which ignores all there is to be judged."

Tariq had thought there would be only rage in him, facing the man who had ordered the murder of his sister. Something burning and righteous, a flame that would only gut out when the blot on Creation was harshly erased. Instead he found himself hesitant, as if on the edge of a precipice tall and windy. Like

there should be consideration where before he had believed there would only be verdict. The Choir of Mercy spoke not a whisper, had not since his last brother had gone from traitor to ash. The Ophanim watched, always did, but now they kept their own council. The choices were his to make, the consequences his to discern. *Is this disappointment, old friends*, he wondered, *or is it respect?*

"You speak as if justice is a scale," Tariq said. "The good of a man weighed against the bad, an arithmetic of choices."

Alejandro Trastanes had set down the sword he had bared in surprise, when finding the intruder in his sanctum, and the Pilgrim had placed the now-empty cup of Praesi tea he'd taken by its side. The fragrance of the dark leaves from faraway Thalassina wafted up still, filling the small study with its scent. A single pot of that tea, Tariq knew, was worth a week of meals for a small family. That was the kind luxury the lean man across the desk was accustomed to, thinking it so natural it was not worthy of acknowledgement. Power held and kept for so long it was no longer questioned. Prince Alejandro thumbed the pendant hanging from his neck, the copper rose that held almost-unreadable inscriptions on the petals. *Beware of war, for in waging it to earthly purpose you have lost the war waged within your soul.* Famous words, these. Written by the renowned holy woman Sister Salienta in her work 'The Faith of Crowns'.

"Is it not, Pilgrim?" the dark-eyed prince said. "Why else would the Heavens wait until death to part the wheat from the chaff? The sum of a man cannot be a single act, worthy or wicked."

—

Izil Isbili, Holy Seljun of Levant, was eight years old.

The listlessness in the boy's dark eyes had waned, after he was returned to his father. It took months of kindness and safety, of his uncle standing by his bed as the nightmares of sudden arrows and gasping deaths woke him screaming, until Tariq's nephew became a child again. And the something more, for the Blood ran true. Tariq had beheld in silence as fire spread where there before had been a hole in the shape of Yasa, grief turning to the burning will to *act*. To do more than hold a title and officiate the debates of the great of Levant, to set out into the world unbent in the face of fear. Tariq beheld, and knew that in the precise moment where anguish was transmuted to resolve Izil had never more been his mother's son. It was a second chance, the Pilgrim thought, a mercy bestowed upon him by the Heavens. His sister given back to him in that small, frail body moved by something greater than itself. And so Tariq stayed in Levante, where is heart had died and been born again.

He watched as his nephew sunk his teeth into his lessons with ferocious tenacity. Numbers and letters, every line of Blood and their greatest deeds. The routes of trade by sea and land, the beasts that still roamed the rough countryside of the Dominion or laired in its deep forests. Languages, more than even Tariq himself knew. The Three Sisters – Lunara, Ceseo, Murcadan – but also Tolesian and Chantant, Ashur's High Tyrian and the tradertongue of the Free Cities. All these Izil Isbili attacked with a fervour that belied his age, and

what others at first dismissed as a child's fancy turned to admiration when the passing of months did nothing to fray it. At the age of nine the lessons of ink and word were portioned to leave room for those of steel, and there Tariq asked favour: in blade and warfare, his nephew's tutor would be the Lady of Malaga herself. Sintra left her holdings in the hand of her brother and heir, and his heart sang almost as much for her presence at his side as it did for the sight of her teaching Izil how to swing a sword. The trite, mundane evil of mankind had robbed the world of Yasa Isbili, of all that she might have accomplished. Of all that she had to give to the land she had so deeply loved.

The Grey Pilgrim could think of no greater answer to that sin than helping her son do it all in her place.

—

"You speak of the soul as a ledger to balance," Tariq said. "Like an evil can be excused, if there is an act of greater good to match it against. But *every* act matters. Each is judged, each is held up to the teachings of the Heavens. Holding to virtue nine choices out of ten does not make the tenth any less of a sin."

Alejandro Trastanes laughed, the bark of it quiet but fierce.

"You speak as one of the Chosen," the prince said. "One in a thousand times a thousand. How many mortals match your exacting standards, I must wonder? I am not *exceptional*, Pilgrim, in any sense of the word. I have been done ill, and done ill in turn – as those before me have, and those after will."

"Is the wickedness of others an excuse for our own, then?" Tariq said. "Once upon a time the Empress Triumphant lived, and evils greater than any before her did she enact. Are all we born since that day to live lawless for it? Should our forebears have wallowed in vice and submission, instead of casting down the Tower?"

"You take my meaning to the absurd," the prince said. "I did not walk under the same skies as the Empress Most Dread, and cannot speak to what I might have done then. I *can* speak as a prince among princes, born in this day. Did you not say, Chosen, that you have seen those among my peers mastered by desire and made vile for it?"

Tariq nodded, for he had. Crowned heads and those of their blood, having grown to see the span of their authority as a fence to break instead of a boundary to dread. Those who drunk of privilege so deeply they became intoxicated with the exemption of consequence to their actions.

"Why then, Grey Pilgrim, do you sit in *my* study and not theirs?" the Prince of Orense said.

—

Izil Isbili, Holy Seljun of Levant, was ten years old.

He'd sprouted like a weed, over the last year, and there was fond jest in the old city that never before had a Seljun needed ceremonial garb so quickly adjusted in size. Not even the almost legendarily fat Jarin Isbili, who by the age of thirty would have broken the back of a horse simply by mounting it. Tariq

nephew was also patiently teaching a girl mere months younger than him how to properly place her feet to accurately loose an arrow. The Pilgrim watched it unfold, leaning against the edge of the balcony overlooking the palace's archery yard, and smiled at the sight. Sintra chuckled, similarly amused.

"Do you think he's figured out she damn well knows how to shoot a bow, by now?" his lover asked.

Tariq glanced at the woman at his side, and could not help but see more than his lover – there was also the Lady Marave, ruler of Alava, and it was her niece speaking with his nephew below. The daughter of her brother and heir. Now that Izil was growing older, what might have once been children at play held other implications. Sintra's niece was not the only girl of similar age brought to Levante since the turn of the year, and none of them had been more than two degrees from one of the ruling lines of the Dominion. Word had spread that his sister's talents had flowered again in her son, and this time few of the mighty in Levant did not want blood tie to the boat they thought would rise with the tide.

"He has," Tariq said, looking away. "He'll be seeing how outrageous he can make the lesson before she visibly reacts."

Sintra snorted approvingly.

"That'll teach the girl," she said. "She's of the Champion's line, not some delicate flower in need of hand-holding."

He inclined his head, neither in agreement nor disagreement. Whatever Sintra's niece might have intended, she was interrupted by a throng of other children. Many of them girls, meant for the same purpose, but there were boys as well. Two Tanja cousins from Malaga, a main line Ifriqui from Vaccei, even the youngest brother of the ruling Osena in Tartessos. Two dozen children, all in all, some from minor Blood but all from an old line. The jostled and the laughed and they argued, but all of them turned towards his nephew like sunflowers following the sun. He could already see it in them, the beginning of true kinship. And now that Sintra's niece was among the lot, an old path was taking shape. Champion, Binder, Slayer, Brigand, Pilgrim. The founding lines of the Dominion, coalescing around an Isbili.

Izil's reign would be many things, Tariq suspected, but banal would not be one of them.

—

"I am here," the Pilgrim said, "because you ordered the murder of my sister."

The prince's surprise was obvious. He had, Tariq saw, expected denial and obfuscation. Or perhaps some sort of justification for twining mortal kinship with an act that would see the powers of a Bestowed put to use. The healer saw no need for any such convolution, for the truth was plain and even if it had been unworthy he would not have balked from it. It was, however, not unworthy in the slightest.

"Then this is vengeance," Prince Alejandro said. "And not justice, for all your pretence otherwise."

"You have ordered the murder of another child of the Heavens," Tariq mildly said. "You are now being put to judgement for this act. Where, prince, is the injustice?"

"You are no impartial judge," the Prince of Orense said.

"The act is writ in you," the Pilgrim said. "Confession was given as to the means and motive. The truth is clear as cloudless sky. There is no partiality to be *had*."

"That you are here at all is partial," the other man hissed. "Are there no greater evils to be seen to than a man with blood on his hands? Are there not thousands in Procer alone who have done what I have done, and more of it still?"

"And this," Tariq said, "excuses your act?"

"You chose me," Alejandro Trastanes insisted. "Is that just, Pilgrim? That what brought you here is a brother's wroth, yet you would force on me a Chosen's fatal decree?"

"I chose the evil that was wrought," Tariq said. "And that evil brought me to you, demanding reckoning. You are not *underserving*, Alejandro Trastanes."

—

Izil Isbili, Holy Seljun of Levant, was twelve years old.

Too serious for a child, Tariq often thought, but then was this not so often the way for tragedy's get? Joy did not come easy to Izil, though neither was it unknown to him. Curiosity came more often, and when the line of teacher and pupil did not stand between them his nephew sometimes sought out his company for talk of faraway places. Of the Heavens and the Gods Above they did not speak, for Tariq would not force such harsh truths on one so young. It was not all harshness, the Pilgrim knew. There was kindness and warmth, too, a patience to the grace that was offered to all the souls of Creation. But Good could not be only that, lest Evil triumph over it, and fool he might be but he still he hoped Izil might never have to embrace that axiom. Not if Tariq remained at his side, as he should have Yasa's. Once the Pilgrim had been blind to the ugliness that cornered his kin even as he journeyed across Calernia to ward off the same taint, but he would not repeat his mistake. The Ophanim had answered that choice with only silence, but he knew they did not disapprove.

They were waiting, patient in the giving of their grace.

The summer night was lazing on towards dawn when his nephew knocked at his door. Tariq's sleep had long been light, so it was with messy robes with sharp mind that he ushered in Izil. The boy's eyes were surrounded by dark circles, and the older man wondered if his nephew had not begun to push himself too hard. His mother had been the same, once upon a time, that light in her almost furious that there was so much to learn and so little time to learn it. That hours would need to be wasted on something as empty as sleep. The Pilgrim's calloused hand tucked back an errant curl of hair on Izil's brow. They both pretended his nephew did not lean into the touch. The same way they pretended Izil did not sometimes look at him in a way that whispered *father*,

and at Sintra with an even more hesitant *mother*. There were too many knots unseen to it, too many things unresolved. All grieved Yasa Isbili still, and Izil's true father still lived. But the boy had grown to resent the man's powerlessness, Tariq had beheld it unfold. And shameful as it was, neither he nor Sintra had turned away the affection so quietly offered.

They would never have children, the two of them. Yet sometimes, when he watched his lover teach Izil the swordsman's stance from the balcony, he could almost close his eyes and... It was a shameful thing, but Tariq had not pulled away from it as perhaps he should have.

"Sleep is not without purpose, Izil," Tariq gently chided. "The books will still be there come morn."

His nephew's dark eyes – *Yasa's eyes, Isbili eyes* – flicked down, but in the boy he saw the truth that his assumption had been mistaken.

"Nightmares," Tariq stated, and withdrew his hand. "I will make us tea, then."

The Ashuran leaves were bitter on the tongue, though he had always been partial to the taste. His nephew was not, and so he now kept a small pot of honey in his rooms. It was not long before the water was boiled and poured into ornate clay cups Tari had been gifted by a grateful merchant in Nicae, what felt like a lifetime ago. While he set himself to the work, his nephew had wandered onto the balcony and the stained glass doors to it lay open. The Pilgrim joined his nephew outside, and pressed the warm cup into the boy's hands. They stood there for some time, waiting for the tea to cool they watched the distant sea. A storm was brewing, very far away.

"You have been to Procer, uncle," Izil said.

"I have," Tariq agreed. "Many a time, when I wandered still. It is a strange land, in many ways. Its people are capable of both great sacrifices and great odiousness, and it is not always a different soul that holds this capacity."

"They made us slaves, once upon a time," Izil softly said, eyes on the dawning storm. "Took everything that we were, until we took it back with blood."

"All those that did the taking are long passed, nephew," Tariq quietly replied. "We do disservice to the living by warring in the name of the dead."

"Are they?" Izil said, turning with a hard stare. "Gone, truly?"

The Grey Pilgrim met his eyes, and said nothing.

"It doesn't matter," the Holy Seljun of Levant suddenly said. "It doesn't matter if they're dead, uncle, because their children are just like them. Blood told. The only difference between the princes that took Levant and those that rule now is that there's a wall in the way. And walls don't protect from everything, do they?"

"Someone told you," Tariq said.

"Of course someone told me," Izil tiredly replied. "I am to rule, one day. They all curry favour."

"Mercy," he said, "can be a cold thing to behold. But it must be offered, nonetheless."

"Why?" his nephew said. "We might as well be tossing silvers into the sea, uncle. They do not *learn*. They do not *change*. They take because they think themselves stronger, that no one will ever call them to account."

"It's not about them, Izil," Tariq said. "It's about us. Who we are willing to be, when the choice stands before us."

"They didn't give Mother a choice," Izil hissed, eyes reddening. "They just *shot* her."

The weeping took him, after that, and Tariq cradled his nephew's small frame as the sobs made it shake. He would only understand it years later, that you cannot truly look at someone when you hold them so closely.

—

Tariq's hand was already raised, when the door flew open. It was not soldiers with swords bared that entered. That would not have seen him release the Light as he did. No, it was laughing children. A girl and boy, neither older than seven, both dark-haired and bearing clever green eyes.

"Papa," the girl said. "Gorja said that-"

"She's lying," the boy insisted.

Neither of them even noticed him sitting across from their father, a bare sword and a pot of tea between them. Their mother – tall and shapely, fair-haired – followed behind, looking as put-upon as amused. Prince Alejandro had gone still as a statue, and Tariq did not need to look to know the terror that had seized him.

"*Caridon*," the mother began in Tolesian, "It appears that-"

She froze at the sight of them, at the blankness of her husband's face.

"Children," she said, voice tight. "Your father is entertaining a guest."

Their eyes only turned to Tariq then, and he smiled gently. They both looked dubious at his presence, perhaps skeptical that their princely father would entertain one as obviously travel-worn as he. They were mannerly enough not to speak their thoughts.

"I will speak with you all later," Prince Alejandro said, his tone admirably calm. "But you must leave me to attend to this matter first."

"Come along," the Princess of Orense said, tone brisk as she tugged back her children.

The boy protested, and her fingers clenched like claws when she forcefully dragged him out. Tariq rose to close the doors himself, as they had not.

"My family, Pilgrim," the prince said. "They are not – they did not know."

A lie, Tariq beheld it immediately. He must have spoken of the matter with his wife.

"I am not the murderer in this room," the Pilgrim said. "They have nothing to fear from me."

Prince Alejandro's answering smile was bleak.

"Not yet, no," he said.

And that, more than anything else spoken tonight, gave Tariq pause.

"The girl," he murmured. "She is eldest?"

"My heir," the prince agreed, just as quietly.

He could see it, Tariq thought, as clearly as if the Ophanim had granted him the vision. The shape of this, sculpted by ineffable hands. In Levante, the son of a slain mother. In Orense, the daughter of a slain father. Between them a wroth that no fear no reason would abate, and the sea of corpses it would lead to. War between Levant and Procer, and how it would pull in all the rest. Ashur, wary of its protectorate again being swallowed by the greatest power of Calernia, would strike out. In the League of Free Cities war would bloom sure as the coming of dawn, from the opportunities or the mere debate over whether they should be taken or allowed to pass. It would spiral outwards, a madness that would make a hundred thousand orphans out of the unbending hatred laying between two. Tariq would not stay his hand because Alejandro Trastanes had a family that loved him. It changed nothing. But neither could he raise his hand in the service of unnecessary suffering.

"You will abdicate," the Grey Pilgrim said, and soft as the words were they rang with the steel of a decree. "And spend the rest of your life as a lay brother in the House of Light."

The Prince of Orense shivered.

"That is just," the man who'd murdered Yasa said.

"No, it isn't," Tariq sadly said.

But it was not the Choir of Justice that he was sworn to.

—

Izil Isbili, Holy Seljun of Levant, was fifteen years old.

With the turn of dawn he would be sixteen and rule the Dominion of Levant in truth. For many years he had prepared for this day, Tariq knew. Promises had been made, both in the realm and beyond it. Grand designs had been patiently awaited, and among them lay the taking of war to the north. Years of argument had done nothing to change this, or change the choice of those who would go to war at the side of Izil Isbili. And so the Grey Pilgrim tread the quiet halls of the palace, in the dark of night, and into his nephew's rooms did he creep. He wept as he pressed the pillow over the boy's face, but his hand did not fail. He would despise himself for this, Tariq knew, until the day he died. But he despised unnecessary suffering even more. The Ophanim laid their hand on his shoulder, afterwards, in comfort. Their saddened whispers broke the silence of many years with a chorus of grief.

But none called him *wrong*.

# Bonus Chapter: Some Recent Changes

Hey!

Some of you who had a look at the comments section last night will already be aware, but there's going be some changes to the Patreon for the Guide and so in all likelihood to the update rate of the coming month (if not longer). There's a minor update as well, regarding PayPal. All of this is detailed below.

In essence, the current rate of three chapters a week and the monthly extra chapter has turned out to be a full-time writing job. I can't maintain that and take contracts on the side, not while keeping up quality on both sides. Since I've no intention of stopping to write the Guide, I've had to push upwards the Patreon goal for three updates a week. It's not significantly higher than what the very generous people on the platform are currently sending me, but it's enough to make a difference to my own finances.

Chances are the new goal won't be met for this month, which will mean return to two updates a week for March. Chapters under that schedule would be coming out on Wednesday and Friday.

A while back in the comments it was pointed out to me that some people prefer PayPal to Patreon when making donations, and at long last that's been seen to. In the side menu, just under the Patreon tab, there's now one that links to PayPal as well. Feel free to send however much you like, anything is appreciated – though I understand very well that it's not everyone who can afford to contribute. (To clarify, PayPal donations will count towards the month's donation goal.)

Regardless of all this, I want to take a moment to tell you all how happy I am that the Guide has ended up with the readership and online community it has. It's been a pleasure to write the books, so I hope they've been a pleasure to read – and that you'll stick with me until the end of the series.

# Bonus Chapter: March Updates

So, this was pretty unexpected. I can't thank those of you who chipped on Patreon enough, it was heartwarming – and more than a little flattering – to see the goal met in less than 48 hours.

As it turns out I misunderstood the way the platform charges: the beat of a few days between the first and the transfer is to allow for people to decline, new patrons aren't added. The total seen on the Guide's page is for the next month.

That didn't end up mattering, though, as the PayPal donations pretty much covered the gap anyway. Special mention to Charles Paige, who by the sum sent I'm guessing just looked at what was missing from the goal and sent that.

In summary, we're staying on three weekly updates for March. Chapter will be up after midnight, as usual, and once more thanks to everyone for their support!

# Interlude: Congregation II

> "What do you mean, they 'went around the maze'? Do you have any idea how much it cost us to build that?"
>
> Dread Empress Malignant I

They weren't even halfway through Brabant when Hasenbach's envoys found them. For all that there were rumours of some strange disruption of scrying down south in Iserre, Princess Rozala Malanza noted that the First Prince's clever mages had no such trouble outside of it – they would not have been so swiftly found otherwise. Not that they'd been trying to hide, but what did that matter when hundreds of thousands of desperate refugees were fleeing south from the armies of the Dead King? Reluctant as the Princess of Aequitan had been to strip so much as a single soldier from the defence of Cleves, there'd been no choice but to ride south with an escort of well-armed horsemen. The sea of people forced away by the advance of the dead were starving and terrified, and Rozala knew well that those with nothing to lose might be willing to take a chance on well-dressed and well-fed travellers. It would have been something of a farce for the three royals heading south to survive the horrors of the war in Cleves only to die to some starveling with frostbite and a hoe. Still, dark as the situation was in Brabant – and no mistake, it was nothing less than grim – it was pleasant dream compared to the war to the north.

Or perhaps it was the other way around, Rozala thought, stirring the contents her goblet with a thin copper rod. Perhaps it was the months she had spent fighting in Cleves that were the nightmare. Gritting her teeth, the dark-haired princess forced her hand to cease shaking and drank the full goblet of brandy tinged with poppy tea. It should calm her enough, she thought, that tonight she would not need to resort to a *Hannoven drowse* to fall asleep – namely, sleeping with her ear to the floor to be assured she would wake in time if the dead and the damned were digging up from below. The Gods were merciful enough that she had time to begin feeling the effects and put away her affairs before her bodyguard announced Louis. The Prince of Creusens looked as bone-tired as she felt, but he offered her a wan smile and sat by the shutters with her when invited. His eyes flicked to the half-open scroll left on the small table between them, too polite to be caught staring.

"So it was you they wanted," Prince Louis Rohanon said.

There was no mistaking the broken seal of the First Prince, but instead of replying Rozala unfolded the scroll a little further and let her comrade glimpse the seal that went unbroken at the bottom of the text. The Highest Assembly's. In time of war Cordelia Hasenbach's word was law, in affairs military, but having her order seconded by a motion of the Assembly meant disobeying it would have Rozala legally committing treason. She'd be stripped of her title as Princess of Aequitan as well as her rights in the Highest Assembly without any recourse, the vote considered as having already been taken through the initial motion seconding the order. Louis' eyes narrowed, and his shoulder twitched. The Prince of Creusens was not cut from warrior's cloth: he was both shorter than her and thinly muscled, with delicate hands. Dark-haired and soft-cheeked, he looked more scholar than soldier. Yet he was also clever, of good sense, and perhaps one of few decent men wearing a crown she had met. The tragedy of his life had been inheriting a principality ravaged by the Great War and finding that the only man willing to loan him the coin to heal it was Amadis Milenan.

The scope of the debt was reputed to be massive, and Louis had admitted to her in confidence it was unlikely to be fully repaid in his lifetime. Amadis had offered to write off a part of the sum should Louis lead soldiers in his support during the Tenth Crusade, and once the horse had been hitched to the cart it had seen the Prince of Creusens dragged through horrors all the way up to Cleves. And back, now, but it seemed they were to walk into a different sort of danger. Louis' shoulder twitched again, and he let out a frustrated breath. Giving in, the prince glanced quickly at the door to confirm it was closed and behind him to be certain there was no one between him and the wall. Three heartbeats after looking, his shoulder began twitching again. Rozala could not think less of him him for this – she'd not been in the bastion, when the ghouls had slipped through murder holes and begun slaughtering sleeping soldiers. Prince Louis Rohanon had been, and he was as uncomfortable without his back to the wall as she would be without skin touching the floor. It'd been the breach at Sautefort, for her.

No one had grasped until too late that the dead would not care about tunneling under water.

"I have been named to the supreme command of an army being assembled in Cantal," Rozala said. "By the shores of Lake Artoise. Forty thousand soldiers, perhaps more."

Louis's eyes brightened.

"Reinforcements?" he asked.

"Not to Cleves," she replied. "I've been ordered by Her Most Serene Highness to reinforce the Dominion's armies and break the foreign armies in Iserre."

"Praesi," the Prince of Creusens bit out angrily. "Callowans. *That's not the war*, Rozala."

"The League as well," the Princess of Aequitan reminded him.

"We should be making peace with all of them," Louis said.

"I don't disagree," Rozala admitted. "But the seals are there, Louis."

"Let's see her enforce *that*, in the middle of the Dead King's wroth," he said. "Madness."

Yet the truth was, Rozala knew, theat neither of them were all that popular at the moment. The attempt by Prince Amadis' supporters – among which they both numbered – to force the Klaus Papenheim's armies to chase after the Carrion Lord had been made known to all of Procer. It'd been framed, no doubt by Cordelia Hasenbach herself, as petty intrigue by the lot of them to attack the elected First Prince while she was sending her own kin to fight the Kingdom of the Dead. In the northern half Procer, save for Cleves where many of them had fought, they were not just a figure of mockery but villains outright despised. If they rebelled, and to refuse the First Prince's order was exactly that, they would not find many allies. More than that, Rozala feared what even the smallest stir of civil war might do to the Principate at the juncture.

"I will go," the Princess of Aequitan said. "Gods forgive me, but I will go. Adeline and Prince Gaspard should be able to hold for now."

"Then I go with you," Louis said.

She inclined her head, too thankful to words to properly convey it. Louis had not fought with his blade, in Cleves, but he had been her steward and seneschal. His ink and orders had been a thousand times more valuable than one more blade would have been.

"We ought to tell Arnaud as well," the prince added. "Last I saw he was drinking himself into a stupor across the street, but he has an iron liver. Odds are he's still awake."

Rozala's lips thinned. Prince Arnaud of Cantal was a rapist, perhaps worse, and an arrogant fool. There was no hiding from that. But none who'd been to Cleves, none of those who'd fought that endless tide of dead smashing against icy shores, would ever be the same again. And Arnaud Brogloise might be filth, but he was filth that'd held the fort at Langueroche alone with his retinue for three days and three nights. He'd fought on foot at the gates, and held long enough for a town of three thousand to flee south. Arnaud knew the stakes.

"Would you fetch him?" Rozala asked.

Louis nodded, poorly hiding his relief at no longer sitting with an unknown at his back. She'd have the table moved for when the three of them sat, the dark-haired princess decided, so he would not be afflicted again. She closed her eyes, for a moment, and felt like cursing. Fighting the Army of Callow or the Legions was not why the three of them had come south. Once upon a time they might have ridden south to scheme how to unseat Hasenbach, but since Cleves? No, not that. They'd come to exhaust their treasuries raising every company they could, contracting every fantassin and emptying every smithy in their lands before they rode back north. Rozala's fingers clenched against the chair as she flinched at a sound that was not there. She was weeks away from the onslaught, now, and still she could hear the sounds in every silence.

The desperate screams of the dying as winged abominations spewed out fire and venom. The biting crackle of dark sorceries as they tore through steel and flesh. And that patient, relentless beat: forward, forward, always forward went the armies of the dead. Without pause or respite or the slightest speck of mercy. The levies and fantassins of Prince Gaspard of Cleves had died like *flies* in the face of the Enemy, even with Chosen holding the line at the capital's port. When Rozala had arrived with the remains of the army salvaged from the Callowan debacle, she'd found the city of Cleves besieged by a sea of shambling darkness. Yet on the wall, a man had stood with a sword like the coming of dawn.

The White Knight had held the line until reinforcements came, defying all odds.

Three months Princess Rozala had shared command of the defence of Cleves with Prince Gaspard. Three months of an endless span of fresh horrors. Swarms of dead rats scuttling up through the sewers to devour wounded soldiers in their beds, rains of poison and acid, great abominations made from the bones of the thousands serving as moving siege towers that spewed out lesser dead over the walls. Three month of burning your comrades lest they rise again and turn on you, of battles that lasted through entire night and day for the dead simply *never tired*. But oh, they had taught the monsters the mettle of Procer.

They'd fought on rocky slopes and crawled through freezing mud, they'd sallied out in the howling winds and challenged the Dead King for every scrap of stone and snow. The White Knight and the Witch broke an entire fortress driving back a pack of dead Chosen, until their shore of the Tomb flew only the pennants of Procer. Thousands and thousands had perished for that, clawing at the dark in choking despair, but now along the shores of Cleves forts were being raised by the hands of bloodied veterans and smithies burned through the night to forge the swords that would be bared when the next wave came.

And the front in Cleves, Rozala well knew, had been the easiest.

At Twilight's Pass the hosts of the Lycaonese had fought three battles in two days against the horde trying to force its way out of Hannoven. The same evening, soldiers said, had seen the coronation of three of the Reitzenberg: Prince Manfred of Bremen died of a poisoned arrow leading an assault to take back the furthest fortress of the pass, passing his crown to his eldest daughter and telling her to continue the charge unflinching before drenching himself in oil and taking up a torch. She'd passed it to her younger sister after losing half her torso to sorcery, and that sister in turn passed it to now-prince Otto Reitzenberg when she took a spear in the belly scaling the wall and fell thirty feet in armour.

The youngest of Manfred Reitzenberg's children carried the charge to the end with that blood-soaked iron crown on his head, took back the fortress and held it for half a day before a dead Chosen brought down the walls and forced him to retreat further into the pass. This, Princess Rozala had been told, was the closest thing the Lycaonese had seen to a *victory* since they'd begun the

fight. And still their people headed to Twilight's Pass, streams and rivers of soldiers wearing old mail and iron-tipped spears. Through the ice and the winds they went to make the same old stand in that same old pass, as they had for centuries. The Princess of Aequitan had mocked these people for their brutishness and lack of manners, once upon a time, for their rough linens and bare-bone homes.

The shame of that remembrance burned her like acid.

In Hainaut, Princess Julienne Volignac lost the entire coast to the dead before the Iron Prince arrived to relieve her. Too long a coast, too few men to defend it and the craggy hills of northern Hainaut made it difficult to march large forces – or defend against many small forces, as the Dead King had sent. When Klaus Papenheim took command he fortified the outskirts of the crags and began clawing them back from the Enemy, battle by battle, but with the shores of the Tomb in enemy hands there was no end to the undead that could cross the lake. The city of Hainaut itself fell to a sudden offensive that broke through the defence lines two months in, and the Iron Prince was said to have taken a wound at the battle.

Princess Julienne herself died charging the dead with her personal guard of three thousand horsemen to buy the time for her people to flee the horde. Her sister Beatrice claimed the crown over the dead princess' too-young sons and swore oath before the entire army that as long as single Volignac remained the Dead King would get nothing of Hainaut but ash and steel. The fight had soon turned desperate after the dead reached the flatlands, for they were harder to defend, but Prince Etienne of Brabant bankrupted himself arming every soul of fighting age in his principality and marched them north to ward off the collapse.

The north of the Principate was fighting for its right to exist with every bitter dawn, and she would not fail it. So Princess Rozala Malanza would hurry south and win the war they shouldn't be fighting, so they could have a chance at winning the one they had no choice to fight.

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If even *one* other royal requested a private meeting with Princess Rozala Malanza only to reveal they'd been secretly corresponding with the Tyrant of Helike, she was going to send the head of everyone who had back to Salia in a basket. When she'd arrived to the sprawling camp by the shores of Lake Artoise, what the dark-haired princess had found there was enough to make her blood boil. The more than forty thousand soldiers, half levies and the rest principality troops, she much approved of. It was the royalty coming with the finer soldiers that had her furious. The First Prince, evidently, has tossed every single prince and princess she could find at the army in order to accrue the largest host possible.

The result was a labyrinth of intrigue and petty bickering: including Rozala herself and her two princely comrades from Cleves, there were no less than *seven* anointed rulers assembled in the camp. Hasenbach's orders had preceded her so there was no contest of her command of the army, but what she encoun-

tered was much worse: one at a time, three fools sought her out to proudly inform her of their foolishness. Princess Leonor of Valencis, Princess Bertille of Lange, Prince Rodrigo of Orense. All of which had been trading information with Kairos Theodosian of Helike.

That Rodrigo Trastanes would number among them she'd took a personal insult, for the man was a political ally. He too was one of Amadis Milenan's pack of open supporters, having turned on his benefactor the First Prince last year. The three who'd been dropped on the head enough to make a bargain with the Tyrant of Helike and approach her with the secret she'd stripped of command and sent Louis to keep an eye on, as her appointed second in the army. Rozala would not trust anyone who'd thought it *clever* to trade information on the location of the Dominion armies in exchange for the same on the Army of Callow and the allied Legions. Not with a command, not with a seat at her council, not with a fucking chamber pot.

That still left Princess Sophie of Lyonis, who the First Prince had quite openly sent there to ensure that Rozala did not take the army and march on Salia to depose her. The ruler of Lyonis was the First Prince's creature body and soul, having murdered her own brother at the Battle of Aisne when he'd tried to betray Hasenbach. For that she'd been rewarded with the crown of Lyonis over her three elder siblings, and remained viciously loyal to the First Prince ever since. The sole comfort of this was that the woman was not incompetent, or a stranger to war. Rozala had no true choice about having Princess Sophie in her council, but she was proving of some use as the mouthpiece of Hasenbach and so recipient of the First Prince's answers.

As in, for example, why it had become so difficult to obtain weaponry and armour in Procer these days.

"You're certain the dwarves won't sell even if we triple the standing price?" Princess Rozala pressed.

The fair-haired Princess of Lyonis shook her head.

"They won't entertain any offer, regardless of the contents," Princess Sophie said. "The First Prince has confirmed it. It was made understood to her that further insistence would be not be taken well."

Rozala almost cursed. The unfortunate truth was that, beyond equipping their own personal troops and keeping an armory that'd provide for perhaps the same amount of armed levies, few Proceran royalty bothered to accumulate armaments. What point was there, when it was possible to hire already-armed fantassin companies instead? If the situation was truly dire for a princess, an order of armaments to the Kingdom Under would provide what was needed as promptly as it could be brought by road from the closest dwarven gate. The Great War had lasted decades and seen a prodigious amount of cheap steel floating around the Principate, to be sure, but much of it had ended up in the hands of already-fighting fantassin companies or since been lost on foreign fields – Callow or the Free Cities. Smiths could not work without metal to work with, and it'd gotten bad enough in some parts of the Principate that the

Prince of Orense had privately admitted to her he now had more silver than steel left in his principality. The existing mines simply could not keep up with the rising demand.

"We can fight two, maybe three battles before our levies are left to wave sticks and shout imprecations," Princess Rozala grimly said. "Gods, do the dwarves *want* us to break in front of the Dead King?"

The Princess of Lyonis eyed her thoughfully from the other side of the table. If it'd been more than the two of them in the tent, Rozala thought, the conversation would have ended there. But it was only them and maps and mostly-untouched cups of wine, so Princess Sophie broke her silence.

"Her Highness believes it might the work of the Black Queen," she said. "To make our war effort unsustainable."

The Princess of Aequitan felt her fingers clench into fists. She breathed out only after a moment, forcing herself to approach it with cold eye.

"She's a monster," Rozala said. "But not one without reason. She'll want us crippled by Keter, not outright devoured."

"That is the First Prince's opinion as well," Princess Sophie agreed. "Yet there is a possibility we must contemplate: that she struck the bargain with the dwarves blindly, and that she may not return from her journey for months yet. If ever."

Rozala winced. That would be disastrous. It wasn't that the Principate wouldn't be able to wean itself from reliance on the dwarves eventually. It was that it would take years for the mines and foundries to be raised to what was needed, as well as cost a fortune. Procer had neither the years nor the coin required for such an ambitious undertaking on hand.

"Then we make truce with Callow," Princess Rozala said. "I've made my peace with fighting the League, Princess Sophie. The Tyrant has been meddling in our affairs so extensively the Free Cities are out to either take most the south or feed us to Keter. But Callow? We cannot afford that fight, not with the vultures already circling us."

"An offer of truce was extended by the Lady-Regent Dartwick," the other princess said. "Including withdrawal of the Army of Callow through the northern pass."

Rozala leaned forward eagerly.

"And?" she said.

"It comes at the cost of allowing the Legions of Terror to retreat with them," Princess Sophie admitted. "The overture was declined."

"You can't be serious," the Princess of Aequitan hissed. "I don't care if they butchered half of the heartlands, send the bastards *out*."

"We've confirmed that if the offer is accepted, there will be rebellion within the month," Sophie said. "It is a certainty."

Rozala almost cursed her out for speaking in absolutes where there could be none, but stilled her tongue at the last moment. Hasenbach, for all her flaws, would not lightly abandon her own native Rhenia to the dead – and that was

what she was doing, so long as armies remained fighting south. Which meant she *was* certain, and there was only one way that could be true.

"The Augur?" Rozala asked.

The other princess nodded.

"You are not to speak of this to anyone," she warned.

The ruler of Aequitan almost rolled her eyes. That Sophie had not been meant for the throne of Lyonis was sometimes quite evident. It was quite gauche in such a situation to speak the words. They were simply *understood*, between well-bred women.

"How bad?" Rozala asked, morbidly curious.

"Most of the eastern principalities beneath Brabant," the Princess of Lyonis said.

Which would collapse half the Principate, the dark-haired princess thought. Those lands were the most-populated and some of the wealthiest in Procer. Or they had been, before the Black Knight led his legionaries to take them to the torch and the sword. If a peasant revolt sparked there the situation would spiral out of control swiftly. Especially if some prince or princess saw an opportunity to seize the throne while any force that could stop them was stuck fighting up north.

"You've never fought the Army of Callow," Rozala finally said. "So you might not understand exactly what it is you're asking of me. I cannot crush their host without massive losses, Sophie. They're hardened disciplined killers that believe in their cause."

"That has been understood," the Princess of Lyonis said. "Which is why your true instructions were not put to writing."

Rozala Malanza leaned back, brows raising, and waited.

"Win a battle, Princess Rozala," the other woman said. "And if the Callowans and the Praesi should manage to escape in good order towards the passage, afterwards? It is unfortunate, but the League's presence would not allow you to pursue."

So, Rozala was to clasp hands with the Dominion to give the enemy a black eye before letting them slink away. It sat ill with her to toss away the lives of soldiers – *badly* needed soldiers – for a play in the Ebb and the Flow, but if the alternative was rebellion then she'd swallow her tongue and do what needed to be done. However many died there, it would be a drop in the ocean compared to what would take place if the heartlands broke behind the defensive lines to the north. She drained the rest of her cup, and set to the business of getting her soldiers fed and marching.

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In peace time it would have been against the laws of the Principate for an army to be mustered in the lands of a prince at the orders of the First Prince without the right being first granted by said prince in front of the Highest Assembly, but these were not peaceful times. Besides, it was in Cantal they were camped and the prince of this land was among her commanders. Prince

Arnaud did not balk at providing what supplies he could. It was not as much as Rozala would have liked, but that was understandable given the damage done by the Legions of Terror. More surprisingly, he did so without any of the complaining the Princess of Aequitan had expected. Out of gratitude she began extending him invitation to the war councils that had previously been restricted to Princess Sophie and Louis. To her further surprise, aside from the occasional bout of arrogant bragging he proved to be rather useful. The prince knew his own lands well, and did not balk at emptying his own purse or armouries to strengthen the army. Rozala only understood exactly what was taking place when Prince Louis approached her as she rode ahead of the columns, a mere week away from the Iserran border.

"Rozala," he greeted her calmly, dipping his head.

The Princess of Aequitan slowed her horse – he was not as skilled a rider, and might struggle to keep to her pace – and returned the courtesy.

"Louis," she fondly replied. "I see you've settled the fools well enough to be able to afford a speck of freedom."

"A prince's labour is never done," he drily replied.

That glint of amusement in his russet eyes Rozala would admit, if only to herself, made him attractive in a mischievous sort of way. It was not a thought she could allow herself to entertain. He might be a widower, and she unmarried, but the interests of their principalities were often opposed. To dally without any deeper commitment would cause dangerous scandal, and there could be no true privacy in a war camp.

"Ours certainly is not," the Princess of Aequitan sighed. "I had counted myself fortunate, that we might never fight the Army of Callow again."

"Ours are not fortunate years," Louis said, tone dark, but shook his head afterwards. "Still, we do what we can. It to speak of that I have come."

Rozala cocked her head to the side, silently inviting him to speak. After so many hours shared they had become more than passing familiar with each other's mannerisms.

"When do you intend to begin inviting the Prince of Orense to the expanded council?" he asked frankly. "Any longer and the slight will grow too deep, he will become much harder to budge."

Her brow rose.

"I had not meant to invite him at all," Rozala admitted. "His dealings with the Tyrant make me wary of his judgement and reluctant to hear any advice from his lips."

"You don't need to actually take the advice," Louis patiently said. "When did Amadis ever take ours? It's simply a matter of binding him to you. You cannot afford to throw Segovia away if you are to cleanly take the reins. The blunder should make him eager to redeem himself, if anything."

The Princess of Aequitan almost informed him she had no need of Rodrigo of Orense to run a brothel, much less an army, before she grasped what he actually meant. It was not the army she was leading that Louis was speak-

ing of. He was under the impression that, in Amadis Milenan's absence, she was usurping leadership of the alliance the Prince of Iserre had assembled. Through those eyes, Rozala thought, the sudden solicitude of Prince Arnaud took a much different meaning. He was currying her favour, much as he had once done Milenan's. For a moment she thought of telling Louis this was not her meaning at all, but her tongue did not move. If she was perceived to have faltered halfway through a coup, her 'supporters' would turn on her without hesitation. And had she not only aligned herself with the Prince of Iserre for lack of other allies in the first place? More than that the man had not gone north, fought in Cleves or Hainaut or Twilight's Pass. If the Callowans released him, would he truly understand? *And if they don't release him at all*, her mind whispered, *who would you trust to take the place of primacy in your stead?*

"I am not Amadis Milenan," she finally said, meeting Louis' eyes. "I intend to take good advice, when it is given."

"Then invite Prince Rodrigo to council tonight," the Prince of Creusens said. "And I will begin to approach the other two who disgraced themselves."

"Amadis never convinced them to back him," Rozala said.

Leonor of Valencis had been friendly, but firm in her refusal of closer ties. Valencis and her own Aequitan had warred frequently, over the centuries, but just as often struck close alliances. Princess Leonor was, if she remembered correctly, a cousin in the fourth degree of blood. The ruler of Valencis had been a tacit supporter of Rozala's mother when she'd made a bid for the throne during the Great War, though after the defeat at Aisne distance had been made between their courts to avoid incurring Cordelia Hasenbach's ire. Princess Bertille of Lange was dependent on Salia for much of her principality's trade – and therefore at the mercy of the First Prince's displeasure – but she'd never outright entered the fold of the First Prince's loyalists. She had a reputation for being cold-blooded and of mercenary nature even by Alamans standards. Amadis had simply never found a price that moved her, Rozala had often thought.

"But you are not Amadis Milenan," Louis Rohanon replied, lips quirking. "I will see you at council, Princess Rozala."

He dipped his head again, slightly lower than the first time, and left her to her thoughts.

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Eight days later, headed into Iserre, the army began to hear fanciful rumours from refugees. Most of them about an army of dark ghosts that left no tracks and spoke no words.

Five days after that, the army began to hear rather less fanciful rumours about a clash between the Army of Callow and a Dominion army. The Callowans and the Wasteland allies fled south, refugees said.

Three days after that, Rozala Malanza found forty thousand Levantine camped on the snowy plains and waiting for her. She rode ahead to meet with

their commander, the Lord of Alava, and begin planning the shared offensive.

The moment she truly knew it all had gone to the Hells was when she found the Grey Pilgrim waiting alongside him.

# Interlude: Congregation III

"We sowers of ruin, straight-backed and proud,
Told them arrant, and arrantly kept our vow:
'No bargain is there, between hunter and flock;
No peace between the rabbit and the hawk.'
We sowers of ruin, reaped all that was sown,
For as Mieza's sons toppled our waning thrones,
They arrant said: 'no bargain now, o lords of war,
For no peace can be, between spear and boar.'
We sowers of ruin, the reapers that were reapt,
Sing the elder song still, for we must not forget:
No bargain is there, between hunter and flock,
No peace can there be, between lash and orc."

"Ruin, Sown", a spoken verse in Kharsum attributed to Yngvild Bittertongue, chieftess of the Red Shields

Lord Yannu Marave of the Champion's Blood felt his scalp prickle. The last time the Lord of Alava's instincts had been screaming this loudly, he'd come within a breath of having his crush skulled by a *culebron* whose scales he'd failed to notice among the leaves of the Brocelian. Yannu had been a young fool, back then, but raised his shield on impulse and so avoided dying to a whip of the tail so strong it put hammer blows to shame. He could not help but wonder if there was not kinship between the dangers of then and now. A fool was once more about to step on the tail a hidden serpent and die for that mistake. That he now stood at the heart of a great army instead of journeying alone into the deeper barrow-woods to bring honourable deeds to his Blood made little difference. As Yannu's station had risen, so had the dangers accompanying it.

"They're camped here," Moro of the Brigand's Blood said, tapping his finger. "On the other shore of the river."

The heir to Vaccei had gained a few fresh scars, fighting at his mother's side against the Marshals. What had already been a hard face on a hard man was now frightful to behold, the red marks left by goblin steel running jagged through the umber-brown and basil-green face paint of his line. The effect was strikingly attractive, though Yannu was careful not to let his gaze linger. He was over a decade older than the other man, after all.

"The river's called the Odelle," Princess Rozala Malanza noted, frowning as she bent over the table to have a closer look. "As I recall, the source is further east and the depth shallow. It'll be frozen over."

The Princess of Aequitan had been a pleasant surprise, the Lord of Alava thought. No Alamans intriguer, that one, but a hardened Arlesite commander who had already fought the greater of their foes on the field not so long ago. Wild rumours still spread about what had taken place as the Battle of the Camps, but not so wild that the Peregrine had not confirmed some of the lot. The Black Queen, if she had truly returned, would be a fearsome enemy. The part of Yannu that belonged to the Champion's Blood was eager at the thought of measuring his prowess against hers. The part that was the Lord of Alava was wary instead, for it had fought against the Marshals for months and learned they had sharp talons indeed.

"If they have ended their march, then they must believe their eastern columns are close to joining them," Yannu said. "We may be facing as many as sixty thousand eastern legionaries, along with however many there are of these grey ghosts."

"Between our hosts, we have eighty thousand," Princess Rozala said. "And if Lord Tanja makes his way as swiftly as promised with Her Highness' southern army, that's another sixty thousand hitting them from the other side of the river."

"Likely double the enemy's numbers, unless the Black Queen is somehow fielding an army that leaves no tracks in the snow," Moro of the Brigand's Blood said.

Word from Sarcella and Akil Tanja put these grey devil-ghosts at less than twenty thousand strong, though it was said some could wield strange sorceries. Yet they were also said to be no stronger than men, blade in hand, and just as mortal. Poorly armed as well, more tribes than companies.

"We should strike at the Hellhound's camp before the rest of her divisions arrive," Princess Malanza said. "Best for all of us we face that army *without* Catherine Foundling in it."

"There would be great honour in taking the Black Queen's life," Moro told her bluntly.

The look in the younger man's eyes spoke of esteem lowered for shying away from a worthy struggle. Yannu would withhold judgement instead. The Peregrine and the Regicide had promised they would take the field against the Arch-heretic of the East should she bare her blade, but the Lord of Alava still remembered the stories from the rise of the Barrow Lord. The warring of Bestowed was never kind to their lesser, and the Black Queen was said to be one of the greatest living villains. Even in death she might wreak great slaughter.

"The lucky ones died when the lake fell on their heads, at the Camps," Princess Rozala said, tone calm yet not less sharp for it. "Those that drowned, though? It wasn't as quick. They had long enough to realize there would be nothing to save them."

The dark-haired princess smiled pleasantly.

"Which would you prefer to happen when you turn comes, Levantine?" she asked.

The heir to Vaccei twitched, no doubt reaching for one of the many poisoned blades on his person, but the Arlesite's hand was already on the pommel of her sword. It was never very far from it, Yannu had noticed, and she seemed uncomfortable when it was.

"Enough," he said. "Moro, you would bare a blade on an ally when the *Peregrine* is among us?"

The man's lips pressed together in disquiet, as well they should. The Pilgrim might not be at this council, but the incarnate soul of Levant had made it clear as rain to all of them that his blessing had been given to the Grand Alliance. To dishonour the living inheritor in Blood and Bestowal of the Dominion's father would be... Even should the Peregrine not take Moro's life, the sheer weight of the shame might see the man slice open his own throat.

"There is nothing to be gained from threats, Princess Rozala," Yannu said, eyes then moving to the Proceran. "We are to fight side by side on this field and more to come."

"Apologies, Moro," the dark-haired woman curtly said, dipping her head.

The heir to Vaccei returned the courtesy, just as curtly. It was for the best that Lady Itima had not been the one given slight to, for the Lady of Vaccei would not have left it at that.

"I stand by my words nonetheless," the Princess of Aequitan said. "We must strike now, before they gather."

"I am reluctant to engage without our full might," Yannu admitted. "The armies of the League are marching towards us, Princess. If they are to try our flank while we face the Marshals then I would have all our soldiery arrayed against the enemy."

Rozala had, amusingly enough, inquired if the Tyrant of Helike had sent envoys to make a bargain with Yannu's host not long after she joined her army with the Lord of Alava's. He'd replied that was indeed the case, and that those envoys could easily be found: the corpses, after all, were still hanging from the personal banner of the Lady of Vaccei. Lady Itima's line had faithfully kept to the hatred the Vengeful Brigand had held against foreigners, and not hesitated to slaughter any sworn to the likes of Kairos Theodosian.

"If we get them to retreat from their camp, we can seize it and close ranks with Lord Tanja's force there before the League arrives," Princess Rozala suggested.

"Or their returning columns could find us engaged assaulting a fortified camp and spring an ambush before Tanja is close enough to reinforce," Yannu pointed out with a frown.

Her insistence puzzled him, for she should well know that the Marshals were capable of plying nasty tricks against opponents made sloppy by haste. Had she not fought the Hellhound herself and come out the lesser captain?

The Lord of Alava had lost hundreds to a vicious charge of Callowan knights before learning to keep his own horse close to his skirmishers, and would not go after his foe so brashly again.

"If we lose the initiative we risk this entire campaign stretching out for months," the dark-haired princess reminded him, sounding frustrated.

*There it is*, the Lord of Alava thought. It had been a rare occasion for all the great captains of the allied armies to hold common council, for both Malanza and he were aware that old enmities would see blades bared should close company be kept. Yet on the two occasions it had, Yannu had studied the princes and princess of Procer. Seen the difference, the subtle currents that ran among them. That Princess Rozala was first among equals was clear, beyond even her right of command, and that the Princess of Lyonis was her appointed warden was just as clear. What had been more interesting, to Yannu of the Champion's Blood, was that even within the Princess of Aequitan's faithful there was more subtle division. The princes of Creusens and Cantal were closer in her trust than any other, and both of those men had... telltale marks. Louis of Creusens had pulled a knife without hesitating on a servant when she'd approached him from behind, halfway to her neck before he stopped himself. Arnaud of Cantal spoke loudly and often, but sometimes also fell into long silences where he moved not a finger. As for Rozala Malanza herself, Yannu had noticed when seated she never crossed her legs. She wore leather boots, and always kept their thin soles squarely against the ground. Like she was feeling for tremors.

All three of these, the Lord of Alava had been told, had gone north to the Principality of Cleves to fight against the armies of the Dead King.

"I was told that the lines in Cleves held," Yannu said, watching the Proceran closely.

Princess Rozala's jaw clenched.

"When the sea pulls back before the coming wave crashes, the shore has not *held*," she replied. "We bought a month, Lord Marave, maybe two. Our defences will break sure as summer's turn if we wait longer than that. You have not..."

Yannu saw her lips moved in a whisper, counting out in Tolesian. Only after reaching twelve did she resume speaking.

"In Callow I fought fae and dead and villain's wroth," the Princess of Aequitan finally said, voice tight. "Believe me when I say that was a *child at play*. The Dead King comes for us all, Yannu of the Champion's Blood. And every day we waste warring against mortals the Enemy gains a deeper foothold."

Eyes hard, the dark-haired princess matched him gaze for gaze.

"I've had to claw back that shore from the Hidden Horror's clutches once before," she said. "Gods have mercy, but I do not know if there are enough soldiers left in Procer to do so a second time."

It wasn't the determination he saw in those dark eyes that moved the Lord of Alava. He has seen will in others, and smashed it to bloody pieces when it stood in his way. Mortals failed, mortals broke: a moment of resolution was just that, a moment. It always passed, and more often than not pain and steel

hurried that passing. Neither was it the fear, for fear was an old friend to him. Yannu's Blood was meant to strive for fearlessness, for the same reckless courage that was the Valiant Champion's mark, but he had never forgot that day in the Brocelian where a splintered shield might have been a splintered skull. Audacity without patience, without watchfulness, was just another way of being frivolous with lives. Fear was the voice that kept your eyes open when bravery became arrogance, and he would not part from his even for a chance at Bestowal. No, it was the heartfelt belief Rozala Malanza had for her own words. She genuinely believed that the bell might toll for the Principate if they lingered here too long in Iserre.

"Then we march to battle," Lord Yannu of the Champion's Blood conceded.

"It'll be ten days to reach the camp," Moro said, stirring from his silence with hooded eyes. "If we hurry."

"Then we hurry," Princess Rozala grimly replied.

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They had been, Hakram had to admit, shrewdly outmanoeuvered.

Juniper's dispersion scheme had been solid, and it had certainly worked for the initial stretch of the march. The Third Army had baited the Lord Tanja's host towards the east while the Fourth followed along parallel lines further north in Iserre, both keeping lines of communication open and keeping watch for a sudden march south by Lord Marave's army. What messengers the Fourth Army had been able to receive from the Hellhound's own two columns headed westwards had told them that the Levantine army under Lord Marave was pursuing them while leaving Marsha Grem and his legions to gather themselves. Until then, all had proceeded according to Juniper's predictions: all she had to do was join with the Legions of Terror and force the Levantines back with a minor battle, to create a gap. Then the Third and Fourth Army were to shake off their own pursuit by Lord Tanja and hurry through that gap, assembling the entire allied force together. From there they could begin a fighting retreat to the northern passage, where the garrison under Duchess Kegan of Daoine would be awaiting them.

The opinion of the general staff had been that, considering the League of Free cities was invading from the south and the Dead King hitting northern Procer in force, the Legions and the Army of Callow would not even be hounded all the way through the retreat north. After the Grand Alliance saved face by 'driving out the eastern invaders', they'd been predicted to focus their efforts on containing the League of Free Cities while sending everything they could spare north. It would have been a campaign cleverly salvaged from the unexpected blow of losing the fairy gates when already committed deep in Procer, one fought with minimal losses while cleanly getting out the majority of the Legions of Terror under Marsha Grem.

Instead, the Fourth Army suddenly found its ability to send messengers north to coordinate with the Hellhound cut when a detachment of Helike *kataphractoi* began roving north of it. The messengers south sent to warn Nauk

and the Third Army about League interference never made it, and were found with arrows in their corpses by General Bagram's scouts. Adjutant had pushed for the Fourth Army to immediately move south and join with Nauk before marching north together, and the Fourth's general agreed. One day into the march, however, a messenger form Juniper stumbled bloody into the camp with cataphracts in close pursuit. The First and Second Armies, the man said, had been taken by surprise and scattered when the Grey Pilgrim joined with Lord Marave and struck with miracles. The messenger had been an old subordinate's of General Bagram's, and the seals were in order. Gritting his teeth, Hakram had backed the decision to hurry and relieve Juniper – without a cohesive army to gather around, the legionaries of the First and Second would be hunted down like animals by the Levantine cavalry, scattered across the plains and vulnerable.

Seven days in, the messenger began bleeding out of the eyes and choked on his own tongue. The priests from the House Insurgent saw nothing wrong with him besides the obvious, but the ranking Senior Mage did when the corpse was dissected. A small stone inscribed with runes was dislodged from where it'd been ebbed at the bottom of the man's spine, and examination under ritual confirmed the magic involved was illusory in nature. One of the few Soninke among the mage cadres eventually noted the runes had patterns in common with Stygian sorcery, and then it all fell together. They'd been had, the messenger was some poor bastard the Tyrant of Helike's men had captured and tinkered with the memories of discretely enough neither priests nor mages had caught it until too late. A few years back, Adjutant thought to himself, the trick wouldn't have worked. But the Army of Callow had expanded wildly beyond its capacity to field experienced mages, and the native Callowan practitioners that'd been brought in to try to remedy that were amateurs compared to Praesi warlocks. And Stygia's Magisterium, as the success of the deception made clear.

Debate raged among the general staff of the Fourth Army, after that, for most of an evening. Some argued that if the purpose of the ruse had been to isolate the Third Army, it likely had been already destroyed by now. A strike by the cataphracts would likely slow down Nauk's ten thousand enough that the Levantines would surround and destroy them utterly. Those same officers argued that marching south now would essentially mean throwing away another quarter of the Army of Callow for Levant and Helike to defeat in detail. Others suggested that it was the Fourth Army itself that was the target, and the ploy's true nature was that the northern Levantines had let the Hellhound go and were instead marching south to pincer the Third and Fourth while Helike kept them all blind. Some even theorized that First and Second Armies truly had been broken, and this was all the Tyrant's trick to lead them to dismiss the notion and hurry south while the rest of the Army of Callow was annihilated. It was bloody chaos, and not for the first time Hakram wondered at how young their highest rung of officers was.

The veterans brought in from the Legions that'd joined after Second Liesse

were keeping it all functional, but there were too many officers who'd gone only through rough training camps before taking up their commission. But General Bagram was no greenhorn, and neither was Hakram himself. The debate ended with the decision to link up with the Third before the situation was further assessed, though careful scouting would be necessary in case the Third Army truly was destroyed and it was a Levantine force south of them. The Fourth Army moved out in good order, and a mere three days in ran into a Helike ambush. Somehow they'd avoided three lines of scouts, and that smacked to Adjutant of either sorcery or Named interference, but the result was brutal no matter the means employed. Three hundred dead, twice that many wounded, and the *kataphractoi* retreated with less than a score casualties on their side. The entire Fourth Army was boiling with fury at the humiliation, but it was only the first of many assaults to come. On its entire march back the way it'd been tricked marching, the army was relentlessly harassed by Helike. Night and day assaults, at irregular intervals, and in the end General Bagram had to order a fortified camp raised every evening or risk losing entire companies.

It was slowing them down even further, forcing them to end the march earlier in the day and exhausting the legionaries for the effort. Hakram suspected that might very well be the point, and by now was halfway convinced Nauk would be either up to his elbow in Levantines or days dead by the time they arrived to reinforce the Third. If any of it was even left. The anger of that stayed with him, and chased away the need for even what little sleep his body still required. His hours he spent either in talks with the general staff or out on watch with the legionaries. It was maybe halfway to Midnight Bell that he saw the glint of armoured riders in the distance, before even goblins caught it, and he immediately sounded the alarm.

"Shit," Captain Mower cursed, peeking over the edge of the palisade, then added a very absent-minded 'sir'.

The old goblin saw the same thing, and did not gainsay Adjutant when he ordered for crossbow companies to be brought to the fore. And half-companies of regulars too. The cataphracts had yet to try a charge, but that did not meant they would refrain if they saw an opportunity.

"So, what's it going to be tonight," Hakram said, teeth clinking softly. "Fire or exhaustion?"

"Bet you it's fire, sir," Captain Mower said. "Been too long since they tried those pitch arrows."

The goblin spoke the word 'pitch' with the kind of utter disdain that would make a High Lord proud. He was a scout officer, not a sapper, but in Hakramès experience that'd never stopped Eyrie get from looking down at the unprofessional savagery of people not using proper goblin munitions for this kind of work.

"They gain more to less risk by forcing us to wake in the middle of the night then hitting us during the day at peak exhaustion," Adjutant said. "The

surprise with the scorpions killed a few dozen last time they got close to the palisade."

"They won't fall for that twice," Captain Mower sighed. "Almost makes me miss Akua's Folly, at least the wights weren't mounted."

"I'd even settle for Dormer," Hakram gravelled. "And the bloody fae could fly."

"That's the Black Queen's service for you," the goblin grinned. "It ain't the Army of Callow if we're not fucked a different way every time."

There was a ring of inexplicable cheers from the rest of the line at that, as the captain had raised his voice to carry. Catherine's popularity with goblinkind never ceased to unnerve him. Robber had once told him it was because she was 'the closest thing a human can get to a Matron, but you know the *fun* kind of Matron not the other kind, and it sort of helps she'd probably murder the other Matrons given a chance, although let's be honest so would the other Matrons'. It'd been surprisingly coherent, given how much drink his friend had in him by that point. Not that Robber ever answered these kinds of questions by anything other than blatant lies unless he'd been plied with liquor and petty crime first. Pickler wasn't any more of a help, as he'd been the one to inform her of the phenomenon in the first place. She'd never noticed.

"Well now, *that's* new," Captain Mower suddenly said.

Hakram's attention snapped back to the present. Behind him the thin stripe of regulars was already standing at attention while the crossbow companies formed up behind them and checked their gear. That much was to be expected: they'd had a harder teacher than mere drills to get them to do it all quick and clean. What wasn't expected was the way the Helike cataphracts had stopped about a hundred yards away from the palisade. They were – wait, that wasn't a Helikean. There was a rider between the enemy and the camp, alone. Adjutant's heart stirred, but what brought it home was the sudden shouts of surprise coming from deeper into the camp. A wooden post was snapped out of the frozen ground and alarm sounded again as long wings began beating. A frankly chilling whinny sounded into the night and Zombie the Third took flight, the wooden post she'd been tied to swinging under her hanging by the bridle.

"Not new at all, Captain," Hakram Deadhand grinned, all teeth and malice. "*She's back*."

# Chapter 18

# Fable

> "Some acts only have to be committed once to afterwards echo a threat in your every silence."
>
> Dread Empress Massacre the First

The Tyrant's soldiers were killing my people.

The cataphracts, when I'd caught sight of them from miles away, had been forming up for a night raid. This was war, I reminded myself. Besides, for all my talk of alliances and bargains with Kairos he remained as much a foe as a friend. No doubt some scheme was afoot, one that involved prodding the Fourth Army into moving some way or other for deeper purpose. Skirmishes against the Levantines, maybe, or to make certain the Fourth did not encounter one of the League's forces. The cataphracts were harassing my legionaries, as they had the Third's, not pulling knives and engaging in struggle to the death. This was no different than Malicia testing the eastern borders of Callow with refugees and warbands, like a villainous cat taking its claws to something to see how it reacted. It would be wisest to chide the Helikean cavalry, slap them on the wrist and send them off to trouble someone else. They'd cased their raid when I intervened, hadn't they? Just the sight of a lone rider had put the charge of sundry four thousand kataphractoi to an end, and as I my valiant Zombie the Fourth cantered forward their ranks bent inwards. They were following orders, obeying one of those fearsome madmen Helikeans had idolized for centuries. I told myself all this, as I bid my mount to stop, and it was enough to stay my hand. Then my mind whispered: *the Tyrant's soldiers are killing your people.*

My fingers clenched, leather gloves creaking. The Mantle of Woe trailing behind me, stirred by the night's breeze, I watched as a pack of officers under Helike's own banner rode to the fore of the host. Five of them, in weather-beaten armour, blades sheathed at their sides. Their conical, crested helms boasted red ceremonial feathers that jutted like a splash of blood, and beneath the rim of the steel cap two curved strips of steel demarcated their eyes. From

those a shawl of mail descended to their chests, the lead officer among them unclasping hers to reveal a scarred mouth.

"Black Queen," the Helikean said in accented Lower Miezan, "I-"

"Kneel," I softly interrupted.

In the silence the followed the word rang like a thunderclap. There was a pause, the breeze raking its unseen fingers on the carpet of snow between us. The officers assembled behind her mouthpiece bridled at the order. Their leader raised a hand.

"We serve the Tyrant of Helike," the woman replied. "And bend before none other."

My staff rose, and with a thunderous snap I brought it down against the wintry ground. The order I had not spoken sounded across the Night like rippling decree, and under the crescent moon's smile the veil we had approached under was ripped away. The banner-sigils jutted out like the masts of a ship in the utterly still sea of Firstborn, fluttering in low murmurs. Red and black and blue, crisscrossed by strokes of silver and gold. Among them two stood higher than all the rest. Ochre inlaid with gold, a rainflower in bloom. *Rumena*. Purple cut by silver, a tree bearing twin circles unfinished. *Losara*. Twenty thousand drow stood like statues around Helike's riders, grey skin touched with the colours of their sigils. Fear ripped through the steel-clad killers sworn to the Tyrant, like a sudden and brutal shiver.

"Kneel," I softly said, "or Gods be my witness, I'll kill you all."

Shapes slid across my face, two crows far above gliding far above passing between the moon's cast and my silhouette. Casting razor-sharp shadows as the Sisters smiled against my neck, Andronike humming in approval. She had not forgot the nightmare made of Rochelant, and held no love for those what would serve its maniacal architect. I found their leader's pale eyes, circled by steel, and saw fear spread through them like ink in water. The words that followed were hurried out, and beneath my notice, even as the soldiers began to dismount.

Under crescent moon four thousand *kataphractoi* knelt in the snow.

"You will stay knelt," I said. "Until I tell you to rise."

Zombie heeded my will and turned around, leaving at an unhurried trot. I left them with their knees to the ground, and went to bring my Fourth Army back into the fold.

—

The cheers began sounding from the palisade when I came within ninety yards. Behind the wooden fortifications the Fourth Army's camp had lit up with fire and fervour both, like an anthill boiling over. Torches lit up, and the wall facing me was pulled open. Within seventy yards I could make out the twin rows of soldiers assembling to make an avenue of steel leading deeper into the Fourth's camp. When I reached sixty yards, a winged shape descended from the sky and landed before me in a geyser of snow. And... wood? What was a post doing – Zombie the Third, bright blue eyes shining with glee, whinnied loudly

and trotted up to my side. My lips quirked and I ran my gloved hand down her mane.

"Hello, girl," I murmured. "Missed me, did you?"

The winged horse I had… acquired from the Summer Court through technically blasphemous means sauntered around my current mount, turning around the back and coming close to affectionately brush against my good leg.

"You *are* a good girl," I praised, patting her neck. "Unless you've been eating corpses again, we had a talk about that."

Zombie the Third neighed, I thought, perhaps a little guiltily. Godsdamnit, I'd told Hakram just because it was occasionally appropriate behaviour for orcs didn't meant he could let my *horse* do it. The look she cast at Zombie the Fourth – who was a pure necromantic construct, and so about as sentient as his saddle – was less than friendly, too. I cocked an eyebrow.

"Come on," I said, patting her one last time for the road. "We're headed to camp. Just let me take care of that."

There'd been a wooden post tied to her bridle, so I leaned forward to unmake the knot and let it drop. Flanked by my own mount, I resumed my advance. The Fourth Army wasn't one of my old commands, not at its source. It had few officers from the original Fifteenth Legion, and while it'd picked up a few spare tribunes from General Afolabi's now-disbanded Twelfth the general staff had actually been from General Istrid's Sixth, the Ironsides – including the general himself, Bagram. But that was officers, I thought as I approached the open gates. The Fourth Army's bones, not the meat. In the rows and rows of faces most I saw were young and Callowan. Recruits joined before the Tenth Crusade began, or in the months I'd spent in the Everdark. Those who'd never known my armies as part of the Empire even in name. Maybe that was why, when I crossed the gates, swords were bared and raised in salute. A steel avenue, that old honour granted to the kings and queens of Callow.

"HAIL!"

The word sounded defiantly into the night as my soldiers welcomed me home. Once upon a time, I thought as the sound washed over me, it would have been only knights allowed to stand among those rows. *But the times are changing.* Head high, cloak trialing behind me, I rode to the end of the alley under the eyes of thousands. At the end, two orcs awaited. One I knew from the few conversations we'd had during and after he brought the Sixth into the Army of Callow, General Bagram. The other had me smiling: Gods, it felt like a century since I'd last seen Hakram. He was still stupidly tall and large, like the Heavens had given an old oak leave to walk around. His hand of bone went without glove, in winter and summer both, but his other – wait, what? I wasn't sure what baffled me more, that he'd somehow lost yet another hand or that he'd not bothered replacing it. I brought Zombie to a halt, his sister matching him, and met Adjutant's dark eyes with mine before cocking an eyebrow.

"You know, one is understandable," I said. "Happens to the best of us. But two? That's just careless, Hakram. It's not like you have any more spares."

"I suppose my clapping days are over," Adjutant thoughtfully replied. "And I never did take to the theatre."

There was a pause.

"You made the same damned joke the last time you lost a hand, didn't you?" I sighed.

"It's funnier this time," he told me. "You know, because I'm running out of hands to lose."

Something like a sob of hysterical laughter almost ripped out of my throat, but aware of the eyes on us I kept it locked inside. I still burned with the need to actually hug the bastard, who was showing just enough fang from one side of the mouth to be implying either a taunt or mockery. A moment later I cleared my throat and inclined my head at Bagram.

"General," I greeted him.

"Your Majesty," he gravelled back, offering a legionary's salute. "The Fourth Army is yours."

I glanced back and saw the legionaries still standing with their swords raised. I supposed it was. Zombie moved under my will, turning to face them in full, and my staff rose almost of its own accord. Blades began beating against shield, a ruckus to wake even the dead, and cheers sounded with them. I glanced meaningfully at Hakram, and after dismounting I clapped General Bagram's shoulder and leaned close to tell him I needed to confer with Adjutant. I was led not far from there, to what I recognized to be Hakram's old campaign tent. I followed in the orc, limping at a pace. The inside was sparse, as usual, save for the inevitable piles of scrolls that followed Adjutant like a faithful pack of hounds. Still, it was warm and well-lit so it would do. I'd barely passed the folds when I was swept up in arms like tree trunks, hoisted up off my feet. I laughed and hugged the bastard back, though I slapped his shoulder for the indignity inherent to holding me up like I was some little lamb.

"It's good to see you," I admitted, when finally the brute put me down.

"You as well, Catherine," he rumbled out. "It has been much, much too long."

"I hear that," I muttered.

"Unexpected that you would find us, but decidedly not unwelcome," Hakram said. "The apparitions on the field outside, are they who I think they are?"

"Drow," I confirmed. "Though they call themselves the Firstborn – no, don't ask, it's a lot more complex than I feel like getting into."

The orc hacked out a pleased laugh.

"You brought the drow to the surface," Hakram said, grinning. "First time they came up in force in centuries. Gods be sated, you actually did it – and so many. There must be at least fifteen thousand out there."

"Twenty," I corrected. "The entire expedition in Iserre is fifty thousand strong, though they have their issues. They're headed your way, should be there before dawn. The Third Army got caught down in Sarcella by the Dominion, but they made it out after losing some skin. They're with the rest of the drow."

"The Priestess of Night is our ally, then?" Adjutant asked.

"They're called Sve Noc," I said. "And they're, well, goddesses. More or less."

"You made an alliance with *goddesses*," Hakram said.

"In a manner of speaking," I said. "You're talking to the current high priestess of Night. Alliance was made, with some strings, but the fifty thousand are here to back us."

Hakram's brow rose.

"The high priestess," he repeated. "Of drow religion. A religion of drow. Presumably for drow. Which, unless I am mistaken, you are not."

"That's the one," I lightly replied.

"What happened to the *last* high priestess?" he asked.

"There wasn't one."

"And you talked goddesses into this how?"

"I asked real nice," I smiled winningly. "The trick was doing it twice."

"Cat, did you pull a knife on goddesses?" Adjutant sighed.

"Of course not," I replied, offended and technically even saying the truth.

The orc stared at me, saying nothing.

"We have an understanding," I said, a tad defensively. "You wouldn't understand, you're not religious."

"I'm not going to touch that without a bottle on the table and half a day to waste," Hakram muttered.

I snorted.

"You're one to talk," I said. "What happened to your hand? Tell me you weren't just struck with a sharp and urgent need for symmetry."

"Necessary sacrifice," Adjutant said. "You'll understand when you meet with Vivienne."

My brow rose.

"Most likely, yes," I said. "But you're going to tell me anyway."

Flash of teeth, which I identified as implying sheepishness.

"It'll be a long conversation," Hakram said.

I studied him closely. I could press further, but it wasn't needed as far as I knew. And if it was, I trusted he would have told me.

"It'll wait for that bottle with half a day, then," I said. "Talk to me about Masego. I know everything Robber knows, but he said you'd have more."

"He knows more than someone of his rank should, though that is nothing new," Adjutant said. "If you're looking for a location, we do not have it. He was seen in the fields west of the Blessed Isle, but we haven't caught sight of him said."

I frowned.

"But?"

"Before we took the gate into Arcadia," Hakram said. "There was a report through the Observatory – the last we ever got. Liesse is gone."

"The ruins?" I said. "They were destroyed?"

"Gone," the orc said. "As in moved. And we don't know how, or where."

My reflex was to reply that was impossible, especially given the ridiculously vicious wards I'd had put around the still very much dangerous ruins, but then I remembered *who* had put those up specifically.

"You think he took the city somehow," I said.

"I think he's not in his right mind, since Thalassina," Hakram grimaced. "And that he got his hands on the broken shards of the single most dangerous magical weapon this continent has seen since Triumphant's day. For what purpose, I can only guess."

Well, *fuck*. This was still salvageable, I had Akua around and she'd know how that monstrosity worked better than anyone – she was, after all, its architect. But until we got a read on how Masego was moving around, this was a sword hanging above someone's head. Whose there was no real way to know, if the disaster at Thalassina had affected Hierophant's mind somehow.

"We need to find him," I said. "*Quickly*. Do you have any idea what happened to the Observatory?"

"Nothing concrete, same as the gates going wild. We've got a dozen running theories, but the mages keep poking holes in each other's," Adjutant admitted. "About a third of them insist it's to do with the way scrying is blocked in Iserre, the rest are in agreement they are entirely different problems with no relation."

It was, I thought, grim irony that the person most likely to give us an answer about what was going on was the one we needed the Observatory to look for.

"I'll see what Akua can figure out, but she'll only have so much time to spare," I said. "I have her working on something else."

He nodded.

"Archer's safe?"

"Working through some things," I said. "It got... bad down there, Hakram. She had a close call."

I could see his chops move as he ran his tongue against his fangs, the cogs in his head turning as he weighed whether or not now was the right time to ask.

"Bottle and half a day," Adjutant finally echoed.

I conceded with a nod.

"We need to talk with General Bagram," I said. "Lay down some ground rules about the drow, prepare for the Third's arrival. I'll want to know about the state of the Fourth, too."

"He'll be waiting," Hakram said.

"Then let's go," I sighed. "We're wasting moonlight."

"You have four thousand surrendered cataphracts outside, Catherine," he reminded me. "The situation needs seeing to."

"Not surrendered," I said. "I neither offered nor asked. They're considering their sins, that's all."

Adjutant's dark eyes scrutinized my face.

"You're thinking of killing them," the orc said.

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"Some," I admitted. "If I let them go today, they're a blade back in the Tyrant's armory tomorrow."

"Are we to break entirely with the League, then?" he asked.

I grimaced.

"No," I admitted. "There are some interests in alignment."

"Then you cannot commit slaughter," Hakram said.

"Unless you have a lot more supplies than the Third, we can't keep them prisoner either," I flatly said. "Four thousand men and four thousand horses. I suppose we could butcher the horses for meat, but the soldiers? Given what's out there, we don't have the manpower for the guards or the food to spare. Not without shaving it much too close for comfort."

"I fought those riders, Catherine," Adjutant said. "So did the Fourth. And I can assure you, there is no love between us. Not even the fondness of respected foes. But we cannot butcher prisoners of war."

"Butchery? Slight and price, Hakram. One for one," I said. "You have lists of dead, lost to their attacks. So did the Third. I will not let this go *unanswered*."

"I wouldn't ask you to," Hakram said.

The orc let out a long breath.

"I could tell you that this would set a dangerous precedent," Adjutant said. "That we must be taken as law-abiding actors, if the Liesse Accords are to be signed and held. I could even say that a massacre tonight will be matched by the Tyrant when opportunity comes for him, and we both know it will."

"But," I said.

My closest friend in the world looked me in the eye.

"Weren't we better than this, when we started?" Hakram softly asked.

I did not answer him on the way to General Bagram's tent. I still had not, after those talks were done, when I headed back into the snows.

—

They'd stayed kneeling.

A few had tried to run, deciding to die gloriously with a blade in hand, and their pulped flesh had been splattered across the snow by the Mighty among my host. The rest had remained knelt in the cold and the dark, waiting for the judgement that was to fall upon their heads. They shivered and trembled, for the wind had not grown gentler in my absence, but even as their legs had begun to ache and their fingers had grown rigid for the chill the cataphracts of Helike had endured. Some portion admired them for it, but it was not so large that it was not drowned out by the anger still fuming in my bones. And even that admiration was tainted, for valour in the service of the likes of Kairos Theodosian could only be abused. The Firstborn parted for me without a word as I tread across the snows, come to meet the five officers who had meant to bargain with me. They had withstood their wait, I found, and softly five feathery streaks of red still rose and fell with the breath of the soldiers. My staff touched the ground with measured beat as I limped to them, and when I halted I felt their

gazes turn to me. It was the leader among them I turned my own eye to, the woman who'd spoken.

"Your name?" I asked.

"Pallas," she said. "I am a general of Helike."

Letting the agony skitter across my leg, I leaned against my staff and knelt to match her height. I glimpsed vivid pale eyes that lingered between grey and blue, set on a tanned face that was younger than I had thought. Not so young she had not lived, I thought, and not so young that she should not have known better.

"Nine hundred and thirty two," I said. "That is how many of my men yours have killed, between the tallies of the Third and the Fourth."

"They fought well," Pallas simply said. "And bravely."

"They died bravely too," I said, tone sharpening.

I saw in her face, then, the expectance of the blow. Of sudden and merciless death.

"I had thought to kill that many of you," I pensively said. "And then another as well, for the remembrance."

"You would take us all instead, then?" Pallas calmly asked. "If that is so, we will not die kneeling. Vainglorious be our pride, Black Queen, we are *kataphractoi* of Helike. We do not meet slaughter meekly."

Cataphracts of Helike, I thought. Legionaries of Praes, knights of Callow, fantassins of Procer. The names changed, and the lands matched to them, but in the end it wasn't it the same defiant promise? *We are people*, it said. *You can kill us, but you cannot make us less than that.* Funny, wasn't it? How you could offer soldiers praise and a title and they'd make of it something to make the world quake. Not the kind of funny that made you smile, but funny nonetheless.

"No," I said. "The man that serves as my better nature waits in camp, and though his kind knows little of mercy he asked it of me all the same."

"Mercy," General Pallas told me, "will not change our oaths."

In that moment I was no longer looking at a woman kneeling in the snow: it was Helike's own grim visage looking back at me, that ancient city-state that had fought Praes and Procer at their peaks and walked away unbowed. And it had done so on the back of men and women just like the one facing me. Iron-wrought souls gathered to a Tyrant's banner, the victors of a hundred fields.

"We serve a Theodosian, Queen of Callow," Pallas of Helike said, "We do not flinch from doom nor grave, under that banner – *or anything else*."

*I could take that certainty from you*, I thought, *easy as breathing. Of all my teachers the one who knew least of fear cowed all of Callow with it, and I have since witnessed sights that would have him pale.* And part of me wanted to, because nine hundred and thirty two legionaries were dead at their hands. And perhaps these cataphracts were brave and skilled and loyal, but they were treating death as a game while dancing to the Tyrant's tune – and even now

remained proud of that truth. I wouldn't even need to speak a word in Crepuscular, to see it all done: under the moon's gaze, when it came to weaving power not even the Tomb-Maker was my match in raw strength. A mere four thousand, kneeling? It would be, as I had thought, easy as breathing. And that gave me pause, because my leg *stung* and I still remembered the sky opening at the Battle of the Camps and sending down death at impotent Procerans. Some nights I wondered if part of the reason my father had refrained from embracing the paths to power that were a villain's due was because he was afraid of what he might *do* with it. The kind of person it made you, to look at four thousand soldiers and know that your own hand could slay them in the span of a breath. The kind of person it made you, to go through with it. Hadn't it always been the tragedy of Creation that might ever went to the people least deserving of it? That I could not change, not truly. But I could, at least, act like I was not the Dead King incipient. Like I still remembered what it was like, to laugh and breathe and hurt – what it meant, to snuff out those same things.

"There was once a man, to the far east," I quietly told Pallas. "He was a killer among killers, and among that red number there were none more loathsome. So when he claimed the Tower, *Foul* was the title he took. Third of his name, and last."

I smiled.

"In the Wasteland they remember him a vainglorious failure, for when he led his armies west the Kingdom of Daoine crushed them all and sent his limbless body back to Ater, along with the head of ever highborn in his host," I said. "Of his duel with the Commander of the Watch and the valour that saw the Deoraithe prevail I could tell you much, but what would it mean to you?"

I tapped my fingers against my staff, hearing the steady beat of *do not forget* along with the pulsing pain of my leg.

"It is the years after I'll tell you a story about," I said. "You see, Foul did not long survive his return. His successor cared nothing for the man, but there were rules to observe. Two bounties were offered. The first for the head of any Commander, only once claimed in the history of Praes. The second, though? It was for two fingers."

I leaned closer, voice almost a whisper.

"The one that came after was titled *Vile*, and of that epiteth proved well-deserving, but for all that he was not without cleverness," I said. "It was longbows on a wall, that broke his predecessor and so he put coin to unmaking the first of these two. For four centuries following, anyone bringing back the severed index and middle fingers of a Deoraithe was rewarded in gold."

Pallas of Helike went very, very still.

"Yeah, I figured you'd understand," I said. "You're an archer yourself. But a snip of the knife and all that skill, all those years... up in smoke. Can't pull back the string without those, can you?"

"And this," General Pallas replied, "is the span of your *mercy*?"

"I never claimed my kind of tyranny to be deserving of capital letter," I said. "So you'll keep the fingers, Pallas. But they will be broken, by your own hands, and with them I take every fucking thing that allows you to call yourself *kataphraktoi*."

The woman's eyes widened in surprise and anger.

"You cannot-" she began.

"Be silent," I hissed. "You ride around slaying my soldiers and abetting a madman's madness when the King of Death is sinking his teeth in the world. You do not get to be indignant, Pallas of Helike. You're a worm in the flesh, and if neither you nor your master can be trusted not to act as the ushers of the end times then you will have to be *disciplined*."

I rose to my feet, leaning on ebony, and glared down.

"You came here as cataphracts," I said. "And here will stay your horses and arms and armour. Not a single one of you will leave this place with as much as a butter knife."

Breathing out, I met pale eyes and let the slightest part of the fury I still felt slip into my gaze.

"Walk back to your Theodosian, General Pallas," I said. "And give him warning from the Black Queen – if he ever pulls anything like this on my people again, there's room for another soul on my cloak."

In the sky far above crows cawed, the sound of it eerily like laughter.

# Chapter 19

# Precedent

> "The evening before a battle is like an entire nation breathing in.
> Only morning will tell if what comes out is acclaim or lamentation."
>
> King Albert Fairfax of Callow, the Thrice-Invaded

"Liability almost seems like too mild a word," Hakram said.

The words were not voiced as blame or complaint, but as a simple statement of fact. Adjutant was assessing a weakness, nothing more. I'd known him for long enough by now to take it was it was, and in truth Indrani probably had as well. It didn't stop her from snatching his handless arm and twisting it behind his back, forcing a heavily muscled orc over a foot taller than her to bend over in pain. The sight of it was rather absurd: Hakram was on the tall side even for his kind, and his shoulders were broader than any human I'd met. Between the set of plate he wore like it was made of feathers, the knife-like fangs and the bone hand Adjutant looked like he should be able to snap her in half. And yet I wasn't even sure he was faking it, when he struggled against Archer's tight and sudden grip.

"I think you meant to say 'Archer, you peerless beauty whose appeal is known even to orcs, thank you for bringing me this nice army and saving my whinging orc ass'," Indrani said.

There was a pause.

"I guess Cat helped," she conceded. "And Akua was there, probably."

"Such lavish praise," Diabolist drawled. "Do cease, Archer, or I will be most terribly embarrassed."

The shade's night-black dress rippled down to her feet, legs crossed elegantly as she ignored the laws of Creation and somehow managed to lounge gracefully in a Legion-issue folding chair. The neckline was low, though not overly revealing of the curves below, and held up only on one shoulder by some sort of cloth strap circling around her neck. The saffron yellow trim along it stretched down casually, bringing attention to the long slit revealing a portion of her leg. Now and then I could feel Akua's amused golden eyes on me, al-

most daring me to look. Diabolist looked like sin, which I was not unconvinced might be what she was actually metaphysically made of these days. Still, this was a great deal les subtle than usual: she usually only resorted to this kind of jabbing when she was irritated, so clearly being cut out of the happenings in Sarcella so she could concentrate on building my well still had her ticked off. She'd get over it, I decided, and did not look at the smooth dark skin a dainty twitch of her foot was further revealing.

"You're not going to let my arm go unless I repeat it, are you?" Adjutant sighed.

"Guess," Indrani smiled, all batting her eyelashes with a coquettish smile.

Being a merciful woman by nature, I allowed Hakram the dignity of pretending not to hear while he offered his full surrender. I was still looking at the same thing he'd been, the fifty thousand drow outside that dawn had chased back into their tents for exhausted slumber. General Rumena had agreed that we needed to keep at least a tenth of the warriors awake during the daybreak exhaustion, as relying entirely on the Army of Callow for protection would be risky, but the logistics of that were proving tricky. We had to put up full sigils for the duty, as mixing warriors from different ones would cause no end of trouble, but it was seen as a punishment duty. Sigil-holders were duelling each other to make other drow's sigils hold watch instead, and though the Sisters had long backed my order that drow were not to kill each other over Night while in my army 'first blood' was another story. The sigil-holder for the Kuresnik was the weakest of their kind in the southern expedition, and its sigil had been forced to hold watch seven days in a row before the matter was brought to me.

The Kuresnik Sigil had been quite literally falling apart under the strain, the first proof we'd had that keeping drow awake through the early hours repeatedly would have physical consequences. Many of the dzulu had taken sick, becoming extremely sensitive to light, and some of the Mighty had found their powers weakened even after nightfall. *Dawn-sickness*, the Firstborn were calling it now. Rumena had stepped in to handle the problem, but ending the duelling entirely had proved impossible even for it. Though respected, the Tomb-Maker remained a first among equals and not someone wielding the kind of largely uncontested authority a general would in the Legions or the Army of Callow. I'd eventually lost my patience and told sigil-holders that if they intended on pursuing this, it would be by my rules. Matches were now arranged by random draw between pairs of sigil-holders, and I'd informed them I would personally rip the Night out of anyone who tried to further debate the outcome after it was settled. And of anyone trying to pull this shit over watches when there were enemy within marching distance. Mighty Radenbog had seemed dubious of my ability to enforce this, when I made the announcement, so I left it to spend three days without so much as a speck of Night to call on.

After losing two toes to frostbite it was duly humbled when I returned its power.

"Now that Archer has ceased browbeating the Lord Adjutant, perhaps we could attend to more pressing matters?" Akua suggested in a sweet voice.

"That's *Lady* Archer to you, Bad Faith Wraith," Indrani replied, tone amused instead of heated.

That detail hadn't escaped Hakram's notice, I saw when I turned back to my informal council. I could almost hear the readjustments taking place behind that calm face, the questions the orc would keep a lid on until it was just the two of us.

"Akua's not wrong," I said. "We have a few hours until the drow can resume march, and at least two of them will have to be spent with the generals of the Third and Fourth getting everything in order. I want us with a clear course of action before that."

Letting the tent's flaps drop, I retreated back into the warmth and claimed a folding chair for myself. My staff remained propped up the cloth wall, its surface seemingly hazy for the closeness with the coal brazier close to hit. I accepted a cup of wine when Akua offered it, pleasantly surprised to find it Vale summer wine at the first sip. I inclined my head at her in thanks and she smirked back, raising her own cup. Indrani preferred plopping herself down atop the table to her folding chair, predictably, and Hakram remained standing. Like an officer giving report, I couldn't help but think.

"We're moving to link up with Juniper's columns," I said. "That much is not up to debate. But I need some context."

I met Hakram's gaze with a raised eyebrow.

"As in, specifically, what the Hells you and Vivienne were thinking marching most the Army of Callow into this mess," I said. "Why not just you and the Hunt, Hakram? You don't need forty thousand legionaries for an extraction."

"We had situations on our hands," Adjutant said. "We were going to have to come for the stranded Legions regardless, but complications grew quickly."

That they'd come for the legionaries Black had led into Procer I had no true issue with, as he'd well know. Aside from the utter waste of lives involved in letting the Dominion and the Principate run down some of the finest soldiers and commanders on Calernia on the eve of all-out war with Keter, there'd been other considerations. Like the fact that the Army of Callow had brought into its fold two of the old school Legions after Second Liesse, and that many of those officers had friends and kin in the stranded army. At the very least, mass discontent and desertions would have come of us doing nothing. Add to that the fact I'd personally given my word to Juniper that I'd intervene if it went bad for them, and it would have potentially made for a very ugly brew if Vivienne and Hakram had left Marshal Grem and his armies to die. On the other hand, there was a difference between putting together a rescue operation and fielding what had to be the majority of the Army of Callow in the middle of Proceran territory.

"Malicia is on the move," Akua softly said, "is she not?"

It did not sound like a guess, but then it never did with her.

"Indirectly," Hakram said. "High Lady Abreha of Aksum has been named the Imperial Governess of the Blessed Isle, and tasked with handling the refugee situation."

I frowned. I'd spoken with this particular highborn once before, after First Liesse. She's offered to back my petition to establish a ruling council over Callow if I killed the other Trueblood hostages I'd taken from then-Heiress Akua, immediately turning on her supposed allies when it became clear I had the upper hand. She'd later become the head of the so-called 'Moderates', after Malicia began methodically dismantling the Truebloods. The old Soninke was treacherous and no doubt just as dangerous as anyone capable of claiming a High Ladyship of Praes but I'd not considered her anything to be truly worried about. The Empress should be stepping on her as hard as she could, and while Aksum would still have mostly untouched household troops the High Lady Abreha did not have a reputation for military talent.

"Thalassina was vaporized, which means the Kebdana are done as a political entity in Praes for at least one generation," Akua mused. "Yet that would not be enough to make Abreha Mirembe a true threat. Which has fallen, Okoro or Foramen?"

There was a slight twitch to Hakram's jaw, the only visible hint coming through that he was impressed. He shouldn't be so surprised, I thought. Diabolist had been raised to drink and breathe Wasteland politics at the very highest level from the moment her monster of a mother had her set down in a cradle. It wasn't something anyone else on our side would be able to ever truly understand, at least not the way she did. Behind the golden eyes there were decades of learning about the tapestry of enmities and alliances that tied together the Dread Empire's aristocracy, pieces of knowledge that no one but those born to that hallowed birth would ever be made privy too. Adjutant would have to face the same truth I had, about Akua Sahelian: damned as she was beyond all redemption, she was terrifyingly *useful*.

"Foramen," Hakram said, eye on me and not Diabolist. "You tasked me to negotiate access to munitions and goblin steel, Catherine, and I have. The Kingdom of Callow has recognized the sovereignty of the Confederation of the Grey Eyries, including over the formerly Praesi city of Foramen."

I let out a low whistle.

"So the Matrons actually raised the rebel flag," I said. "I thought they'd wait until the very end, hedge their bets."

"We loaned them gold and armaments to incite them," Adjutant admitted. "Vivienne and I believed it was necessary to implement a containment strategy on Praes, after Malicia's wave of assassinations last year."

"The dwarven gold," I said, coming to the obvious conclusion. "So you did get it."

"Accounts were made open to us in Mercantis," he agreed. "We put them to good use. Our loans to the Matrons will be repaid in the good we want from them, namely their steel and munitions."

I nodded. Risky business, but it made a mess for Malicia to handle instead of the other way around for once. Besides, we needed the munitions if the Army of Callow's war doctrine – which took much from the Legions of Terror's own – was to remain fully usable. Without them, my entire sapper corps essentially lost its teeth.

"So why does Foramen falling make High Lady Abreha a problem for us?" I asked, flicking a glance at Akua.

"The goblins will have slaughtered every Banu they could get their hands on, which means two great families of Praes were destroyed in quick succession," Diabolist elaborated. "That will worry the others. Nok was sacked, and that will shake the faith of its High Lord in the Empress' authority. With Wolof in the hands of my dear cousin Sargon, which Malicia should own body and soul – perhaps even literally – and High Lady Takisha of Kahtan now sharing a border with the Matrons... Arguably, High Lady Abreha is now the second most powerful woman in Praes. Her holdings are untouched, her troops fresh, and her influence at its very apex. In olden times, this would be enough to make her the Chancellor."

"So Malicia sent her to the Blessed Isle, hoping she'd be trouble for us instead of her," I frowned.

"I would wager the intent to be cornering High Lady Abreha into acting against Callow and having her killed by our hand," Akua said, then dipped her head at Hakram. "I assume she reached out privately to Lady-Regent Dartwick with assurances that any such actions on Abreha's part would be against her own instructions?"

Hakram bared his fangs.

"And if we kill her, there will be no retribution," the orc said, tacitly agreeing to all she'd said.

I closed my eyes for a moment, putting it together. Then why had the Army of Callow come west instead of east, given that we now had an ambitious and dangerous High Lady at the eastern border? I didn't believe Hakram or Vivienne fools enough to strip Summerholm of its garrison for this, or that Juniper would have agreed to them doing so in the first, so at least the gate into central Callow would hold even if it was attacked by surprise. But what was the long-term solution to this mess that would be found in Iserre? They were coming for Grem One-Eye, after all, and – well, that would do it.

"You want to use the Legions of Terror loyal to Black as a bulwark between us and Malicia," I suddenly said, opening my eyes. "Grem and his legions to be put up on the Blessed Isle, I'm thinking, with a neat supply arrangement the crown would handle the grain part of."

"And more," Hakram said. "I have been speaking with the Clans willing to take my envoys. There are some who still remember the Steppes nearly bucked the Tower's rule, when Nefarious still reigned."

"Ah," Akua breathed out, sounding delighted. "Grem One-Eye, the orc who might have become the first Warlord since the Miezan occupation had he not

entered the Carrion's Lord service instead. You mean to encircle the Wasteland with greenskin realms, one of them unified behind the only orc alive that might feasibly be accepted as lord over all the clans."

It wasn't, I decide, that she enjoyed the thought of Praes losing such a significant part of its territory. She simply admired the elegant viciousness of the plan, surrounding a foe with a net of allied nations by calling on ties that Malicia had no claim to supersede.

"Vivienne's notion," Adjutant said. "She's working on Marshal Grem, though unless the Black Knight dies we're unlikely to convince him."

"So we can settle the entire eastern border, if it goes well," I said. "Which leaves us free to rebuild Callow in peace, and strike deals with the Grand Alliance. That's still what puzzles me, Hakram. Why so large a force here?"

"'cause they're twisting Cordelia's arm," Indrani drawled. "That about right, Deadhand?"

Her casual tone cut through the conversation, a sudden reminder that for all that she'd remained quiet and seemingly bored out of her skull until now she'd been paying attention. And as usual, she cut straight at the heart of the matter.

"You were gonna have to send *some* soldiers through anyway to get the Legions moving," Archer continued, "and would you look at that, it was going to be pretty close to Salia. Enough that she'd have to worry about a gate opening right at her doorstep, if you felt like being hard. So you thought, why not lean on the First Prince a bit?"

I stared at Hakram, who looked rather abashed. Or hungry. It'd been a while since I'd had to decipher the nuances of orc expressions.

"Two birds with a single stone," he conceded in a deep rumble. "It was to be a quick campaign, with perhaps a few skirmishes to blood our fresh recruits. Vivienne would offer a truce to the First Prince, conditional on surrendering the Legions to our custody, and along the implied threat of our presence we'd offer to return Prince Amadis to her. The Grand Alliance's armies would be free to move north unimpeded, and at your return you would find our borders secure and a blooded army ready to fight against the Dead King. We would have a strong position to push for the Liesse Accords in exchange for our assistance."

"And Black?" I asked, tone mild.

"Not in Proceran hands, as far as we know," Adjutant said. "And heroes are not so easily bargained with."

It'd been a neat, tidy plan that resolved most of Callow's issues in a single stroke. Malicia would be forced on the backfoot, the border at the Blessed Isle put in the hands of a famous general personally loyal to my father who'd already once ignored formal summons from the Empress and the Army of Callow's dangerously green soldiers would get a taste of campaigning in preparation for the horror that would be the war against Keter. It'd been even cleverer than they thought, as Cordelia Hasenbach making a truce with Callow would have allowed her to start buying armaments from the dwarves again. The

First Prince must be worrying about that, right about now. Given the amount of cheap steel their civil war would had brought to the surface the Proceran armies should be in no danger of running out of armaments anytime soon, but Hasenbach was far-sighted enough she'd realize she could not fight a long-term war against the Dead King without outside forges propping Procer up. She had three choices, broadly speaking: Callow, the League of Free Cities or the Kingdom Under. Given that two of them were barred as long as she was at war with me and the Tyrant was pulling the strings of the third? She'd see the writing on the wall. It'd been a solid plan, I had to give them that.

Only now instead of what they'd planned, the Army of Callow was split in half within Iserre while Proceran and Levantine armies surrounded it, having no way to take a fairy gate out until I got to it. We'd lost soldiers, the Grand Alliance had lost soldiers, and while all this chaos spread the Tyrant of Helike had been orchestrating his own schemes for his still-inscrutable purpose. Somewhere in the countryside my father was in the hands of the Grey Pilgrim, who would be drawn to any decisive battle between my armies and the Alliance's sure as dusk's coming. Add to that the way Masego had gone missing after witnessing sorcery horrifying enough to level most a city and a war fleet, promptly gotten his hands on the ruins of Liesse – quite possibly the most dangerous magical weapon of our age – and that he must be too hurt or confused to reach out to any of the Woe. This, I thought, was going to be a bloody mayhem of sprawling death and treachery. The kind that determined the path a continent was going to take in the years that followed.

"Well," I finally said. "This is going to get a little tricky."

"This is going to get a little tricky," Indrani cheerfully repeated. "Now *there*'s the title of your memoirs, Cat."

"I've always been partial to 'it got worse'," Hakram offered, the filthy traitor.

"Murder ensued," Akua tastefully suggested.

I glared but she just stared back at me, all smirking and insolence.

"You're all useless," I complained.

"Hakram's memoirs," Indrani grinned.

I gestured obscenely at her, which only had her chortling harder. Finally remembering I'd had a cup of wine on the table during this entire conversation, I snatched it and watered my parched throat. Gods, I'd missed actually being able to *enjoy* things.

"All right, then," I said. "Let's try to make a plan that doesn't end up dooming the entire continent."

"Cheers," Akua Sahelian smiled, raising her glass in answer.

# Chapter 20

# Bearings

> "It is best to count one's fingers after shaking hands with Praesi."
>
> Queen Rowena Alban of Callow

I'd never gotten the full story behind that scarf. Indrani almost never took it off, with the notable exception of when she was naked and otherwise occupied, and she'd been evasive about it when I'd asked. The weave was unusual, finer and tighter than I'd ever seen of Callowan cloth, but save for that there was nothing exceptional about the grey and green scarf. It was from Mercantis, she'd said, and a gift from the Ranger. The first thing she'd ever owned. Aside from those bare bones Indrani had never spoken a word of the matter and I knew better than to push. I was not without little pieces of my own, stolen moments and memories I would rather not have put under the scrutiny of another no matter how dear to me they were. Worn as the cloth was, it seemed one of the few possessions Archer actually cared for along with her monster of a longbow. That she was a wanderer to the bone was plain enough to see, standing before me with the sum of her earthly belongings as she was. Blades, bow, a leather satchel and the clothes on her back. She neither needed nor particularly wanted more than that. A strange thought, to me. I'd not acquired a taste for luxury even after taking the crown, but having a place of my own – a home – and some comforts in it had always seemed natural. Something everyone would want.

I supposed I'd just have to make those rooms a little larger, for whenever my vagrant of a friend came back.

"Snow's crisp," Indrani said. "Wind's calm. Good night for a stroll."

"I'd tell you to be careful," I said, "but somehow I don't see that happening."

Tugging down her scarf to flash an admittedly roguish smile, Archer winked at me. This was not, I decided, in the least reassuring.

"I'll be the very soul of prudence," she lied.

Leaving me to stand leaning on my staff, she quickly darted across the snow to take Hakram's shoulder in hand. Half a hug, a rough display of affection.

"Keep an eye on them, Hakram," she said, without a hint of irony. "You know how careless they get without me around to chaperone."

Adjutant leaned down to gently knock his forehead against her own. Neck angled a little to the side, I noted, as to allow for Indrani to rip open his throat with her fangs were she an orc. A display of trust and kinship, the kind orcs usually reserved for their close family.

"If you die, I've staked a claim on your bow," he told her.

That startled a laugh out of her, along with jeering about how he was supposed to shoot anything when he kept dropping hands all over the place. Akua was standing a little to the side of them, high-collared dress of pale and gold sweeping down to her feet. For all the apparent slenderness of the cloth, she was unaffected by the chill of the night. Indrani clapped her shoulder amicably, which the shade allowed with a fondly tolerant smile.

"You know, since I'm leaving-" Archer began.

Diabolist sighed.

"Fine," she conceded. "Look your fill."

Indrani's brow rose in surprise, then she grinned eagerly. Did I even want to know? A heartbeat passed, and Akua did not move.

"You're still wearing clothes," Archer pointed out, sounding a little cheated.

"According to certain interpretations of Trismegistan theory, I am in fact naked at all times," the shade drily replied.

"Praesi treachery," Indrani cursed.

Adjutant's silhouette loomed tall at my side, the orc calmly studying the scene. Lingering on the smile that came easy to Archer's lips, the almost mellow way Diabolist stood even when so close to her. The last time he'd seen the two of them together, I thought, Indrani had suggested firing arrows at Akua for sport. *Before the Everdark*, I thought, but that was only part of it. *Before Great Strycht*, in truth, and the choices made there. Hakram had not been part of those dark hours, and might not understand the ties they had forged. Vivienne, I considered, almost certainly would not. The musings were set aside when Archer finished her usual ritual of taunts and insults with Diabolist, nonchalantly returning to me. She hesitated and I went rifling through my cloak, fingers emerging tightened around a silver flask I tossed at her. Nimbly snatching it out of the air, she cocked an eyebrow at me.

"Iserran brandy," I lied.

It was, in fact, the foulest-tasting belt of drow *senna* I'd been able to get my hands on. Hopefully she'd choke on the muddy taste of the mushroom-made liquor while expecting a smooth Proceran distillate. That ought to teach her covers were not to be hogged when it was this cold out and your queen was very much mortal again.

"But I didn't get you anything," she pouted, putting away the flask even as she did.

"That's quite-"

I could have struggled and perhaps even blocked her, but when she put a hand on my waist and dipped me backwards I decided to allow Indrani her way. The kiss was rough, though in a way she knew I liked, and the warmth of her was stirring.

"There," she said, after withdrawing.

I coughed to hide my breath was a little uneven.

"There," I very eloquently agreed.

Her hand remained on my shoulder and she met my eyes, this time with serious mien.

"I'll find him, Cat," Indrani said. "Bring him home in one piece."

I nodded, just as serious.

"If one of us can, it's you," I replied. "I'll be expecting the both of you back."

"You've gotten so demanding since they put a crown on your head," Indrani snorted.

This time we parted for good, and with a casual wave of the hand at all of us she began her trek into the snow. Under the last sliver of the warning moon I watched her leave to recover Masego. Hakram and Akua came to stand at my sides, flanking me in shared silence until finally I breathed out.

"Come on," I said. "Adjutant, I want to show you something."

I glanced at Diabolist, who nodded back. Good, it was about time I had a close look at the well I'd charged her to gather.

—

I could feel the slow, constant pulse of the Night even from over fifty feet away.

Akua had put up comprehensive layers of wards around the tent, but that much accumulated power could never be entirely hidden. To me, who stood First Under the Night, it was like feeling a warm whisper of wind against my skin. Diabolist's eyes looked brighter, her body more… tangible the closer we came, but it was Hakram's reaction that interested me. He was the only one of the three of us who truly still bore a Name, after all. I could see in the way he straightened his back and free his hand from encumbrance that he was feeling *something*, at least. He met my gaze uneasily.

"There's a scent in the air," he gravelled. "Like coolness and dark."

"Sharp nose," Diabolist said, and she ushered us into her workshop.

I'd only been in here once before, at the start, and when the well had barely even taken shape. This was rather more advanced, I thought. Field conditions were no friend to the kind of precision work mages of Akua and Masego's favoured at the exclusion of almost all else, but Diabolist had made do on the road. The ground beneath the tent was bereft of snow and had been glassed by a Mighty's flame to be perfectly level. The shade glared at us when we entered until we rid our boots of the worst of the snow, and she went through a pack to retrieve cloths for us to wipe them entirely clean afterwards. Akua herself almost danced to the side of the artefact she was constructing, steps light and

elated like a girl at her first summer fair. Adjutant's eyes remained peeled on the well for a long moment, until he let out a shuddering breath.

"What," he said, "exactly is that?"

"Our answer to the Grey Pilgrim," I said.

In a sardonic bit of humour Akua had actually built it to look like a wishing well, though one held up above the floor by four curved supports of lead. Lead, I had learned from my recent studies, held strong properties of stability and grounding if never touched by fire. Held up by those supports was a disc of polished onyx, and from that bottom rose the shape of a well. Shards of obsidian bound together by thin strands of copper – there was, allegedly, no better metal for bridging – made up a glittering octagon, though several large swaths of the side were still empty. Above the well itself, two slender pillars of amethyst-studded copper held up a quaint little angled roof. The roof itself was made of the same obsidian-and-copper assembly as the well, though compared to the octagon the progress made in filling it was farther along. Unsurprising: every shard from the well contained the full exertion of a Mighty's Night from dusk till dawn, but the roof held only the same by sigil-holders.

"At this pace, the main body will be finished within seven nights," Diabolist said. "The upper receptacles-"

"Roof," I drily said. "She means roof."

"- will take within twenty to thirty nights," she finished, as if I had never spoken. "Though the artefact itself will be functional after the upper receptacles are half-filled, which will be achieved two dawns from now."

"Won't be as strong, though," I said.

"Which would only be an issue if you meant to directly oppose a foe's miracles," Akua said.

Hakram stepped forward hesitantly, boots crisply sounding against the floor. He leaned over the roof, thickly-ridged brow knotting.

"I recognize some of this," he said. "Praesi sorcery."

Diabolist let out a pleased little noise.

"Indeed," she said. "The underlying structure is Trismegistan, of course, though I required some… consultation with Sve Noc before I could properly account for the properties of the Night."

"And what does it *do*?" Adjutant asked.

I began moving forward, then suddenly stopped. My staff had begun to pulse, the Night I had woven within beckoned by Akua's much more complex creation. Unwilling to risk the power still sleeping inside, I propped it up against the side of the tent and limped forward instead. Hakram extended an arm without a word, and I gratefully leaned on it. Fingers tracing the obsidian of the roof, I drew his attention to three symbols in Crepuscular carved on the frame. They reappeared in the patterns, over and over again.

"Years ago, when we were still kids playing war games in the Tower's shadow, I had a talk with Kilian," I said. "I told her that Juniper was actually pre-

dictable, in a way, because if she had all the information she nearly always made the right choice."

I smiled, almost melancholy at the memory of those simpler days.

"Presumptuous of me to say, as she proved in swift order, but I learned to temper the principle," I said. "But for this? Oh, I know how they're going to swing at us. They tipped their hand at the Battle of the Camps, Hakram. They have one tool that could *really* cripple us, so it's a near-certainty it'll be used."

"And so you prepared an answer," Adjutant said.

I ran my thumb against the three symbols. One did not need to know Crepuscular, to glimpse their meaning, for the written language of the drow could sometimes be of obvious meanings. The sun rampant, the sun halved, the sun veiled.

"So we prepared an answer," I softly agreed.

We left Akua to her toil, after that, filling a well I hoped would not be needed. Yet, as with the sword I had been leaning on in the shape of a staff, I was not certain I would have a choice.

Waste of wastes, but what else could I do?

—

Marching across Iserre with an army of near seventy thousand, even if fifty thousand of those were drow, was not a quick or quiet affair. The Fourth and Third had been put through twin ringers of constant pursuit and assault, and to be frank both had been reaching the end of their rope. Yet I couldn't afford to slacken our march, either, as drow scouts began reporting that the Levantine army we'd fought the vanguard of at Sarcella was on our tail. Still more than a week behind us, but the reason for that delay became clear when reports of banners not of the Dominion emerged: they'd had Principate reinforcements. Either southern levies hastily put together, or more dangerously the border army of twenty-thousand the First Prince had garrisoned in Tenerife to discourage incursion by the League. Which meant Kairos and his allies had let the lot of them through, because they shouldn't have had the strength to push back a determined League force. If it truly was Hasenbach's southern army, that was bad news indeed. Those would be professional soldiers, in majority, that the First Prince had judged would be able to either slow or turn back an invasion by the entire League of Free Cities. They wouldn't be pushovers, or peasants with spears.

The forced halt of several hours every dawn further complicated our advance, as it needed to be compensated for by marching after nightfall if we didn't want to lose almost a third of the day's march. The Firstborn significantly quickened after dusk, of course, but my legionaries most definitely did not. The disjointed peaks made planning awkward, especially as I was wary of simply sending a significant drow force ahead: we were headed into contested grounds, now. A force of five thousand Firstborn caught just after dawn by Levantine or Proceran cavalry would be severely bled, and sending a legionary escort with them would defeat the entire purpose of the exercise. There was

no obvious fix to the issue, and none of my three current generals – Abigail, Bagram, Rumena – suggested a feasible alternative. We'd just have to awkwardly force our way forward as fast as we could, hoping we'd get to Juniper before the opposition did.

It was a mere six days after the Fourth was brought back into the fold that we ran into our first enemy outriders.

"Proceran," General Bagram opined. "Alamans, at a guess. The Arlesites tend to carry javelins."

Adjutant grunted in agreement. The Fourth had taken the front, today, so it was them who'd sent for me when riders were seen on the horizon. The two of them were on foot, which given that I was seated atop Zombie meant for once I towered taller than either of them.

"That's at least sixty horsemen," I noted, shielding my eyes from the sun with my hand. "Screening company, you think?"

"Seems likely," Bagram said. "Finally good news, eh?"

I nodded thoughtfully. The riders were to our northwest, and if they'd been sent there to watch four our advance it meant we were getting close to Juniper's position. It also meant, though, that the northern armies of the Dominion and Procer were close enough to the Hellhound that were keeping an eye out for sudden reinforcements to her position. *So we're not the only ones at your gate, Juniper*, I thought.

"No point in sending foot after them," Adjutant said. "They'd be long gone by the time any legionary got there."

"So we don't send legionaries," I replied. "One of you get a message to General Rumena, I want the Losara Sigil to send a warband in pursuit immediately."

"Even light foot won't catch up to horse," General Bagram told me as delicately as an orc could, which wasn't very.

I forced down the sharp swell of irritation.

"No, General Bagram, during the day it will not," I flatly said. "Should the horsemen rest at night, however, the Firstborn might very well catch them by surprise if they begin pursuing right now."

I must not have hidden my annoyance completely, because Bagram saluted and promptly volunteered to speak with Rumena himself. He wasn't a bad commander, I knew. More experienced than any of my Rat Company officers, he'd been the second of General Istrid for decades and effectively run her general staff while she fought on the frontlines. But he wasn't one of mine: he was one of Black's people, in some deep manner. From Black's crop of soldiers shaped by my teacher's own decades of war. Bagram would not trust my judgement the way Juniper or Nauk would have. I was, in his eyes, still very much the Carrion's Lord apprentice. A promising successor but not my teacher's equal.

"The temper's back, at least," Hakram amusedly said.

I glared at him.

"He might as well have called me an idiot," I retorted.

"He's fresh to your service," Adjutant said. "And a hint of fang will be good for your relationship. Bagram was second to Istrid Knightsbane, a hard look won't offend him."

I grunted, somewhat mollified.

"It's better now," Adjutant pensively said. "When your hackles go up, it's still *you*. Not Winter hunger with a Foundling shape to it."

I glanced away.

"That was me too, Hakram," I said. "Just with large enough a hammer everything looked like a nail."

"It was you on a dark day that never quite passed," the orc disagreed, head shaking in slight disagreement. "And whispers in your ear. You handled it better than most would have, but the marks were there."

"You never said anything," I frowned.

"You were drinking *aragh* like water, at the start," Hakram said. "But you got it under control after some prodding. That meant you weren't frozen, just slowed. I was willing to wait."

My fingers clenched.

"Maybe you shouldn't have," I said.

"It didn't make you worse, Catherine," Adjutant said. "Jagged edges, true, but those weren't sunny days. Jagged kept a lot of people breathing."

"Killed just as many," I said.

Adjutant turned to me, the glare of the sun casting shadows like scar across his leathery face. The dark, deep-set eyes were as serene as I'd always known them to be.

"You did what needed doing," Hakram Deadhand said. "It wasn't all pretty, and most won't thank you for it. But you kept Callow standing until it could stand, and even with Winter in your soul it was a peace you strove for."

He bared a thin stripe of ivory fangs, chidingly.

"It's a gentle sort of tyranny, by my reckoning, that you would name the worst of you," he said.

I released the grip on my reins, slowly.

"It's a little uncanny, sometimes," I said. "The way you always know what to say."

His fangs clicked amusedly.

"That is who we are," Adjutant simply said.

I stroked Zombie's mane and spurred her slightly, enough that she danced to the side and my leg grazed his side. We stayed there for a while, watching the riders on the horizon, until he spoke up again.

"So," he said. "Archer?"

I cocked my head to the side.

"I know there's a risk in sending her after Masego when there's heroes on the prowl, to the both of us, but-"

"You are letting her leave to return with a victory," Hakram interrupted in a rumbling voice, "and sending a trusted and powerful Named after what could

be a disastrous trouble. I'm well aware, Cat. As you are that I wasn't asking about that at all."

I cleared my throat.

"Surprised you waited this long to ask," I said.

"Wasn't entirely sure until the farewell display," the orc admitted. "You two have always been…"

Yeah, he didn't really need to elaborate on that. For both our sakes, really.

"It's a thing," I said. "That is happening. On occasion."

"But not," Hakram said, "too frequently?"

"We're not involved, if that's what you're asking," I said.

"Ah," he hummed. "Unusual, for you."

He didn't ask the question, only leaving the door open to elaborate if I felt like it. Gods, I'd missed him.

"I'm in the middle of a continent-wide war," I eventually said. "Romance isn't exactly a priority."

"But," Hakram said.

"Might be something I want eventually," I shrugged. "Won't be anytime soon, or with her. We know where we stand, and regardless there's the… Masego situation."

"That's been hard to get a read on," the orc said.

"Like watching denial and obliviousness waltz," I snorted. "Though I have to wonder how much of those there really are, when it comes down to it."

Masego had his habits, but he wasn't exactly blind. Mostly he missed cues, or misread the reasons for things – I suspected his upbringing hadn't helped, both because of the men who'd raised him and the environment they'd raised him in. I could hardly think of a more terrifyingly frustrating place for a boy who'd had difficulty understanding others than Praesi aristocratic circles. When it came to the Woe he tended to catch onto things fairly well, and ask when he thought he was missing something. And he'd asked me to take care of Indrani before leaving for Thalassina, noting her to be upset. As for Indrani, well, what she said and what she thought weren't always the same thing. Especially when it came to what she considered shamefully soft attachments, like admitting she loved people who loved her. *Fucking Ranger*, I uncharitably thought.

"I don't think it would be an issue if we kept doing this after we're all back together," I finally added.

Hakram bowed his head in agreement.

"Tell me you're not sleeping with the other one, at least," he gravelled.

I choked.

"Akua?" I protested. "*Gods* no. I mean, don't get me wrong, just look at her-"

"You often do," the orc said. "Though I don't see the appeal, to be honest. She's dangerous, I suppose, but all soft and fleshy."

"Those can, uh, be good things," I muttered. "But she's still Akua, Hakram."

"I am aware," Adjutant said. "But I wonder if that means the same thing it used to, Cat. For you, at least, and perhaps Indrani."

"This the softer predecessor of the crucible Vivienne is going to put me through?" I said, a tad sharply.

The orc shook his head.

"I wasn't down there," he said. "You will have reasons for this, though you haven't shared them. I want to know where we stand with her, that's all."

Silence reigned, for a long moment.

"I am no longer bound by the oath to kill her," I acknowledged.

"But," Hakram said.

"One hundred thousand souls," I said. "There has to be a price for that."

He slowly nodded.

"Until then, she is to be Akua," the orc murmured. "Not the Doom of Liesse."

I did not reply. I did not need to.

—

Before dawn, Ivah came back with four survivors from the Proceran outriders. We were two days' march away from Juniper, which was pleasing.

The enemy had beaten us there, which was not.

# Chapter 21

# Intervention

> "Even madmen can win at dice."
>
> Callowan saying

General Abigail rode poorly, though that was hardly a surprise. Most of my army was no better. Given that it was in majority Callowan, that was somewhat shameful: my people had once held a reputation for breeding the finest war horses on Calernia and riding them into battle with distinguished record. That'd been before the Conquest, though. A lot of Old Kingdom noble families had preferred butchering their own herds to turning them over to the Tower, and Black famously almost had an uprising on his hands when he moved to obtain horses from the mostly-untouched south of the kingdom. It was one of the few times my teacher had actually backed down. In practice, the old expectation that anyone of means as well as anyone of high birth would be able to ride with a lance had died out under the decades of occupation. A large part of what had birthed that custom in the first place was gone, namely the need for a large pool of trained mounted soldiers to fill the ranks should the Wasteland invade, but in my eyes the real culprit had been the lack of such mounts to be had.

What few war horses had remained were either closely kept by the last of the Callowan aristocracy or by law set aside for the use of the Legions of Terror – in specific the Thirteenth, which had been raised from Callowan bandits and rebels in the first place. Ratface had once told me, years ago, that for the smugglers who could pull it off selling a horse was about as profitable as selling the equivalent weight in spices. Wasteland aristocrats were willing to pay ludicrous sums for a purebred Liesse charger or even a dappled Vale courser. That'd been the thought, anyway, that the old herds and ways were gone. There'd been some satisfaction in the fact the knightly orders might be lost but at least they weren't under Praesi banners, the kind of bittersweet victory that'd been rare after the Conquest and so even more dearly savoured. But then the Order the Broken Bells had crawled out of the chaos of the Arcadian Campaign, and given

time it might spread that knowledge again. A pretty, thought, though in the present it wasn't making either mounts or skilled riders appear out of thin air.

"Ghastly beasts, I'll tell no lie," Abigail of Summerholm muttered, eyeing her mount with distrust. "Bit unnatural, if you ask me."

The horses I'd confiscated from the four thousand *kataphraktoi* numbered more than that. Less than military wisdom would have dictated a field force of cavalry should take with them, but six thousand horses was nothing to sneer at. Hakram had speculated that considering they weren't moving with a remount for every cataphract they might just have a field camp somewhere in Iserre where the rest were being kept, but we'd had no time to look into it. Out of sheer practicality we'd already had to butcher a thousand of those no doubt very expensive mounts, which at least had put the orcs of the Third and Fourth in a rather good mood – fresh meat was a delicacy, out on campaign. But we'd also more than enough left for what might be considered luxury, namely mounting large contingents of messengers and officers. The matter was further complicated by the fact that horses not specifically trained out of it tended to panic around greenskins, but the humans in the general staffs had gained mount at least.

"You get used to it," I said. "Though it's been some time since I last rode a living mount, I'll admit."

I fondly stroked the rough coat of Zombie the Fifth and received a pleased exhale from the Helikean horse in reply. Zombie the Third was currently being punished by dragging a cart, which looked rather absurd for a winged horse and I knew she very much despised doing. The crime she was atoning for was that this morning I'd found *someone* had caved in the head, ribs and spine of Zombie the Fourth. She'd tried to look innocent, the wretch, but unless there was another hooved creature in my army jealous of my attentions then I had my culprit. Apparently you could take the Winter necromancy out of the fae horse, but actually you couldn't and it would keep that vicious temperament forever.

"If you try to shake me off again I'll have you made into boots," General Abigail whispered, glaring at her horse and apparently under the impression I couldn't hear her. "You know what? That's your name now. Boots. How do you like that, *Boots*?"

Boots proceeded forward at an indifferent trot and I cleared my throat. The black-haired woman paled, reminded of my presence.

"I, uh, agree Your Majesty," she hastily said.

I sighed. She hadn't listened to what I was said in the slightest, had she?

"Oh, good," I airily replied, offering her a smile. "Then I expect it'll be done within the hour."

I enjoyed the panic that seeped into her eyes a little too much.

"Is that," she tried, "customary?"

Trying to find out what she'd agreed to by context. My long experience of pretending I already knew things while getting Masego to explain them allowed

me to see through her admittedly pretty translucent wiles.

"In Ashur, I'd assume," I gravely said.

"Yes," she slowly said. "That is... well-known."

"You can tell Adjutant you're in need of our maritime charts for the Tyrian Sea," I continued. "Gods be with you, Admiral Abigail."

She let out a little whimper, which she tried to pass off as a cough. Then she stilled.

"We don't have a border with the Tyrian Sea," she realized. "Or a fleet."

"Which will lend you the element of surprise," I mused.

"Queens aren't supposed to have people on," General Abigail plaintively said.

I hid my smile by looking away.

"Call it royal prerogative," I replied, then took mercy on her and changed the subject. "What do you think of your new officers?"

"The transfers from the Fourth are all old hands from the Legions," the blue-eyed woman said. "To be entirely honest they didn't need much settling, Your Majesty. And Legate Samid could do my job better than me, if you let him."

*Legate Samid served for fifteen years under General Afolabi, a Wasteland aristocrat, and first enrolled in the Legions at the beginning of Black's tenure as the captain of Malicia's armies*, I thought. *His loyalties are rather more complex than yours, my dear.*

"Then learn from him," I said. "And take his advice, when it has good sense."

I'd ignored the implied offer to step down from her generalship and resume her legate duties, as I had the last five times she'd indirectly broached the subject. And would keep doing. Talented Callowan candidates for a general's mantle didn't grow on trees, much less those with no ties to any of the factions in my court. An abdication was a tricky matter even when a dynasty was stable, and considering mine consisted of me and a tumultuous reign of less than five years I hardly qualified. A popular Callowan general with a distinguished war record and no real ambition for power would go a long way in stabilizing what would follow in my wake. I set aside the thought for now. It was too early to tell if Abigail of Summerholm could really be used in that manner, and pushing too hard too fast would only spoil the broth.

"I won't know the first thing about fighting heroes, ma'am," General Abigail said.

"I've killed more than a few and I barely do," I shrugged. "Besides, ideally we won't be killing anyone."

"That's, uh, not the sentiment I expected to hear," the black-haired general said.

"Any corpse we make down here is one less warm body to throw at the Dead King, Abigail," I said. "And heroes, well, we'll need more than a few of those to drive the Hidden Horror back into hiding."

"Into hiding," she slowly said. "Not to kill."

"You ever seen a god die, General Abigail?" I said.

She shivered.

"Can't say I have, ma'am," she replied, lips tight.

"Neither have I," I said, "but I suspect it would be *messy* business. Best we know our limitations, and not bargain for more than we can deliver."

"I hear that," General Abigail muttered.

About time to segue into more personal matters, I mused. I'd taken to digging into her past, when the opportunity rose, though what I'd learned was as amusing as it was appalling. Inquiried about her family had let to *'My Ma brewed, and what Pa didn't drink we sold*.' An open-ended question about why she'd enrolled had led to *'Our place in Summerholm burned down, and all respect Your Majesty but have you ever smelled a tannery?*' I'd been about to ask about the orc tribune – Krolem, his name was, I'd had Hakram look into him – that she brought with her everywhere when movement caught my attention at the corner of my eye. Enemy outriders? No, I saw as I squinted, some of our own scouts. The Third Army was at the head of the column for the day's march, and with my personal banner being raised along with its own the scout officers were likely to head here for their first report. I'd not expected anything from them for some time, to be honest. Our best guess had Juniper's camp half a day away, further west along the frozen river we were following.

"Unusual," I said.

The general followed my gaze, but said nothing.

"Come on," I decided. "We're headed to the front of the column."

I spurred Zombie the Fifth forward, peeling off from the side of the Third Army and outpacing the marching legionaries. Abigail followed more slowly, hissing curses at her uncooperative mount I pretended not to hear. It wasn't a full scouting line, I saw as I approached. Only a tenth, all goblins, with the line's sergeant among them. *Whatever they saw*, I thought*, it was urgent enough they backtracked.* I reined in my horse a dozen feet ahead of the front of my column, slowing him to a trot to remain ahead as the goblins approached. Abigail arrived just before they did, legs so tight against her saddle I winced to think of the cramps she'd have tonight. The sergeant – stringy, small and more yellow than green, the ritual scarring around her lips lending her a grisly touch – came forward and saluted.

"Your Majesty," she said. "Sergeant Hurdler, reporting."

"At ease, sergeant," I replied.

I glanced at Abigail and saw she'd mostly composed herself. Good enough.

"You're back earlier than expected," I said. "Your report?"

"Whatever we got out of the Procerans, it was inaccurate," the goblin said. "The Hellhound's camp is about half a bell ahead, and when Lieutenant Reeler sent us back battle was already being given."

*Shit*, I thought. There were hills to the west of us, split in the middle by the river our maps called the Odelle. Not all that tall, but enough they'd cut

our line of sight. *It makes sense*, I grimly conceded. Juniper would want hills on one of her flanks if she could, knowing she'd be outnumbered in a battle.

"Battle," I said. "Elaborate, sergeant."

"Marshal Juniper raised a fortified camp on both sides of the river banks," Hurdler said. "An army of Levantines and Procerans was assaulting the northern bank, last I saw."

"Which was?" I pressed.

"A little over an hour," the goblin said. "We could see from the taller hills."

Fuck. I'd bet on Juniper against most generals, and on Grem One-Eye against the few left, but they wouldn't just be fighting mortals. There would be heroes, and if what Hakram had told me about Vivienne was true then Juniper wouldn't have any Named to pit against them. The Pilgrim alone might be driven back by the Wild Hunt, but the Saint? Laurence de Montfort had already proved she could savage the lot of them singlehandedly. Our Proceran prisoners had told us about cavalry skirmishes and ambushes, not a pitched battle over the camp. The enemy had moved quicker than we'd anticipated. My fingers clenched and I leaned back against my saddle, turning my face to the sky. I whistled, loudly.

"Ma'am?" Sergeant Hurdler said.

"Pass your report along to General Bagram and Lord Adjutant immediately," I told her. "Dismissed, sergeant."

She saluted, and left dragging along her exhausted scouts.

"General Abigail," I said.

The blue-eyed Callowan was watching me warily.

"Your Majesty," she replied.

"The Third Army is to march on those hills as quickly as you can make it," I said, the staff in my grasp twirling to point at the slopes to the west. "You're to fly the Third's banner from the tallest hills. Send a messenger to Bagram, and fly the Fourth's as well."

"And General Bagram is to follow?" she asked.

"Pass this along to Hakram: Five Armies and One," I said.

"That's all?" Abigail blinked.

"It's enough," I amusedly replied.

"And you, ma'am?" she asked.

I glanced up, and saw exactly what I'd been waiting for.

"I'll be going ahead," I said.

In a splash of snow, Zombie the Third landed right in front of me. Wings still unfolded, she celebrated her release from punishment with a smug little canter. I gesture for one of the legionaries in the front rank to approach, some beardless boy who looked almost too small for his armour. I passed him my living mount's reins and instructed him to lead it back to our supply train, but paused when I caught the sun glinting off his helm.

"Your name?" I asked.

"Edgar, ma'am," he replied, sounding too young and too awed. "Of Laure."

"Are you?" I smiled, and flicked a glance at Abigail. "Good, it wouldn't do to have the Summerholm folk take all the glory. I'll be needing to borrow your helmet, Edgar."

The boy's eyes widened in surprise, but he fumbled at the clasps and held it up like an offering. I set it under my arm, pulling my loose hair back into a ponytail with the leather tongue I still carried in my cloak. The legionary helmet settled on my head with a comfortingly familiar weight. I winked at Edgar.

"Last time I was on a field and royalty went without one of those, I had them shot," I said.

The boy choked, and I grinned before limping to Zombie's side, waiting until she'd folded her wings to hoist myself atop her. I turned to Abigail.

"See to it he gets another before battle, would you?" I told her, dipping my head towards the kid.

"I will," General Abigail nodded. "Should I be asked your intent, Your Majesty, what should I say?"

I mulled over that as my mount spread her wings.

"I'm going to make a point, General," I said. "Tactfully."

I spurred on my winged mount and she raced ahead, leaping up and rising to the beat of long wings. We rose and rose and rose, high into the sky, until the sun was warming my bones and I judged the height was sufficient. The time for quiet was over, I thought. Night flooded my veins, sluggish under the glare of day, but it was enough to rip open an inky-black gate into Arcadia. Below us, as it happened. We dove through the gate into the realm of the fae. Sunny skies awaited us on the other side, the Summer sun's disapproving light upon us, but what did we care? There was only the endless blue firmament and the descent, Zombie responding to the nudges of my knees and adjusting the angle so we would tumble through the destination I could feel in the back of my mind.

I pressed close against her back, cloak trailing behind me, and squinted against the howling air. My staff of ebony I clutched tightly, until I could feel the point the needle was to emerge from the cloth. Beneath us was spread out a fortress, banners of neither Court I had known raised tall over pale walls, and cries sounded at our approach. The tallest tower, I saw, was our gate out. The very summit. I grimaced. Well, too late to hesitate. Down, down, down, until I could almost make out the faces of the fae jousting in the courtyard below, laden with silks and elaborate armaments. My staff rose and sluggishly the gate out ripped itself open atop the tower. We plunged through narrowly, and in the beat that followed found ourselves diving through fresh skies.

The cool air of Procer whistled around me as the gate closed, and we joined the battle unfolding below.

It was a bloody mess that I witness sprawling out beneath me. I'd been afraid that the northern Levantines and Principate reinforcements had somehow managed to steal a march, but by the looks of it they hadn't. Not exactly. In the distance I could see columns of soldiers heading south, spread out like

glittering snakes of steel. This was a vanguard, not the full host. That'd be reassuring, though, if Juniper actually looked to be *winning*. The Army of Callow and the Legions under Marshal Grem had raised a fortified camp across the two banks of the frozen River Odelle, not only palisades but earthen ramparts and even platforms for their siege engines. The northern part of that camp, however, was a wreck. What must have been flat grounds once was now a disaster of collapsed tunnels, the outskirts of which were being fought over by legionaries and Levantine foot. The Hellhound had dug under her own camp, I thought. It would have taken goblins to do this much damage so swiftly. Odds were she'd meant to bait the enemy into the northern bank and then collapse it on them, possibly with munitions thrown in to make it a crippling blow. Something had gone wrong, though, because among the havoc I saw more of our dead than the enemy's.

Our side was stuck in fighting retreat to the southern bank fortifications, but the legionaries were getting the bad end of that scrap – on uneven grounds, the lightly-armored Levantines were proving much more effective. Many of them carried javelins, I saw, and those were death on even good armour when properly thrown. Even when not, they turned shields useless by sticking in them. It wasn't the kind of fight the reformed Legions of Terror had been built for, and the Army of Callow was daughter to that institution. The Order of Broken Bells was out on the left flank, but *too* far out: they'd been baited into pursuing lighter Levantine cavalry, by the looks of it. But it was on the right that disaster loomed. Proceran horse, a force at least seven thousand strong and advancing at a trot. I'd put my hand to fire it'd held back until now, and I could see why: if it charged down the Odelle, as it was moving to do, it would neatly cut the retreat of the legionaries fighting their way out of the wreckage. There'd been palisades put over the ice, Juniper wasn't an amateur, but they'd been shattered beyond repair by something and sappers were struggling to raise fresh ones. They wouldn't make it in time, I assessed. Not something solid enough to resist a hard charge by seven thousand hardened Proceran mounted killers.

Someone had hit my side exactly where they needed to for this to turn into a debacle, and I had my suspicions as to who. I wasn't seeing the Pilgrim or the Saint anywhere but that hardly meant they weren't there. Yet this could still be salvaged, I decided. If the legionaries in the wreckage didn't get cut off, most of them should make it to the southern bank and then the siege engines would stop the enemy advance cold. Which meant that seven thousand horse had to be turned back. I worried my lip but pressed my knees against Zombie's side and she angled her glide down to land ahead of the Proceran cavalry. Making the fairy gates hadn't put me out of commission, but I wasn't exactly fresh anymore either. I wouldn't be able to pull a second Sarcella today, of that much I was certain, even if heroes decided not to interfere. Calling on a few vicious Night tricks might slow down the enemy, but I'd burn out long before I could make a real dent in seven thousand horsemen.

Five hundred feet before the enemy, Zombie's hooves skimmed the surface of the cold field and left long spouts of snow like wings as she landed. I watched the Proceran banners trail in the breeze far ahead of me, vivid coloured stripes flying high above rows and rows of steel-clad soldiers. Some of those I had seen on the pages of ancient volumes. The red lion of Valencis, the strange green dragonfly of Lange. Other symbols I did not: a long-haired maiden clutching bow and arrows, a bronze wheel atop a pale column.

Four hundred feet.

One I had seen before with my own eyes, I realized, and not so long ago: a scarlet salamander on flaxen bed, the arms of Aequitan. The detail startled a laugh out of me. An old acquaintance was among them, then. Borrowed helm glinting in the sun, I twirled my staff and leaned forward. No miracle of Night came. Instead, using the length of ebony wood I traced a line in the snow ahead of me.

Three hundred feet.

Watching seven thousand killers ride towards me with no sign of slowing, I did the only reasonable thing left to me and went looking through my cloak. I snapped my wrist, black flame flickered, and I pulled at my pipe. I inhaled the wakeleaf with a little sigh of pleasure and breathed out a long stream of smoke.

Two hundred feet.

I grinned, broad and sharp and just a little mad. Now, the thing was, if it came to a scrap they might just kill me. They knew that. I knew that. Yet here I was, unmoving.

One hundred feet.

Catherine Foundling, out of breath and out of her depth, would be swept aside with a warlike shout. They weren't facing that girl, though, were they? They were facing the Black Queen, the warlord who'd slain fae and bound them to her service. The monster who'd brought down the sky at the Battle of the Camps, faced a band of heroes alone and raised a lake's worth of dead. They were facing every dark rumour I'd ever had put to my name, after watching me dive out of a pitch-black portal on a dead fae horse. And sure, odds were I was mad. Gone the way of the Old Tyrants, drunk on power.

But, a little voice would be whispering, what if I *wasn't*?

I grinned, and smoked my pipe.

Fifty feet.

They flinched first.

# Chapter 22

# Standoffs

> "One hundred sixty nine: any companion volunteering to stay behind and hold off a superior enemy will be guaranteed success, twice over if having already taken a mortal wound."
>
> "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

It was like watching the sea split.

Even at the measured pace they'd been keeping fifty feet was too close for them to outright end the charge. There were seven thousand of them, and though they weren't tightly packed those kinds of numbers had weight and momentum – that was what made cavalry charged so dangerous in the first place. No, stopping wasn't in the cards, so instead the Proceran wheeled to the sides. It was beautiful display of horsemanship, the kind of skill I might have applauded were it not the work of soldiers still intent on killing mine. I kept a calm eye on the proceedings to see if any of the riders were crossing the line I'd traced in the snow, but whoever had called them back had pulled the leash in full: as if held back by an invisible wall, the stream of riders spread out on the sides but never crossed. I pulled at my pipe calmly, studying the enemy and running a mental tally of who might be in command. This lot should have been sent south by Hasenbach herself, but with her uncle and most her fellow Lycaonese up north fighting the Dead King she might not have had a competent loyalist to appoint at the head of the army.

Princess Rozala Malanza was a possible candidate, assuming the results of the Battle of the Camps hadn't tarred her reputation as a general in the Principate, but she was one of Amadis Milenan's supporters. If she held command, it meant that the situation up in Salia had gotten rather *interesting*. No, odds were it was one of the western princes or princesses that held the run of the host. I'd seen the banner for Lange flying, and that was possible, but more likely it'd been the rulers of Brus or Lyonis – both long-standing Hasenbach supporters – that held primacy. I'd find out soon enough, I supposed, because *someone* had given the order to hold back. I spat out a mouthful of grey smoke

and adjusted my helm slightly so that the sun wouldn't shine into my eyes. It was a nice day out, more cool than cold and nearly windless. The many plumes of smoke rising from the wrecked camp where Juniper's trap had failed made the lack of breeze obvious, and I allowed myself a glance in that direction. The bitter fighting retreat of my forces had not ceased in the slightest: if anything, the Levantine foot was going after my soldiers even more aggressively than before.

The enemy ranks parted to let through a heavily-armed party of thirty, and though the faces of the royals coming to were still hidden to my eyes the three banners above them were not. The salamander of Aequitan was there, which meant Malanza herself was part of the delegation, but hers was the only heraldry I knew for certain of the three. The long-haired maiden clutching a bow and arrows I vaguely remembered to be from northern Procer, though which principality I couldn't say. The green eagle perched on a crescent might be the arms of Cantal and therefore another old acquaintance – Prince Arnaud of Cantal had been at the Battle of the Camps – but I was pretty sure there was another principality that had a green hawk *clutching* a crescent moon for heraldry, and I did not trust myself to tell the difference. The Principate's royal heraldries were a labyrinth at the best of times, and prone to changing along with the branches of the ruling families that held the seat. I got my answer before long, though, when the cavalry escort parted to allow three royals through. *Would you look at that, it really is Prince Arnaud*, I mused. This was getting rather nostalgic, wasn't it?

Dark-haired and dark-eyed as Arlesites often were, Princess Rozala had little changed since we last met. Physically, anyway, I thought. There was no easy smile on her lips today, and the way she held herself even on the horse... Like there was nowhere that was entirely safe. I'd seen that before, in old soldiers. In Black too, who'd lived his entire life knowing he was one misstep away from death at heroic hands. *You weren't like at the peace talks after the Camps, Malanza*, I thought. This was fresher, and I could think of only one war that'd leave so deep a mark so quickly. She'd fought up north, then. Prince Arnaud was still an unimpressive middle-aged specimen of Alamans royalty, though he appeared to have added a little muscle to his plump frame since we'd last met. Wouldn't do to dismiss this one, I told myself. He'd stuck out to me as bearing watching during the truce talks, feigning emotions he did not feel very convincingly. The last of three was a woman I'd never seen before, fair-haired and blue-eyed. Older than Rozala but younger than Arnaud, with a soldier's bearing and a narrow but handsome face. No great beauty, unlike Malanza whose curves and long curls would be well worth a second look in a different situation, but emanating a sort of robust health that was pleasing to the eye.

Rather interestingly, it was Princess Rozala that rode ahead of the other two. They reined in their horses a mere ten feet in front of me, riders bearing their banners behind them as the rest of their escort held tight on the sides.

"Black Queen," the Princess of Aequitan said, tone grim. "It really is you."

"In the flesh," I replied. "It's been some time, Malanza. I see you've still keeping Arnaud around, for some godsforsaken reason. Who's the fresh face?"

The Prince of Cantal, who I'd so casually referred to, purpled with anger. I no longer had the senses of a fae to listen to his heartbeat, and calling on the Night might be taken as a hostile act, so I could only wonder if it was yet another piece of theatre on his part.

"Now see here, you filth Damned-" the prince snarled.

"Arnaud," Princess Rozala said, tone sharp.

The man forced himself to calm, and I kept my face blank to hide my interest. Prince Amadis was still in the custody of Callow, last I heard. In his absence had someone else taken up the reins of his little cabal of crowned malcontents?

"I am Princess Sophie Louvroy of Lyonis," the stranger blandly said. "You are, I believe, the self-proclaimed Queen of Callow."

"Ah," I hummed. "So, you're the minder the First Prince set on ol' Rozala. Should I be addressing you for the rest of this conversation, or is she actually allowed to speak for herself?"

"A petty and transparent scheme, as befits your reputation," Princess Sophie coldly replied.

She twitched, though, like she'd wanted to glance at Princess Rozala but caught herself before she could. There were military types – and the Princess of Lyonis seemed too comfortable in armour not to be one of those – that were also subtle diplomats, but it looked like Sophie Louvroy wasn't one of them. Good to know.

"You've refrained from attacking us, Foundling," Princess Rozala said. "The courtesy has been returned. Evidently you want to talk, so talk. I've no time to waste on insults and posturing."

I studied her for a moment, the tanned face visible through the raised visor of her elaborate helm. The fresh pink scar on her cheek, too rough to have been caused by a blade. Her armour was freshly polished, I saw, but it had blemishes now it'd not had at the Camps. She was *worn*, and the visible signs of it were the shallowest part.

"Withdraw," I said. "And I will not pursue."

"*Pursue*?" Princess Sophie hissed indignantly. "You are one woman-"

I ignored her, meeting Malanza's eyes instead.

"We've been at this crossroads before, Rozala," I said.

"So we have," the other woman softly agreed. "But this is not Callow, Catherine Foundling. We did not seek this war."

"Then let it end," I said. "Those in my service who brought the sword to Procer, I will chastise appropriately. I don't want to fight this battle, Rozala Malanza. But trust me, neither do you."

"And we're to take you word for this?" Princess Sophie mocked. "You, a-"

"Sophie," I said, tone nonchalant. "If you interrupt this conversation one more time, I may very well lose patience and relieve you of your tongue."

The fair-haired woman blanched, then reddened, and though she opened her mouth I stared at her calmly. In silence. A heartbeat passed, then another. Her mouth closed and I returned my gaze to Malanza.

"The Legions of Terror put half the heartlands to the torch," Princess Rozala said. "That cannot go *unanswered*, Foundling. Break ties with them and the Army of Callow will be allowed to leave Procer unhindered. On this I give you my word."

"You know I'm not going to give you that," I said. "I offer you this instead: allow them to leave in my charge. They will be, from that moment onwards, my responsibility. I give you my word that should any of them attempt to enter Procer again, save at the invitation of the First Prince, I'll see everyone involved hanged."

"We could kill you right now," Prince Arnaud said, voice grown cool for all the earlier heat. "Do you truly think yourself so powerful you could turn back so many horsemen, Damned? You overestimate your bargaining position."

I cocked my head to the side and looked at the man. Eventually, I tapped the bottom of my staff against the line I'd drawn in the snow.

"Cross it, then," I simply said.

I could see him considering it. It was in the way his legs shifted, like he was preparing to spur his horse forward. His fingers were inching towards the sword at his hip. Teeth worrying the dragonbone shaft of my pipe, I inhaled the wakeleaf and let it burn pleasantly at my throat. I exhaled, and Prince Arnaud grit his teeth but did not try me. It was the calm that was doing it, I dimly realized. Even more than the power they had seen me wield with their own eyes, the more they watched me fail to be cowed the more I could feel them grow unsettled. Thinking I knew something they didn't, that I still had some card up my sleeve. I wondered if this was how Black had felt, making the armies of the Liesse Rebellion melt away like summer snow with nothing but a few tricks and the weight of his reputation.

"Malanza," Princess Sophie whispered, "the longer we wait-"

"I know," Princess Rozala crossly replied.

The longer they waited, the more of my legionaries retreated back to the safety of the southern camp. The more their chance to score a decisive victory slipped away.

"Where did you go, Black Queen?" the Princess of Aequitan suddenly asked. "For nigh a year you were gone."

"I went into the darkness, Rozala," I said. "And what I found there followed me out."

"The Everdark," she said, lips thinning.

"Withdraw," I gently repeated. "And I will not pursue."

"It cannot go unanswered, Foundling," she wearily told me. "There would be... consequences."

I looked up into the sky, at the burning glare of the sun.

"There would be consequences to forcing my hand as well," I said, and returned my gaze to her. "A truce, for today. And tomorrow we will see if for once the costs can be paid with ink and gold instead of blood, for that last currency we can ill-afford."

"It might come to a fight tomorrow regardless," the Princess of Aequitan said. "So why should I hold my blade today, when the advantage lies with us?"

"Did you ever read about the old crusades, Rozala?" I idly asked.

"Prince Gontrand's five volumes of *'Empyrean Wars'* were part of my readings as a child," Rozala frowned.

"Never read those," I said. "See, my own education pulled a little to the east. What I got instead was the *'Commentaries on the Campaigns of Terribilis the Second',* and there's part that stayed with me. I thought about it, after Akua's Folly. After the Camps too. It's written that in the wake of the victory that broke the Fourth Crusade, on the shores of the Wasaliti, the High Lords sang Terribilis' praises and called him the greatest general Praes had ever seen. He lost his temper with them, and here's what he said-"

I cleared my throat.

"Another such victory and I will rule an empire of ghosts," I recited.

Silence followed in the wake of my words.

"Now," I quietly said, "you might win if we fought. Or maybe I'll end up the victor of the field. But either way, Malanza, we'll both be losing. You should know that, if you've been where I think you have."

"What would *you* know of ghosts, Catherine Foundling?" the princess hoarsely replied.

"Enough I don't want to fight today," I said.

Her armoured hands closed around her reins as her lips trembled with a heady mixture of fear and rage.

"Princess Sophie, sound the retreat," Rozala said, voice rough.

The Princess of Lyonis drew back as if stung, narrow face filling with surprise and indignation.

"Princess Rozala-"

"Merciful Gods, Louvroy, just sound the *fucking* retreat," the Princess of Aequitan seethed. "She's a monster and half mad besides, but she's right. How many soldiers are you willing to throw away putting her down? One thousand, two, three? *Our entire horse*?"

I dipped my head, if not in thanks then in respect.

"Spare me, you carrion thing," Princess Rozala snarled. "This is not the respect of worthy opponents, and do not mistake this for some sort of arrangement. You've merely contrived to make yourself into the least of great evils yet one more time."

Seizing her reins, she turned aside her horse.

"You will be seen to, Black Queen," the Princess of Aequitan called out. "There will be a day where all sins will be called to account."

*Might be*, I thought. *But it won't be today, or by the likes of you*. I waited there, atop my horse, until the trumpets sounded. The cavalry was pulling back, almost embarrassedly, but it was to the fighting in the wreckage that my eyes turned. They did not listen, at first. They were Levantines, and this was a Proceran command. But the trumpets sounded again, insistently, and finally the call was heeded. Just like that, the battle came to a close. For now, I thought. The rest of their host was still marching towards this dawning nightmare, and even more were following behind the army I'd led here. This was far from over, and it was with that tired thought that I began the ride to the soldiers I'd just saved.

—

When I'd found the Third Army, I'd been welcomed with relief. When I'd reunited with the Fourth, it had been to a queen's honours. What awaited me at the camp on the southern bank of the Odelle was entirely different, however. Oh, there were cheers. The ramparts of wood and beaten earth were filled with legionaries from the First and the Second, and they greeted my return with a deafening roar. But as I guided Zombie up the ramp that led into the camp proper and the gates were opened, I noticed that the escort awaiting me inside was not among the cheering throng. My eye ran quickly over their number – forty of them, more than should be needed for a mere escort if neither Juniper nor Vivienne were able to come themselves – and then lingered on the number of lightly armoured soldiers among them. Mages, fifteen of them, and I did not think it coincidence that there were five ogres among the remaining soldiers. Robber had mentioned there were instructions in case of my return, I remembered. To make certain I was me, and not some puppet of whatever I'd found below. It was not an unsound precaution, but I still felt my temper rise.

I'd just faced down an army of Proceran cavalry without even a fucking sword at my hip and this was my welcome home? An army we shouldn't even be fighting, I thought with mounting anger, and two of the three people responsible for that particular bout of foolishness had been the ones to send me this *escort*. My mount slowed as I approached the two lines of soldiers awaiting me, and I raised an eyebrow when I recognized one among them – though she was hardly a soldier, truth be told.

"General Hune," I said. "I see at least one of this army's commanders found it in them to greet me in person."

The thick plate on the ogre made her look more a steel fortress than a person, but she'd not worn her helm – the effect was almost comical, like a tuft of person over a siege engine. Hune Egeldotir's face had not grown any less brutish, at first look, though neither had her eyes lost that look of patient cleverness. She didn't look like she'd aged a day since we'd first met, though given the rumoured lifespan of her kind that should not have surprised me.

"Your Majesty," Hune replied, her voice still surprisingly delicate for her size. "Welcome back."

"Welcome indeed," I flatly said, glancing at the rest of the party.

"Orders, ma'am," the ogre said, though she did not sound apologetic in the slightest.

It would be, I thought, only be sensible to go along with this. To let the finest mages the army had on hand confirm I was not in fact a possessed shell before I was allowed the *privilege* of speaking to the Lady-Regent of Callow and the Marshal of the same. My fingers twitched. If I protested, I wondered where the legionaries around me would fall. There were a lot of Callowans among them, I thought. More than there would have been a few years ago, though with Vivienne as regent that loyalty might not be as clear-cut as I believed.

"Orders," I repeated, tone pensive. "Funny thing, those."

I hardened my voice.

"General Hune, kneel."

The command rang, though my voice was not raised. It didn't need to be. The ogre stilled, and I could see the shiver go through the rest of the soldiers she'd brought with her. All around us, the cheering began to peter out as legionaries realized something was afoot.

"Your Majesty-" Hune began.

"I have you an order, general," I softly said.

She looked at me, and whatever she found there she knew better than to argue with. Like a tall oak breaking, the ogre knelt in the muddy snow. I glanced at the legionaries that'd come with her, the uneasy mages and tensing soldiers.

"Disperse," I coldly said.

I didn't bother to look if they'd obeyed, though the sound of hasty footsteps told me that had. I pressed my knees against Zombie and she tread forward, until I bid her to stop by Hune's still-kneeling form.

"Get up, Hune," I said. "And the next time one of them tries to give you an order like this, remember who you swore an oath to."

The ogre rose to her feet, and though there was anger glittering in those eyes there was something else as well. I'd been content to leave the reins of the Army of Callow largely in Juniper's hands, so far. Perhaps now and then, though, a reminder of who it was they served might not go amiss.

"I will not forget, Your Majesty," General Hune said.

I glanced at her, almost amused at the boldness.

"Then come along," I said. "I mean to have a frank conversation with the Lady-Regent and the Marshal."

The glint in the ogre's eyes told me that while she might not be all that fond of me, she'd not forgotten who had put her in this situation either. We made our way through the fortified camp, Hune taking the lead as she knew the lay of it, but with legionaries moving out of our way it was not long until we arrived before a tall pavilion. The banners besides it, I saw, included my own. I did not dismount. There was a guard of soldiers around, a full line.

"You are relieved, legionaries," I said.

The lieutenant among them – an orc – glanced at Hune and my irritation spiked.

"If I need to repeat an order one more time," I said, "there will be need a need for *gallows* today."

"Ma'am," the lieutenant got out in a croak, hastily saluting.

Under my cold stare the rest of them scrammed with him.

"General," I said. "If you would?"

The ogre raised the flaps open for me and I rode in without even needing to lower my head. She looked surprised when I gestured for her to follow me in. The pavilion was still full of officers. Juniper's full general staff was there, along with a few others. An old orc with a black band over an eye and two aides at his side needed no introduction, but Vivienne I almost did not recognize. She'd grown out her hair, and no longer wore leathers. There must have been around twenty people inside the pavilion, when I entered, but a heartbeat later you could have heard a pin drop. Juniper was first to react.

"Hune, what did you-"

"Juniper, if you still want to have a marshal's baton by the end of this conversation you will sit down and shut up," I calmly said.

The orc flinched like I'd struck her.

"This is-"

"On your oath, Hellhound," I snarled in Kharsum, "you will be *silent*."

She swallowed, loudly. I glanced at Marshal Grem One-Eye, whose face was a study in neutrality.

"A pleasure to meet you, Marshal," I said. "We will speak later."

"Well met, Black Queen," the old orc gravelled.

A dip of the head was offered, respect but not submission, and he took the hint. His aides followed him, so I turned my eyes on the other officers. Those, at least, were mine. Aisha was studying me with a blank face, I saw, and had a hand on Juniper's arm.

"Out," I said, inclining my head.

"Catherine, this is not-"

Vivienne's voice, the tone almost forcefully calming, had me clenching my fingers again. Zombie felt my legs tighten and whinnied angrily.

"Your regency is at an end, Vivienne Dartwick," I said. "Put the seal on the table."

The general staff had left the tent before the seal clattered against wood. Vivienne was looking at me like she'd never seen me before.

"General Hune, take a seat," I said. "Depending on the outcome of this conversation you might in command of the Army of Callow by the end of the day."

"You can't be serious," Vivienne said.

"Nauk is dead," I said. "I've had to personally save the Third Army from encirclement and annihilation. The Fourth was bled savagely by Helike while essentially marching back and forth across the same patch of Iserre. Today, I

found you engaged in a pitched battle with a Grand Alliance army – that is, a force that should be three months to the north *preventing the fucking Dead King from rolling over Procer*."

My voice had risen, but I forced out a breath to calm myself.

"To add insult to injury," I evenly said. "You were losing that battle to the extent that I had to personally step in and settle the matter. Now, I would have preferred to have this conversation with Adjutant there to speak as well and no enemy army within a day's march. Your little stunt outside, however, has officially made me lose patience."

My staff hit the ground beneath us with a hard thump. Both of them drew back.

"Now," I calmly said, "do explain to me why either of you should still be trusted to make decisions about anything other than what you'll have for dinner."

# Chapter 23

# Readjustment

> "The price of dominion is the halving of one's grasp, for a ruler may hold a crown or hand but never both."
>
> Julienne Merovins, tenth First Princess of Procer

I'd dismounted, eventually, mainly because my leg was starting to twinge again. A chair would be easier on it, though it was a great deal harder for me to glare down at people without a horse under me. My anger had cooled some after the initial remonstration, but it was far from gone – part of me was seething, and though I knew only part of the blame lay with the two women seated across from me they were not exempt from being called to account. Not when, to my knowledge, there was not a single part of this ill-considered western campaign that wasn't a spectacular disaster in some way.

"For my defeats I offer no excuse," Marshal Juniper said, tone rough.

This was the most cowed I'd ever seen her act, and with damned good reason. I trusted the supreme commander of my armies, even now. I did trust her *judgement* less than I would have a year ago, however. The thing was, what she had done – what Hakram and Vivienne had done with her – it couldn't simply be settled with a calm word and a reminder to be careful. Not when my delaying my return from the Everdark for as little as a month might have seen the Army of Callow either slaughtered or ended as a fighting force. The Third lost, as it likely would have been without my intervention, meant the Fourth was alone and blind to the east. Add onto this that they'd been getting hammered by the mere vanguard of the Grand Alliance host before I arrived today? The decisions taken by my foremost commander had nearly led to the end of the armies she was commanding. For the political aspects of this howling mess I would not hold her to account, but the military ones? They were very much her purview.

"I'm not interested in your falling on your sword, Marshal," I flatly said. "I've already spoken with Adjutant, so I have an understanding of the deployments made and the reasons for them. Splitting the columns was risky, but

tactically sound. Before that, gating in between the Dominion forces was an equally sound manoeuvre. If, once more, *risky*."

My voice hardened at the last word, and though she did not flinch she did stiffen. In all our years together, I'd never once before chewed out the Hellhound like this. We'd had disagreements, the most animated of them over Bonfire and later the conduct of the campaign in northern Callow, but they'd been only that. Disagreements. For the most part I'd allowed her the run of the Fifteenth and later the Army of Callow, usually only intervening for reasons that weren't strictly military in nature. For all the oaths and the fact that I wore the crown, our relationship had been as close to one of equals as circumstances allowed. Right now, though? This was not Catherine talking to Juniper. This was the Black Queen speaking to the Marshal of Callow, and I reasons to be furious.

"A defeat, or several, is not something that needs excusing," I said. "To expect a flawless record would be absurd, especially given the calibre of our opposition. But I am currently looking at a series of tactically solid steps that led towards the greatest strategic disaster of our tenure together, and that needs an explanation."

I tapped my fingers against the table.

"Why is the Army of Callow fighting in Iserre, Marshal?" I asked.

"Your Majesty-"

Vivienne's interruption once again had my temper flaring. I glanced at her, still finding the sight of her milkmaid's braid surprising, and arched an eyebrow. The visible disconnect between the woman I'd left behind and the one I was looking at made it easier to rein in my irritation, though only by so much.

"Do you speak for Marshal Juniper now, Vivienne?" I calmly asked.

Her lips thinned.

"This campaign was not decided by her alone," she said. "I also bear a responsibility."

"You are not Marshal of Callow," I said, calling on my thinning reserves of patience. "A graduate of the War College, a trained strategist or indeed a military officer at all. For the diplomatic aspects of this debacle, the main responsibility lies with you and Hakram. I am well aware of that. This is not the diplomatic aspect."

My eyes flicked back to Juniper.

"Well?" I said. "*Should* Vivienne be a part of this conversation, Marshal?"

"No, Warlord," Juniper replied, chin rising. "She should not."

I dipped my head in approval. At the very least she was owning the fuckup instead of trying to spread around the responsibility, though whether that was out of persisting dislike for Vivienne or a personal sense of honour I couldn't be sure. My silence was taken as the invitation to speak that it was.

"It was necessary to evacuate the Legions of Terror," Juniper said.

I nodded in acknowledgement.

"They fought at the Vales," I said. "A debt was owed. How did this translate to your finding sense in deploying forty thousand legionaries through magical means of ingress and egress in the single most Name-infested region of this continent?"

"I did not believe any force below twenty thousand would prove a sufficient deterrent," the orc said. "I can't speak to the politics involved, but the size of the force was meant to ensure no battle would actually take place even if heroes spurred armies to move in time."

"Then why forty and not twenty?" I said, frowning.

"Because there was no telling when you would return," Juniper admitted. "And that meant if the northern Principate broke, we might have to occupy the Principality of Arans to prevent the Dead King from holding one side of the northern passage into Callow."

The Stairway, I thought. Which should currently be defended by the army of Duchess Kegan, but only from the Callowan end of the pass. Considering the Principality of Hainaut was all that stood between the armies of the dead and Arans, her worry wasn't unfounded.

"Adjutant didn't mention this," I said.

"The situation was still theoretical," the Hellhound said. "We'd have a gap of at least two months between leaving Callow by Arcadia and arriving in Iserre, possibly more, which effectively killed our capacity to occupy Arans in time if the front in Hainaut broke. Committing twenty thousand soldiers – two divisions – and the Wild Hunt was splitting the forces in a manner that made it impossible to exert our strength correctly."

I breathed out, forced myself to consider the logic in what she was saying.

"Even if you sent the two remaining divisions north before leaving, they'd arrive late and be dependent on Duchess Kegan's army to manage occupation of Arans," I finally said. "Which, without me at the helm, she might not be inclined to give. On the other hand, having the full four divisions with the Hunt meant if the strike proved necessary you could march in force immediately and entrust the Deoraithe with the supply line from the other side."

"That was my reasoning," Juniper agreed.

"And Adjutant was not informed of your theory because?"

"Because he had nothing to contribute to the planning," the Hellhound bluntly said. "And I wanted the plans ready for implementation if things went to shit after he and the Lady-Regent tried to make a truce with Procer."

I let a few heartbeats pass to see if she had anything to add, but she did not.

"General Hune," I said without turning. "Anything to add?"

"Two months before our departure for Iserre, the general staffs for all four divisions were assigned a tactical exercise called Citadel," the ogre evenly said. "While no direct mention of Procer or Arans was made, it involved rapidly occupying a foreign territory with limited forces. Priority was placed on fortifying it against an outside assault even while occupation took place."

Essentially confirming Juniper hadn't woven this entire Arans thing out of thin air, though I'd not been all that inclined to believe that in the first place.

"Noted," I said.

I drummed my fingers against the tabletop, resisting the urge to hum. This was still a massive fuckup, I thought, but at least Juniper had actual reasons for having brought the Army of Callow this far out. Were they sufficient, in my eyes? I wasn't sure, to be honest, and I shouldn't be passing judgement on that until I had all the information at my disposal instead of a simple debrief. The Hellhound's actions as still almost ended the Kingdom of Callow as a military power for at least a decade, and she'd proved to be imprudent repeatedly. On the other hand, every risk she'd taken was at least calculated and overall dictated by what could only be called a desperate fucking times.

"Marshal Juniper, in your own opinion where exactly was the blunder made?" I finally asked.

"When I ordered the army to gate in between the two Dominion forces," she replied without missing a beat. "To be sound, that manoeuvre depended on *certain* access to gates when leaving. It was a blunder to assume that would be the case."

She wasn't changing her stance as to the necessity of fielding the four divisions of the army, I noted, which meant the Hellhound still believed it'd been the right call given what she'd known at the time. On the other hand, she wasn't trying to excuse herself by saying it would have been impossible to anticipate the gates would start going wild when they did, or that scrying would be made impossible by something still unknown.

"And do you believe Adjutant the Lady-Regent interfered with how you would have planned this campaign otherwise?" I asked.

She mulled over that, for a moment.

"No more than you would have, Warlord," Juniper said.

*Fair enough,* I thought.

"You're not stripped from command," I finally sighed. "As of now, General Hune is confirmed as the senior among the generals in the Army of Callow."

A warning, essentially, that if she blundered this badly again then the ogre would be handed the marshal's baton.

"When the situation in Iserre is resolved," I continued, "a tribunal of senior officers will be convened to assess whether or not the decisions you took in this campaign warrant charges of incompetence or reckless use of authority. Their verdict will decide whether or not you are demoted back to general."

"Understood," the Marshal of Callow rasped.

"Good," I said. "I'll be perfectly clear: I have no intention of being involved with this tribunal beyond ordering it convened. This is not *personal*, Juniper. This isn't happening because I am angry with an old friend, or appalled by what your decisions almost led to. But if the Army of Callow is ever to be more than just my personal warband, then its members need to be accountable for what they do."

She nodded, but her face was unreadable. I did not know whether or not she believed me.

"None of this can hold until it's been confirmed you're actually Catherine Foundling," Vivienne said, face resolutely set.

She hadn't reached for a knife, and idly I wondered if she still carried any. Probably. Losing her Name did not mean she'd lost her skills, simply that there wasn't quite as much weight behind them.

"Yes," I said, smile turning hard. "Let's talk about that."

My fingers clenched.

"What the *Hells* were the two of you thinking?" I hissed out. "A pair of lines, fifteen mages? All of this led by General Hune, who is well-known to be aloof from me? Did you even pause to consider what it looked like?"

I glanced at the ogre in question, inclining my head to convey no offence was meant. She replied with the same, visibly unaffected. It was, after all, nothing but the truth.

"Precautions had to be taken," Vivienne said, though she winced. "You've agreed on those in the past, Your Majesty."

"If I'd actually been a puppet what would have happened?" I harshly asked her. "I would have splattered them across the ground, accused the two of you a fomenting a coup and I'd have your head on pikes within the hour. What could *fifteen legion mages* have done, Vivienne? Unless you've recruited practitioners capable of High Arcana in the last year, little more than scream before they died."

"They were chosen for their capacity to check on your identity," Juniper said. "A ritual-"

"Could have been done in private, away from the eyes of the troops," I spoke through gritted teeth. "If I was willing to cooperate – and I will be, once this fucking conversation is over – then there was no need to play out what looked like an arrest. If I wasn't, if I was an impostor or a puppet, exactly what difference would *forty soldiers* have made?"

There was a long moment of silence in the tent.

"I was aware you had no head or liking for politics when I named you Marshal, Juniper," I said. "This, though? You should have grasped this without need for explanation. What would have happened, even if I'd been taken away without fighting and not reappeared? How many legionaries would have believed I was an impostor, after seeing me turn away the Proceran horse?"

I paused, forcing myself to breathe out and calm.

"We're not eighteen anymore," I said. "There's no one to clean up our mistakes for us. You're the highest ranked military officer in the kingdom, when you don't consider the ramifications of your orders there are *consequence*s."

I turned to the other reckless gambler, almost at a loss for words.

"As for you, Vivienne, do I even need to say anything?" I tiredly said.

She looked away. That was answer enough.

"Marshal Juniper, General Hune," I sighed. "You may resume your duties. Within the hour the hills to the west will be occupied by the Third Army, while the Fourth and fifty thousand drow auxiliaries move to the northwest to pressure the Grand Alliance's army."

Assuming Hakram had understood me correctly, whoever held command of the enemy army was going to have a hard choice to make. Either they'd allow an enemy force with numerical superiority and two entrenched positions – this camp and the hills General Abigail was marching on – to begin encircling them before the battle continued, or they'd have to withdraw further north and surrender any advantage they'd gained today. My bet was on the enemy retreating, given that they had reinforcements following behind us, but if Princess Rozala and the Dominion commander wanted to get into a slugging match even after my warning then the Army of Callow and the Legions needed to be readied for the fight. Juniper nodded, and rose to offer a salute. Hune settled for a nod, which given the respective sizes of herself and the pavilion was probably for the best.

"Marshal?" I called out as she began heading out.

"Ma'am?" Juniper gravelled.

"Have the appropriate mages prepare the ritual," I said. "Discretely. Leave an officer outside this tent to guide me there when I've finished."

"Understood," the Marshal of Callow said, and left without another word.

I wondered, with a pang, if what had been said here today had just ended one of the last few friendships I had. If a relationship it'd taken years to build had just been put to the torch and we would be returning to the distant formality of the first months of the Fifteenth. Perhaps not, I thought. Orcs tended to handle reprimands like these better than humans, and she'd not named me her warlord lightly. But something would change, I knew, and it might not ever entirely return to the way it used to be. And Juniper, of the two I had chewed out, was likely to take this the best. Akua's words about the conflict between the needs of the queen and the woman lingered at the edge of my thoughts, but they were too bitter for me to be willing to acknowledge them.

"I suppose now is to be my turn," Vivienne Dartwick said. "Was it a kindness or a bad omen, that you dismissed the others first?"

I finally allowed myself a good look at her. What had once been short dark hair was now elaborately put together in a milkmaid braid that circle twice atop her bangs, reminiscent of a summer fair crown. The blue-grey eyes had not changed, I thought, but something about the cast of her face had. She seemed... older. Like she had grown in the year I'd seen her. The old leathers had been traded in for a long-sleeved pale blouse, conservative in cut but still baring most of her shoulders. It led into high-waist wine red skirts, though beneath I'd earlier glimpsed more practical leggings and boots. An engraved silver ring on her hand was the only visible adornment she'd bothered with, save for the royal seal of Callow I'd earlier ordered her to set down. Vivienne hadn't grown any more beautiful, since we'd last seen each other – she was

still barely taller than I, and of rather similar frame. But there was something subtly matured about the way she carried herself. My eyes flicked to the seal still on the table, and for a moment I regretted ordering her to put her down. Her regency had come to an end the moment I'd returned, truth be told, but the manner of making that clear need not be so humiliating. *On the other hand, Vivienne*, I thought, *what choice did you give me?*

"I didn't want it to be like this," I said. "But here we are. I have questions."

"Duchess Kegan is now Governess-General," she said. "And was granted broad if temporary authority in my absence, though I kept the regency title proper until today."

"Adjutant already told me," I said. "Kegan was the best of the choices you had. Baroness Ainsley being Keeper of the Seals stacks the council towards nobles too much for my tastes, but I'll concede there wasn't anyone else with both the pull and the competence."

"The recognition of the Confederation of the Grey Eyries-"

"Was within your authority as Lady-Regent, and something I can stomach," I calmly said. "The Matrons are vicious monsters, but also a thorn in Malicia's side and willing to sell us goods we badly need. The scheme to make a king of Grem One-Eye was overly ambitious, to my eye, but not offensively so. Arranging for him to hold the Blessed Isle with Black's own legions was inspired, and I wholeheartedly approve."

"This is not," Vivienne murmured, "the way I expected this conversation to go."

"I'm not going to ignore the significant achievements to your name because you angered me," I mildly replied. "You did very well with the regency. Until, at least, you decided to allow this atrocious blunder of a campaign. Then you deepened the mistake by accompanying the army personally. So I suppose my questions is this – what, exactly, did you think this mess was going to accomplish?"

She smiled, at tad bitterly.

"And my answer determines whether I remain one of the Woe," she said.

"Don't give me that," I sharply said. "Whimpering in self-pity is beneath the both of us. You were given power and authority, Vivienne. I'm asking you to explain your how you used them, not throwing a tantrum. Given the messes I've had to clean up, this is an exceedingly measured response."

"You didn't deny it," she said.

"You think fucking up means you're not one of us?" I said.

"Doesn't it?" Vivienne replied, eyes unreadable.

"The lot of you didn't cut my throat after the Doom of Liesse," I said. "Why would you think this is any different? We can lose, Vivienne. But we have to learn. We have to own it. And we have to face the fucking consequences, because otherwise we'll *just keep doing it*. And it's more important than my feelings, or yours, but it doesn't mean they aren't there."

In the lucid, terrifying moment that followed those words I realized this might be how it'd started for Black. Looking at a mess and knowing that loving those responsible was one thing but exempting them from consequence another. *Is that how you learned? To put it in a box and only let it out when the necessary callousness was over with.*

"So tell me," I said, repeating myself with the sudden taste of ash in my mouth. "What did you think this was going to accomplish?"

She talked, I listened, and with careful patient cruelty I hardened her to avoid making the same mistakes twice. We walked to the ritual together, afterwards, and some part of me was almost disgusted at the glints of gratitude and respect I caught in her gaze when she looked at me. Like I'd not, as lovingly as callously, burned her with shame and bound her with affection so that Vivienne Dartwick would be one step closer to the woman I needed her to be.

I was, in the end, my father's daughter.

# Chapter 24

# Theft

> "Wisdom is a tower built of failure and rue."
>
> Ashuran saying

It wasn't even an hour before the Third Army's banners hung above the hills that were now to my east instead of west.

"Like kicking an anthill," Vivienne said, eyes gazing far ahead.

She wasn't wrong. We were looking at the same thing, I thought, but my sight was better than hers. A sliver of Night had seen to that. General Abigail had grasped my meaning deeper than Id thought, it seemed. I'd told her to fly the Fourth Army's banner as well as her own for a reason, namely to imply much greater numbers in the hills than there actually were. The Summerholm girl had gone a step further than what I'd instructed and thinned her lines to an almost reckless extent: from the perspective of the Alliance soldiers in the plains below, it must look like there were at least twenty thousand fresh soldiers anchoring our left flank. Actually fighting with lines so thin would be disastrous, but it was a calculated risk. Even if the enemy suddenly marched on her she should have just enough time to redeploy before the fight began.

"Hakram's force will be revealed soon enough," I said. "That ought to pressure them into a full withdrawal."

"Wouldn't it have been quicker to send the entire host into the hills?" Vivienne asked.

Her tone was curious, not critical, and the expectation in her voice that she would be answered was almost as irritating as it was pleasing. Barely a quarter bell had passed since I'd chewed her out, and already she was back on old footing. I was glad of the confidence, I really was, and well aware it was petty of me to be irked that my displeasure hadn't left deeper marks. But Vivienne had once called me petty when speaking to Akua, unaware I was listening in, and like a lot of what she'd said that night there'd been more than a grain of truth to it.

"It would have," I agreed. "On the other hand, it also risked a standoff. They'd have been left to mass their entire army largely in peace, and we to establish a common line facing them. Two large coalition armies looking at each other over a fence, hands on swords. A lit sharper if I ever saw one. No, I want them to retreat. To give us space."

And the flanking manoeuvre by General Rumena and General Bagram, under the steady hand of Adjutant, should do the trick. When I'd been up in the sky riding Zombie, I'd had a decent look at the enemy forces on the march as well as those already fighting. The western army – the mixed Dominion and Procer force that Princess Rozala was part of – had been marching on Juniper form the north, which had logistical implications. Iserre had been stripped bare of anything edible, which meant Malanza and her allies were running on what supplies they could either carry with them or get flowing from further north. Given the size of the western army, which at a glance I'd put at more than sixty thousand strong, without a steady flow of foodstuffs they'd start burning through their stocks at a prodigious rate. The amount of men might have been manageable, but the horses? I very much doubted they could afford to keep that many war horses for long without fresh supplies coming in. Besides, the northern campaign had taught me much of how Procer handled it supply trains. In a word, badly. It came from the way their armies were put together, in my opinion, more than any inferiority of intellect compared to the architects of the Reforms in Praes.

Instead of a unified army directly under the Tower – or, these days, me – Proceran forces were raised from the personal troops of rulers, hired fantassins and mass levies. The personal troops were trained, equipped and fed by the prince who fielded them, which was a costly thing even in peace time. That meant, as a rule, that princes and princesses of Procer had kept personal armies around the same size as those of the Old Kingdom's nobles while being both significantly richer and ruling lands both larger and more heavily populated. Proceran logistics, as they currently stood, were well-versed in keeping forces that size fed and well-equipped. The rub came when the armies grew larger, which meant bringing in fantassins or levies. The mercenary companies were usually only hired for as long as they were needed then cut loose, meaning there'd never been a *need* to develop a system to feed larger forces for long. As for the levies, well, like everywhere else in the world they were handed the bare minimum in food and arms before being sent into the grinder. Those larger armies were usually fighting on enemy territory, too, where 'foraging' – a pretty word for armed robbery – could be used to fill up the stocks.

In this particular case though, the western army was stuck in a principality already picked clean and a whole chunk of foreign Levantine troops whose personal supplies had to be running dangerously low after chasing Grem and Juniper for so long. When Hakram appeared further north with a large force, threatening to cut off their supply lines, they'd be forced to either prepare for battle or withdraw. Considering we'd have them both half-encircled and

severely outnumbered, battle would not be an attractive choice. Unless heroes were involved, I thought. Which they very well might be. For all the earthly considerations pointing at why fighting us here would be a terrible idea, there was a reason I'd ordered Juniper to prepare for a fight.

"Diplomacy, then," Vivienne said, breaking my long silence.

"In a manner of speaking," I grunted. "Princess Rozala made it clear her side wants the heads of the Legions on spikes. That's not happening, so I'll be removing the issue from the table: come nightfall, if they've withdrawn then our entire coalition is gating out of here."

"Tactical offence, to allow for a strategic defence," she mused.

She half-turned to me, the azure blue cloak she'd donned when leaving the pavilion tight around her shoulders.

"And you're not afraid without the blade at their throat they won't consider bargaining?" Vivienne asked. "The truce offer I extended to Hasenbach was refused even when it looked like we had the advantage in Iserre."

"I think with us reappearing somewhere in Arans, with supplied coming in through the northern passage and a comfortably defensible position, the First Prince will have to consider how far she can afford to push us," I frankly said. "More importantly, with us gone and the two Grand Alliance armies in Iserre within a week's march of each other the League is either going to retreat or take a beating."

"Both would be dangerous to Procer," Vivienne noted. "A retreat means they have to keep armies south to pursue. A victory on the field might prove more costly than the war to the north can afford."

"If Kairos intended to collapse Procer, he would have already done it," I said. "He wouldn't have come through the Waning Woods, either. The League armies would have battered through Hasenbach's border army in Tenerife and begun occupying southern principalities. Feasibly they could have occupied Tenerife and Salamans without getting much more of a fight, then dug in for the long term. After that..."

"All it'd take was raids into the bordering principalities for those royals to try withdrawing their troops from the north and march back to defend their lands," Vivienne softly agreed. "If Hasenbach tried to go after them through the Highest Assembly, it might lead to civil war. If she did nothing, the Dead King would likely eat the north."

"Instead he surprised us all and marched out of the Waning Woods to cut into this dance," I said. "No, he's after something from the mess in Iserre and it's not hammering nails in the Principate's coffin."

"It would not be territorial concessions, or anything monetary," Vivienne frowned. "There would have been better, easier ways to force those."

"He's a villain of the old breed," I said. "Ink on parchment isn't what he's after. I met with him, in Rochelant, and he hinted Hasenbach has been dredging something dangerous out of Lake Artoise."

"He is a liar, as you reminded me rather sharply," she said.

I'd not been pleased to hear she'd been trading information with Kairos, to say the last. It was one thing to do what I had, haggle an alliance of convenience against the Wandering Bard after trading secrets. It was another entirely to pass him detailed assessments of the Dominion's armies, even if the payment was useful word out of Salia and the north. While I'd understood that the Jacks were still too young an organization to have penetrated deep into Procer, and certainly to have a way to pass along regular reports given the mess the Principate was in right now, relying on the Tyrant for anything meant you were getting played. If I had to guess, he'd making little deals like that with everyone he could: offering piece for piece, and ensuring he alone had a bird's eye view of what was taking place in Iserre. I was finding it worrisome Kairos had been interested in details about the Dominion armies, too. It could be another layer of deception, sure, but it might also mean he believed he would be fighting them in the future. Or that he was selling that information to the Dead King, I acknowledged with a grimace. There weren't a lot of things I'd put past Kairos Theodosian.

"Oh, there's *something* happening there," I said. "That much I don't doubt. But I don't necessarily think it's whatever trouble she's brewing that interests him. Or even her in particular, to be honest – this campaign, the First Prince herself, I think they're means to an end."

"That end being?" Vivienne asked.

"I don't know yet," I admitted. "But if he's willing to launch an entire invasion in the middle of war against Keter just to get leverage on Cordelia Hasenbach, it's not going to be a trifle."

"The man needs to die," Vivienne said. "The Hierarch as well. They're too unpredictable, Catherine. If they start swinging at the wrong moment, the consequences could be... wide-reaching, to say the least."

"I'm sure Cordelia thinks the same thing," I said. "And that's why he's made himself so very costly to remove from the board."

Strategic offence, I thought with rueful amusement, paired with tactical defence. Mad or not, I had to concede that the villain king of Helike was viciously cunning. The more the western and eastern coalitions fought without him being involved, the more reluctant they grew to engage his fresher forces. The only way out of that downwards spiral, as far as I could see, was to withdraw my forces from Iserre and let him face the storm he'd stirred without my standing shield for him. In the distance I could see Malanza's vanguard fully withdrawing from the battlefield. Even the Levantine horse that'd baited the Order of Broken Bells into chasing them all the way to irrelevance had pulled away, and now Grandmaster Talbot's knights were sheepishly riding back to camp. I'd let Juniper handle the reprimand for that, I decided. It had been her battle, even if she'd been losing it. It'd also make it clear to the high officers that she still held command even after my taking her to task.

"You haven't asked," Vivienne suddenly said.

"Asked what?" I replied.

"If I still have a Name," she said.

I glanced at her.

"I know you don't," I said. "Yours had a subtle weight, but even that is gone."

"Then you haven't asked why," she said, then blue-grey eyes narrowed. "Unless Adjutant told you."

"He didn't," I told her. "Or even explain why someone's going to end up calling him Hakram Handless, for that matter."

"And you're not worried in the slightest?" Vivienne asked, tone inscrutable. "Gods, even just curious?"

"It's a strange horse to ride, a Name," I said. "Black said it was willpower that got you on the saddle, and I don't entirely disagree with him, but I think that's only part of it."

I looked into the distance, at the Alliance host retreating into the second part of the trap I'd laid. It was a kindness that was due, not to look at her while speaking this.

"It's a recognition that you're trying to *do* something," I said. "William wanted to kill his way out of Praesi rule. Akua wanted to bind everyone else. Indrani wants to pass through life unhindered. Whatever it is you're after the Name makes you better at doing it, I won't argue that. But you don't get a Name unless you're already good at it, Vivienne."

I cleared my throat.

"So I'll answer the question you didn't ask: no, you're not getting tossed out on your ass because you can't steal the sun anymore. That's a trick. The important parts came before you were the Thief, and that hasn't gone anywhere."

Vivienne let out a shuddering breath.

"How is it," she quietly said, "that you always know exactly the right thing to say?"

The urge was there to pull away with levity, draw attention to my admittedly chequered diplomatic record, but I didn't follow it. It would have been cheapening the sincerity of the moment, and wouldn't that defeat the point of having it in the first place? So instead I said nothing, for lack of anything to say, and let silence stretch.

"The Empire killed my mother," she murmured. "Did you know that?"

My fingers clenched.

"Not for sure," I said. "But I suspected."

The moment I'd learned her last name was Dartwick, looking into her past had become a great deal easier. Out of courtesy I'd not dug too deep, but I'd had a look anyway. Her father had been a baron before the Conquest, vassal to the Count of Southpool but her family had remained rather obscure in the years that followed. There'd been a bit of interest in her father after he was widowed, before the man made it clear he would not remarry, but it'd died down quick after he did. That'd gotten me curious enough to look into the mother, and my brow had risen when I found out she'd died in a hunting accident not long after

the Conquest. It could have been an actual accident, I knew. But in the early days of Praesi occupation, more than a few Imperial governors had arranged 'hunting accidents' when they were inclined to discretely put down rebellious elements.

"I say the Empire, Catherine, because it makes no difference who gave the order," Vivienne admitted. "The decision came from Governor Chuma, though he's long dead. Some might say it was in truth her fault, for joining a rebel cabal. That she knew the risks. Others might argue that whatever hired hand did it was the killer in every sense. But it's never quite that simple, is it?"

I stayed silent. The question had not been meant for me to answer.

"I think I understood that even as a child," Vivienne pensively said. "That is was larger than just my mother and the governor. That it was about Praes, what it was doing to us. The *way* it was doing it to us. Chuma, you see, he was one of the light-handed governors. Didn't hang whole families, only the rebels themselves. The rest got off with a *fine*."

Different Imperial governors, I thought, had taught us different lessons. Vivienne had been taught that we were cattle, to be sheared when laden and beaten when unruly. Less than human, in the Empire's eyes, but not to be hurt without reason. Mazus, though, Mazus had not been interested in such a civilized arrangement. He'd been a looter in silk clothes, a noble in nothing but the ugliest ways that word could be meant. From him I'd learned that no one in power would ever be fair unless you *made* them. Vivienne had tried to claw back some pride with her thefts. I'd tried to murder my way into authority with a sword.

"I started stealing to even the scales, though I knew coin would never be the right measure for that," she said. "I kept stealing because they deserved it. Because every time I took from them they got a taste of loss. Of what they were doing to all of us."

"And then they warned you off," I said.

"Assassin," she acknowledged. "A small cut on my father's throat, and I stayed my hand. But he'd passed when William raised the banner and the anger was still in my stomach."

"And it isn't anymore?" I quietly asked.

"You killed him," Vivienne said, evading the question. "But what did that change? They'd been killing us for years before I was ever born. Truth be told I think it was Laure that did it."

"When we spoke," I said. "In the palace."

"It wasn't the words, Catherine," she said. "You can have a silver tongue, now and then, but I did not trust you an inch back then. It was how *tired* you were. I'd seen you go from victory to victory, but that night you didn't act like you were winning."

"I wasn't," I frankly said. "And there were greater disasters on the horizon."

"You were fighting for Callow," Vivienne acknowledged. "But that was the detail that took me so long time to understand even after joining. We weren't

talking about the same thing when using that word. Because for you it also meant the Fifteenth. It mean the goblin tribe in Marchford. It meant everyone willing to live under the laws, to pay their taxes and stand on the wall when the horn sounds."

"They *are* Callowans, Vivienne," I said. "I won't ignore what was the best of us, in the old days, but we can't just-"

She raised her hand to interrupt me.

"I know," she said. "I know, Catherine. And that's what killed it. Because I would look at Hakram, at Masego and Ratface and especially the goblins and I would wait for them to be the enemy. Because they'd always been, because that was what the Conquest meant. But then they kept faith, Cat. They died, and they died for you but not just that. Also because they were serving something they believed in. And that scared me, because if they weren't the enemy then what had I been fighting all these years?"

*The Tower*, I wanted to say. *The High Lords. What made all of us this way, heroes and villains and the ever-spreading graveyard between.* But this wasn't my moment, it was hers, and so I kept to silence once more.

"My Name was already thinning by then," Vivienne said. "Sometimes it wouldn't work as it used to. Sometimes I couldn't feel it at all. And when my hair began to grow again, I was terrified. Because if I wasn't even the Thief anymore, then what use was I?"

I saw her fingers clench.

"I nearly did some very foolish things," she said. "But Hakram cut off his hand, and if nothing else that stayed mine. And it forced me to see, Catherine, because in the months following that night I did the most good for my homeland I ever have and not a single speck of it involved theft."

She let out a breathless laugh, though it was more mockery of herself than mirth.

"I wasn't angry anymore, Cat," she said. "Or at least, not at the same people or for the same reasons. Mostly I was afraid. And the more I tried to pretend I was still fifteen and collecting my mother's dues from something that no longer existed, the more I missed the point: that I was a child, when I became the Thief, and it was a child's anger I was still heeding."

I watched her and found regret painted on her face, though a soft and thoughtful manner of it.

"But you weren't a child anymore," I said.

"And so I was no longer the Thief," Vivienne softly agreed. "Because I've learned that just taking from the enemy won't change anything. That we'll need more than that, to change the world, and that's what I want to do most of all."

And so the Name had died, I thought, along with the indignation that'd birthed it. It might be that something else would come of that, but she would never again be the Thief. The girl who had become her no longer existed: she'd been outgrown by the woman standing at my side. Vivienne Dartwick's eyes

were clear, I saw, and her back straight. In the afternoon's light, cloaked in blue and hair braided like a fair crown, she seemed almost regal. I hoped, truly, that no Name came of this. The Liesse Accords, as written, would bar any and all Named from being rulers. And it was early days yet, I knew that, and it was not a decision to be made in haste.

But Vivienne Dartwick had just talked herself into being the foremost heiress-candidate to the throne of Callow.

# Chapter 25

# Dead Ends

> "And so the First Under the Night came across a portal where great danger might lurk, and upon witnessing it halted and sought the council of Sve Noc. 'O Night,' said the First, 'what wisdom do you offer?' And so the Young Night answered thus: 'Try a foot first.'"
>
> Extract from the 'Parables of the Lost and Found', disputed Firstborn religious text

*Shit*, I thought to myself, *this is going too well.*

"- the Alliance army has effectively withdrawn, and is making camp for the night," the officer continued. "They have recalled everything but scouts, as far as our own can see."

I'd told Vivienne what I wanted out of the manoeuvres, namely forcing the western coalition to give me just enough room that I could gate my armies away from this mess. It was starting to look like I'd be getting exactly that, which was highly suspicious. Reports had begun to come into the pavilion over the afternoon, everything going according to plan. First the opposition drew back, then General Bagram threatened their supply lines further north and they outright retreated. Had any of the crusader commander taken the Fourth Army's distant presence as an immediate threat and charged? No. Had the drow been ambushed by some unforeseen sun-based sorcery kept in store just for this day? No. Had some hero assassinated half the general staff of one of my divisions? No. This was going off without a hitch, which meant it wasn't and the Gods were about to dump a sackful of angry badgers on my plans.

"Your Majesty?"

"It's always badgers, you know," I complained. "It never goes a *little* badly, its's always 'oh no, there's goblinfire burning the city' or 'oh no, the Praesi summoned a bunch of devils again' or even 'oh no, half the continent thinks a crusade would be just the thing'. Would it really be too much to ask for a mishap instead of a catastrophe once in a while? Like, 'oh no, we're out of the good

wine, but that's fine we've got this pretty decent bottle instead we'll just drink that'."

There was a long moment of silence in the pavilion.

"So, double watch and not single," Marshal Juniper said, sounding vaguely embarrassed of me.

"Don't you give me that, Hellhound," I grunted. "You know I'm right. Matter of fact-"

I went looking through my cloak before realizing I was not, in fact, carrying anything that could remotely be used as coin. Arguably the main drow currency was murder – although, given how much obsidian they always seemed to carry around maybe in practice it was that – and it wasn't like anyone had handed me a purse full of golden aurelii since I'd come back to the surface.

"Hakram," I said, extending arm with my palm up.

I didn't even bother to look, nor him to argue. Two heartbeats later I was slapping coins against the table, more specifically –

"- *silver*?" I said, turning to glare at Adjutant. "You cheapskate. That's old Marchford coinage, too, it's basically worth nothing nowadays."

"Thought we'd get rid of it while in Procer," the orc shamelessly admitted.

"Ugh," I said. "Fine then. Juniper, I'm betting these *eight silvers* that when you send a rider out on the field they'll run into a scout on the way back with urgent news."

"To clarify, they're silvers only in the nominal sense," Adjutant helpfully added. "Their actual worth is closer to-"

"You believe we're about to be ambushed," Marshal Grem interrupted in a rasp.

The old orc was an interesting sight, I'd admit. The cloth covering the missing eye his epithet promised was nothing out of the ordinary, simple black linen with the First Legion's symbol embroidered in gold. It was the Marshal himself I found interesting: neither as tall as Hakram nor as broad as Nauk had been, the sight of his frame in Legion armour brought to mind an old tree – all dry and corded, but likely to be nasty if pushed. He was, it would not do to forget, more than just one of the finest military officers in the Empire: he was also an old man who'd been born before the Clans were bound so tightly to the reformed Legions of Terror. Back in the days where the orc clans had preferred raiding each other and on occasion the Praesi to taking the Tower's gold and serving in the ranks. For his clan to have been as prominent as it'd reputedly been, he must have seen some brutal fighting. *And that was before he joined up with Black, through a civil war and the Conquest*, I thought. There was a dangerous man, behind that red-brown eye. Simply because my teacher's latest scheme had backfired on the Legions did not mean the orc was helpless.

"I believe this has proceeded perfectly when we know for a fact there's heroes nearby," I replied. "One way or another, this is about to get ugly."

"Battle?" he asked, tone calm.

There was no doubt in his eyes, like what I had said was a statement of fact. I almost shivered at the sight of it, the old general waiting to dissect my instincts like an augur would a bird. How many times had Black stood in my place, lending his paranoia's edge to a finer commander's plans?

"Not tonight," I said. "We're too close to sundown. But they'll spring a surprise on us, you can count on *that*."

"Then it might be best to issue the recall for the Fourth Army early," Marshal Grem said. "And allow the 'Firstborn' to handle the defences as our divisions withdraw through Arcadia."

I flicked a glance at Juniper, who after a beat nodded.

"Do it," I said. "Adjutant-"

"I sent one of mine to have a look," Hakram gravelled. "We'll know soon."

I didn't quite manage to set aside the nagging feeling that we were about to get screwed, but we still managed to get some business done in the stretch that followed. We needed to hash out supply arrangements for Marshal Grem's legions beyond this particular Iserran mess, and I had no intention of forever feeding the legionaries unless they proved of some use to me – either garrisoning the Blessed Isle or participating in the war against the Dead King. If they wanted to wait out the war until Black died or returned, it would not be through the grace of Callowan granaries. One-Eye hinted pretty bluntly – still, it was something of a novelty to see an orc *hint* at all – that private talks between he and I should be held on the subject, and I was wondering whether to push for either Hakram or Vivienne or both to be in the room instead when a legionary stumbled back into the pavilion. He saluted at me first, so he was one of mine and not the Legions, but his eyes flicked at Adjutant after. One of Hakram's helping hand, then.

"Report," I ordered.

"Your Majesty," the legionary replied, saluting once more. "While the enemy's forces have not redeployed, they have sent a party out in the plains towards us."

My fingers clenched.

"How many?" Juniper asked. "Horse or foot?"

"Two or four," I said, tone calm.

The legionary's eyes widened.

"Two, Your Majesty," he agreed.

"And they'll be raising a tent, the smug pricks," I said.

Something like fear passed in the soldier's eyes.

"It is so, Your Majesty," he said.

"Black Queen?" Marshal Grem rasped, tone inquisitive.

"One is the Grey Pilgrim," I said. "I'm guessing the other's the Saint of Swords, though he might have traded in for younger muscle. Well, *fuck*."

The last word I said feelingly, as it looked like all my preparations had gone up in smoke.

"They raised a tent, soldier?" Adjutant said. "You are certain?"

"Yes sir," the legionary nodded. "One of those Proceran pavilions, the ones they use to receive people."

"We're not gating anywhere, looks like," I cursed. "Let's find out why at least. Adjutant, have a space cleared for an attempt. With contingencies."

My second nodded, and after a few nods of respect spread around left to see my will done.

"An explanation would be appreciated," Juniper growled. "For those of us who aren't Named."

"The Pilgrim is under the impression we'll be talking soon," I said. "Considering I'm very much planning on getting the Hells out of here by Arcadia if it's possible, that means he knows something we don't about why that's not possible. It's his whole thing, Juniper, being wise and and all-knowing. In practice I'd guess he's got some ties to a Choir, maybe some limited foresight. Not that he'd be a fool without, mind you, but he's certainly got an edge. Either way, by putting up that tent he's making a point."

"Posturing," Vivienne said. "That is to say, preparing for negotiations."

"How kind of our friend Tariq to be willing to talk," I said, tone gone sardonic. "Why, he might even be willing to consider peace as a personal favour to us. Entirely unrelated to the fact that he's currently losing, no doubt. It will be our privilege, nay, our *blessing* to be allowed to make a truce with the side of the Heavens."

"Manifold thanks to the Gods Above," Vivienne agreed without missing a beat. "Who have ever protected and preserved us, praise be. We may have to raise a new cathedral in Laure as an expression of our gratitude."

"I take it," Marshal Grem said, "that you are less than fond of this hero."

"Well, he's only tried to kill me twice so far," I mused. "So I guess that still puts him somewhere between Saint and Malicia, relationship-wise."

"Wait, what's the left extremity of that line?" Vivienne frowned. "It can't be the Saint, we've barely fought her."

"I think it's still William," I mused. "He tried to kill me every single time we met, I'm pretty sure. I mean, so did a few others but mostly 'cause they didn't get to meet me twice."

"That feels underwhelming," she said. "He couldn't even ruin a city without Contrition holding his hand, second rate at best. Really, they shouldn't even make the list if they haven't tried to murder you through use of an astral sphere."

"Eh, I think Pilgrim's star-thing is more like a metaphor," I said. "That'd only leave High Noon Delight and Queen The-Sky-Is-A-Reasonable-Weapon from Summer. Two's not a list. Besides, if we're opening the floor to metaphors then Willy's murder-sword thing kind of looked like moonlight."

"Didn't the Page have a similar trick?" Vivienne asked. "You mentioned it a while back."

"Oh *man*, I'd almost forgotten about her," I admitted with a hum. "When I think about Three Hills it's always Nauk popping the Exiled Prince in the throat that comes to mind."

*Bambambam.* Marshal Juniper smashed her sheathed sword against the table one last time, for emphasis, and then cleared her throat with a growl.

"Orders, Your Majesty," she said.

"At the moment?" I said. "Everyone is to remain in a defensive posture, as they've already been ordered to. We won't know more until I've tried a gate, which Hakram is securing grounds for me to do as we speak."

I drummed my fingers against the table.

"I'd recommend for the two of you to prepare a plan of action for the eventuality of being forced to march out of Iserre," I said. "Or being forced to give battle here, either against the current army or the entire Grand Alliance field force."

"You don't intend to participate?" Marshal Grem asked.

"The skeleton I'll leave to the two of you," I shrugged. "I need to see some birds about something, and if that doesn't work I'll have to beat Larat until answers come out. Might take a while, it's mostly lies and arrogance in there."

"Understood," One-Eye said, apparently unruffled.

Merciless Gods, what kind of insanity had my father put this one through that he wouldn't even blink at that? I shot him an assessing look, but let it go for now.

"You coming?" I asked Vivienne.

"The birds," she said. "From underground?"

"Those are the ones," I agreed. "They're perfectly safe."

Vivienne's brow rose.

"Probably safe," I corrected.

The brow stayed up.

"To me," I specified.

"I shall stay and provide a political perspective to these unfolding campaign plans," Vivienne Dartwick serenely said.

"You do that," I snorted, then glanced at the Marshals. "Until later, then."

A dip of the head for me, salutes for them, and on my way I went.

—

It was still the better part of an hour before dusk when the Sisters came to me.

I could have tried the gate before then, of course, and very nearly did – though it would tire me to make the attempt, it was nothing that second wind coming with nightfall wouldn't carry me through. Still, I was… wary. I'd not forgotten what Robber had told me, the tale of gates into Arcadia opening into the Hells instead or simply wildly out of course. Adjutant had done well in arranging for me a wide courtyard now surrounded by basic wards, but if devils started pouring out those wouldn't be enough. *I* might be, even on my own, but best to exercise a little patience if it lowered the risks. The crow-shaped

slivers of godhood sliced into the glare of the sun like knives, their unnaturally graceful flight taking them in twin spirals until they claimed my shoulders in unison. Perfect unison, I'd realized. Not even the fraction of a moment in delay. That kind of precision was unsettling, as no doubt they'd meant it to be.

"I have a problem," I said, leaning on my staff.

"A servant of the Pale Gods," crow-Komena said with relish. "*Finally*."

"See, I don't believe it's actually him that's the trouble here," I said. "Well, not this particular trouble anyway. He's definitely some other sorts."

"You believe the ways into Arcadia to have been wounded," crow-Andronike said. "Amusing, that you'd believe what frustrated some errant Splendid would be a threat to us."

"Now *that*," I said, "is the kind of talk that ends up with gods in boxes. Or cut up for parts. Or, you know, made to scamper away in disgrace by a hero. You've been down there for a long time, O Goddesses of Night. Here be monsters, and some of them were born to make sport of those like you."

I could feel their roiling anger, not that it cowed me in the slightest. My very purpose in their service was to pull them back when they were about to make a mistake like this. Twirling the ebony staff lightly, I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth.

"So, let's try this again," I said. "I have a problem. Some hero with friends upstairs believes I won't be able to gate out of here. In your opinion, how dangerous would it be to try opening one right now?"

"The taste of the boundary has not changed," Komena said. "You worry for nothing."

"It would not, if the change were coming from without," Andronike noted.

My brow rose.

"So, if there's a mess it's more likely to be coming from Arcadia?" I asked.

"A more precise explanation would be well beyond your understanding," Komena said.

It was surprising, I mused, how quickly one got used to being condescended to by a bird. I lowered my staff, tip touching nothing at all.

"So, a quick look is in order," I said.

Night flooded my veins, abrupt and eager to answer my call. The gate ripped through Creation easily, to my surprise – and that of the Sisters, I felt. I'd felt this before, in Marchford. When Akua's demon had weakened the fabric of Creation enough that it was made easier for the Winter Court to raid through. It'd not been like that when I gated earlier, I thought.

"This is unusual," Andronike said.

I felt it too, even as the ink-black gate opened before me. Eyes, unfathomably large, gazing at me. The surface of the gate was like liquid obsidian, though without a single ripple, and I hesitated. I held back, leaning on my staff.

"Thoughts?" I said.

"Try a foot first," Komena drolly suggested.

"Oh, we think we're funny now do we?" I muttered. "Mark my words, that one's going into the holy book."

*Godly advice, my ass,* I thought. Still, wasn't like there was another choice was it? I breathed out and stepped through. The rippling sensation was replaced by howling winds as my feet stumbled over Arcadia's grounds. Blinded and deafened by what must have been half a hurricane, I called on the Night and let Andronike's steady hand guide my will: a bubble of stillness bloomed around us, sudden and absolute. Breathing out, I put my cloak in order and finally took a good look around me. This was Arcadia, I was certain of it. The... sensation was the same. Which made what I was looking at all the more worrisome.

"That is not the work of fae," Komena croaked.

"No," I murmured, "I don't think so either."

Before us spread out a wasteland to make the heart of Praes flinch. Choking black dust billowing in a great storms as streaks of lightning erupted wherever they wished, striking at the ground with thundering claps. The noise of it all was deafening, even inside the bubble of stillness. I could see fractures of glowing red snaking across the ground, and liquid fire bubbling out when currents unseen made the heat rise in great geysers. The sky above us was an endless shifting tapestry of darkened clouds, with malevolent pale lights lurking behind them. This had been Arcadia, I thought, before someone broke it beyond repair.

"No," Andronike said, disagreeing with my thought. "To the very point it can tolerate breaking, and not a step more."

In the distance I could see the great storms strengthening, until what looked like the eye of the madness: a great hidden shape, the dark winds whirling around it masking the true appearance of what lay there.

"This was done on purpose," I murmured. "And you felt it too, didn't you? How easy it was to open the gate here."

The Sisters did not speak the approval, though a hint of pressure against my thoughts served as acknowledgement. It was almost secondary, now, that I wouldn't be able to evacuate my armies through Arcadia – as if I'd not lose every damned soldier, trying to march them through here. I suspected now that if I tried to open a gate leading to anywhere I'd still end up here, as if all the paths now led to this place. In a sense, I thought, they probably were. Something, or someone, had damaged this chunk of Arcadia to pry it loose from the rest. And now, if I was not mistaken, this wretched placed was slowly dropping down into Creation.

"We are *seen*," Komena suddenly hissed.

Behind me, the still-open gate shuddered. Well, shit. I wouldn't be using that one to leave anyway, but it looked like we'd drawn the attention of something I'd rather not be in the eyes of.

"What is it that's here," I urgently pressed. "Before going back we have-"

The gate broke. The inky power it was made of *shattered*, and the shards started slinking through the dusty ground – towards that hidden shape in the distance, I judged.

"Tell me," I hissed at Sve Noc. "Is it the Dead King, or-"

An eardrum-breaking shriek tore through this nightmare of a realm, then four grinding cacophonies in interweaving succession. Almost like rusty metal being pulled apart, but the truth of it was much worse: in that storm-cloud covered sky, burning red circles formed. Out of them winged creatures poured, swarms and swarms of them, weaving in and out of the horrid winds. Hellgates. Temporary and unstable, but hellgates nonetheless.

"- or Hierophant," I finished, shivering. "*Fuck*."

"We need to leave," Andronike said. "The gate, First Under the Night."

"There's something happening," I said. "Look, under the hellgates."

Some glittering array of runes formed in a circle, at twice the height of a man, though looking upon them cut at my eyes in an almost physical way. I thought I glimpsed something ghostly at the centre of the runes, but it was there for only a moment – and then the massive detonation that followed blew me off my feet, ripping right through the miracle. I landed in a sprawl of dust, cawing crows stumbling with me, and didn't ignore the Sisters twice. The gate ripped open in front of me, though to my horror something fought me for control of it. A will pitched against my own, though that was no person's. It felt more like one of the fae, though one of royal title at *least*. The goddesses slid their will along mine, and that bought us just long enough to drop through the bloody fairy gate. I dropped on the ground maybe three feet to the left of where I'd entered the other gate, covered in dust and lightly smoking.

"Well," I murmured, looking up at the setting sun. "That's going to be a problem."

# Chapter 26

# Civility

> "No plan is beyond dreading the sound of a match being struck."
>
> Dread Emperor Reprobate the First

"You could change," Hakram gently suggested, "into something that's not still smoking."

I patted at my cloak absent-mindedly, irritated that even after three rounds of that there still seemed to be smoke wafting up somehow. My face was caked in dust and soot, so Adjutant was being fairly light-handed by just talking about clothes, but to the Hells with it. Who was I trying to impress on the other side, by not arriving dressed like a grimy goblin and smelling of dark sorceries? That lot had already declared me Arch-heretic of the East, the only way to go was up. A sharp whistle had Zombie trotting to my side instead a spoken answer and Hakram sighed.

"I take it you won't be washing either," the orc said.

"Got it in one," I cheerfully replied. "Now, we're just waiting on-"

Leaning against my staff, I pushed myself atop my docilely waiting mount. I settled comfortably onto the saddle, the length of ebony in my hand spinning gracefully the once before I brought it to rest against her neck.

"- a message," I finished. "After that we'll be going to have a nice polite chat with people who may or may not want to murder us."

"Is Vivienne coming along?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Not for this, considering what it might come to," I said. "And even with you I'm hesitating."

I glanced at his latest mislaid limb.

"You still any good in a fight, Adjutant?" I asked, tone serious.

He'd known me long enough not to be offended by a question most orcs would have drawn steel over, knowing it was genuine.

"I only need one hand for an axe," Hakram simply replied.

I nodded in acknowledgement, and neither of us saw any need to belabour the subject any further. In the same way that he'd trusted I asked my question without derision, I would trust him not to be letting pride do the talking when he'd answered it. Dusk was mere moments away, but even in that spreading gloom the winged silhouettes of the Sisters were blots of deeper darkness. It would have been convenient to use them as messengers, but I'd not even bothered to ask – Komena might be somewhat amused by the insolence of it, but Andronike certainly would not. I got cawed at quite enough already without trying to use goddesses as carrier pigeons. The word I'd been waiting on came back on foot, in the shape of Lord Ivah. It knelt before my horse, head rising only at my silent inquisitive glance.

"It was arranged, Losara Queen," the drow said. "The order was received."

"Good," I said. "On your feet, Ivah, and back to the sigil. We might have a long night ahead of us."

"One can only hope, First Under the Night," the Lord of Silent Steps smiled.

It heeded the dismissal without tarrying any further, leaving no footstep and making no sound as it vanished into the depths of the camp. Adjutant had visibly been busying himself tying two bundles to the sides of my mount, but it would have been a mistake to believe that meant he'd not been closely paying attention to everything taking place by him.

"Drow are hard to read," Hakram said. "But this one seems bound more tightly to you than the others."

"It was first among my Peerage, in trust if not necessarily in might," I said. "The distinction remains even past the death of the titles they bore."

"Loyal?" the orc asked me, head cocking to the side.

"To me?" I smiled. "More than some of its fellows are comfortable with, I think. But their true loyalty goes to something I merely stand for. Best not to forget that, when making demands of them."

"And what demands will be made of them tonight?" he asked.

I hummed.

"The order I sent was a contingency," I said. "Best you don't know of it for deniability's sake. But if the Saint of Swords is there, Adjutant, I'll be making a play."

"For?"

"The thing they have that I most want," I said.

I could see in the tightening of his brow that Hakram was forcing himself not to ask more questions even as we made out of the camp. He wouldn't be pressing more over the scheme hanging in wait, so odds were he was simply still curious about the drow. It had a fond smile quirking my lips, though I hid it away. Akua had taken to the culture of the Firstborn only insofar as it involved the levers of power and other exploitable angles, Indrani had learned what pertained to her own interests and little else. Hakram, though, was fascinated by drow culture in a manner that went well beyond the immediately useful or relevant aspects of it. It was odd seeing them through that fresh set of eyes,

having them taken in as strange and exotic when they were neither to me. I'd indulge him for an hour or two later, though if he intended to make a treatise on the subject I was definitely letting him pick at Ivah's brains instead. I'd refused the legionary escort Juniper had offered when I'd told her I would be headed for talks with the Pilgrim and his latest round of minions, along with Vivienne's suggestion of an honour guard of knights. They both had their instructions in case this ended with someone killing me, which I considered to be unlikely but would be arrogant to be presume *impossible*.

It was not a long walk, to where our enemies were waiting for us, and it was opens ground every step of the way.

The pavilion was held up by two poles, thick canvas painted green and gold descending from there in a roughly rectangular shape. The entrance, flanked as it was by truce banners, had been tied open just enough to reveal four silhouettes within without letting out the heat from inside. All of them seated at a table, with raised braziers providing warmth in the waning light of day. Hakram and I did not hurry, allowing the shadows to lengthen with our approach. Crusted with dust and ash, I must have looked to have been tarred to better match the dark: the sight of me, at least, brought a sliver of almost indulgent amusement from the goddesses still circling above. Sve Noc descended on dark wings twofold in the exact moment day turned to night, and they claimed my shoulders as perch without a word. We were close enough to the pavilion I could make out the faces of most within. Rozala Malanza, face drawn and tired after the day's battle but no less grimly cast for it. The Grey Pilgrim himself was no surprise, for he would have been drawn to a day like this sure as flies to fresh corpses.

The sight that had my pulse quickening, however, was the Saint of Swords: Laurence de Montfort's crooked frame and wrinkled face were unmistakeable. Well, it seemed I was going to be playing with fire after all. The fourth and last was a man looking to be in his early forties I knew not, though I could hazard a guess. He was built like an orc, tall and broad and thickly muscled. Add to that the deep tan and the good chance he was the commander of the Levantine part of the army, and odds were this was the Lord of Alava. One of the Champion's Blood, as they were called, though it was my understanding that the heroine who'd killed Captain was not kin to the actual blood descendants of that ancient hero. The two mortal rulers were fresh additions, not in attendance when I'd gotten my first report of this tent being raised. The Pilgrim must have sent for them before I even departed the camp with Adjutant. The hero was laying it on thick, I decided with a frown. That particular point had already been made when he first had the pavilion put up. This reeked of overcompensation to me, and that was not something I'd usually associate with an old hand like Tariq. Regardless, I had no intention of being pulled into his rhythm.

"Here," I suddenly said.

Zombie stride came to a sudden stop maybe forty feet away from the pavilion, and I stroked her mane affectionately even as Hakram followed suit. With

a hard shove I planted my staff in the snow, and Adjutant mirrored the gesture with the truce banner he'd been marching under. Without a word it was made clear to the other side I would not be humouring them with a single step further. Komena cawed approvingly from my shoulder, never one to pass the occasion to stick it to someone even through ceremony. It was almost amusing watching the ripple of dismay that passed through the enemy when they realized that they'd have to leave their nice warm tent to come speak with the Black Queen. A small gesture, perhaps, but so had been their own intention in making me crawl to their table and domain before speaking to them. I intended to make it clear from the beginning, which side it was between us that came closest to being considered the *supplicant*. They filed out one by one, and I had to suppress a grin when I saw the Saint had gotten stuck with the duty of carrying out a brazier. Seeing the woman who might just be the most dangerous killer in the service Heavens being used for manual labour warmed the petty cockles of my heart. The Grey Pilgrim took the lead, those simples grey robes that should prove no match for the cold all he'd bothered to wear. Malanza and the Levantine let him stand in front, an implicit endorsement of his primacy, while the Saint put down the brazier near them with ill-grace.

"Queen Catherine," the Pilgrim said, "we-"

The touch was light as a feather, for the first fraction of a moment. People often said they could feel a weight to the gaze of others, when it was on them, a sort of sense for the attention – and this was the same, in a way. The crow-goddesses on my shoulders stirred, and the touch was torn through by their will like a hand through cobwebs. It came back, a little stronger, and from a myriad angles. Komena's wings spread in irritation: the night shivered around us, and only then did the attention *withdraw*.

"Tariq," I interrupted in Chantant, tone harsh. "If you don't tell your owners to keep their grubby little fingers to themselves, I might just decide to take offence to their behaviour."

Like tossing a stone in a pond, I got to see the ripples from that. Princess Rozala was surprised, and a little confused. The Levantine looked... angry enough to draw steel, but hiding it much better than I would have guessed. Good ol' Laurence had a hand on her sword, ornery cutthroat that she was. It was for the best, I mused, that the scheme I had in mind required me to get under the skin of most these people.

"Pardon?" the Grey Pilgrim said, what looked like genuine surprise on his face.

Andronike cawed on my right shoulder, though the true meaning she simply wove into my mind as a thought.

"Mercy, huh," I said. "That'd be the Ophanim, if I remember my theology right."

I leaned forward, peering at the Grey Pilgrim and not.

"Are you listening through him, you meddlesome old things?" I asked. "Try that again and I swear I'll take a few feathers for my cloak."

Hakram, bless his soul, had always been quick to follow through on my plays.

"This could be taken as an assault under truce banner," the orc gravelled. "What exactly is your meaning in arranging this, Princess Malanza?"

The Princess of Aequitan's face betrayed irritation, before she mastered it and it became a pleasantly smiling mask.

"This is a misunderstanding, Lord Adjutant," she said.

"They're lying," the Saint of Swords said. "It wasn't an attack, only gazing."

Years of rubbing elbows with Praesi ensured the flash of satisfaction I felt never made it to my face. Laurence was always going to be the weak point, here: she was powerful, unused to having to measure her words and hated me to the bone. Like a lot of people who'd been the strongest in their surroundings for years on years, she'd not had to really answer to anyone for too long. That led to sloppy habits.

"So by your own admission the Choir of Mercy attempted to look into my mind," I coldly said.

Rozala's face tightened almost imperceptibly. She might not have a sense for stories, this once, but she could recognize a diplomatic blunder when she heard one.

"The Saint of Swords does not speak for us," the princess said. "As I said, Black Queen, this is a misunderstanding. Let us put it behind us and-"

Suddenly, Andronike began laughing in the back of my mind. A heartbeat later I heard Tariq flinch, and from the crow-goddesses I felt only vicious satisfaction.

"Gods, child, what have you done to yourself?" the Grey Pilgrim said. "Those things on your shoulder... those are no crows. How many times can you sell your soul?"

Had he tried to gaze at them using an aspect? I almost pitied him if he had. The foundations of apotheosis for these two had been millennia of hateful murder, and the mortar had been Winter freely given – look at one of those raw would have been painful, but the two? Still, I ignored him and kept my eyes on Malanza instead. She was the angle I needed to exploit right now. The Levantine, who'd still not been introduced, was watching this unfold with wary eyes but not apparent inclination to step in.

"Your delegation has now assaulted me, accused me of lying over said assault and is now trying to lecture me like a misbehaving child," I mildly said. "Explain to me, Rozala Malanza, why I should not simply *leave*."

"Perhaps a recess is in order," the Levantine said, speaking up for the first time. "An hour, setting terms through intermediaries to avoid this strife."

His tone was calm, and his Chantant only lightly accented. What he was suggesting had a decent chance of succeeding, which was why I couldn't allow it to happen. This needed to have a very specific shape to it, if I didn't want it to end with a sword running through my guts.

"There has been no evidence that your side is willing to negotiate in good faith," Hakram said, tone just as calm. "A recess would change nothing. It is an *explanation* that is required."

"I am Yannu Marave, Lord of Alava and first among the Champion's Blood," the Levantine said. "I give my word that no assault was meant, to the best of my knowledge."

Cool-headed, I thought. That was unfortunate. Why couldn't I have gotten your average brash Dominion swordarm in attendance instead? Hells, the boy in Sarcella had been from a legacy of mages and he'd been nowhere this even-keeled.

"Perhaps the two of you had diplomatic intentions," I conceded, adjusting the angle of the thrust. "If that's the case, we may proceed without their presence. It has certainly been nothing but a distraction so far."

The earlier anger returned to his eyes. *There we go*, I thought.

"The Peregrine will always have a voice in the councils of Levant," Lord Yannu replied, tone grown cool.

Now we were getting somewhere. He'd taken a position, I could take offence to it rightfully and walk away from this without having been 'the villain breaking negotiations on purpose', which was rarely a situation that ended well for said villain.

"Foundling, this is getting out of hand," Princess Rozala said, with forced calm. "As Lord Yannu suggested, a recess would be best."

"She's breaking this down on purpose," the Saint said, and spat to the side. "The Enemy always schemes, Malanza, you should have learned that by now."

And it was true, I thought, but by saying it she'd given me exactly what I needed.

"That's quite enough," I said, allowing anger to seep into my voice. "We're done here. If neither you nor the Pilgrim can keep your *hound* on a tighter leash, Malanza, we'll settle this on the field."

Now, there was the gambit. But I'd been fairly sure the moving parts would come together just right. With the Sisters disallowing whatever it was that allowed the Pilgrim to look into people, he should be on the backfoot. Experience, for once, would work against him: when you used a tool for several decades, suddenly losing it required an adjustment. Even the finest swordman in Creation would need time to adapt after being forced in his first fistfight in sixty years. Time which I'd been careful not to give the Pilgrim, so to speak. Now, Malanza had to answer for two heroes neither of which she had any real authority over, and she was not great diplomat in the first place. That I'd be able to work around her when the chaos set in was a given. The only unknown had been the Lord Yannu, but even though he'd given me trouble most of Levant came with a usable handle: the Grey Pilgrim himself. Even the implication he was to be dismissed had been enough to harden the Levantine's position. Now, I had passable reason to leave in a huff. And I'd repeatedly slighted the Saint this whole time, when odds were she'd be opposed to this kind of conference in

the first place. I was leaving with the promise of waging a battle that would be dangerous for her side, in her eyes likely succeeding at whatever scheme I'd been intent on. So, after I took my reins in hand and began to tug at them to turn Zombie around, I prepared to find out whether my gambit was going to pay off.

A flicker of movement from Saint, and just like that *I had them*.

"Laurence," the Pilgrim yelled, "don't-"

I wouldn't be able to avoid that, I thought even as steps almost faster than I could follow had the Saint of Swords standing in front of Zombie and swinging her blade at my throat. But then I'd known I wouldn't be able to, and taken precautions well in advance. As the steel made it a bare inch from my throat, ruffling Komena's feathers lightly as it passed, Laurence de Montfort was decked in the face.

She went tumbling across the snow, spewing out blood and even a tooth, while Rumena the Tomb-Maker followed.

The Grey Pilgrim's hands blazed with light, but a heartbeat later I had my staff in hand and pointed at him.

"You make a move, Tariq, and I'll drop you," I said, tone perfectly calm.

He hesitated, even as the two mortals on his side reached for their blades in delayed reaction to this unholy mess, and that was quite enough for General Rumena to see my will done. The Saint of Swords landed on her feet, but the ground beneath her turned into boiling shadow and her leap up as she raised her sword once more had her land in the grasp of the old drow. Who closed its fingers around her throat, and squeezed lightly once. Her hand went down at the clear signal that the drow could have killed her but would refrain if she ceased moving. In a fair fight, I suspected the Saint would kill it after some trouble. In an ambush, as I'd arranged in a sense, it might be a little more even. But my weapon here wasn't Rumena's own might, so much as the fact that the Saint of Swords was a heroine who'd just attacked someone leaving peaceful negotiations held under truce banner. There wasn't a single fucking story that would get her out of this, so long as I was careful.

"I've had better fights from *jawor*," the Tomb-Maker scathingly assessed in Chantant. "This cattle is blind and easily provoked, Losara Queen. How has it survived so long in the Burning Lands?"

I couldn't *prove* that Rumena had worked on its mastery of Chantant purely to be able to slag its opponents verbally, but I had very deep suspicions.

"Catherine," the Grey Pilgrim said. "You cannot-"

"Your Majesty," I idly corrected. "I am going to ask you questions now, Pilgrim, and if you don't answer them quickly and truthfully then General Rumena will execute the attempted murderer of the Queen of Callow."

"Queen Catherine," Princess Rozala tried, but she wasn't part of this right now and so I simply ignored her.

"Do you have Amadeus of the Green Stretch as a prisoner?" I asked the Pilgrim.

"Yes," Tariq said.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"At camp, under restraints."

"Is he alive and unharmed?

"Yes," Tariq said.

"Is he in his right mind?" I pressed.

"As far as I know," the Pilgrim said.

"Good," I smiled. "Fetch him, right now. I'll trade him for your murderous little friend."

The Grey Pilgrim remained silent for a long moment.

"Laurence is one of the few living heroes who might be capable of slaying the Dead King," he said. "More than that, of killing him permanently. You could be dooming the continent by killing her."

I met his eyes and smiled.

"General Rumena," I said. "Squeeze a little tighter."

"Merciful Gods, Foundling, this is madness," Princess Rozala yelled. "You can't extort us-"

"Your delegation just tried to murder me under truce banner, Malanza," I snapped. "You should be licking my boots in *fucking gratitude* that a prisoner is all I'm demanding to let it go."

"The Carrion Lord torched entire principalities," the Princess of Aequitan snapped back. "How many thousands of dead innocents are on his head? And you think you can just ask for him back?"

"Black's the only way Praes doesn't collapse and take a third of the continent down with it," I said through gritted teeth. "So take your damned objections and choke on them, Malanza, because he might be a monster but he's *mine* and he's still needed."

"Don't do it, Tariq," the Saint called out. "Let them have me and then slit the bastard's throat. No truce with the Enemy."

"Tighter still, Rumena," I coldly ordered. "Pilgrim, an answer. You won't wait me into a story that turns this around."

"If you kill her," Tariq said, "I'll kill him."

"You've kept him alive so far for a reason," I countered without missing a beat. "While I have no pressing reason to keep de Montfort breathing save for this trade. Try again."

"You are gambling with matters beyond your understanding," the Pilgrim said, sounding frustrated.

"If even a single one of you had taken any of the deals I offered we wouldn't be standing here tonight," I told him without a shred of sympathy. "Instead you get this and you get me. You were warned, Pilgrim. My terms were given, do we have a bargain?"

"He's killing her," Pilgrim said, eyes flicking to the Saint.

"Best hurry then," I harshly replied.

"I only have the body," the Grey Pilgrim said. "The soul was removed."

"By who?" I snarled.

He didn't answer, and that was answer enough. The fucking Saint of Swords.

"Where's the soul?" I asked.

"I do not know," the Pilgrim replied, then glanced at the Saint again. "If Laurence dies, Catherine, we have no accord."

"General Rumena, loosen your grip slightly," I reluctantly said. "And you must be hard of hearing, Pilgrim – it's *Your Majesty*. How can you now know where the soul is?"

"I entrusted it to the Rogue Sorcerer," Tariq said. "And sent him into hiding."

"Why?" I hissed.

"So that the Black Knight's body could be publicly slain while his soul remains usable as leverage," the Pilgrim said.

"Have the body delivered, then," I coldly said. "It'll serve for a start."

"And Laurence?" the Pilgrim pressed.

I glanced at her, at the naked hatred on her face. Before this she had despised me mostly in principle, I thought, but now? Now it was personal. She'd be after my neck from the moment she was let loose.

"You can have her back, once I have the body," I finally said.

My eyes turned to the princess and the lord, who looked deeply uncomfortable with what had taken place – as much with the Regicide's actions as the fact it looked like I was coming out on top, I thought.

"So," I said. "I suppose we have some time to kill before I get the body. Let's have us a peace conference, then."

# Chapter 27

# Overtures

> "You should listen to the devil on your shoulder, my friend. I had it nailed onto there for a reason."
>
> Dread Emperor Abominable, the Thrice-Struck

It went like this: the opposition insisted they could not hold diplomatic talks while one of their own was being held up by the throat. In response, I somewhat politely cast aspersions on their grasp of matters such as reality and remembering who'd tried to kill me under truce banner *literally moments ago*, then told them it'd be rather absurd to stand there in silence while the Grey Pilgrim went to fetch my teacher's unconscious body. I spoke the word 'unconscious' with a heavy wink, because what was a little borderline necromancy between 'friends'? Lord Yannu promptly told me talks couldn't be had without the Peregrine, who in turn suggested that his word was enough for me to order General Rumena to release his personal Heaven-endorsed attack hound. He would then join my conversation with Malanza and the other Levantine.

"That's an interesting suggestion, Tariq," I smiled politely, showing a great deal of teeth. "Especially since it implies I still hold your word to be of any worth at all."

"Mind your tongue, villain," the Lord of Alava hissed. "To cast doubt on the honour of the Pilgrim's Blood is to insult the Dominion of Levant itself."

"Will the Grey Pilgrim be surrendering himself into my custody immediately, then?" I pointedly asked. "Honour might be at least in part satisfied by that."

There was a moment of pained silence, though from certain quarters there'd been understandably no surprise. After all, Princess Rozala had been in the tent when the treaties were first drafted and signed while the Grey Pilgrim had been an actual guarantor of the terms as well as part of them.

"You overreach, Black Queen," Lord Yannu said. "Such demands are beyond your ability to enforce, to say little of your right to them."

"My *right*?" I curtly repeated. "Did they not tell you, Lord Yannu, that I have written treatises signed by both your Peregrine and the Prince of Iserre to this nature? Treatises including terms that placed the Pilgrim in the Kingdom of Callow's hands for a time as hostage, and that your honourable Peregrine instead fled my capital in the night last year? Oaths and promises were broken, and he's since shown no willingness to make reparations for this or even acknowledge it happened."

"There was greater need for me elsewhere," the Grey Pilgrim replied. "Duties whose call was keener than what had been arranged."

"The oaths were inconvenient, so you broke them," I translated with a beaming smile. "But that's all right, because I'm just a villain after all. Charming."

"I would make amends, Black Queen," the Pilgrim offered.

"Sure," I replied without hesitation, "surrender yourself, right now. You'll be put to trial according to Callowan law and dealt with accordingly."

"I cannot do this," Tariq said, "so long as you lead an army against the Grand Alliance."

"Ah," I mused. "It was a platitude, then, and your word remains dust to me. Let us discard this notion of my putting faith in the promises of a man who does not afford anyone else the same courtesy and move on, shall we?"

None of them liked that, but Malanza steered the conversation away from the fact that both she and the Pilgrim had already broken terms of a bargain made with me before they lost any more feathers. The arrangements ended up being kicked down the line: talks would end until I'd received the body and released the Saint, then resume with the Grey Pilgrim in attendance. A waste of time, in my eyes, so I turned my gaze on Princess Rozala instead.

"I'm willing to bargain with you without them in attendance," I bluntly said. "You strike me as the most trustworthy of the three, at the moment, though admittedly that doesn't mean all that much."

The Princess of Aequitan hesitated, while in the back of my mind I gauged her situation. There were more Dominion soldiers than Proceran ones in the western coalition army she was fighting with, so it wasn't a given that she had the most clout in whatever power-sharing arrangement made up that host's command. On the other hand, if she was here then it was with the First Prince's backing and this remained the Principate of Procer: she had legitimacy the other two did not, being foreigners.

"We can speak," Princess Rozala said, "while other matters are seen to."

The large Lord of Alava stirred, face openly displeased, but the princess raised a hand in appeasement.

"I will not negotiate, or offer terms," the dark-haired woman said. "Only speak. Diplomacy can take place when all are in attendance."

The Grey Pilgrim spoke softly, in a language I did not know – a Levantine tongue, most likely, since Lord Yannu seemed to have no trouble understanding it. They conferred softly, and I watched Princess Rozala from the corner of my

eyes. She seemed as much in the dark about what was being said as I, and not particularly pleased about it. Adjutant leaned in closer.

"Murcadan, I think," the orc whispered in Kharsum. "Spoken mostly around the region of Alava city. I'm not surprised Rozala wouldn't know it, it's their least widespread tongue."

I slowly nodded. Might be true that the language had never seemed worth learning for the Princess of Aequitan. Although her principality was deep to the south of Procer and closer to the Dominion than any other foreign nation, Ceseo or Lunara would have been more useful picks if she meant to dabble in learning something of narrower use than tradertalk. Whatever the truth of it, the side conference between the Levantines did not take long. Quiet words were exchanged with Princess Rozala herself, and there must have been agreement as the Pilgrim sought my eyes once more and when denied that withdrew without another word. Lord Yannu inquired to the practical aspects of the trade, namely how the unconscious body would be carried, so I glanced meaningfully at Hakram. Adjutant moved to speak with the Levantine aristocrat, leaving Princess Rozala Malanza to speak with me alone. Well, not exactly: Komena drew her talons against my shoulder for a moment before lazily flapping away to perch herself on the shoulder of her favourite, General Rumena. The old drow showed no sign of tiring from holding up the Saint of Swords by the throat, and overall had seemed rather unimpressed by her glaring even before half of Sve Noc claimed its shoulder. The crow taking flight drew Malanza's attention to the one still on my shoulder, though she couldn't seem to gaze at Andronike directly.

"I wouldn't recommending looking at either too close," I said.

"Demons," Princess Rozala said, lips tightening into a line.

Andronike let out loud gurgling caws that might have been taken as laughter, and certainly rang of mockery.

"Sve Noc," I corrected. "Or their attention, anyway. No summons these, Rozala Malanza, bound and bargained for. Though if that makes you fear them less, I'll count you a fool for it."

The Proceran princess studied me for a moment, dark eyes inscrutable.

"What does it mean?" she asked. "Sve Noc."

"It means your learning is shallow, Rozala Malanza, while this world's roots run deep," Andronike spoke in perfect Chantant from my shoulder. "It will be amusing, to see how little of you the adjustment allows to remain. Already the cracks are showing, aren't they?"

The Princess of Aequitan turned ghastly pale.

"It will take more than brandy and poppy leaves for the digging to stop," the goddess on my shoulder laughed. "Hands and picks and tireless flesh, pulling aside the –"

"Andronike," I calmly said. "Enough."

"The clever little things would turn on you in a heartbeat, my herald, if they believed they would triumph in that strife," she said. "In their wanton

arrogance they prance about, blind to their utter *fragility*."

"Are we not all fragile, in your eyes?" I retorted.

"Some more than others," Andronike said, but left it at that.

Wings spreading, the crow-goddess took flight and left me to face a shaken Princess of Aequitan. Her tanned visage had turned ashen, and a tremor was running down her arm. Not, I noted, the one that clutched the handle of her sword.

"What is that *thing*, Black Queen?" Princess Rozala croaked.

"Desperate measures made altar," I said. "Apotheosis is not a gentle affair, and they were not gentle before it."

"Riddles," she accused.

"I've given you truths," I shrugged. "What you make of them, in the end, is not my concern. I am not your keeper, or for that matter your empire's."

That last sentence had blood returning to her face, and iron returned to her spine. I studied Rozala Malanza under the gentle light of the moon, waited as she put herself back together. It was absurd, I thought, to think of her as young when she was older than me. But she couldn't even be thirty, and it struck me that in different times she would have been considered much too young for the importance of the duties thrust upon her. As Hasenbach's commander in Iserre, she was arguably on par with the Iron Prince in authority within the ever-fluid military hierarchy of Procer. Perhaps even higher. *Young and worn before her time*, I thought. *The chorus of our age.*

"Procer is on the verge of collapse," Princess Rozala told me.

I hid my surprise at the fact that she'd outright admit that. The blood was in the water for anyone to see, and here in Iserre there were ingredients enough to cook the death of empire, but there was still life in the beast.

"In different circumstances, I might have celebrated that," I frankly said. "Not, however, today."

"You cannot afford for the lines up north to break, Black Queen," the princess told me, tone cool. "Too many of the refugees south would die, the sheer amount of corpses to be raised would effectively make the Dead King unstoppable."

Gods, I *wished*. Unstoppable was the prelude to some adolescent in colourful clothes bringing down the flying fortress, or inexplicably stabbing a villain's soul. Unfortunately, I doubted Neshamah would make any mistake so easily exploitable by the Heavens and their chosen.

"I didn't come to Iserre to fight any of you," I pointed out. "I'm extracting my forces."

"Do so," the princess said. "You will not be hindered."

"Including the Legions of Terror," I flatly said.

"That," Princess Rozala said, "cannot be allowed to happen."

I already had a biting reply on the tip of my tongue when I forced myself to bite it instead, eyes narrowing as I looked closer at the dark-haired Arlesite. She wasn't being high-handed, I thought, or refusing to recognize the realities of her situation. There wasn't defiance or righteous anger on her face, only a

sort of tired resignation. Rozala Malanza was essentially telling me, without outright speaking the word, that if the Legions left with my forces there would be dire consequences for the Principate.

"How bad?" I asked.

"Bad," she replied, tone grim.

"I can't give them to you," I frankly told her. "I won't backstab an ally and it'd make a bloody mess for me besides."

"If you were to escape with them," Princess Rozala delicately said, "after being defeated, that would be a different story. Or so I am told."

My fingers tightened around my reins and Zombie whinnied.

"That's not a small favour you're asking," I said. "Or a harmless one."

It wasn't an exaggeration to say that a great deal of my legitimacy – insofar as I had any – as the Queen of Callow came from my largely uninterrupted string of battlefield victories. I'd had political defeats aplenty, and strategic drubbings more than once, but even the worst of my days commanding an army could be argued to be at least draws. As the First Prince had once put it I was a warlord, and those only rules so long as they kept *winning*. It'd also put me in a weaker position when pushing for the Liesse Accords, coming from the cold as an already beaten foe instead of a victor, and that was without even getting in the practical aspects of being 'defeated'. Even if I were willing to waste soldiers over such theatre, which I honestly wasn't sure I was, this would be a risky business even if I trusted the opposition well. Which I did not. Malanza wasn't unreasonable, but a year ago she'd been invading my homeland and she'd never bothered to hide the despised me personally. That left the Levantines, which as long as the Pilgrim was around couldn't be trusted to do anything but what he 'advised'. How could I be sure that halfway through the withdrawal of my forces they wouldn't try to turn the face victory into a real one?

"I do not have room to negotiate, Black Queen," Princess Rozala murmured. "I would prefer if I did, but what do I have to bargain with save doom and despair?"

"I'd be taking on heavy risks," I reminded her. "On the account of people who are still my enemies."

"There is a greater enemy still," she told me, eyes serious. "*The* Enemy, and he comes for us all."

"I'm not unaware of that," I patiently said. "It's not that I'm unwilling to avoid setting fire to what's left of Procer, Malanza. It's that I'm not convinced if I try to help you your fellows won't stick a knife in my back halfway through."

She grimaced.

"I don't suppose," she said, "that my word of honour as the Princess of Aequitan would mean anything to you."

"More than nothing," I finally said. "But it only matters if you're in command of the army on the other side of this field, and I don't believe that's the case."

"I hold supreme command over all armies of the Principate in Iserre," she said.

"And the Levantines?"

"This half their forces answers to Lord Yannu, for the most part," Rozala said. "We make plans by council."

"Then you can't speak for the army," I said, not unkindly. "If the Grey Pilgrim asked the man to turn cannibal he actually might. Turning on a villain? That wouldn't even merit hesitation."

"You need to set aside your grudge against the Chosen, Foundling," the other woman told me. "Though I understand he broke faith with you, it was a shallow betrayal."

"He disappeared to hunt down my mentor, whose soulless body I've just had to trade for," I flatly said. "He'd didn't leave to take a nice stroll down a promenade, Malanza."

"The Carrion Lord killed thousand on the field, and dozens of thousands through the burning of them," the Princess of Aequitan spoke evenly. "I can only grieve the Peregrine did not simply slit the man's throat instead of resorting to such theatrics."

I could have argued this, truth be told. There was no denying Black was a monster, but he hadn't decided to torch his way through the Proceran heartlands for the pleasure of it on a sunny morning where he'd had nothing else planned. It'd been a calculated attack at the manpower and stability of an enemy nation who'd been in the process of invading my homeland and his. While I wouldn't defend his actions, or the validity of his methods even if they appeared to be working – to everyone's loss – he'd not committed that atrocity in a vacuum. It'd be a direct response to the Tenth Crusade, whose stated goal was the destruction of Praes. Black's policy had been to avoid war against Procer for decades before I'd known him, and it seemed rather rich of all these righteous folk to go out of their way declare war on one of the most infamous monsters of our age and then be appalled and surprised when he behaved monstrously. If you shoved your fingers in a brazier, at the very least you should expect to get burned. On the other hand, I was disinclined to defend an atrocity I didn't believe in and was currently screwing all of us over. Let her talk: if that was all she did, I had no issue with it. The talk was hardly undeserved.

"My point is that he's not ever going to consider promises binding, Malanza," I said. "Not if they get in the way of what he believes needs to be done."

"That is rather reassuring to me," the princess said. "Considering he's one of the most decent men I've met."

"I'm not going to argue whether the Pilgrim's anything with you," I flatly said. "But you can, at least, recognize why I'd hesitated to trust in him given his history of both breaking oaths and attempting to kill me."

"Make your peace with it," Princess Rozala said, rather unmoved.

It occurred to me, then, that from the Princess of Aequitan's perspective I was angry over simply our battlefield encounters and the Pilgrim's escape from

Liesse. She did not know that I'd good as begged the man to make any path but going to Keter feasible only to be turned down. Or that his wriggling into a role through the treaty after the Camps had essentially been an attempt to get me killed through a redemption story, after having spent that entire diplomatic conference trying to manoeuvre me into a story that'd get me either slain or sidelined. I wondered if she'd believe me, should I tell her. Likely not. Part of that I suspected only Named could truly understand, and then not even all of that rarefied breed. As for the rest, why would the Black Queen's word be taken for anything? No, I was simply expected to take the word of my fucking betters while everyone dragged my own through the mud. I pushed down the sharp flare of anger I felt at that. It would be of no use to me here.

"There's more there than you know," I finally said. "I am not unwilling to bargain with him, but trust him blindly when the stakes are so high? No."

"You would refuse without even giving reason?" Malanza said.

"Where'd you learn what would happen if the Legions were allowed to walk?" I replied.

She didn't answer. Yeah, we all had our little secrets. Might be the Augur, I figured, but other things as well. Tariq had Mercy whispering in his hear, it seemed, and I wouldn't write off the possibility that Tyrant had offered some sort of deal – or made of threat – either.

"Trust is a funny thing, isn't?" I murmured.

I considered, for a moment, telling her about what was taking shape in Arcadia. It'd be a danger to her side as well, I figured, though not an immediate one. I knew I *should* tell her, because if it came out later that I had known a catastrophe was forming there and said nothing there would a price to pay in many ways. But there'd been hellgates, in that broken place. And what I believed might have been High Arcana. It was possible for it to be the work of the Dead King, who had been known to use both these things, but that wasn't where the shape of this story – Masego missing, Liesse disappeared, everything coming to a head in Iserre – was leading. If I told any of the crusaders that knowledge would make it to the Grey Pilgrim. And more dangerously to the Saint of Swords, who I'd just humiliated and used as coin in a bargain, who I'd have to release before too long lest this situation be turned on me. If Laurence de Montfort learned that the Hierophant was meddling with these kinds of forces, she'd have a pretext to kill him. And I did not doubt for a single fucking moment that she'd try. Would she succeed? I honestly wasn't sure.

But I was certain I wasn't willing to gamble with Masego's life, so I kept my mouth shut.

"There's no point in holding talks over this, is there?" I finally said. "Not unless you're willing to offer me hostages and other forms of safeguard, which you won't be."

"You know the appearances of that would make it impossible," Princess Rozala calmly replied.

"Then we appear to have nothing left to speak about," I said. "I'll be marching my armies out of Iserre, Malanza."

I met her eyes, smiling ruefully.

"I'd suggest you get yours out of my way, for all our sakes."

# Chapter 28

# Acts

> "Despise not the treacherous but instead the weak, for while both serve the same purpose where treachery requires skill and daring weakness requires only mediocrity."
>
> Dread Emperor Vile the First

It didn't look like he was sleeping.

That disturbed me almost more than the rest. Amadeus of the Green Stretch was still alive, by the measure of most people. The signs of life were certainly there: breath, heartbeat, warmth. So it *should* have looked like he was sleeping, but it didn't. It looked like someone had just... torn out his consciousness and a body had been left behind. Its physical functions went on but having known the man – loved him, in our own misshapen way – I couldn't call this breathing corpse anything but the remains of him. His soul could be anywhere, by now, and combing through Procer for it brought to mind that old metaphor about the needle and the haystack.

In this case, though, the needle was a top-notch Named mage and the haystack was both hostile and on fire. I'd tell Vivienne to have the Jacks watching, and I was considering passing on what I'd learned to Malicia. She was my enemy, true, and he'd both defied and disobeyed her. Yet I suspected she'd sacrifice quite a bit to bring back to Ater and might even be willing to cooperate with me to see his soul snatched back from the heroes. I only barely grasped the nature of the ties that bound Black and Malicia, but I did not doubt the depth of them. Neither would have been quite so intensely furious at the other after Akua's Folly if there'd not been trust to break.

Was it not an irony of sorts that I was now relying on the architect of that same folly for answers? The shade of the Diabolist had only bothered with a cursory examination of Black's physical state before turning her attention to more eldritch matters. She was a healer of some talent, I knew, but it was more a result of Akua being skilled at branches of sorcery that required knowledge of anatomy and biology than out of any true affinity for the healing arts. Like

Masego, she was more chirurgeon than physician. It was typical of Praesi to be more interested in the cutting of things than the mending of them. Fingers resting on my teacher's forehead, Akua was frowning with her eyes closed.

I could feel the quiet lapping of Night at his body, and perhaps I should have been studying her methods to learn from them what I could. Instead, though, my gaze remain on his face. He was bearded, now. It was uncomfortable to look at, though more for the sloppiness of the growth than the threads of grey within. Black had always been cleanly to a fault, austere in all his affairs but always well put-together. His hair was still dark, for the most part, but it'd grown longer and like the beard grey was now touching it. It was... distressing to see. Like a chip on a blade you'd believed forever smooth.

"Barbaric," Akua suddenly said, both hand and Night withdrawing.

Golden eyes had fluttered open, and she was looking down at Black's body with patrician disdain.

"Elaborate," I said.

"This was not even sorcery, dearest," Akua said, wrinkling her nose. "The work of that ignorant little savage the Saint of Swords, I would wager. It was the metaphysical equivalent of attempting field surgery while eyeballing the affair with a two-handed sword that was most definitely *not* cleaned beforehand."

"Elaborate usefully," I specified, hiding my dismay.

The body was alive, for all the lack of driving intellect within, but had it been damaged irreparably? I was intending to snatch the soul back when opportunity arose, to put it back in this very shell of flesh, but if that wasn't possible we'd have to get... inventive.

"The severing between body and soul itself was clean and sharply made," Akua said. "But near every other aspect was botched. It was done too abruptly, for one, and so in a damaging manner. Which means there will be some disconnect between the soul and body even should they be reunited, possibly permanent. Memory loss is likely as well, though proper rituals can mitigate that aspect and it is likely to be minor in nature."

"Shit," I muttered. "Masego cut up my soul a bunch of times and it was never this bad. Why is this so different?"

The look she sent me was offended on Masego's behalf, I thought, but also on hers and possibly even mine for having asked what she evidently considered to be a highly plebeian question.

"Laurence the Montfort is a murderous vagrant swinging a butcher's knife at matters she only dimly understands," Akua said. "The Hierophant was taught by the Lord Warlock himself from the cradle, and even in those days likely could be counted as one of the ten most learned Trismegistan practitioners on Calernia. You are comparing a mangy attack hound to one of the finest mages alive."

"That's nice," I said. "But what I want to know is if the Saint purposefully made this sloppy or if it was just the only way she knew how to do it?"

Diabolist mulled over that for a moment.

"Though I hate to dismiss the possibility of incompetent wickedness in our opposition," she finally said, "I believe this might genuinely have been the most clear-cut separation she could accomplish given the means at her disposal."

So, the Saint had been a bad chirurgeon but not necessarily a malicious one. I supposed the distinction had been academic, anyway. I would have remembered malice directed at my father when he was helpless and prisoner, but in and of itself it would not have moved me to either kill or spare her. That decision, in a way, would be making itself. If the Saint acted against me or mine even one more time, I'd get her head on a pike. If she was reined in by her allies, then I'd swallow my spite and let her be pointed at the Dead King instead.

"Noted," I said. "Which brings us to our next trick – can you track the soul using his body?"

"I cannot," Akua immediately replied.

My eyebrow rose.

"The reasons why are twofold," she told me. "The first is that, as I've already told you, the severing itself was keenly made. The… sympathy between body and soul that would remain in most circumstances is near entirely absent here."

"Near," I said.

She inclined her head, conceding the point.

"Which brings me to the second reason, namely that I've already attempted to do this and found my workings frustrated," Akua said. "Someone is occluding the soul from sight and search, and doing so with surprising skill."

"The Pilgrim mentioned he passed on the soul to the Rogue Sorcerer," I said. "Who I sadly know little about, save that he often uses fire sorcery when fighting."

"Given that the workings on his end were surprisingly apt at gainsaying Night and its miraculous nature, I would wager her him Proceran or Proceran-taught," she told me. "Jaquinite sorcery would be uniquely suited to the thwarting of the miraculous, being inspired of miracles itself."

My lips quirked into a mirthless smile. What a helpful coincidence that a Named mage from the theory of magic most suited at hiding from my means of pursuit would be sent off with what I was looking before I even returned to the surface. Fucking Heavens. It might genuinely have been a coincidence, for all I knew, but given the opposition I was inclined to gesture obscenely at the sky just on principle.

"So what *can* you do?" I asked.

"Establish a ritual array for resonance," Akua said. "It will be imprecise and require a great deal of power, but when employed the ritual should reveal if the soul is close."

"Define close," I said.

"A radius of seven leagues," she said. "Though that broad it will simply reveal if the soul is within that area. For more precise results, the radius would have to be significantly lowered."

Seven leagues, I thought, forcing myself to visualize it. It wasn't nothing, though I would have preferred larger if there was to be an investment of Night in every attempt. The haystack had been made into smaller bundles, I supposed, but it'd not gotten smaller in any real sense.

"Prepare the ritual array and make me an estimate of the kind of power it'd require," I finally said. "When you have the time, Akua. This is not as high a priority as our immediate threats."

It surprised me that even looking at Black the words were not difficult to speak. I'd thought, I supposed, that looking at him in the flesh there would be a sudden sprout of sentimentality that'd have me hesitating between taking risks to pursue this and taking a more pragmatic approach. I cocked my head to the side, gazing at the pale skin of my teacher, and found that aside from a faint tinge of guilt the decision hadn't brought anything out of me. And the guilt, truth be told, came more from how the decision had barely needed to me made than from the making of it. *But then you'd understand, wouldn't you?* I thought, looking at the not-sleeping man. *That there are larger things at stake than you and I.*

"You seem wistful," Akua softly said.

"I don't know what that means," I lied, "you don't need to impress me with your fancy Wasteland words, Akua, I-"

"Playing the fool did not work even when I considered you to be one," the shade said. "Why would it now?"

I shrugged my shoulders, as if to say it'd been worth a try. I could have simply left the tent, I thought, but that would have felt too much like a retreat and I'd had enough of that for the evening. After my private talks with Princess Rozala had made it clear there was no real chance of an accord being reached, I'd simply waited until Black's body was delivered to my people before taking my leave. My warning to her had been blunt, but then we were rather past subtle intrigues weren't we? The day and night had been exhausting in a way that had nothing to do with the physical, and seeing Black with a gaping hole where everything that made him who he was should be hadn't helped my mood in the slightest.

"You must hate him like poison," I eventually said. "Are you remaining civil as a courtesy to me?"

I didn't like to think of Second Liesse – or the Doom of the same, as some called it, though my own people most often named it Akua's Folly – but on that dark day I'd been allowed a glimpse into the nature of Akua Sahelian. Not through the madness she'd wielded like a blade, or the the victories she claimed over me, but when I had seen her flinched. She had bound me, title and Name both, and the binding could not lie: when Akua saw her father die before her eyes, it had wounded her. The body of the architect of that death now laid on a

cot before us, yet not so much as a flicker of hatred had touched her face in all the time she'd been in the tent.

"Hate," Akua repeated, tone pensive. "I can see why you would believe so."

I glanced at her and found golden eyes watching the Carrion Lord's chest rise and drop at its own steady pace.

"Are you claiming you don't?" I asked.

"I suppose I might kill him, given reason," the shade said. "Though that would differ from duty only by the tinge of satisfaction that it would bring, like an old mistake finally blotted out."

"I was there, Akua," I said. "I know what it did to you, when-"

She turned to me with burning eyes, and my tongue halted.

"My father's death was the writ of many hands," she said. "His, it is true, but others as well. The goblins who fired the crossbows. Your own, for serving as distraction while he was taken. But most of all, the fault is mine."

She looked way.

"I waged war on villains, and did not sufficiently safeguard that which was precious to me," Akua said. "I am the mother of that murder in every way that matters."

"There's sense to that," I replied. "Logic, even."

My eyes stayed on her.

"And not a trace of the grief I saw then," I finished.

She turned to meet my gaze, and for once there was anger not mastered or leashed in the cast of her face.

"What is it you want from me, Catherine?" the shade asked bitingly. "Tears? Lamentations? Or is it pain that you demand?"

"Yes," I said. "I want you to be in pain."

She flinched back at that like I'd slapped her. Before a heartbeat had even passed, she was smiling and amused and her body beginning to angle so it would display her curves more prominently. I admired how well she'd been trained almost half as much as I utterly despised it.

"While I've certainly heard you prefer the rougher forms, I-"

Her tone was light, suggestive, there was a slight emphasis on heard that implied she might actually have heard Archer and I spending a night together – which was possible, tents weren't exactly the finest way to keep something quiet – and she'd changed tack blindingly quick. I ignored it.

"If you're in pain," I continued, "if you can *feel* pain, I means you value things. People. That you begin to understand things other than yourself have value."

"I have always known that," Akua said. "Your take on Praesi values, my heart, remains simplistic for all that we have spoken of the subject."

"Intellectually you assign value to other people," I corrected. "For their usefulness, potential, the pleasure or amusement they can bring you. But that's still thinking of them as assets. As objects. But if their loss pains you, Akua, they were more than an object to you."

"Should I weep, then?" the shade harshly replied. "Should I wail and beat my chest, swear revenge on all those who can be revenged upon? Should I burn half the world to assuage my grief, make Creation pay the *long price*?"

The Callowan term she spoke derisively, but I could hear it was forced. It had screwed my countrymen, over the years, the need to see grudges settled. But it also appealed to that vicious, childish part of us that wanted to answer pain with pain. Hurt those who'd hurt you. And anyone who'd ever grieved had heard that song, sung to one beat or another.

"Would you like to?" I asked her softly. "Weep. Wail. Bury him with no honours of mine, but what you can offer from daughter to father."

"And what would you know of that, Catherine?" Akua said, sounding tired.

My eyes flicked back to the body laid out in front of us.

"I know," I said, "that sometimes you grieve more what could have happened than what did."

Akua did not answer. The silence hung heavy in the air, broken by only two people breathing. The shade among us had no such need.

"He shouldn't have been born in Praes," Akua said. "He'd be angry with me for saying that, but anywhere else on the continent they would have let him read in peace and deep down that was all he ever wanted. But in the Wasteland, when the Gift flowers so strongly there are *expectations*."

"He was powerful, I'm told," I said. "Like few others."

"Like many others," Akua softly denied. "But he was clever and found angles others did not even consider. But he was not of the old blood, so his fate was death or patronage. He could have been husband to my mother, you know. He had the talent for it and if he'd tried to establish a presence at her court he would at least have been made a formal consort. But it wasn't in his nature, Catherine, to see magic as a tool for power. To him it wasn't just the Gift, it was a gift."

"He's the one who taught you," I said.

"I suppose he did," Diabolist murmured. "Though it was never a lesson in the way my tutors would have made it. He was... sharing something he loved with me. Helping me understand it so we could wonder at it together. It made a difference. I could not help but love it as well, when it was something that was *ours*."

I envied her that. The memories she must be peering at with that faraway gaze, the hours she'd gotten to spend with her father that hadn't been just lessons. Getting to know him as more than a teacher and a guiding hand.

"I loved him," Akua suddenly admitted. "But, in the end, not as much as I loved what my mother taught me to reach for."

She chuckled barrenly.

"So how could I dare weep, dearest one, when I chose that ambition over him?" she said.

"Because you miss him," I softly replied. "Even so, you miss him."

I heard her move and found her leaning forward. Chin against her raised palms, long hair cascading down her back. I couldn't see her eyes or her face, but the tension in her shoulders was open.

"I do not think this is a kindness you offer me, Catherine," she said, tone ambiguous.

"It's not about kindness or cruelty," I said. "It's about being whole, more than just the parts that're useful."

Silence, as she mulled over my words.

"Why?"

A dangerous question, that, for it was being asked by a dangerous woman. Akua Sahelian was bound to me still, and had been shorn from Winter by virtue of there no longer being such a thing. But my leashes on her had frayed as well. The Night was not mine, and though I could stripped her of her power that would have left her nothing but a shade. Powerless. It should have been a matter carefully weighed, the absence of many safeguards Winter had allowed against Akua being divested of her claws. It hadn't been, though, not after Great Strycht. Because she'd said some things about doing good that night that I didn't believe she truly understood the implications of. Because once you embraced a principle, you didn't get to pick and choose where it worked and did not.

"Because, now and then, I forget who you are," I said.

*What matters more*, Akua Sahelian had asked of me once, *the conviction or the act?* I still had no answer to that, no iron-bound truth to offer. But she had made her choice, and it betrayed her own belief.

"It won't matter," Diabolist said, "for you are, my darling, Callowan to the bone. It will kill me or it will kill you, but in the end all debts will be paid."

"So it will," I agreed quietly. "Did I not swear to you, once, that no place in Creation would safeguard you from me?"

"That," Akua fondly said, "and a fate that would have men trembling in a thousand years."

*Praesi*, I thought and did so less than affectionately. Would else would take a ruinous oath as a tender remembrance?

"And you'll have that," I mused. "It's owed. But I'll make you into a person first. Because there's no meaning to passing judgement on the Diabolist – she's just a villain. That's the sum whole of her."

"Yet you still do not believe there is difference between the Diabolist and Akua Sahelian," the shade said, cocking her head to the side. "I am bemused, dear heart."

"I'm going to claw back a person from what they made of you, Akua," I calmly said. "And then, at the end of our road, we will have justice."

"And I will submit myself to this decree," she said, sounding amused. "You seem implacably certain of that."

"It is borrowed certainty," I said. "But certainty still."

"I am all ears, Catherine Foundling," she drawled.

"What matters more," I asked, "between the conviction and the act?"
"The act," Akua Sahelian said.
She had not hesitated a moment and so I smiled.
"How long have you been acting like one of us, Akua?" I simply asked.
No answer followed, not after and not when I left the tent.

# Bonus Chapter: Inexorable

> "Courage and cowardice fill the same grave, but earn different eulogy."
>
> Lycaonese saying

Otto Reitzenberg's crown sat ill on his brow, and always would. On it weighed the three deaths that had carried him through the gates of Sternlerin fortress: his father and sisters, every one of them a better and braver soul than he. They had perished at the Enemy's hand, and with every death further down the line of succession the crown was passed until it sat on his brow. Sat laden with the weight of those who should have led their people instead. Sometimes he thought he could hear them in the wind. Father's rasping laughter, his throat never quite recovered from the poison on the ratling spear. Gude's calm and steady drone, never moved to haste by fear nor displeasure. Elsa's thundering wraths and kindnesses, neither any less terrible than the other. The Enemy had come for the House of Reintzenberg, that day, and spared only the runt of the litter. For the blood he carried on his brow his people had named him Otto Redcrown, and in his hands the heavy charge of turning back the tide of the Dead had been left.

He was not that charge's equal.

"Come now, Reitzenberg," the other man drawl, "no need to look so grim. The situation's markedly improved since this morning."

The Prince of Bremen scowled at his companion, unamused by the attempted levity. Prince Frederic Goethal was the very personification of every mocking tale shared around fires about the Alamans – covered in silks and ribbons, his long flaxen hair cascading down in ringlets all the way to his shoulders and usually drunk well before noon. The Prince of Brus was also the only ruler from south of Neustria to have sent so much as a single sword to join the defence of Lycaonese lands. And it was more than a sword the man had ridden with: near the entire army of Brus had made for Twilight's Pass under the prince. Frederic was, Otto believed, both a finer soldier and a finer tactician than the Prince of Bremen himself. Yet he was also as prone to preening as the colourful azure and crimson kingfisher that was the banner of the House of

Goethal. The juxtaposition of the two was disconcerting, made more so by the fact that the man was barely twenty and boyish in looks besides.

"I do not see how, Prince Frederic," Otto said. "For one, this appears to be a dragon."

The long stretch of mountain passes, valleys and narrow ridges popularly known as Twilight's Pass had several choke points, the jagged pits of Volsaga being the latest they had been forced to defend. Volsaga Fortress itself, raised on a narrow strip between two sharp cliffs, had held for a fortnight as the dead massed their hosts under cover of constant, grinding assaults. It might have held for another fortnight, Prince Otto thought, if not for the Dead King unleashing the skeletal horror he'd just referred to. The gargantuan dragonlike thing had torn through the outer walls, ignoring like arrows and stone like they were summer rain, and scattered the defenders as the lesser dead poured in. Now it was curled around a low peak that loomed above the path into the fortress, forbidding attempt to claw it back from the dead.

"'twas a dragon, perhaps," Prince Frederic mused. "It is now quite dead, one assumes."

"We pulled back in time," Otto grunted, ignoring the other man's words. "We'll save maybe half the companies we'd committed to the fortress. That is still a heavy loss. It will be a fighting retreat until Graueletter, too, and that abomination is bound to pursue."

"The dwarven ballistae seemed to have only irritated it, alas," the Prince of Brus conceded. "Though given the weather in this parts, it is a miracle the things work at all."

"How, then," Prince Otto patiently said, "has our situation improved since morn?"

"I would think that obvious, Reitzenberg," Prince Frederic said, and elegantly flicked his wrist upwards.

The Lycaonese prince glance upwards, and saw little more than the sky. There were none of the corpse-drakes, at least, which he supposed was a small mercy. Both archers and slingers were beginning run out of projectiles, and it would be days before the next supply convoy.

"I see nothing," Otto admitted.

"The sun has finally deigned to arrive, my friend," Prince Frederic cheerfully said. "We will, at least, perish slightly thawed."

A convulsive chuckle tore free of Otto's throat before he could help himself. It'd been a dark jest, but then Lycaonese humour was not renowned for its lightness. The Prince of Brus took a moment to push back his long curls, then glanced curiously to their side. The Farewell Stones were a striking sight, Otto would admit. The steles of granite carved straight from the stone went on for most of a mile along the mountain path, most of them with a large iron peg hammered through. Some were empty, others rusting, but in every last one a farewell in iron had once been made. It was not a monument the way southerners would know it, but to his people it held great meaning.

"I'll confess never to have heard of this shrine," the Prince of Brus said. "May I ask what it stands for? It does not seem dedicated to the Heavens, at least in no way I understand."

"It is not," Otto replied. "My people call them the Farewell Stones, and they are no hymn to Above. They are... a vow, I suppose. Oft renewed, never fulfilled."

"A Lycaonese custom, then," Frederic Goethal said, eyes curious.

"This place, Volsaga," Otto slowly explained. "It is halfway through Twilight's Pass, and the easiest path through it. Armies have marched here since before the days of the Iron Kings, when we were tribes held together only by fear of the dark."

The Alamans prince listened attentively, his face twisting with fascination.

"When we come through here, to march against the Plague or the Dead," Prince Otto said. "We make a farewell in the stone. Before going to war, we leave it as an oath."

"The spikes of iron," Prince Frederic murmured, glancing at the long stretch of them. "There must be hundreds, and the rust... Some of them are mere traces, now."

"We have done this," Otto Reitzenberg said, "for many hundred years. Every time knowing it might be the last. That this war could be the one that breaks us and lets the Enemy devour us all."

"But there is always a fresh farewell," the other man said, tone thoughtful.

Otto nodded, pleased her understood.

"When the farewells reach the end of the steles," the Prince of Bremen said, "those at the beginning have faded. So it has been, so it will be."

Otto turned to his sworn swords and curtly gestured. They came forward with a large fold of leather and opened it before the two royals. Inside was a large peg of iron, and another of his soldiers offered a steel-tipped hammer to accompany it. The Alamans prince smiled in understanding, eyes sweeping to the stele closest to them. Empty, save for some last traces of rust deep inside.

"You are to add your own farewell, I take it," Prince Frederic said.

"We," Otto Redcrown said.

The other man studied him closely.

"How many Alamans have given farewell here, Otto Reitzenberg?" he quietly asked.

"After today," Otto said, "there will be one."

The Prince of Brus paled, as if slapped.

"There is no need to-" he began, then bit his lip and when he resumed speaking his voice was hoarse. "There should be no reward for this, Prince Otto. Not for simply joining the battle when you've all had to bid farewell to these passes for centuries."

The Prince of Bremen shook his head, for after all the other royal did not understand him. Did not understand this.

"We are not better," Otto said. "We too have murdered and schemed, Frederic Goethal. We have warred on our own and on southerners for greed or lust for power. There is naught in our bones that sets us apart from the stuff of other men."

The last of the House of Reitzenberg straightened his back and took the iron peg he was being offered.

"It is the choice that matters," Prince Otto Redcrown said. "Of marching through the pass. Of leaving shelter behind so that you may shelter others."

The hammer was pressed into the hands of the Prince of Brus by a gruffly insistent armsman, and the fair-haired Alamans finally took it. There was no disapproval in the eyes of the soldiers sworn to Bremen, as Prince Frederic prepared to hammer in the peg that Otto was holding in place. There would be none from the soldiers of Hannoven, either, or Rhenia and Neustria. Why would there be? When the call had sounded, when the Dead had crossed the lakes, only one prince had come north. The name of Frederic Goethal would be remembered in these lands so long as Lycaonese held them. The hammer came down, claiming three strokes before iron nestled deep into rock. Otto clapped the shoulder of the other prince, after.

"We retreat to Graueletter," the Prince of Bremen gruffly said.

"No," Prince Frederic quietly replied. "No, not quite yet. You northerners are not the only ones with their pride."

The flaxen-haired man whistled sharply and there was a cheer from the slope below, as the two thousand horsemen that were his persona retinue raised their banners. The Prince of Brus sent for his horse and deftly mounted the saddle, claiming a long lance from his page.

"The fortress is lost, Prince Frederic," Otto told the man.

"That may be," the man smiled, "but you were not wrong, in saying the beast will pursue us during the retreat. Many will die, should it not be slain."

"Charging the path is a fool's errand," Prince Otto bluntly said. "It will kill you all."

"So we will do no such thing, my friend," Prince Frederic replied. "See the low peak where it looms, and the slope above it."

The Prince of Bremen flicked a look, only to confirm what he already knew.

"It is sheer enough to be called a cliff and not a slope," he said.

"We shall be most careful not to tumble, then," Frederic Goethal grinned, looking for all the world like an impish boy. "Worry not, Reitzenberg. We will return victorious, should we return at all."

"It is folly," Otto said.

"I am a Goethal of Brus, my friend," the prince said. "*I Dare* are the words of my blood, and to them I will keep. Prepare the retreat. We guests must meanwhile earn our keep."

The Prince of Brus rode away to join his retinue, and Otto stood on the heights above them spellbound. They were a colourful lot, these Alamans horsemen, a riot of silks in red and blue trailing behind their polished scale

like fairy wings in the kingfisher's colours. Pages saw to their riders, and to the cheers of the soldiers offered up thin glasses of what Otto thought might be crystal. Pure crystal, exquisitely shaped and filled with red wine. Prince Frederic took up his own and led his mount to the fore of the retinue before raising his glass.

"Ladies and gentlemen – to Procer, and Her Most Serene Highness," he toasted.

As one, the soldiers toasted and drank. Not the full glass, the Lycaonese saw, but a mere sip of it.

"To our hosts."

The Alamans drank.

"To the kingfisher, may we never shame it," Prince Frederic said.

A cheer followed, and another sip. The Prince of Brus' horse arched impatiently, though even one-handed the man reined it in effortlessly. He laughed, loud and bright.

"To doom, and glorious death," he bellowed.

Madmen that they were, every single one of the Alamans flung their glasses against the ground. Crystal shattered, red wine spilled like blood, and behind Prince Frederic Goethal the riders followed. A fortune had been broken on stone in a moment of pique. Otto Redcrown watched as they rode up the mountain paths, disappearing in a crown of mists and stone. There was nothing he could do but arrange the retreat and wait, ordering bowmen companies forward to cover the retreat of the last soldiers escaping the fortress. The dragon of bones stirred at the sight, though it did not yet deign to intervene. There was still fighting taking place in the fortress courtyards behind it as the dead overwhelmed the last of the trapped defenders, and it lazily watched until nothing but the dead remained. Mere moments after, two thousand Alamans crested over the mountain path overlooking the abomination's perch.

Otto's fingers tightened as he saw them slow as they reached the edge of the slope, that steeply inclined bare rock precipitously tumbling down towards the skeletal horror that still remained perched over the path. The kingfisher banner rose glittering under the sun, blue and red and glittering gold, and two thousand lances were lowered as the cavalry thundered down the slope. To doom and glorious death Prince Frederic had summoned them, and the Alamans joined him laughing and singing their summer songs as they charged, silks trailing behind them like ephemeral wings. The beast only saw them too late, and like a pack of bright-clad wolves they tore at it. Tore at it and died. Leathery wings were ripped, but their beating still shattered horsemen and horses alike. Claws tore through armour and lace just as easily, maw crushed men and mount in a single screaming snap. But the madmen did not flinch or flee or withdraw. With hungry tenacity they carved up the abomination, 'til limbs had been rent and bones broken.

Until the Prince of Brus himself shattered the skull with a hammer, and the eldritch lights in the monster's eyeholes were snuffed out. The man raised

it high above his head and the cheer from the army was deafening, defiant. A sliver of light brought to a dark day. Of the two thousand horsemen that sallied out, six hundred returned.

Easily thrice that many soldiers might have been lost in the retreat, if they had not gone.

—

There was going to be a snowstorm tonight.

Captain Bernhardt had learned to tell the signs: wind grew restless, and colder, but you could still taste the heaviness in the air. It'd be a rough watch for whoever served after dusk, even more so for the rationing he'd had to place on braziers. Charcoal and stones were running low, and the promised supplies from Bremen had never arrived. In the captains' private opinion, it was a toss-up whether it was the Enemy's warbands who were responsible or the ugly truth that there were only so many supplies to go around and half a dozen forces that needed them more than his own. Not that the territory Bernhardt had been ordered to hold was without importance: Hocheben Heights sloped down from the southern peaks of the Kaltwend, a broad plateau that stretched all the way to the rocky shores of Lake Pavin. It was a lock on the hard spit of land that stood between the Grave and the tributary river to Lake Pavin, heights overlooking lowlands now crawling with the dead and damned. There were only a few paths up the sheer cliffs, though, and he'd ordered them collapsed the moment he took command. The dead had only half-heartedly tried the climb a dozen times since, and been duly driven back. He could understand why commanders might send the wood and grain to Twilight's Pass or the Rhenian Gates instead, where every hour saw a fresh swarm of horrors unleashed.

It didn't make the nights any warmer for his soldiers, though.

The fair-haired captain mused loosening the rationing for the duration of the snowfall as he tread the icy stones of Emil's Displeasure, the long stretch of fortifications jutting from the edge of the plateau. The watchtowers were few, for this high up they were hardly needed, but Prince Emil Papenheim had not been skinflint in seeing to the defence of Hocheben. Stone parapets with punctured arrow slits oversaw the drop, and further back thick oaken trap doors led to the dug-in sections Hannoven soldiers fondly called the *Emilzorn*: tunnels leading to lower in the cliff side, through which ice-soaked trees and massive stones could be rolled down to fall at any force trying to climb up. Bernhardt had found the two hundred men and women left in Hocheben by the Iron Prince to be priceless, after coming to take command at the order of now-dead Prince Manfred Reiztenberg. His three thousand soldiers were mostly Neustrians, as was he, and they'd never had to fight for the heights in their lifetime. The old garrison knew the paths, knew the defences, and Bernhardt had made sure to make their own captain his second. You couldn't trust a Hannoven woman to crack a smile even at her own wedding, famously, but what Captain Elpeth lacked in humour she more than made up in ability to kill things.

Bernhardt tightened his furs around his shoulders as he passed the third and last watchtower, slowing his steps by the brazier tucked away behind it. The three soldiers out on watch looked up guiltily as his arrival, well aware at least one of them should be up on the tower at the mercy of the evening wind.

"Captain," the oldest among them began. "We-"

"Up," Bernhardt interrupted in a rasp. "Now, and I will pretend I saw nothing. Don't let it happen again."

The older man saluted, the spear but clacking against the cold stone beneath, and Bernhardt watched him hurry back to his post. The other two might have looked abashed, he thought, though it was hard to tell with the padded cheeks of the helmets hiding away so much of their faces.

"It will snow tonight," he told them. "Keep a careful eye out. The Enemy does not shiver or sleep."

"We will, sir," the youngest solemnly said.

Gods, he thought, she couldn't have been older than sixteen by the sound of her voice. The lock of red hair that'd slid out from under the rim of her helm was moving with the wind. No older than Bernhardt's own oldest daughter, which he'd seen off with the family coat of mail and his dead wife's sword. Seen off to march with Prince Manfred's host to hold Twilight's Pass against the Dead King, along with most the Neustrian volunteers. Fredda could be dead, for all he knew. Word from the fighting at the pass had been sparse, but what he'd heard had been enough to chill his blood.

"I'll take you at your word, soldier," Bernhardt said, tone softening.

It was a whim that drove him to stand at the battlements, to take a look over the edge into the howling winds. Far below bare trees and evergreens stood half-buried in snow, until a frozen river cut them off, and it was the sight of that river that raised his hackles. A large patch of ice was *cracked*. He could see no dead moving below among the trees, and yet...

"Sound the horns," he ordered. "All steel to the walls."

"Sir?" the girl asked.

"*Now*," he barked.

It was instinct, he knew, but there was something wrong. Captain Bernhardt stepped back and went looking through the sparse supply cache at the watchtower's side, until he found what he was looking for: a long torch, ending in a tightly-tied cloth soaked with oil. He plunged it into the brazier, waiting until it caught fire before stepping back to the edge of the battlements. Atop the watchtower the call to arms sounded, sharp and echoing across the heights. Steadying his hand, the captain tossed the lit torch over the edge of the cliff. For five, ten heartbeats he thought he'd made a fool of himself and utter relief swelled. Then the torch hit something that wasn't there, and after a sound like a broken mirror a hulking shape flickered into sight.

"Gods stand with us," he whispered.

It was no simple dead, but instead a great abomination. A misshapen thing made of men's bones and stretched out leather, shaped as some long-clawed

bear with an overripe belly scaling the cliff. It must have been almost two hundred feet tall and half as large. Empty eye sockets turned to look at him, and with a keening sound the abomination leapt up.

"Spears at the ready," Captain Bernhardt ordered, hastily backing away from the edge.

Two sets of bones claws closed around the battlements, grinding against the stone, as behind Bernhard the first reinforcing company spread out. Shafts of wood with tips of iron or steel dipped forward. The fair-haired Neustrian bared his sword, cursing himself for having left his shield at the barracks when setting out. The abomination's massive head came out, all leather and bone and blind malevolence. It opened its mouth, jaws unhinging, and with horror Bernhardt realized that the monster was not the whole of it: climbing relentlessly out of the dead thing's belly were sure-footed corpses, armed and armoured. It was a siege tower, he realized, the likes of which only the Dead King could possibly craft. And a precursor to all-out assault. They might hold here, he thought, but how many others like this were climbing up the cliff unseen? The captain found the eye of a soldier at the front of the spear wall.

"You," he said. "Go, and tell Captain Elpeth what you saw here. She has command."

The young man opened his mouth to protest, but Bernhardt would not argue and so ignored him.

"Volunteers," he called out. "Ten of you, with me. Let us give Keter its fucking *due*."

In front of them the abomination was spewing out its dead progeny, corpse after corpse forming a foothold, but ten brave souls came to his side. They used the old way, knowing full well what it meant. Three large urns of pitch, three torches, the rest to serve as the arrow in flight. The girl was one, that soldier with the errant red tuft.

"Go back, kid," he said. "Let another old hand take your torch."

Dark eyes met his.

"Hanne," she said, tone hard. "My name is Hanne, and I am *Lycaonese*."

The rebuke was hard as the voice. No older than his own Fredda, the captain thought. *What kinds of fathers were we, to raise daughters like these?* It was a bitter kind of pride, but pride nonetheless. Grip tight around his sword, Bernhard nodded.

"Steady then, Hanne," he rasped. "Remember that the flame is what matters."

She let out a shivering breath, nodding.

"Though mountains crack, and ice will thaw," Hanne said.

Bernhardt of Neustria let out a spout of laughter like a spasm and nodded, taking the lead. Behind him the volunteers fell into formation

"Though mountains crack, and ice will thaw," he called out.

Spears cracked down against the stone, a defiant snap.

"Though walls will fall, to tooth and claw," the captain screamed, voice rising.

Eleven against the assembling dead, and still they charged. Sword in hand Bernhardt hacked at the bronze-clad corpse before him, elbowing the dead aside and burying himself in their line. At his side the other swords fought like the mad, pushing in and knowing there would be no going back.

"Though stars will fade, and shadow spread," Bernhardt screamed, and they screamed with him.

Three of the volunteers were dead already, taken by axe and spear, but the dead had not expected so fierce an assault by so few and for a heartbeat he stood before the beasts' open maw with no foe before him. His sword he dropped, snatching a torch from one of his fallen instead and the girl, Hanne, pushed at his side even as he took an axe in the ribs. The gap in the enemy surprise had bought them was already closing.

"On the heights we stood, with iron red," she whispered, teeth clenched.

Torches were touched to pitch – one, two, three.

Into the beast they leapt, screaming defiance, and from the inside it burned.

The Hocheben Heights held halfway to dawn, and the surviving garrison retreated in good order.

# Chapter 29

# Retrospect

> "My son, the Helikeans insist it is better to live a day as a lion than a hundred years as a sheep but as in so many things they are missing the point. Lions commonly live a decade and a half, sheep slightly less. It is not them you must emulate but instead the common tortoise, a wise creature that achieves very little but will do so for a very long time. This is the ideal state of politics."
>
> Extract from the infamous 'Sensible Testament' of Basilea Chrysanthe of Nicae

We got three days' march before Creation turned on us.

It was always going to, I'd known that deep down – there'd been too many moving parts sent to spin within the bounds of Iserre for my armies to be allowed to escape the grounds so easily. But I'd expected, and planned for, the Heavens putting their fingers to the scale through the local crop of heroes. My contingencies had been built to kill or cripple enemy Named, killing as few actual soldiers as was possible. If there was to be a confrontation, my thought had been, best it be contained to Named and army strength on all sides be preserved. Given that we now outnumbered the western coalition army by a fair margin, that shouldn't have been too difficult. The enemy fielded less than eighty thousand on their side, though they had us almost hilariously outnumbered in all matters cavalry. In comparison my own coalition had taken beatings but overall no dramatic losses, and that left us on rather healthy grounds: a little over twenty thousand veterans from the Legions of Terror, around thirty seven thousand legionaries of the Army of Callow and my largely intact fifty thousand drow. One hundred thousand and ten in total, more or less, so we had the enemy not only beaten in numbers but arguably in quality of soldiery as well.

It'd been the assessment of the Marshals that the enemy was unlikely to seek a pitched battle, and I'd concurred. It wasn't that it'd be impossible for the enemy to win, should they attack. If they hit us during the hours after dawn

we'd be down most the drow and they'd regain temporary superiority in numbers, which might allow them to swing this around if they bled us bad enough before the Firstborn were back on their feet. It was that the costs of such a victory would be horrific, to put it bluntly. Losses would be massive on both sides, and with Princess Rozala having a seat in those war councils there'd be at least one voice to remind them that if I felt my people were being forced into a corner the gloves would come off. Whether or not we were correct in guessing the enemy's thoughts, their actions at least were correctly predicted: as the eastern coalition began a march to the northeast, out of Iserre and towards Cantal, the western coalition shadowed our advance but did not engage. Not even in skirmishes, to my mild surprise. I'd expected cavalry raids and Levantine light foot to try out screening forces, but the enemy made a point of never engaging in bloodshed.

Some of our soldiers considered this a good sign, and talk in the camps was that we might just walk back to Callow without drawing swords. Juniper had been scornful of the rumours, and passed down instructions to stamp them out, but myself I'd been rather impressed there were still any optimists left in my armies. You'd think they would have gotten themselves killed by now, just by dint of odds. Regardless, my own expectations remained dark and so when the first sign of trouble arrived I was validated instead of disappointing. It was on the fourth morning, about an hour before the Firstborn would be able to shake off dawn torpor, that a chunk of Creation half a mile wide shattered like glass in front of my armies.

"That," Vivienne slowly said, "looks like a gate."

It did, I thought, and that was not good news. The two of us had been riding to the Third Army's camp, when Creations began creaking, so it was only a short ride to General Abigail's command to order a runner being sent for 'Advisor Kivule'. I half expected a comment from Vivienne at that, but found her face to be largely indifferent. She caught me looking, though, and raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not a fool, Catherine," she said. "In Masego's absence, she's the finest magical expert we have. It would be wasteful not to make use of her."

"Haven't said a thing," I replied, raising a hand in protest.

I declined the escort the Third Army offered, as well as the offer to accompany me that General Abigail offered while poorly hiding a cringe. She hid her relief at my refusal just as poorly, to Vivienne's subtle amusement. We rode together towards the break and all the while she was suppressing a smile.

"That one's in no danger of being tempted into reckless adventures, at least," Vivienne finally drawled.

"I find the lack of ambition refreshing," I admitted. "The boldest step she's taken so far is discreetly inquiring if service months under a field promotion still count towards earning a general's retirement pension."

The other Callowan choked, swallowing her laughter.

"Well?" she asked, tone hoarse with suppressed hilarity. "Does it, Your Majesty?"

"Figured I'd throw her a bone," I mused. "It's not like she's getting a general's salary at the moment anyway."

We might have continued quite a while in that vein if the approach of the breach hadn't killed any semblance of amusement. We'd ridden close enough that I could make out what laid behind the filmy, gauze-like surface of the breach: a barren wasteland of howling dust storms I'd visited before. Frowning, I noted that the opening seemed to lead to a place different than the one I'd stood at. The great whirlwinds with streaks of lightning and the earth cracking open into geysers of flame were miles and miles away.

"*Shit*," I feelingly said. "This is happening a lot quicker than I thought it would."

Vivienne rode closer, as her sight was not as good as mine, and had grown pale by the time I caught up with her. I almost turned to acknowledge what I felt arriving behind me, but the breach itself was currently of greater interest,

"You told us it was slowly coming into alignment with Creation," the dark-haired woman said. "That it might take months."

"That's what Sve Noc told me," I told her. "And I had no reason to believe they were wrong."

"They were not," Advisor Kivule said.

Her presence in the Night meant her arrival was no surprise to me, but I was pleased to note that Vivienne either had grown better at hiding her surprise or she'd also somehow noticed. 'Advisor Kivule' was dressed entirely in black, her closely cut dress covering going from the hollow of her throat to her boots, and neither her face nor her hair were visible under the elaborate veils and half-hat she wore. That I had bound Akua Sahelian to my cloak after Second Liesse was rumoured, but there might be unrest if it came out I was not allowing her to walk about without chains. The false name and attire wouldn't fool anyone already suspecting her identity, but given the kind of entities I'd bound to my service in the past Vivienne had assured me that the most popular rumours had nothing to do with Diabolist. Apparently she was either a drow sorceress I'd stolen from underground – never mind that they'd seen actual Firstborn and that as a species they distinctly lacked curves – or a fae I'd seduced into making oaths to me. The slightly uncomfortable way Vivienne had spoken the word 'seduced' made it clear what kind of seduction was being referred to, which was actually rather flattering – it did imply, after all, that I was skilled enough in bed to bedazzle one of the fae.

"Cryptic," Vivienne commented. "If you'd care to elaborate?"

"The unpleasant vista that can be seen on the other side is not aligned with Creation," Akua replied. "In this, Sve Noc were entirely correct in assessing the time. Though I cannot be certain as to what caused this phenomenon, I can hazard an informed guess."

"Which is?" I asked.

"You described High Arcana runes and a detonation taking place while you visited, Catherine," the shade said. "Repeated impacts of that nature might reverberate across the boundary between Arcadia and Creation, creating temporary breaches."

"So whoever-" Masego, most likely "-is behind the mess on the other side, they're swing hard enough at the wall between us and them that tiles are shattering," I frowned.

"A more accurate metaphor would be a sword striking at a pond," Akua suggested. "The initial strike will leave a mark, in this case being the breach you see before us, before creational laws make the water return where force chase it from – in this case, the boundary pressure eventually closing this breach."

"At least there's not a permanent gate into Arcadia in the middle of Procer," Vivienne said. "Somehow I doubt Hasenbach would be too pleased about that."

"Wasn't us," I replied out of reflex. "And if it was you can't prove it, so in a philosophical sense it isn't."

There was a moment of embarrassed silence as the other two women looked at me. I grimaced.

"Well," I spoke into the quiet, a tad defensive. "Given our history, I might as well start practicing the official response early."

"Inadequate," Akua said.

"Sloppy," Vivienne said, almost simultaneously.

They didn't turn to glare at each other, though given how much of a point they were making of not doing that they might as well have for all the difference it made. The irritation from Vivi was likely genuine, but rubies to piglets that Akua was just having fun yanking her chain. It would be a much greater challenge, I thought, to wean her off pettiness than it would be to wean her off of Evil. Who could say I'd not learned to pick my battles?

"Glad we're all in agreement," I drily said. "I need practical details here, o advisor. When's this thing going to disappear? Can we expect others to appear, and if so how often?"

"Less than a bell," the shade replied, which had me sighing.

Four hours, in the winter season, was no small portion of the daylight hours already shortened by the forced slumber of the Firstborn after dawn. We'd have to march around the damned thing.

"As for your second question, there are two possibilities," Akua said. "The first is that we are looking at the initial breach, in which case we might have days before a second instance – though the occurrences will quicken as the process advances."

"And the second?" I asked, bracing myself.

"This is not the first breach," Akua said. "And they have simply been occurring in different parts of Iserre, for an unknown amount of time. We could be looking at hours instead of days for the apparition rate."

"Diabolist," Vivienne said. "What happens when the rate is so close as to be instantaneous?"

"In metaphysical terms, a repurposed chunk of Arcadia will made into a half-realm straddling the boundary between it and Creation," the shade said.

"And in physical terms?" I asked.

"I don't believe this has ever been accomplished before," Akua Sahelian cheerfully admitted. "And so I've no authoritative answer to give, darling dearest. It ought to be interesting to find out whether we are simply to be obliterated by the initial bridging or the process will closer to the forging of a permanent domain with tendrils reaching in both realms."

Certain death or probably death, then. There was a cheery thought. I closed my eyes, let all I'd learned sink in. I'd come across more than a dozen moving parts since I'd walked out the gate bringing me to Iserre, but this was it – the pivot, the fulcrum, the culmination of all this bloody mayhem. Had the Tyrant planned this far? No, I decided. No one was that good, not even the Neshamah, and for all his brilliance Kairos Theodosian was no King of Death. Now, in matters of war and politics I could grasp how we had come to this cliff's edge. The Grand Alliance could not and would not yield, neither could I and all the while violent madmen rode the carriage that was the League of Free Cities down ever slope they could find. But what was the *story* here? There was one, of that there could be no doubt. There were too many Named in Iserre, too many crowns and too many secrets for there not to be a tale in the works. If it were merely the western and eastern coalitions clashing, we would have the heroic and the villainous and the usual tragedies in black and white.

The League's presence muddled that, however. It was no longer so clear-cut, and after the unfolding calamity in Arcadia was brought into the mix the waters became even muddier. *Kairos wants to play a trick*, I thought. *I want to forge a peace and wield it like a blade.* I could only guess at Masego's intent, but he could not be in his right mind. That would make him, I thought, a danger or an obstacle. The sword hanging above all our heads but not someone who would influence the shape beyond that. Now, I knew what Princess Rozala wanted but she wasn't the champion for her side was she? It was the Grey Pilgrim that would bear that mantle and I wasn't really sure what the old man wanted. He should have killed Black, I thought. It would have made more sense to do that if peace was what he was after. I would have been utterly furious, true enough, but if they'd killed him while he was in the middle of burning Procer I would have had to swallow my anger. Instead he'd given me reason to... *To twist arms so that I could get him back,* I thought, and my blood cooled. I'd heard rumours about Black being dead or captured even in hamlets, it was a given that the moment I came to Iserre I'd hear about it.

So when I'd first encountered the Pilgrim and the Saint, I'd baited her and tricked him to go after something he'd known for certain I would want. And I'd won a victory. Oh, it hadn't been given to me, but narratively speaking I'd received a written invitation to take it. *And I won from it the body without the soul, the part that actually makes Black dangerous to them.* It'd been bait, and I'd taken it. A victory, I thought once more. Could it actually be that simple?

I wasn't Named, not anymore, but I was the high priestess of Night and the weight of the roles I still played might be enough. And there had been growing similarities, hadn't there? I'd slipped into them without even noticing. I now bore a staff and no sword, I called on miracles to aid and protect rather than attack. I had godlings whispering in my ears, companions at my side. I was eldest in influence among the priesthood and Named of a coalition of nations, and an unequaled religious figure in one of them. I had made myself and been made into the patchwork-cloaked opposite of the pilgrim in grey, one step at a time. And now I'd claimed a win over one that might be called my rival. This, I thought, felt like a pattern of three. One I had initiated as a villain, and with a victory.

I knew well what followed: draw and then finally defeat.

Now, if I were the Grey Pilgrim, why would I go this far out of my way to kill Catherine Foundling? Because the Choir of Mercy told me to, I immediately thought but just as quickly dismissed. If Tariq were simply a murderous errand boy for the Ophanim he'd be a great deal less dangerous. No, if he was doing this and had invested so much time into doing it when the Dead King was devouring the north then it was for a reason – not necessarily one I'd considered good or decent, but one that would seem those to him. My eyes blinked open and I found my companions both staring at me in silence.

"I am the Grey Pilgrim," I said. "Why, of all the threats currently on the board, do I need to have a story-forged knife either at or in the Black Queen's throat?"

"The fairy gates," Vivienne replied, cocking her head to the side. "They can either make or break the war to the north. The ability needs to be either solidly secured or removed so it can't be a threat."

Which made sense, I thought, if I grasped the timing of it correctly. Black had been captured while I was in the Everdark, which meant the Dead King had either been mustering his armies or already on the march. The Pilgrim ended a strategic offensive that had a real risk of starving half the Principate into collapse if left unchecked while simultaneously acquiring leverage on both Malicia and myself. Snip with the soul and not only did he keep that leverage but he prepared a pattern of three. The degree of foresight that'd require was frightening, to be honest, and I suspected beyond even a hero in bed with a Choir. On the other hand, I wouldn't put it beyond the Grey Pilgrim to do all this as a *contingency*. Ending a threat while expanding the tools at his disposal? Yeah, that might fit. He'd know he was exposing himself to my tearing through a gate and appearing behind him at some point down the line – rescuing my teacher would have quite the weight behind it – but cutting out the soul would muddle up that story and I suspected he could do quite a bit with the ability to predict where I'd appear when coming for the soul. Was that really all it was, though? The gates had simply made me too potentially dangerous *not* to pull a knife on? Considering the man had looked into my soul a few times, he must have known that I'd rather avoid war if I could. I glanced at

Diabolist, whose gaze remained hidden behind her veils.

"Because it is the only certain way of killing you," the shade calmly said, "and Calernia cannot survive a second Dead King."

I opened my mouth, then closed it. It seemed an absurd claim, for all the talk of apotheosis that had preceded my descent into the Everdark. Yet I trusted Akua's intellect, if less so her judgement. She wouldn't have said that without careful consideration. I thought back to my fights with the heroes, when the Tenth Crusade had come knocking. I'd dropped a lake on the enemy, to be sure, but it wasn't worse than what the likes of the Warlock and possibly the Witch of the Wilds could have done with a little preparation. Although, arguably the lack of preparation needed on my part made it – no, this was all missing the point. Feasible way of *killing* me, Akua had said. That brought different perspective. Sure, I'd been repeatedly slapped around by the Saint of Swords and she'd shrugged off the worst of what Winter could bring to bear, but I'd usually accomplished what I came for while going around her before retreating. The Pilgrim himself had seen me tear through a band of heroes while fumbling with the barest fraction of my mantle had been able to do. If I'd known half the tricks at the Battle of the Camps that I'd known in the Everdark, I honestly doubted anyone but the Pilgrim or the Saint would have been able to put a scratch on me. And those two, I realized, were the oldest and perhaps most powerful heroes on the continent.

Shit.

The thought that the man could have conceived of me as a nascent Dead King was ludicrous, he'd been able to see into my fucking *soul*. I wasn't... Gods, I'd done some dark things and not always for reasons as good as I would have wished but there were lines I'd always refused to cross. That I would have kept to. *This can't be personal*, I told myself, and put aside the horrifying thought that a truth teller might have genuinely believed I had the potential to become the likes of Neshamah. Stepping out of myself, I looked at the story of Catherine Foundling through the Grey Pilgrim's eyes. The past was largely irrelevant, I decided, save perhaps for a note that I'd been taught by the Black Knight and would likely draw on his manners and methods. What mattered was that I'd come into a Name as the manifestation of what Tariq had called *the sin of our indolence returned to haunt us*, the first time we'd ever spoken. That was important, that informed what I considered the Black Queen to be. She was a form of retribution by Creation, by the story, for a failure on the side of Good. Catherine Foundling, as an entity, was inherently dangerous to the Heavens. Still, as the Pilgrim I didn't like killing unless the situation required it and I did not yet know if it did. I should, at least, meet with this Black Queen.

What did I find when I did? Offers of truce, offers to reduce the dangers for everyone, but also a mutilated soul. And Winter encroaching on the remnants, essentially a standing temptation by a power older than Creation and by nature prone to contaminating mortal minds. I make the reasonable offer of this very dangerous person abdicating the crown and allowing others settle the kingdom

she's slowly turning to Evil by simple virtue of ruling it, but mortal considerations prevent her from accepting. This is a good sign, because it means she still has good intentions. This is a bad sign, because her attachment to Callow is the kind of narrative leverage Below will use in a heartbeat to make a full monster of her. So I make a bargain about keeping the damage under control with the Black Queen, hoping that after a clean military defeat she'll be forced to reconsider the earlier offer. On the other hand, we have to be *very careful* not to push her so far she'll sink into Winter and become the kind of mess that gobbles up armies before it's put down. It's a delicate dance, but I've been at this game for a very long time and I have the Saint of Swords as a contingency. Then the Battle of the Camps happens.

A full band of heroes fails to kill the Black Queen, then the Saint fails after them, and the gate trick kills a few thousand people in less time than it takes to drink a cup of tea. Then the backlash makes her fall into some sort of state – Diabolist taking the reins of the body, though I might not know that – and she faces down the entire heroic contingent simultaneously before snapping out of the fugue state and forcing a truce on the battlefield. Catherine Foundling has now proved dangerous, exceedingly hard to kill and mentally unstable. Given that she's running around with an entire fairy court's worth of power, good intentions or not she needs to be removed. The peace conference achieves that, more or less: the terms ensure I'll be around her, able to find a weakness or guide her into a redemption story that'll either kill her or turn her to good purpose in the service of the Heavens. The Tenth Crusade is repulsed in the Vales as well, but that's all right because the Black Queen is the key to settling Callow and she hasn't gone anywhere. But then the Iron Prince along my native Levant prepare for a second invasion through the Vales, and she comes seeking help. This is a very, very dangerous moment. If I do not help her, I've thrown away the story the deaths at the Battle of the Camps bought me. If I do help her, on the other hand, I might be destroying the same Grand Alliance that will be the same power bloc necessary to put her down if she gets out of control.

Cordelia Hasenbach's dream ensures peace in the west, forced restoration of Callow to Good and a unified front against the long-term term Evil threats I've spent my entire life fighting. Catherine Foundling is a young villain-trained queen with expansionist neighbours and access to power that dehumanizes her the more she uses it – the story of that descent into atrocity practically writes itself. The choice is only hard to make in the sentimental sense, and I've been doing this too long to allow sentimentality much of a weight. Only, after that, instead of running back to Praes or making Callow into some kind of nation-fortress while I discretely look for an acceptable successor, she *leaves*. I don't know where she's going, but there's nowhere that's not a disaster. Keter, to the Dead King? Arcadia, where she can bargain with fae? To the Everdark, where not even the Ophanim can easily look? If she went to the Tyrant of Helike that might be a relief, but months pass and she doesn't appear in the League.

This is a problem, because a half-taught girl with that mantle is one thing but whatever the fae or the Dead King might make of her is a *very* different sort of trouble. Then Keter begins invading the north, and the game changes: no oath I took means a thing when the survival of Calernia might be at stake. So I leave, and set to shaping a story that allows me to put her down by any means necessary should she return as a true villainous Queen of Winter.

I breathed out, and it was almost jarring to think of me as myself again. The plunge had been deep and exhausting, but it'd also been necessary. Both Vivienne and Akua had been right, in their own way. Whether I came back as a monster or remained the same, the Pilgrim benefitted from having a story-wrought knife at my throat. If I was to be the Grand Alliance's gate-maker, I could either be bargained with nicely or with the reminder that a promised victory might kill me. If I was the… Queen of Moonless Night, for lack of a better name, he needed to kill me and *fast* or it might mean the end of the western nations. The thing was, stepping out of myself, I could finally see why he'd consider me that much of a threat. Because I did have the *means*, didn't I?

To tread the same path as Dread Empress Triumphant.

It wouldn't even be all that hard because the pieces were all already there, waiting to be picked up. Already I had Callowans in legionary armour and the a knightly order under my banner. The Duchess of Daoine had sworn oaths to me, and service of her armies, and from the Empire I had already stolen three legions and come to Iserre claiming more. And I could do a great deal more than that: bringing Black into the ranks of the Mighty would forge me a monster of a general who finally had the power to match his wits. I lacked mages, so while Procer bled to hold back the dead I could force the submission of the already-fracturing Praes and bring the finest sorcerers and warlocks of the continent into my forces. Malicia could kneel or be buried with the Tower, and once the rest of the east was unified the goblins would make a deal and the orcs would fall into that nascent empire naturally – I'd have Hakram, Black, and Grem One-Eye in my service, how could they not? And then we could turn west and take the gloves off. I had Hierophant and the ruins of the fortress-artefact of Liesse. I had the Wild Hunt and ties with the ruling court of Arcadia, I had the high priesthood of Night and alliance with Sve Noc themselves. Oh, he was right to be afraid I thought.

If every other choice was taken from me, it might still come to that.

"I came back," I mused as I looked up at the sky, "reeking of millennial ritual murder and fresh apotheosis, with slivers of living godhood perched on my shoulders and a sworn army of drow. I've effectively confirmed his every fear."

"He will come for you," Akua said. "I expect that to a man like him there is not a single act that would be immoral when taken in the prevention of a second Dead King's rise."

She was, I grimly thought, probably right.

"So we reach out," Vivienne said. "Make it clear that you are no such thing and offer reassurances."

"He'll still want a draw for the pattern of three," I grimaced. "Just in case."

"So what do we do?" she asked. "Because this isn't looking good, Catherine. If what I've heard about how he caught the Black Knight is true, he's not a man we want to make desperate."

I clenched my fingers and unclenched them, looking at the gate. *Kairos wants to play a trick. I want to forge a peace and wield it like a blade. Tariq wants to make sure no one can end the world, or at least our little corner of it.* They key would be beyond the gate, I decided. Where I already suspected the armies of the League would be marching through, and perhaps even the other Grand Alliance army as well.

"Now I know what everyone wants," I said. "So I just need to figure out how to win without making everyone else lose."

# Chapter 30

# Weaver; Woven

> "Just as planned."
>
> Inscription on the front gates of the mausoleum of Dread Emperor Traitorous

The locals called them 'Mavian prayers'.

Centuries ago, before these were lands of princes and plots, what was now called Iserre had been the cradle of a war between the Arlesite *regales* of the south and the proud Alamans chieftains of the heartlands. The few respectable books written on the subject in that era – penned by Atalante or Stygian scholars, when not by Ashuran officials – agreed that the Arlesites had been on the winning side more often than not. The current lay of Iserre itself spoke to those victories: though many of its people spoke Chantant, it was Tolesian that was the most common tongue and Arlesite customs that were most kept to. The land has been won by the aggressive southerners leading warbands out of their stone keeps, Alamans tribesmen slowly forced out of their ancestral holdings by a thousand lost skirmishes. Those old tribes must have had a hundred names, but as a tapestry of tightly-knit kin and cultures they'd been colloquially known as the *Mavii*. And though eventually forced into flight further north, these Mavii had left behind the marks of what had once been a powerful and wealthy confederacy. The so-called 'Mavian prayers' were more common sight in northern Iserre, it was true, but even in the rest it was not uncommon to see long rows of grey raised stones sketching out some symbol or meaning now long lost.

Iserrans now insisted those stones had been raised as prayers to the Gods Above, each representing a passage from the Book of All Things, but the Wasteland books I'd read on the subject of Procer had expressed a great deal of skepticism on the subject. For one, the Alamans had not kept to the House of Light as it was now known. Every tribe had elected priests and kept faith to the Hallowed, as in those days they'd called the Heavens, but personal worship of great spirits and angels nominally beholding to them had been just as promi-

nent. Some of these spirits, I now suspected, had not been lesser gods or remnants of wilder ages but instead wandering lords and ladies of Arcadia. The suspicion had grown from the shapes I glimpsed of these raised stones, how they had been pleasing to my eye in some ineffable manner even now that I'd broken ties to Winter. It had been good as confirmed, however, when I'd found this particular 'prayer'. It was a barrow, or a tumulus as those were called in Procer, though one larger than any I'd ever heard of in Callow and crowned by a strange pattern of great stones. Three concentric rings, the stones of them interlocking to give the illusion of a full and complete circle when one stood at the foot of the barrow.

Standing at the centre of it, I'd felt a whisper of the sensation that had once filled me when shaping gates into Arcadia with the strength of Winter. This had been a thinning of boundary once, I thought, a place enshrined in some eldritch manner. Whatever power had coursed through these grounds vital and vivid in olden days had long died out, but it had left behind a taste of itself. Like a desiccated ancient riverbed, I decided. I could have run my fingers along the traces of the old currents carved into what was now stone and dry sand, charted their shapes and guessed at the intents, but there would be no bringing back the old waters. The world had moved on, the stars were no longer aligned. Whatever patron the Mavii had once bargained with had abandoned the game for fresher ones. Still, there was something about the place that appealed to me. It would serve for what I intended.

"There," I said, idly pointing with my staff. "Gently."

The four legionaries awkwardly moved to the side. All were orcs and warrior-fit, so the large table they were moving might as well have been a sack of feathers, but amusingly enough they were having to be careful of not wrecking the table instead of labouring under the weight of it. They set it down in the snow with a muted crunch and I met their salutes with a nod before they retreated to the bottom of the barrow. Where more work would await them, for it was a veritable procession that was setting up my headquarters at the heart of this Mavian prayer. Chairs and smaller tables, along with precious maps and a library's worth of scrolls and reports. A writing desk, with quills and ink and all wax for seals. Last of all, the same sinfully comfortable armchair I'd stolen from the Count of Old Oak a few years back. Hakram had proved, as always, that he was a prince among men when he'd revealed he'd had that little piece of furniture brought along for the Proceran campaign. It'd been kept with Juniper in the First Army, whose supply train was the largest, but now that all four of the divisions of the Army of Callow were reunited I had wonderful cushions to sink in once more. Vivienne wandered in with the last of the additions, seemingly amused at the burrow I'd had assembled.

"And when it starts snowing or raining, shall you bravely retreat?" she drawled.

Leaning against one of the tall stones, long skirts swishing against her boots as she tread through the snows, Vivienne looked like some noble's daugh-

ter gone on a ride more than the former Lady-Regent of Callow. The pales shades of her blouse and dress made the laughter in those blue-grey eyes seem lighter, somehow, more innocent. *Or perhaps simply less weighed upon*, I thought.

"I've already had the outskirts of the barrow warded by our mages," I said. "For wind and quiet."

"One of Masego's patterns?" she asked, idly pushing off the stone.

"Yeah, though I'm told they can't get it to work the way he said it should," I noted. "He has a very unique definition of 'elementary knowledge', our Zeze."

That some of our senior legion mages had outright admitted the scrolls Hierophant had left on the subject of warding might as well be gibberish had served as a fresh reminder that I'd been dealing with some of the finest mages on the continent since becoming a villain and I that I should temper my expectations accordingly. The rituals he'd taught my mages lines in the days of the Fifteenth had since become the standards large-scale sorceries of the Army of Callow, but not all of them could be used without him guiding the casting and there was no real replacement for Masego to be had. Talented mages were costly and time-consuming to raise, and unlike the Wasteland I didn't have centuries of teaching methods and arcane knowledge to dole out to raise any even should I find talented individuals – which I *couldn't*, because unlike Praesi I didn't have well-trained agents out there looking for the signs of young children with the Gift. Add onto that the fact that the Legions of Terror had picked clean the most obvious magical talents in the kingdom after the Conquest, and it was no wonder that so few of my mages were of Callowan stock.

"And for the wet wrath of the Heavens?" Vivienne idly asked, leaning over one of the tables to have a look at the scrolls stacked on it.

"I dabbled," I shrugged.

It was one of the more abstract uses of Night I'd resorted to, which had been interesting in its own way. Spinning threads of a miracle I had seen before – the bubble of stillness the Sisters had forged around me when we'd tried to gate out of Iserre – I'd crafted a sort of intangible roof and bound it to the stones. Komena had perched herself atop one long enough to call the work 'clumsily-executed but clever in principle', which was the closest she'd ever come to complimenting something I did with the Night. Vivienne hummed, and pursued it no further.

"So," she said. "Are you going to tell me why you've called a halt to the march and ordered the Hellhound to establish a fortified camp?"

Leaning on my staff, I began slowly limping around the edge of the raised stones. It was a fascinating thing, the way the interlocked slabs allowed me to glimpse down at odd angles. Revealing the sight of my armies camped below, raising palisades and digging ditches.

"Because we'll be fighting a battle soon," I said. "And there's no point in running around until we know we can win it."

"How do you know we'll be fighting a battle?" Vivienne asked, brow furrowing not in disbelief but in curiosity.

Wondering what she'd missed that I had not, how she could remedy that failure when the chance next came. It had not escaped me that she'd taken my tongue-lashing differently than Juniper. My Marshal had judged the fault to be in herself, and so that the mending of it must come from herself as well – Juniper had turned back to books and discussions with other commanders, the familiar whetstones of her mind. Her art of war had been found insufficient, and so she would better it until this was no longer the case. Vivienne, though, had been harder to gauge. She was... learning, if there was any word that could be used for it. Looking at the successes of others like she was trying to squeeze out the essence of them to make it her own. It was a little unnerving, at times, and at others frustrating. Mostly for me, when I found the whisper of my instincts a hard thing to explain.

"Because we are headed to a pivot," I said, "and this... isn't enough. Our army and the Pilgrim's, that's too small a scale compared to the magnitude of power gathered. It might be that it starts with simply us, but it won't stay that way."

"Because the story," she slowly said, "requires more than simply us and the Pilgrim. Yet you have fought battles before where-"

I raised a hand to interrupt her.

"The breaches, Vivienne," I said. "They make a lot possible and therefore those things will happen – because once the groove is there, the possibilities will flow into it like water."

I cleared my throat.

"We can have that talk later in more detail," I added. "Council won't be for hours yet and I don't want to have repeat myself."

She nodded.

"I should see to the Jacks, anyway," Vivienne said. "Adjutant's coming to join you?"

"Eventually," I said. "I've sent him to get me a proper suit of plate fitted."

"It *has* been odd to see you limping about without one," she admitted.

I snorted and waved her away. As she walked away I propped up my staff against the side of my armchair and lowered myself onto it with a sigh of pleasure. I sat facing rings of stones with an unobstructed view, tables at my sides groaning with the documents I'd sent for. It wasn't long before I caught the slight sound of leather on snow, my only advance warning that I once more had company.

"You have the supplies?" I called out.

"And you claim you don't have the fae hearing anymore," Robber complained. "Bullshit's what I say."

My minion popped into sight, leaning against the left arm of my chair. I was rather impressed he'd made it that far without my picking up on it even when I'd known he would be coming.

"You're just getting old," I mocked, because it was always a bad idea to give so much as an inch to a goblin.

He should be around sixteen now, I thought. Goblins rarely made it beyond forty, and that was for the better bloodlines – of which Robber was not, and that was setting aside the harsh lifestyle of service in my armies. Thirty was likely when his body would start breaking down, barring rituals to stretch out his lifespan, and at that thought I suddenly regretted the quip.

"You're telling me," the Special Tribune complained. "Only cowards make it to fifteen, but I just can't seem to croak. I've had to make my peace with the fundamental truth of this world, Cat: I am simply *too good to die*."

I smothered my grin, the earlier regret chased away as quickly as it'd come.

"A heavy burden to bear," I solemnly agreed. "I know it well."

He eyed me rather skeptically.

"Didn't you die that one time?" he asked.

"I think I'm on three now," I muttered. "It's not one of my better habits."

He snickered.

"No wonder you sent me after these, then," he said.

I had sent off Special Tribune Robber on a most important errand, and as I pawed through the knapsack he'd brought me as tribute I had to concede he'd done his duty well. Two bottles of Vale summer wine were set on the table to my right while I squirrelled away the satchels of wakeleaf into the many pockets of my cloak. Save for one, which went to stuff my pipe. Passing my palm over the herbs had them lit with the slightest touch of Night, and I inhaled with pleasure before lying back in my seat.

"All right," I said. "Serve as my hands."

"I figure Archer might object," the little wretch cackled.

"You might notice I didn't send for a footrest," I warned him.

He hurriedly made elaborate apologies that coincidentally happened to insult Indrani more often than not, but I put him to work. Against three stones, three sheets of parchment were put up: one for the Grey Pilgrim, the Tyrant of Helike and the Black Queen. Robber skittered around with ink as I dictated to him, his handwriting godsawful but honestly not that much worse than mine.

"The Pilgrim wants a draw with the Black Queen," I said. "The Pilgrim wants to preserve the Grand Alliance armies. The Pilgrim wants Procer at war on only one front."

Robber's sloppy drawing of the Peregrine as bearing a heavy mustache and a crooked nose was physically inaccurate, but in the interests of morale I allowed the misrepresentation.

"The Tyrant wants leverage on the First Prince," I said. "The Tyrant wants the means to position the Hierarch. The Tyrant wants there to be no victor in Iserre."

Kairos' illustration had him either bearing horns or with his head on fire, it was hard to tell, and I was fairly certain that his arms ended in fingers and

not crablike pincers. Still, I decided it wouldn't do to infringe on the vision of so accomplished an artist.

"You going to tell me what you're after now?" Robber asked, sounding genuinely curious.

"That doesn't matter," I said. "It matters what they *think* I'm after, because that's what they'll plan according to. We're not the only ones scheming here – if we plan assuming that everyone else will be passive we'll just be wasting ink."

"So what do they think we're after?" the goblin said.

"The Black Queen wants to preserve her armies," I said. "The Black Queen wants leverage over the Grand Alliance. The Black Queen wants the soul of the Carrion Lord."

Which were all things I did want, but not necessarily in the manner they'd think I did. I wanted Black back not to make him my foremost general or use him against Malicia, but because he was my father in all but name and I'd not allow his fucking soul to be snuffed out by the blind machinations of the Pilgrim. I wanted leverage over the Grand Alliance not to force treaties advantageous to me but instead to get everyone at the table for the Liesse Accords: the intent wasn't hostile, and to be blunt if there were other ways of getting there I'd much prefer using those. As for the preservation of my armies, while it was true whether that assertion came back to bite them or not would depend on how well they'd assessed my degree of ruthlessness. I didn't want to get any of my soldiers killed if I could avoid it, but that didn't mean I'd shy from battle either if it was the best means to get what I wanted. Sadly, I was dealing with the Peregrine and a madman who'd tricked the likes of the Wandering Bard. I'd assume, at least in principle, that they had a decent read on my personality.

"And now one more parchment," I said. "The pitfalls we have to avoid, how we'd lose."

"Folding on those wouldn't be losing?" Robber asked, skeptical.

Nimble fingers flicked 'my' parchment, though mercifully there was no representation of me sketched aside from a hastily filled-in crown.

"It'd be a defeat, certainly," I said. "But put that parchment above the others, because botching any of those would be *the* defeat."

It went above Kairos, and to my amusement the goblin had to drag a chair and climb it so he could both hang it and write on it. Dipping the quill in an inkpot, he turned to me with an expectant look.

"The Grey Pilgrim cannot die," I said.

Inconvenient as that line was, it needed to be drawn. If Tariq died and we'd killed him, a death feud was struck with Levant. If Tariq died and the League killed him, eighty thousand Levantine troops would be marching east instead of west. If Tariq died by accident, well, likely I'd get blamed somehow. I pulled at my pipe and spat out a mouthful of smoke.

"The western and eastern coalitions cannot lose more than a fifth of their forces," I said.

He let out a low whistle at that. The quill scratched, though his gaze kept flicking back to me curiously. I sighed, and explained after another drag of wakeleaf was released.

"For us, a fifth would be about twenty thousand dead," I said. "For them it'd be somewhere between fifteen to thirty, depending on whether or not they can merge their armies before the fight. If either of us loses more than that, we're crippled as a field army for at least several months. We can't afford that, given the situation up north."

"And the League?" he asked.

"Can't be considered reliable in any sense so long as the Hierarch and the Tyrant are running it," I said. "Preserving its armies isn't a priority – to be honest, I'd feel safer if we carved away them by at least a fifth."

I drummed my fingers against the arm of my seat, staring at the fresh ink on the parchment. I worried my lip thoughtfully and only after a long silence did I speak.

"The Grey Pilgrim cannot have get a draw against the Black Queen," I finally said.

I could not, in the end, trust him with that kind of power over me. Not even for the sake of making an alliance. Robber finished the words with a flourish, as if a twist of the wrist could make his calligraphy look anything other than cramped and sickly. I had not exactly picked the most able of scribes.

"Finished?" Robber asked.

I nodded. He scuttled down, quite blatantly pilfering the quill and inkpot before putting away the chair.

"And now?"

"Now," I murmured, "I *think*."

The parchments, those tidy little triumvirates of desires and pitfalls, hung in front of me but I did not need to look at them. Putting them up had served the purpose I'd had it done for, allowing me to place it all together as a structure instead of a series of abstractions. I closed my eyes, let it all fall together.

"I can leave, Boss," Robber quietly offered.

"Don't," I said, chewing on my pipe. "We're going to play a game, you and I."

"Ominous," the goblin praised.

The wakeleaf burned my throat, filled my lungs, and for a moment I felt a strange joy go through me like a spasm. I was enjoying this, I realized. This feeling, like my mind was full to burst and empty at the same time. Like I'd been filled with jagged edges, glittering pieces of madness and brilliance and that there was a solution to the crawling chaos, a twisting and winding formula that would bind it all to my will. I breathed out, smoke and heat leaving my lips, and smiled. Eyes fluttering open, I snatched the staff and hobbled to the parchment-bearing stones with feverish energy.

"Now," I said, "to a layman's eye, it might seem we're in a spot of trouble."

"If have a few of those, if you need spares," Robber offered.

"But if you look at it closely, we have angles," I continued. "For example, though the Tyrant will stab anyone who looks about to win in the back he is in fact our *ally*."

The goblin choked.

"What was that, Boss?" he said. "I can't believe I heard it right."

I knocked the butt of my pipe against barely-dry ink under the drawn caricature of the Tyrant.

"Kairos can't accomplish what he wants if there's no truce," I said. "Think about it, Robber – if his whole reason for getting into this war is getting leverage on Cordelia, then he needs room to actually *use* that leverage. He can't do that from Iserre while openly at war with her. If blunt coercion was all he needed he could have gone after her armies to force her hand, but he didn't. You know what that tells us?"

Robber's eyes narrowed in thought.

"The cripple's not willing to hand this war to the Dead King," my Special Tribune said. "He'll duck and weave, but these are matron games – a knife here and there before we all sit smiling."

"Aye," I said. "And one thing more: he needs me at that table, the wretched little bastard. If I don't agree to truce talks then all his schemes are dust. He can't make a separate peace with Cordelia, not when he's trying to twist her arm. He needs to be the kingmaker in this threesome of ours, not the sole enemy, and that means having all of us at the same conference where he can play us off each other."

"What's he mean to use the Hierarch for, anyway?" Robber asked.

"I'm not sure yet, but it doesn't matter right now," I said. "What does is the fact that the moment I try to push for a peace conference he'll back me to the hilt regardless of all other considerations. See, no victor in Iserre is only important for him insofar as it'll affect the conference that follows the fight here. Balance of power and all that. But if I make it clear that the only way he gets that conference is walking my line, you know what follows."

"He walks, like it or not," the goblin finished. "He's our borrowed knife."

"So he is," I grinned. "Now Tariq, Tariq's what Black would be if someone ripped out the part of his mind that itches to fix things and shoved a Choir in there instead. If a situation goes south on Tariq, he won't double down or throw a fit: he'll measure the risks, and if there's no worth to the strife he'll cut his losses and prepare for the next round."

"Hate to tell you, Boss, but the situation hasn't gone south on him yet," Robber reminded me.

"It doesn't need to, that's the beauty of it," I told him.

I spun on myself, lightly tapping the Pilgrim's parchment with my staff.

"See, the only thing in there I can't allow is the draw," I said. "He wants to preserve the Grand Alliance armies? So do I. He wants Procer to be able to turn north? So do I. To get what I want out of this, I don't actually need to screw him out of most of what he wants."

"As I've been given to understand," the Special Tribune mused, "he also wants to slug you in the story real bad, so to speak. And he's really a bastard kin of the Carrion Lord, he'll have schemes afoot and blood that's lizard-cold."

"Ah, and so we get to the tricky part," I conceded. "If I walked up to the Grey Pilgrim right now and offered him everything he wants save for the draw, he'd refuse. But that's not because he's a fanatic, Robber, although he is. He's not your average screaming, barn-burning zealot: he's the exemplar of the long view. The Pilgrim is what the Heavens use to make sure the forest fire doesn't become like, well, the last few years essentially."

"He'll come after you quiet and sudden, Boss," Robber said. "And you're good at the second, but the first famously ain't your wheelhouse."

"You're missing the point," I said. "He's the broad view hero, Robber. They don't have another one of those, it's the entire reason he's so influential in the first place. Fighting him at all is a mistake. The key to handling Tariq is twisting his arm in that same broad view: making it clear to him that if he actually takes a swing at me, the costs will make even a success so *utterly ruinous* it'll defeat the entire purpose. And the moment he knows that. . . "

"He takes the wins he can," the goblin said. "And cuts his losses on the rest, drawing back for the next round."

I drew back myself, coincidentally, emptying the ashes of my pipe onto the snow and gazing at the loose constellation of sentences.

"You know, Robber, there's a story back home that in the old days there was an Alban king who went mad," I said. "Thought he was made of feathers, so he ordered all the palace windows nailed shut and all the doors closed. Wouldn't even take off his cloak, since he was convinced without it the slightest breeze would disperse him into a million tufts."

"So he 'fell down some stairs' and an ambitious daughter succeeded him?" Robber snickered.

"He was an Alban, even if mad," I chided. "No, they suffered his whims intent on waiting him out. Until one day a window broke in a storm, and he dropped his cloak in fright but did not dissolve. The old king, the morning after, summoned the court and announced he realized now he had been mad and was cured of his madness."

"That's distastefully uplifting," Robber opined.

"Story's not over," I said. "You see, the king had realized he was not *made* of feathers. He simply had a coat of them, for he was in fact a bird."

The goblin grinned.

"So what happened to him?" he asked.

"Oh, they settled him down," I said. "But a few weeks later he climbed the highest tower in the palace and leapt down to take flight."

"Did he?" Robber asked.

"We have a saying about it," I smiled. "A king can fly-"

I shrugged.

"-but not for long."

Amused, the Special Tribune bared needle-like fangs in approval.

"See, the thing is," I murmured. "I always thought that he must have deep down known he was mad. Because if he *hadn't* known, if he'd really believe that with all his heart. . . "

I chuckled.

"Now and then, Creation has been known to grant the mad a pair of wings," I said.

"So what's your Callowan folk wisdom leading to, Boss?" Robber asked.

"Let's find out, my dear minion," I said, "if we are mad enough to fly."

# Chapter 31

# Fall or Flight

> "In boldness find salvation, for stillness is the herald of death."
>
> Princess Beatriz of Salamans, most famous for turning her trial for high treason by the Highest Assembly into election to the office of First Princess

"I need you to write three letters for me," I told Hakram.

Three letters: one was a knife, one was a bet and one was a lie. Wielding those like the sword and board that had once been my favoured armaments, I would win or lose before the week was out. Comfortably settled in my perch atop the barrow of a people long scattered to the winds, I poured myself a cup of wine and kept a steady eye on Hakram. The writing desk I'd had hoisted up here had not been built with orcs in mind, that much was evident. My second was broader than the wooden frame, and could not lean his armoured elbows against it without the whole thing starting to groan like a dying calf. It was a rather amusing sight, the tall orc bent over the desk with a long quill in one hand and looking for all the world like he could be lifting the whole thing with the other. The oil lamp atop the frame was an island of tangible flickering warmth in the surrounding glow of the magelights that had been brought here and hung from the raised stones. The sight of the Mavian prayer wreathed in that pale halo was an eerie one, a reminder that once upon a time fae had tread these grounds and made bargains with those who had raised this strange work. It felt fitting, in a way, for like my old friends of Summer and Winter tonight I intended treachery.

"Which first?" Adjutant asked.

I sipped at my cup, let the warmth of the wine pool in my belly.

"To the Tyrant," I said. "As follows: Kairos, you misshapen treacherous weasel, you should have been drowned at birth. I expect whatever spawned you tried but already the Gods had grown gills on your neck, foul monster. Sadly this must have allowed you to crawl out of the refuse pile they tossed you in to come trouble me today."

The sound of the quill dipping into the inkpot followed by the scratch of it against parchment filled the silence that followed. Hakram's admittedly superb calligraphy should lend a touch of elegance to the whole tirade, I decided.

"Therefore," I continued, "in the spirit of our close and cordial alliance, I offer my support for the demand that will be made by the League of Free Cities in exchange for its acquiescence to a peace conference. That support will have the full weight of my force and influence behind it."

I drummed my fingers against the arm of my chair as I waited for Hakram's hand to catch up to my words, only resuming when his scrawl stilled.

"Naturally, this is contingent on your own support in extricating the Army of Callow and its allies from their current difficulties," I said. "Should you refuse, I will be forced to withdraw from Procer entirely and begin preparing the east for the wars that will come in the wake of the Principate's destruction."

Adjutant finished writing before raising a hairless brow at me.

"You think he'll believe that?" the orc asked.

"He will," I simply said.

After glancing at the certainty on my face Hakram did not argue the point any further, simply conceding with a small dip of the head.

"And add one last thing," I mused. "Lower down, like we're trying to be discreet. 'I have heard that recently you lost a great many horses, which is a tragic happenstance. As I would not have such a dear and noble friend without a mount, I offer you this purebred Liessen charger to ride into battle instead. May he serve you well.' "

Adjutant looked at me oddly.

"We don't have any purebreds," he told me. "They're too costly to field. The Order uses mostly halfbloods and Vale breeds."

"I'm aware," I said. "I need you to find the shoddiest, sickliest goat we have and paint it white. Not well, though, just kind of half-heartedly. Try to make it a female one if you can. Send it along with my letter, when the time comes."

The orc cleared his throat a little too quickly for me to buy him looking at me this disapprovingly.

"This is how you deal with Kairos, Hakram," I told him nonetheless. "He's not like Malicia or the Dead King, he doesn't give a damn about respect or rules or making deals that'll last longer than a moon's turn. I offered him steel and honey and an elaborate insult – it should do the trick."

"We're not made of goats, Catherine," Adjutant reproached.

"Fine," I sighed, disgruntled. "If you can't find a suitable one just find a stray dog and glue horns on. Diplomacy isn't cheap, Hakram, you should know this by now."

"As you say, my queen," the orc serenely replied.

I gestured obscenely at him before watching him blow the last lines of my letter dry, fake my signature without missing a beat and finally roll the parchment when it was all done. It went into a small leather sheath, ad a red wax candle was lit from the lantern's flame before he dripped it atop the scroll. The

royal seal was pressed until it made its mark, my sword and crown on a balance, and it was put away. His eyes returned to me and I put down the cup I'd finally managed to empty.

"To the Pilgrim," I said.

"Full honorifics?" Hakram asked.

I mulled over that a moment.

"No," I finally said. "Grey Pilgrim will do, it's in that function I'll be addressing him."

The tall orc nodded, and began writing anew.

"I, Catherine Foundling, first anointed Queen of Callow of my name," I said, "formally offer the unconditional surrender of all forces under my command to the Grey Pilgrim, Tariq of Levant, also known as the Peregrine. Let there be no further bloodshed between your armies and mine, and through that surrender peace be obtained for us all."

It was with a low whistle that Adjutant finished writing the last sentence, with a practiced hand adding signature and seal when I shook my head to make it clear there would be no other addition.

"The third?" he asked, afterwards.

"Addressed to the full war council of the Army of Callow, including summons for Vivienne Dartwick," I said.

Hakram went still, for a moment, and when he moved it was to eye me warily.

"In your formal capacity as queen?" he asked.

"That's the one," I casually agreed. "Put up the formalities, make this an official decree with my seal, and take one of the larger sheaths. I want to write to them about Theodosius' Dilemma, the whole story."

Adjutant cleared his throat.

"Those of us who went through the officer track at the War College have already heard it," he said. "There was a tactics class on the subject."

"Some of them won't know it," I said. "So we'll be thorough, yes?"

"Yes," he gravelled in agreement.

For the longest time there was only my voice cast over the scratch of quill against parchment, as I told the story mostly the same as I had read it. There was, however, to be an addition afterward. Hakram's hand stilled, and when he looked to me for instructions I have him one last sentence.

"I grant to Vivienne Dartwick the title of Lady Dartwick, with all assorted honours and privileges;" I said, "in addition I name Lady Dartwick the heiress-designate to the crown of Callow."

I hadn't gone as far as naming her a princess of the royal house as that would mean, legally speaking, that she was either my adopted sister or daughter. Both thoughts were rather unsettling for all sorts of reasons. But by first granting her noble title, even if that title was landless, I could make her my successor without breaking Callowan law. Didn't much like the thought of expanding the aristocracy, even for Vivienne, but the only two ways to make her

heiress-designate without making a bloody mess of feudal law had been that or bringing her into the royal house. The two ways of doing that were adoption and marriage, neither of which I believed to be palatable to us, so Lady Dartwick it was.

"It's a dangerous game, Cat," Hakram warned me.

"It's the only kind we ever play, Adjutant," I said. "And the letters are only to be sent when I say, so don't worry."

"That would be a first," the orc drily replied, but his hand moved nonetheless.

Three sheaths of leather were hidden away after he finished, bearing my seal, letters awaiting within. *A knife, a bet, a lie.* Instead of crawling into bed afterwards I spent half the night gazing at the stones where Robber had hung parchment for me. All the while silently feeding Night to the staff in my lap that was not a staff but a sword, a sword that was not a sword but a prayer.

When I finally fell into slumber I slept only fitfully, dreaming of laughing crows.

—

Years ago I would have been in the thick of it. Tripping over every discovery, blood going warm and cold with the twists and turns of Fate as I struggled to bend it to my will. I was older now, though, and though perhaps not all that much wiser I was at least more patient. I'd learned the value of not tipping your hand too early when playing these sorts of games. And so it was sitting in my stolen chair, pulling at a mug of steaming tea, that the news found me. It was Vivienne who carried them up the barrow, steps quick and alarmed.

"A breach had opened to the southeast," she told me. "An army is going through, its banners from Levant and Procer."

I inhaled the fragrance of the tea and did not reply, letting her pace back and forth. So it was finally starting.

"Who was the first out?" I asked out loud.

"Our outriders weren't close enough to-" she began.

I raised a hand.

"I wasn't asking you," I gently said.

Larat stepped out of the circle of stones with the languid grace of a hunting cat. The huntsman who'd once been the Prince of Nightfall walked against what I instinctively felt to be the cast of this circle, the way its power had once been leaning. It was like watching a man stroke a cat the wrong way, only I could almost feel it in my bones. Truly, my treacherous lieutenant had taken to petty vexations the way fish took to water. His long cape streamed behind him lazily, dark as night and sewn with jewels. The furs and leather he wore were fastened at his waist by a sash of scarlet cloth, from which hung that sheathless sword he favoured.

"A hero, most tenebrous of queens," Larat smiled. "Named and finder of paths, strutting for the rest of the cacophony to follow."

"His actual Name, Larat," I said, unimpressed.

"A sorcerer of roguish inclinations, my liege," the fae replied, raising hands to appease me. "Fleeing, then finding and now all aflutter from the sight of us."

"The Rogue Sorcerer," I grunted. "Yeah, that sounds about right. They'll need a mage for this, and last I heard the Witch was up north."

"That's all you have to say?" Vivienne said. "Catherine, the situations is getting grim. It's an army of nearly sixty thousand that crossed, and already Malanza's own host is sending riders to make contact."

I sipped at my tea.

"How long before the pursuers come out, do you think?" I asked Larat.

"Within the hour there will be a break," the huntsman grinned, a slice of pale malice between red lips. "And the parade of fools will merrily stumble out."

"Cat?" Vivienne slowly said.

Her eyes were moving back and forth between us, like she couldn't quite decide who to look at.

"Kairos is crazy enough to take a shortcut through a crumbling half-realm likely run by Masego having a breakdown just to get here earlier," I said. "On the other hand, are the crusaders? Would they take that risk just to go quicker? No, they wouldn't. But Kairos wants them here as well, and he dictates the military strategies of the League. Which means. . . "

"He cornered them," Vivienne said, eyes alight with sudden understanding. "To give them the choice of a battle where they'd likely be annihilated or taking a chance on a path through Arcadia."

He'd been able to do this not because he was a peerless military genius, I knew, or because he had some oracle at his side. It was simply that the Tyrant of Helike had most likely been trading information with near every other army out in Iserre, and so alone of all the commanding generals he'd had the bird's eye view of what was happening in the region. Given that, and the cadre of skilled warlocks that the Stygian Magisterium was made up of, it was far from impossible to both corner the other Grand Alliance army and ensure there was a breach nearby when he did. Desperation would do the rest.

"And the crusaders got a guide for the journey, perhaps the only wizard that could truly help them in all of Iserre," I said. "That is Above's due, the cast of providence. But that wizard also carries something I want, because Below always gets its due. It all comes to a head here, Vivienne."

My friend rested her hand on the back of her neck, pressing back a few curls of hair that'd not been brought into her crown-like braid. I'd caught the twitch in her fingers with muted amusement, recognizing it as Vivienne wanting to pass a hand through her hair before remembering it'd been styled.

"What are you actually up to, Cat?" she finally asked. "Juniper's been on edge."

"Because I've left her to decide how an engagement should be fought, if it happens," I said.

"Because you haven't been part of the planning," Vivienne frankly said. "Until now, you've been at the table for every campaign. That you'd take a step back after chewing us out has us a little perplexed."

Larat's lone eye was on us, the huntsman nonchalantly leaning against a stone as he listened to our conversation. I debated dismissing him, but I'd been the one to send for him in the first place and I still had a conversation due with the unofficial captain of the Wild Hunt.

"If I didn't believe the two of you capable of discharging your responsibilities, I would have demoted you," I replied. "It's that simple."

Blue-grey eyes narrowed as I gave answer to only the least important part of what she'd asked. I sighed and raised a calming hand.

"You can't be in the know for it," I said. "It wouldn't work if you were."

"We don't have a great history with complicated plans," Vivienne reminded me.

"It's not complicated," I said.

She looked skeptical, which only served to irritate me.

"It *isn't*," I sharply said. "It's not a series of events building on each other, it doesn't fail if there's a part that doesn't happen. It's a set of counterweights that only move if there's a push."

"I don't mean to question you," she delicately said.

Larat snorted, too loudly for him not have meant for the both of us to hear it.

"That's exactly what you're doing," I flatly said. "And in principle I don't mind, but in this instance your having incomplete information is part of the design. Which makes it all the more pointless when you press for answers that I can't give you without making the plan irrelevant."

"That is mildly polite way," Vivienne said after a moment, "to tell me to shut up and move along, isn't it?"

"I understand you're worried," I said. "But I'm telling you this has been accounted for."

A mirthless smiled quirked her lips.

"So either I trust you or I don't," she said.

Part of me wanted to sharply point out that Hakram was almost as much in the dark and he'd not needed this kind of coddling, but I held my tongue. I did not mean Adjutant for the same kind of purposes that I meant for Vivienne, and so it was unfair to both to try to expect the same behaviours of them. I could not put the dark-haired woman in front of me in positions of command and authority repeatedly and expect her not to act like someone in them. She, and Callow itself, couldn't remain under my shield forever. One day I would have to abdicate, and when that day came I would not brook chaos and disorder in my wake. That meant there had to be a worthy brow for the crown to be settled on, and that brow would not belong to someone who feared to ask questions when it was inconvenient. So I held my tongue, and let my irritation bleed out in the silence that followed.

"The Everdark changed you, didn't?" Vivienne finally said.

My brow rose, but she did not elaborate.

"I'll talk to Juniper, make sure she understands there's nothing to worry about," she continued. "Good hunting, Black Queen."

"You'll know what to do, when the time comes," I said. "I trust in that."

She sketched a bow before retiring, and it had my fingers clenching. How was it, I wondered, that losing her Name had made her *harder* to read? Larat's lone eye had been watching us eagerly that entire time, drinking in the complexities of the relationship hungrily. It was the kind of thing Winter fae had delighted in, and my huntsman might no longer claim any allegiance to that dead court but roots were not so easily discarded. That vicious coldness would always be at the heart of him.

"Larat," I said. "Approach."

"My queen," the fae replied, bowing after a flicker of a smirk.

The raven-haired huntsman stepped forward, light-footed and sure, and smoothly knelt before me. I drummed my fingers against the staff in my hand, idly wondering whether I'd gotten to the point where I should kill him. Did he suspect my thoughts? I couldn't be sure, but it was with interest he looked at my ebony staff.

"Curious?" I asked.

"No threat to me, that softest of deaths," Larat said.

I leaned forward and smiled.

"Are you sure?"

The urge to deny me flickered across the fae's pale face, but a moment pass and that denial never left his lips.

"You make sport of me, my queen," he said.

"Clever little fox, you are," I said. "But not as clever as you think. We made a bargain, and it's your way out, but we are bound by more than that."

"To my oaths I will remain true," Larat said.

"Of course you will," I said. "You don't really have a choice, do you? It took me a while to understand, but the details put it all into place."

"We gave our word willingly and without qualms, my queen," the one-eyed fae reproached me. "Why do you now remonstrate?"

"*Remonstrate*," I laughed. "How offended you are, now that I know I own you body and soul. Winter – my Winter – died and suddenly your gates are a spinning wheel of destinations. Come now, did you think I wouldn't learn of it? I am more than you liege, Larat, this entire time I've been your patron. The source of your power. You took a chance when you left Arcadia reforged, made yourself into a Wild Hunt that was not matched to a Spring and Autumn. So to stay here in Creation, you needed a little more than just calling yourself that. You needed an anchor."

"Have we not served you faithfully, O Queen of Night?" Larat said.

"It must have been terrifying," I mused, "to realize one day that your oaths bound you to more than the Winter in my veins. That there was an ocean of darkness, now, and that within it swam creatures in every way your superior."

"*Superior*?" Larat hissed, and the anger was bare and terrible. "These-"

I smiled, inviting him to continue, but the former Prince of Nightfall curbed his tongue. Too late to avoid confirming what I'd suspected yet not known for certain. Ah, pride. Of all the weakness of the Fair Folk it had always been my favourite.

"Seven crowns and one, laid at your feet," I said. "That is what I promised you, and that is what you will receive. Rise, Larat."

I rose, and let a sliver of Night pulse through my veins. The Wild Hunt was summoned, and my own mount with it.

"Don't worry, old friend," I told the fae with a warm smile. "I'll see to it that you get everything that you deserve."

I wondered if it was a trick of the light, or if I was truly glimpsing *fear* in that sole eye. No matter. When night fell I would ride with the Hunt, and the three of us – Pilgrim, Tyrant, myself – would find out whose cunning would cut deepest.

# Interlude: West, Ever Pursuing

> "Note: investigation in why sharing a problem is said to halve it remain inconclusive. Perhaps more varied trials are needed, as the tiger always ends up killing both subjects no matter the order they're put in the cage."
>
> Extract from the journal of Dread Emperor Malignant II

Lord Akil Tanja of the Grim Binder's Blood crouched over the thinning snow and passed a hand through it, the twinge in his knees a reminder that this was not his first war but it might just be his last. He was not so old as to crumble into dust at the first touch of wind, but life away from the comfortable confines of Malaga had taken a toll on him. There were practices for a binder of his talent that might allow health to seep back into his flesh but the Lord of Malaga had always disdained their likes. He would not play chasing-games with his age by binding and devouring creatures, not even those that would survive such a perverted act. The rueful reflection on his age was forced to the side by the calm voice of his sworn enemy and ally.

"And?" Lady Aquiline asked.

"The earth beneath is still frosted," Akil said. "These are war-grounds. Let there be blood."

"Let there be blood," the Lady of Tartessos agreed with a crisp nod.

Neither of them considered giving the Proceran captains marching with their host a voice in this decision. Had Prince Alvaro of Salamans survived the battle with the Stygian army there might have been need to do so out of courtesy but the man had died to the Magisterium's dark sorceries – after taking a wound he'd melted from the inside over the night, Akil had heard – and the remaining commanders were neither highborn nor powerful enough to force the issue. They would follow the Dominion in battle, like it or not.

"They say the One-Eye will be there," Lady Aquiline Osena of the Slayer's Blood said. "That would be a worthy head to claim, do you not agree?"

The Silent Slayer's quarrelsome brood, Akil thought, had always shown a distasteful obsession for the killing of famed foes. The one-eyed greenskin

who had been named Marshal of Praes many years ago was perhaps the most famous alive of his kind, but if Akil understood correctly the orc must also be an old beast by now. Hardly a challenge for a sharp young killer like the Lady Aquiline. That she had spoken of an aged orc but not of the Hellhound or the Deadhand was telling, in his eyes, for while those two's fame was fresher the ending of it would have been worthier dead. *Fairer.* The Lord of Malaga spat to the side before rising from his crouch.

"Shake the bushes before shooting at the sparrow, Osena," he replied. "Marshals do not fight from the front and they have raised a fortress from nothing, these easterners."

The lair of the Black Queen's armies had been an impressive thing to behold, when Akil had first taken stock of it. Beneath a tall barrow crowned by raised stones a maze of death had been raised from wood, steel and earth. A deep ditch led into a palisade – a base of beaten earth, topped by spears – where legionaries kept watch night and day. Behind that first line flat grounds spread into flat killing grounds, ending in another palisade that prevented easy access to terraces filled with siege engines and crossbowmen. Deeper behind that walled camps filled with tents and protected by teeth-like bastions of earth and wood jutting outwards mad up the last line of defence that would be manned by mortals. Lord Marave's messengers had spoken of strange lights above the barrow, after nightfall, and so Akil did not need to be told where it was that the Black Queen had made her den. These would be hard defences to crack, he knew, and Lady Aquiline's loose talk of claiming heads displeased him. Marshals of Praes were not easy meat, nor were the villain queen's own champions.

"Now is not the time to lose your stomach, Tanja," the Lady of Tartessos chided. "You heard Careful Yannu's stratagem same as me, and did not speak against the soundness of it."

That it had been the scheme of Lord Yannu Marave had only made Akil hesitate all the more. Aquiline Osena had not shared a border with the Champion's Blood for most her life, unlike Akil himself, and so she could not understand why the way they called the man not Reckless or Brave but *Careful* Yannu should be troubling. The Lord of Malaga had fought two honour wars against Lord Yannu's predecessor and found him a hard fighter but no great trouble. He'd sent a war-party into Alavan territory under Careful Yannu only once, though, in the moon that followed the man's ascension to lordship.

His own cousin and boyhood playmate Jaira had led it, for she was skilled with sword and bindings both and clever in the ways of war. Yet unlike his predecessor, Yannu had not fought the raiders as they passed through the flatlands taking riches and honour. No, he'd waited until they were returning north laden with loot and prisoners. Then he'd caught them while they were fat and slow under cover of night, butchering them wholesale. Without warning, without honour duels, without anything other than death weighed and measured. Jaira had been the only survivor of the night, and Lord Yannu had dragged her to the border before opening her throat in sight of the warbands Akil had sent

to reclaim his cousin. He'd then left without even hearing out the calls to duel by the warriors of Malaga.

The point made had been harsh, but so was the man: Careful Yannu was willing to let his holdings bleed if it allowed him to position himself for a killing stroke. And once crossed, he would not stay his hand in retaliation no matter who had first given insult. The Marave were steel-cast madmen who answered to only Gods and Pilgrim, and barely even those. The notion of one blessed with both their line's talent for killing and a good mind for strategy was worth respect and wariness both. Madness and cold method were dark mothers to dark days. Lord Akil Tanja had not fought a second honour war against Alava since that pointed lesson and slept easier for it.

And now he was being told to place the fate of his captains, of his soldiers, in the hands of the Lord of Alava. A man known to sacrifice for the killing stroke, and do so without hesitation. He was tempted to refuse, to force a conference where another plan would be laid out before battle was given, but Lady Aquiline was watching him with those cold eyes. Waiting, patiently, for a misstep that would allow her to wrest command of the host from him. Razin's mistakes had been paid for, but the taint of failure still hung over the Tanjas. If the Lady of Tartessos went to the unsworn captains, claiming he had lost his nerve, Akil could not be certain of the outcome.

"I have already said," Lord Akil replied, "that there will be blood, Lady Aquiline. We will follow the stratagem of Careful Yannu and make war on the Enemy."

And still, he could not help but glance at the pale and empty vista behind his host. That long expanse of snowy plains, which had until morning been broken by the eldritch sight of a passage leading into Arcadia. It was gone, now, though the remembrance of the harrowing journey through that storm-wracked hellscape would haunt them all for years to come. The League of Free Cities had not followed them through the breach, after hounding them through it, yet Akil could not help but wonder if they had not taken another path after. If there might yet be more to this battle that the armies of the Black Queen and those of the Grand Alliance. Lady Aquiline had sent for the horn-bearer granted to them by the Holy Seljun while he looked, and though she looked hungry for the honour she did not overstep.

The young boy passed him the strange carved horn inherited from days long before the Dominion, an old artefact said to have made from the tip of a *guisanes*' horn. The legendary gargantuan bulls whose stride had shaken the world and flattened hills into plains were perhaps more myth than history, but it was said a shadow of their thundering might remained in wonders crafted from their remains. Whatever the truth of it, when Lord Akil Tanja of the Binder's Blood sounded the horn his magic shivered inside him as the deep call echoes across the plains. In the distance, after a long moment, the sister-horn in the hands of the other Dominion host offered a shuddering call in reply.

Banners rose and without further ceremony the battle began.

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Marshal Juniper of the Red Shields watched her enemies advance in silence. The sight of so many soldiers on the move would have been impressive for someone who had not fought in the Arcadian Campaign or slogged through the brutality of Second Liesse, but after these Juniper had found it took much to awe her. Yet for all that the armies before her lacked the ostentatious wings and sorceries of the Courts or the relentless horror of the Diabolist's wights and devils they were no less dangerous for it. Flesh and steel did not splash so colourful across the pages of histories as the means of monsters and villains but they worked. And the Grand Alliance had brought much of both to bear on this field and this day.

"They don't seem to have organized beyond attacking together," Grem One-Eye said.

The sound of Kharsum spoken crisp and clear was like a breath of fresh air straight from the steppes. Juniper let that taste of home settled in her bones before growling in agreement. The armies of the Grand Alliance had not joined before moving against her fortifications, to her relative surprise. It might have taken them a few days to restructure after merging ranks, but they would have been stronger for it and there was not much she could do to better her own position with the means at her disposal. Her warlord had hinted that the League might be on its way to join the melee as well, Juniper noted. If her foes believed that arrival imminent, it might explain this hasty assault. This was speculation, however, and ultimately of no import to her. It was the facts that mattered. An army of eighty thousand was approaching from the northwest, under the command of Lord Yannu Marave and Princess Rozala Malanza. An army of sixty thousand was approaching from the southeast, under the command of Lord Akil Tanja. The first two commanders were known to her, and their armies as well. Of the latter commander, however, almost nothing was known save for his name.

"The northern force is the weaker one," Juniper said. "Much of the foot from Vaccei is light and Malanza fields mostly levies. If a rout is to happen at all, it will be from there."

The orc at her side grunted his agreement. They watched the enemy form up, and with cold eyes the Marshal of Callow sought weaknesses. The northern army advanced cautiously, which did not surprise her – she'd traded blows with them before. The Vaccei skirmishers advanced in a deep but loose screen ahead of the Proceran foot Princess Rozala had brought: a hodgepodge mixture of levies, fantassins and principality troops. Dartwick's spies had brought back word that as much as six tenths of the Principate infantry should be levies, which was promising, but thoughts of an easy rout were put to rest by the two wings of infantry flanking the Procerans. The Lord of Alava, Yannu Marave, had brought to the crusade some of the finest heavy infantry Juniper had ever seen. Only four thousand in whole, at least, but it was marching ahead of lighter armsmen from Alava and Vaccei in much greater numbers. A sharp

sword to open a breach, Juniper thought, after the skirmishers found a weakness.

"Malanza has the horse again, looks like," Marshal Grem said.

The banner told it true, though she found the other orc made as wary as she felt by the way the near ten thousand horse – mixed Proceran and Levantine horse, though vastly more so Proceran than the other – the Princess of Aequitan led was peeling off from the rest of the army and moving towards the south. The mass of cavalry was moving slowly, but in good order.

"She didn't make the plan for this," Juniper said. "She's much more aggressive a commander than that, she'd keep the horse close on the flanks to try a charge if opportunity arose."

"Lord Yannu then," Grem said. "Shame. He's a hard one to bait."

"Too much to hope for he spends the Vaccei foot against the palisades, I suppose," Juniper muttered.

The older man twitched in amusement. The daring raids and ambushes from the Vaccei warriors and their vicious warleaders of the Bandit's Blood had not endeared the Levantines to either orc. Juniper found her eyes drifting south, to the other army, and found her back prickling. Most of what she saw there she had expected. The enemy was moving with skirmishers ahead, though the screen was much smaller than the northern army's, with two massed forces of infantry behind it. One Proceran and one Levantine. The Principate foot here should be mostly professional soldiers, Juniper thought, which explained why unlike in the northern army's formation they'd not been placed between steadier soldiers to hold up their spine. The detail that had her hackles raising was the detachment of cavalry splitting off from the army, a solid seven thousand moving north. From a bird's eye view, the Hellhound considered, within the hour there would be a point where her camp was as the centre of a neat square.

"They think they have a way to breach the palisades," the Marshal of Callow said. "Interesting."

The Marshal of Praes squinted his one eye, gazing at the moving cavalries. He arrived, she suspected, at the same conclusion she had: they were being positioned to hit forces defending the palisades from sudden angles after a path suddenly being opened for them.

"The reserves are readied," Grem One-Eye said, baring his fangs. "Let them try."

A moment later the skirmish lines of the northern army entered the first killing yard the Marshals had prepared for them and the slaughter began.

—

Moro of the Brigand's Blood had lost thirty warriors in the time it took to drink a skin of water. He was not stranger to death dealt and received, but the sheer suddenness of it took him by surprise. The traps had been cleverly hidden, he thought, covered with a thin layer of snow and earth. And they must have been dug at night, for even with watcher his mother's had not known of

them. Not all warriors who'd fallen in the pits had died to the sharp stake at the bottom, but all had taken wounds – and their screams had brought hesitation where before there had been only courage. The warriors of his lands, Moro would admit to himself, were not used to being on this side of the traps and were not taking it well. The heir to Vaccei had called a halt, and sent for what he thought might just be the solution to the troubles. It wasn't long before the priests answered his call, for the Lanterns were never far from the vanguard of strife. A full battle-party of thirteen had come in answer, to his pleasure, and the eldest among them sought him out.

"Honoured Son," the woman greeted him. "You seek illumination?"

"I seek to walk within the Light," Moro agreed. "For me and mine to follow its paths."

The woman's face-paint, golden and pale, hid her expression well. He could not tell whether she approved or disapproved of his request, which while not presumptuous was still a request – for some of the Lanterns just that was enough to give offence. They were a touchy lot. Regardless, after a heartbeat she suddenly whipped around and a lance of Light struck out. Twenty feet forward, it broke through a thin layer of snow and earth to reveal the trap under.

"Follow, then, Moro of the Brigand's Blood," the Lantern said.

Her companions spread out, and at the fore of Moro's own warriors came men and women bearing long perches. They would reveal these traps, he smiled, for the Enemy had been foolish enough to lay them far out of crossbow range.

—

General Hune Egelsdottir waited until it was clear no more of the warrior-priests would reinforce the frontlines. She glanced at her senior mage, mildly amused by how eager he seemed to be to act.

"Fire," she ordered. "On special assets only."

Behind her, rituals bloomed as the mage cadres finally received the authorization to act. One, two, three, four, five: she long spears of flame formed and were sent out like massive arrows. Without scrying to adjust the trajectory it was unpleasantly imprecise business to use these sorts of rituals, as shown by the rituals. All were impacts – the ogre made a note to commend the officers leading the rituals – but only three of the priests were turned to cinders.

No matter, it was only the first volley.

"Again," the general of the Second Army ordered, the faintest trace of a smile on her face.

—

Lord Yannu Marave sat atop his horse and thoughtfully chewed the mouthful of bread he'd ripped from the loaf, eyeing the falling javelins of flame.

Princess Rozala had told him the Army of Callow had used such ritual sorceries before, though allegedly it had not since the Hierophant had left its ranks for destination. It would have been sloppy, however, to assume that meant

without the Bestowed they could not. So he hadn't, instead preparing the same manner of defences the Proceran armies had at the Battle of the Camps. The priests from the House of Light, that tame Proceran breed, were shuffled to the front and ordered to form protective panes of Light. The Vaccei warriors were not yellow-bellied, and so did not need much haranguing before their advance resumed.

—

Grem One-Eye leaned forward and Juniper grinned, broad and fierce. They had, she believed, noticed the same detail. Though the ritual sorcery had been checked by priest intervention once more, there'd been a departure from the way that trick had been used at the Camps. Instead of massive layered shields covering the entire frontline, this time the Grand Alliance had resorted to a mere half dozen large panes protecting where the rituals had been striking. Dartwick's spies, the Hellhound was forced to admit, had actually provided useful military intelligence.

"They're spread thin on priests," the Marshal of Praes laughed. "Too many wars, Hasenbach, too many wars."

The Marshal of Callow did not reply, for her gaze had turned south where battle was finally being joined. General Abigail, the Hellhound had decided, was in need of thorough tempering. Her command at the southern front should serve, for a start.

—

The pit traps had not been part of the warnings Lord Marave had passed, but Aquiline Osega was not moved by the loss of a few dozen skirmishers. In the hunting of a foe strong and cunning, such deaths were inevitable. The Lady of Tartessos had been riding behind the last of the slingers and javelinmen, a handful of captains at her side, when she ordered the assault to be halted. Inevitable losses or not, she would not countenance simply throwing soldiers at the traps until a safe path emerged. Her favoured captain, dearest Elvera – who had such a dark reputation, with some, but to Aquiline remained the smiling woman who'd taught her how to reply to scraped knees with broken teeth – quietly reminded her that with Lord Yannu's force advancing there could be no long halt without leaving his army exposed to the full attention of the enemy. Feeling out the traps with perches would take too long, Lady Aquiline had decided. No, it was time for bold steps. The rider she sent to that hard-eyed old monster Akil Tanja returned with the answer she'd wanted: the binders of Malaga would take the lead.

Reining in her horse, it was an effort for the Lady of Tartessos not to show the thrum of excitement she felt at the notion of seeing the finest sorcerers of Levant in the fullness of their war-making. When had been the last time Creation witnesses such a thing, she wondered? Not since the Sepulcher War, at least, and perhaps not even then. A mere hundred men and women in thick coats of leather and iron grey cloth marched to the front, skulls and bones and claws bound by fine brass chains. The spread out in a line, and one of

them raised a hand. There was a grinding scream, like a hundred blades being scraped against each other, and a translucent drop formed in the air a few feet in front of the binder. The ground beneath it, snow and earth and snow, was sucked upwards by some invisible force that broke it all down to grains. The other binders followed in the first one's wake, drops forming one after another and the scream becoming utterly deafening. And still Aquiline did not look away for a moment, for in front of her spirits were being given shape.

The first one shaped a wyvern, the winged creature with the long stinger-tipped tail letting out a scream all too-real before it began to advance and strike at the ground to reveal traps. The snow and earth it was made from shifted like true flesh and sinew, for the spirit the binder had called forth still remembered the body it has once worn. It was a company of beasts that was brought forth, manticores and griffins and *culebron*. Even a few creatures she did not recognize: *her*, the Lady of Tartessos, whose true domain was the savage Brocelian!

The beasts of snow and earth sprang forward, implacable and relentless.

—

General – despite her best efforts – Abigail of Summerholm idly wondered if you got a worse penalty for deserting when you were a general. She'd assumed it couldn't get worse than hanging, and that could only happen the once, but considered the amount of Wastelanders enrolled in the Army of Callow she just couldn't be sure. Well, there was nowhere to run to anyway so it was all academic in the end.

"Burn those up, boys," she called out.

Krolem relayed the order more proper-like, wonderful aide that he was. Behind the generals rituals bloomed, but Abigail just had this sinking feeling it wasn't going to be enough.

It wasn't pessimism, she told herself, if you were part of the Army of Callow.

# Interlude: Graves We Have Yet To Fill

> "The middle years of the Uncivil Wars can roughly be described as a series of conflicts fought to determine peace terms. The tragedy of those years, in retrospective, can be said that while the overwhelming majority of them desired peace no two Calernian powers could agree on what exactly the terms of it should be – and so to war they all went, convinced every step of the way that the others were at fault for it."
>
> Extract from the personal memoirs of Lady Aisha Bishara

The third volley did not work better than those before it.

The spears of flame rose into the sky like quarrels loosed, before the guiding sorceries of the legion mages who'd performed the ritual pulled them down. The arc was sudden but graceful, the crackling fire in red and gold tearing straight through the five largest apparitions the Dominion had sent forward. Earth and snow dispersed at the explosion of heat and light, the grounds beneath what had been the shape of strange creatures scorched through a vaporized layer of a frost. There were about a hundred of the damned things, General Abigail thought, but it wouldn't have been too bad if a ritual volley actually put the abominations downs. Instead she winced as she watched the flames of her mages disperse in turn, leaving behind only small droplets of eldritch power hovering in the air. A heartbeat later the ground beneath the droplets began breaking up and the creatures that'd been broken began reforming.

"It's not getting any slower, ma'am," Krolem said.

"I can see that, thank you," she acidly replied.

Fuck. At this rate the entire web of traps the army's sappers had worn themselves to the bone digging during nights and hiding before dawn came would be trampled into irrelevance by some strange godsdamned Levantine magic. She squinted at the creatures again, noting how the massive manticore in the lead acted like it was actually hungry. That had to be blasphemous, right? It was all looking a little too much like necromancy, and you weren't supposed to do that if you were on the side of a crusade these people were on.

"I'm not arguing the House Insurgent is right, mind you," she muttered. "But this needs looking at, is all I'm saying."

"Ma'am?" Krolem asked, sounding confused.

Had he been talking? Abigail had no idea, but now was not the time to look like she was losing it in front of the troops. The Black Queen's barn-burning oration at Sarcella had riled them up like young dockworkers who'd just gotten their first pay. If they thought she was the weak link in this army, Abigail thought with a sudden urge to grimace, they were going to tear her apart. Possibly literally given the amount of orcs there were in the ranks. *Look calm, Abigail*, she told herself. *It's all under control.*

"Quite right, Krolem," she slowly said. "Spot on. On that note, I need you to request a deployment order from Marshal Juniper."

She sent him off after a quick elaboration, fairly sure the Hellhound would refuse her request and so in the after-battle reports she'd have an excuse for her failure to perform. That it would put her straight at odds with the Marshal of Callow would be even better, she giddily thought. Marshal Juniper might even demote her, or drum her out of the army.

A girl could dream, couldn't she?

—

Forward, Akil Tanja had ordered.

The Lord of Malaga was no fool, to send his binders forward unprotected, but neither would he spare them contribution. After Lady Aquiline had requested the deployment of his finest war-sorcerers to clear the approach of traps, he'd immediately sent for his son. Razin was in need of deeds to redeem himself, if he was to remain the heir to Malaga, and opportunity would arise soon enough. For that purpose Akil had ordered the boy to gather captains enough for two thousand warriors, all bearing shields, and appointed him to command before sending him to reinforce the binders. They would need that protection soon enough, the Lord of Malaga knew, for the bound spirits that had been sent forth were reaching the end of their leash. No other power of Levant had made as deep study of the arts of binding like the Grim Binder's line, and though Malaga was hardly the only city to send binders to war for the other families such a thing was rare and always in small numbers. That had obscured some of the limitations of their craft, which would become clear very soon if Akil was not careful with his orders.

The binding of a soul or spirit was done with one's own blood mixed with the ancient flower-dye, tattooed on one's skin with needles of barrow-bone. The patterns of these bindings had been refined by Akil's ancestors, to require less breadth and shackle the bound more tightly – and cease sickening the blood of those who used them recklessly. The sharing of those secrets with those who entered the service of the Tanja was why so many practitioners came to Malaga, with the finest among them allowed to read the tomes of the Obscure Library in exchange for oaths to answer calls to war by the ruling lord or lady of the city. Yet since the founding of the Dominion, no binder saved those Bestowed

had ever succeeded at sending one of their bound entities further than three hundred feet from themselves. Akil was talented in the art, as befitting of his blood, and so the silver-winged hawk he'd bound as a boy he could send as far as two hundred and twelve feet without the shackle turning on him. Yet it was a rare thing for any binder to reach more than two hundred feet, and even most of those allowed to peruse the Obscure Library remained in the antechamber of that hurdle.

This mattered today, if only because soon the spirits of his binders would have to halt their advance. Ordering them to advance would remedy the issue and allow them to clear the entire field all the way to the enemy fortifications without further casualties, but it would also leave them vulnerable. Razin and the shield-bearing warriors he'd assembled would see to that vulnerability, he'd decided. It would leave his son close to the front, too, and so able to lead the assault against the same force that had humbled him at Sarcella.

At the head of his host the Malaga binders were surrounded by rings of steel, and as he had ordered forward they all went.

—

"Why?"

Marshal Juniper of the Red Shields was frowning. General Abigail's tribune – a good Hoaring Hoof Clan boy by the look of his jaw, she'd noted with approval – cleared his throat in that way young officers always did when they had no good answer but had to answer anyway. Silver-quick, the wistful thought that Nauk truly had ruined that army down to the bone came and went.

"So she didn't say," the Hellhound cut in before he could reply.

Tribune Krolem sheepishly flared his teeth, and did not deny it.

"Only a thousand?" Juniper asked again, to confirm.

"Yes ma'am," Tribune Krolem agreed.

The Marshal of Callow's instinct was to send him back with an order for General Abigail to make a proper proposal including for what she wanted the soldiers, but she held her tongue. Catherine had raised the other woman up for a reason, and it would not be anything as simple as birth. If her warlord had simply wanted to put Callowan hands on the reins of her armies, Juniper suspected Brandon Talbot would have been the chosen candidate. Instead, though, she'd chosen an enlisted legionary who'd shot up the ranks. Not someone with ties to nobles or fame in the kingdom. Catherine had seen something in the younger woman, and though Juniper of the Red Shields did not she'd not long ago had reminder of the value of trust.

"She has them, then," Marshal Juniper said. "See Tribune Bishara for the proper writ and be on your way."

The boy moved quick, like she'd stung him, but Juniper had already put him out of her mind. Marshal Grem's curious eye on her she ignored as well, her own attention now solely turned to the southern front. What was the first commander Catherine had handpicked since Juniper herself scheming, exactly?

—

*Shit*, Abigail thought, look at the writ Krolem had just handed her with a sinking feeling in her stomach. The Hellhound had actually agreed? *Why would she – no, don't panic*, she told herself. This could still be salvaged if she watcher her step. On one hand, she'd actually be expected to produce results now. On the other hand, as long as she tried to pull off a vaguely coherent plan and failed she'd probably still manage to avoid the noose. Gods, Abigail knew she should have made her request more unreasonable, if she'd gone overboard the Marshal would have refused. But no, she'd just to *had* hedge her bets and make it look like her theoretical plan had been reasonable just to improve the chances the Black Queen wouldn't feed her liver to buzzards after this was all over with. Her mother was right, she'd never learned to quit while she was ahead. Sure, Ma had lost an eye and a finger brawling with Annie Sutherland over who made the better beer, but just because she was a lunatic didn't mean she was wrong. Fucking Sutherlands, anyway, strutting around like Annie having been in the Royal Guard meant she knew anything about brewing.

"She did know a thing or two about knives, though," she conceded in a mutter.

"It is a great honour, ma'am," Krolem, who was still there, rumbled approvingly.

"Yes," Abigail echoed with a stiff smile. "Honour. Just the word I was thinking of."

The Callowan general hid her rising horror with the practiced skill of someone who'd been forced to be around the Queen of Callow and pretend not to be terrified the whole time. All right, so the damned Levant magic beasties didn't die to fire and that probably meant they wouldn't give a damn about siege engines either. Munitions, maybe? Couldn't really do that without using sending sappers in, which seemed ill-advised, but it was only the First Army that had the 'spitters', those strange devices Sapper-General Pickler used to lob munitions over long distances. Goblinfire was a restricted substance as of last year, though, so Abigail would need authorization from the Hellhound to send for any and that'd be suspicious as all Hells since Krolem had just been there. Options, she needed options.

"Where's our Senior Sapper?" she asked Krolem.

"She's checking in on our engines," the tribune gravelled. "Though she asked me to pass her continued protest as to the amount of munitions we passed on to Special Tribune Robber."

"Why?" Abigail said, feeling another spike of fear.

"His cohort isn't part of the Third Army, it's detached," the orc said.

"Why did we pass munitions to Special Tribune Robber?" she clarified.

"You don't need to test me, ma'am," Krolem reproached. "Your signature was on the forms, the general staff is aware you planned some contingencies – just not what they are."

*Oh Gods*, Abigail thought, realizing that the Black Queen's favourite goblin assassin had forged her authorization for something involving munitions and

she had absolutely no idea what. *O Gods*, Abigail silently repeated, turning to prayer in her hour of need, *I know I'm in the service of a villain but isn't this still a little much?*

—

Razin Tanja crouched down to the side of the pit.

He'd return to the front of the formation soon enough, but for now he... Well, he wasn't sure exactly what it was he was doing. There was something about this situation that felt like a stone in his boot. The Third Army had defended Sarcella with dogged viciousness, making the Dominion pay in blood for every street. They had done so even after being taken by surprise in the middle of the night after the assassination of their commanders, which while Razin still thought little of Callowan heresy had nonetheless impressed him in regard to that people's discipline. Now that same army was facing them from a tall palisade after having days and night to prepare, and all they had prepare was a few pits with stakes at the bottom? No, he could not believe that. Certainly the fighting would harden the closer they came to the rampart, but this was too little.

It was not a complicated trap to build, Razin decided as he studied it. A stake at the bottom, the slopes inclined so anyone falling would be led towards it. Some sort of thin weave had been used to keep the hole covered, but it'd been crumpled by the claws of a bound wyvern and the weave had fallen below. That part was the most cleverly made, the heir to Malaga mused, for the weave had made the grounds look perfectly untouched until it was touched. Now the rings of shield-bearers escorting the binders were going around the revealed traps, advance slow but steady. The two sworn swords behind him were shuffling impatiently, but Razin refused to be hurried. He rose just enough to move, circling around the rim of the hole, and wrestled down the embarrassment he was starting to feel. It was a simple pit trap, and he might be making a fool of himself by insisting on taking so long a look at one.

The man's fingers clenched. No. He would not bend so easily as that. Pride had already led him down a dead end once. If a little humiliation let him make certain there was no deeper trap then he'd suffer the bite and do so unflinchingly. The sun shining from behind him – the afternoon at his back warmed him even in his armour – gave him half a breath's worth of warning, and that meant he survived the first blow. Coming out in a spray snow and earth from a hidden nook within the put, a howling goblin tossed something at Razin's sworn swords while leaping up with a knife bared. The heir to Malaga caught the blade with his shield even as he tumbled backwards, the wildly cackling creature continuing to stab away as it landed on him. There was a loud crack behind them and something wet landed on Razin's cheek. The yellow-eyed monster bared needle-like teeth and slid the knife between two armour plates, but the Levantine socked it in the mouth with an armoured fist. Wincing at the shallow wound, Razing Tanja rose even as the goblin spat out blood and laughed, reaching for something in its leather satchel.

It never got to finish the movement, for the heir to Malaga rammed the hunting knife he'd adroitly palmed through its left eye.

Back on his feet a heartbeat later, Razin grimaced when he saw the bloody mess the thrown munition had made of his two escorts from the shoulders up. Blood and bone and brain fluid stained the snow around the two corpses. Gaze turning to the rest of his command, he heard the crack of further munitions and grimly admitted to himself the Third Army of Callow had once more succeeded as springing an ambush on him.

—

Special Tribune Robber assessed the situation with a proud stare.

Sure, they'd been forced to come out early when one of his minions had revealed their presence before the enemy was fully past their force. On the other hand, even springing this too soon they'd gotten a full two dozen of those Dominion sorcerers. Dipping low, Robber leaned forward a bit to better slit the throat of the blinded warrior he'd caught with his brightstick. Popping out of the holes and hitting fast with munitions, his cohort had done a lot damage in the span of thirty heartbeats. But not, he mused, enough to secure a comfortable retreat. The strange spirits the Dominion mages had sent ahead to continue ripping up traps were hurrying back, and between those and the warriors recovering from the surprise two hundred goblins all spread out had no real chance of fighting their way out. He whistled, loud and clear, three times. *Scatter*, it meant. Smothering a grin, the Special Tribune began the run back to the tender embrace of the palisade held by the Third Army. A great day's work, if any of them survived.

Still a good day's work, if they didn't.

—

"They won't make it," Krolem said.

They most definitely would not, Abigail silently agreed. Already more than twenty goblins had been slain by warriors running them down, but those had been the few whose hiding place had been within the Levantine formation. The rest has scattered to the wings with that insolent goblin aplomb, not that it would save them. They were quick, Special Tribune Robber's sappers. Far quicker than humans on foot, especially on trickier terrain like snow. But they were not quicker than the enemy's creatures, not even close, and with more than seventy of those left there was no doubt about the outcome of the chase. The monsters were drawing back already, closing the gap with inevitable haste. Maybe ten would make it out alive, General Abigail guessed. If that.

"Brave man, Special Tribune Robber," her aide added, tone thick with respect.

*Fuck*, Abigail thought, with a fresh well of horror. The Black Queen's favourite goblin assassin was about to get himself killed, and the only parchment trail there would be of it bore her signature. Faked, sure, but who'd ever believe that? She was going to get blamed for this wasn't she? She was going to get blamed for this and some godsdamned buzzards were going to eat her liver.

She needed to get at least that one goblin out alive. Striking with rituals again? No, wouldn't work. They'd gotten quite good at avoiding those, and there were too many beasts anyway. Slowing down less than ten at a time wouldn't get her anywhere. What did she have? Siege engines, which wouldn't do anything more than the rituals, legionaries and – oh, *oh*. Abigail might just survive this yet.

"Still got that writ, Krolem?" she nonchalantly asked. "Send them out now."

"Ah," the orc breathed out, looking at her with shining eyes. "I understand now, ma'am. You've played the Dominion like a fiddle."

"That is absolutely what I did," Abigail baldly lied.

—

Akil Tanja's fingers had begun clenching with the first explosion and had not loosened since. He had not anticipated that the goblins in the Black Queen's service would burrow like worms within their own traps, and neither had his son. Malaga had lost nearly thirty binders for that mistake, men and women whose powers had each taken decades and a fortune to forge. Dead, faster than it took to drink a cup of wine. Now the wretched creatures were fleeing, but they would be run down. If any of them was taken alive, he would have the damned creatures hung from his battle-standard after personally crushing their malevolent skulls. At least Razin had drawn the enemy's blood and asserted control swiftly, which should prevent his reputation from being tarred too much by this unpleasant turn.

"Movement by the enemy, my lord," one of his captains announced.

The Lord of Malaga followed the man's gaze and found the Army of Callow was opening the southern gate of the camp. Reinforcements to extricate the sappers? They would arrive too late. Akil rather hoped the enemy commander was fool enough to send legionaries forward. The spirits bound by his war-sorcerers could kill soldiers as easily as they could clear traps, and any legionary killed down on the plains was one that would not be fighting from atop the palisade. The wooden grate opened, and Akil Tanja's lips thinned at what he saw. Horsemen, the first of the column carrying a tall banner: a bronze bell with a jagged crack going through, set on black. Lord Akil had read of these: the Order of Broken Bells, the sole remaining knightly order of Callow.

"Call them back," the Lord of Malaga said. "*Now*. And hurry the skirmishers forward."

Two of his captains peeled off like he'd swung at them with hot iron, both bearing orders. From where he sat astride his horse, Akil was forced to watch it all unfold without being able to intervene. The Callowan knights thundered out of the fortified camp without missing a stride, forming up as they advanced. There must have been at least a thousand, Akil saw with rising dread. The skirmishers were on foot, the binders and their escort too far ahead. They would not arrive soon enough. The only hope of the binders – of his son – was that the bound spirits would slow the enemy knights long enough for a retreat. Razin must have understood the point as keenly, for the bound creatures aban-

doned pursuit of the goblins within moments and turned sharply to the side. Facing them, the knights of the Broken Bells slowly lowered their lances and quickened from canter to full gallop. The sight of it, Akil thought, was moving. Callowan knights in their prayer-carved armours, charging a host of beasts. The Lord of Malaga tensed for the impact, eyes fixed on the lances.

He flinched in disbelief, when the knights rode through the spirits like they were mist.

Sorcery sliding off their armour like water off a duck's back, the Knights of the Broken Bells broke through and kept charging.

—

There was something deeply satisfying, Abigail mused, about watching Callowan knights trample enemy foot. It scratched an itch she hadn't known she had. The enemy mages tried other sorceries, after their nasty little trick failed, but flames and curses were nothing new to the cavalry of Kingdom of Callow. Compared to the Praesi, she thought, these Dominion folk were fumbling amateurs. The commander of the Order's detachment had split his horse into two wedges of five hundred and rammed them straight at the enemy shield walls, shattering men and shields alike. The knights had then withdrawn in good order, after the initial momentum of the charge was spent, and formed up as they turned the enemy flank and simply charged again. The Dominion had sent two thousand foot to escort its sorcerers, but by the time General Abigail sounded the retreat for her cavalry more than half that number was lying dead on the ground. It might have been more, if enemy reinforcements hadn't hurried. Where sorcery would fail javelins might just succeed, so reluctantly she'd pulled back the Order. Abigail was leaning against the top of the palisade with her elbows and watching the cavalry retreat in good order when she heard her tribune return.

"Special Tribune and his cohort have been settled, ma'am," Krolem said.

She nodded absent-mindedly. The goblin she'd needed to keep alive as alive, beyond that they were hardly her concern.

"It's about to get ugly, Tribune," she said, gazing at the massing enemy.

The skirmishers remained spread out, but the foot behind them was now locked in thick formations. They were getting ready for a run at the palisade.

"Ma'am?" the orc said.

"Get the engines aimed," Abigail of Summerholm grimly said. "They have a path to us mostly cleared, now they're going to take it."

—

Lord Yannu Marave patted his horse's mane, and fondly held out his palm to feed her the last piece of bread from the loaf when she turned. He'd been told of the debacle to the south by the outriders he'd left to keep an eye on the situation, and it had darkened his mood. A few hundred warriors were a drop in the sea of what would be lost before this was all done and over with, but binders were a rare breed. They might have been of great use in the war to the north, had the Lord of Malaga's blunder not effectively pissed away half of

them. Yet there was no point in losing his temper, he knew. This was merely the first movement of an intricate dance, and his side had never been meant to win it. In the distance he watched the skirmishes of Vaccei and their Lantern guides make it to the edge of the slaughter yard, and only then raised a hand. One of the lesser horns was sounded, and the warriors came to halt. As well they should – any further and they would be in what he suspected to be the outer range of the enemy's engines. In truth he should probably should have let them continue advancing until that suspicion was confirmed, but in the end he would rather overestimate enemy range than throw away lives on such a petty confirmation.

He had what he needed of this northern front and if any of Akil Tanja's captains had eyes they would have what he needed of that front as well.

"I would have your judgement, Peregrine," he calmly requested.

The Grey Pilgrim did not answer immediately. Instead the holy man gazed at the distant ring of raised stones, that incongruous crown atop a tall barrow.

"She will not step in even if the palisade is assaulted," the Pilgrim finally said. "Perhaps not even if the camp is breached, as you had arranged."

And so, Yannu knew, this meant the Peregrine would not intervene either. It had been made clear to the Lord of Alava what the consequences of the Grey Pilgrim acting first might be, and he would not have such disaster brought upon them all.

"Then the offensive I had planned is doomed to failure," Yannu of the Champion's Blood said, unruffled. "And we must resort to the second string to our bow."

A shame. He'd enjoyed the cleverness of the scheme, the use of the Saint and the Sorcerer to take the cavalries through crumbling Arcadia and strike at the heart of the enemy camp while assault on the palisades tied down most of their troops. Yet one must now grow too fond of plans, lest they be followed even when they no longer suited. As was the case here, to his understanding. Neither the Grand Alliance nor the Black Queen wanted to risk the heavy casualties of a committed duel to death, which meant every manoeuvre on this field was in fact was a jostling for position in some greater game. One where the victor could twist the arm of the defeated without having sown too great a field of corpses first. It was Yannu Marave's duty to help the Peregrine triumph in this struggle, nothing less or more.

"Sound the retreat for all hands," the Lord of Alava ordered his horn-bearer.

The Peregrine looked at him strangely, as if the holy man was watching someone both a stranger and an old friend. It might truly be so, Yannu thought, if the old stories about his distant kin Lady Sintra were more than merely that.

"You will be challenged over this," the Pilgrim said.

"I have been challenged before," Yannu Marave said, neither boastful nor wary.

He might have to kill Akil Tanja, the Lord of Alava mused, or at least the man's champion. The Lord of Malaga had taken enough losses today anger

might lead him to such a blunder. Perhaps even a second champion would need killing, when he told the others that they would resume the attack during the night now that the safe paths to the palisade had been cleared. Ah well, these things happened. Nothing for it but swinging the blade.

Victory was born of blood, and only ever earned through it: this Yannu Marave knew true as any other child of Levant.

# Interlude: Trust Is The Wager

> "War itself has no worth, as it is a temporary state. War ends, and therefore its fundamental purpose is to shape what comes after it. It then follows that a war fought without the ambition of a planned peace is inherently a mistake."
>
> Extract from the treatise "On Rule", author unknown (widely believed to be Prince Bastien of Arans)

Yannu Marave had been taught, as a boy, to make a spectacle of honour duels. There were some who might have called such a teaching *arrogant*, a presumption of superiority in all matters of steel, but those people were not of the Valiant Champion's Blood. The Lord of Alava had followed those ways as a young man, let the crowds roar with thrill and fear as he made sport of warriors. He had done this while master of the field from the first stroke to the last, and taken much too long to understand the sickness and cruelty of the act. Yet a duel fought for honour, for decision, could not be a dull affair. The resolution must be striking, the victory evident, lest other warriors wonder if their own blade would have served the cause better. And so Yannu Marave had left behind the ways of the champion, of a duellist, and instead learned the arts of killing. As his forbears had mad study of the slaying of armies and beast, he had learned to take apart men of all stripes. Warriors in plate or leather, hunters and Lanterns and even the strange-stepping slayers of the Brocelian's outskirts. All these, and binders as well. He had learned to kill these, kill them quick and clean and without a fuss.

And so he'd opened the throat of Akil Tanja within eighteen heartbeats of their duel beginning, flicking his hooked blade free of blood and sheathing it in the same smooth gesture.

Even as the corpse of the Lord of Malaga finished tumbling backwards and life left the man's eyes, Yannu of the Champion's Blood had calmly asked of his fellow lords and ladies of Levant if any other wished to contest the decision to attack again after nightfall. From the corner of his eye he'd seen Aquiline Osega's hand dip towards her own blade, her Slayer's Blood boiling at the thought of the match that could be had there, but the young woman mastered herself. The Lady of Tartessos was a dangerous woman, for her age, and would only

become more so with the passing of years. She bore watching. The Lord of Malaga's son and heir, Razin Tanja of the Grim Binder's Blood, was not so patient. His sword ripped free of the scabbard, cutting through the silence that'd followed Yannu's question.

"By smoke and dust, I vow enmity between us," the boy rasped out, his voice cadenced with old words. "'til steel has sung and shield splintered, let there be no truce nor breaking of bread by our hands. On the blood of my father, I swear the last abjuration: by my hand the earth will spit you out from your grave, denied rest in barrow and shade."

Razin Tanja's face was still streaked with the iron and red of his line's facepaint, and though tall and well-formed the boy was in no state to fight the duel to the death he's just forced. He'd taken a wound today, Yannu noted, which had torn muscle near his shoulder. The healing done had been later and lackluster. Still, a murmur of solemn respect shivered through the assembled captains and Blood of the war council. Though Razin Tanja was said to have blundered and overstepped at Sarcella, that he would be so unflinching in swearing revenge over the same man who'd flogged him was garnering respect. From his own captains most of all, Yannu thought, and that was for the best. Razin Tanja could not formally become Lord of Malaga until his foremost kin gathered to acclaim him before Gods and men: respect and prestige would be his only true claims to command of the war captains of Malaga.

"So be it," Yannu replied, dipping his head. "When your wound is fully healed, I will meet you on duel-grounds."

"Why wait?" Lady Aquiline mildly said, eyeing the two of them smilingly. "Send for Proceran priests and have it done and over with. Let us settle all our affairs before battle is given."

The Lord of Alava met her gaze with clear displeasure. So clever she'd cut herself, that one, and too eager to see her last remaining rival to command of the other Dominion force dead on the ground.

"Shut your fucking mouth, girl," Lady Itima of Vaccei said, tone conversational.

Aquiline Osena's stare turned poisonous, when she faced the woman who'd had her two younger brothers killed. Itima was an old hand, and of the Bandit's Blood, so she was unimpressed by the sight and spat to the side in disdain.

"Yannu, confirm that little bore from Tartessos in command of her army and let's get this over with," the Lady of Vaccei said, glancing at him. "The longer she talks the more I feel the urge to make another cup out of an Osena skull."

"Remain civil, Itima," he chided her.

"There is no civility north of Tartessos," Lady Aquiline angrily said. "Only poison and-"

"Fewer of your siblings than there used to be, eh?" the older woman grinned.

"*Enough*," Razin Tanja hissed.

The two women turned to him with barely veiled surprise.

"My father lies dead on the ground, his corpse not even cold," the boy said. "And you bicker over old feuds? I will wait until the end of this strife to exact my due from the Maraves yet you cannot even curb your viper tongues for an hour? Shame on both your lines."

"Not yet lord," Lady Itima drawled, "and already making enemies. Truly Akil's boy, though with half the sense and none of the-"

"I name Aquiline Osena war leader of the southern host," Yannu calmly interrupted. "Do any contest this?"

"Agreed," Razin Tanja rasped.

"Agreed," Lady Aquiline coolly said.

There was a pause.

"Agreed," Itima Ifriqui conceded, reluctance purely for show.

They put it to the captains, afterwards, but with the Blood having spoken the matter was good as settled. Even the Malagans kept to the word of their young heir without qualms when enemies were there to see, though Yannu knew better to think Razin would not have to make private bargains with the most powerful to keep them following his orders.

"Then we are bound with common purpose of war," the Lord of Alava said. "Let none stray until our enemy is broken."

Already the sun was beginning to set, he thought. It would be a long night before their armies would be ready to strike at the Black Queen's host, for soldiers were in need of healing and rest. Yet the time would come, and for the first time in many years an army of the Dominion of Levant would march out with the Peregrine among its number.

—

"The savages are cutting each other up," Prince Arnaud of Cantal said with open disdain. "I believe one of their great lords was freshly butchered and even now is being set to flame."

This small pavilion of hers, Princess Rozala thought, was near filled to the brim with royalty. She would have preferred to cut out near everyone here of the council being held, but with the situation what it was that would have been more trouble than it was worth.

"I have spoken with Lord Marave," the Princess of Aequitan evenly said. "There was disagreement over strategy, and it was settled by an honour duel ending in death. Lord Akil Tanja was slain, and his heir Razin has taken lead of the captains of Malaga. He has been placed under command of Lady Osena, who is well-learned in the ways of war."

"They're Levantines," Princess Bertille of Lange drily said. "How *learned* can they possibly be at anything?"

The ripple of laughter that went through the tent at the quip was enough to begin scraping at the bones of Rozala's patience, which boded ill for the rest of this council. She was disappointed to note that the slightest trace of a smile had quirked Louis' lips. It should not be held against him, she ultimately decided. Prince Louis Rohanon was a clever and decent man, but he'd still been raised

Alamans. His ancestors had not fought a hard war to take Levant, unlike hers, or an even more brutal one to keep it. Rozala glanced at Princess Bertille and found the older woman watching her, an assessing look on her face. She was pushing, the Arlesite princess thought, to see how far she could go without being called to order. The temptation was there to immediately put her in her place – it would be as simple as ordering the other princess to take a walk, dismissing her before all the others – but Rozala knew this was not the hour for it. Bertille of Lange was useful to her, and would remain so for a long time. Best to only bare the knife when there was something to hold over her head.

"We will of course defer to your judgement in this matter, Princess Bertille," Princess Sophie of Lyonis calmly said. "As is only natural, given your distinguished military record and extensive knowledge of the Dominion."

The Princess of Lange reddened and Rozala Malanza had to smother a smile. Both at the harshness of the reply – Bertille had no military achievements to her name, and was not known as a great scholar – and the fact that Princess Sophie's continued open dislike for her fellow royalty kept pushing them ever further into Rozala's camp. Cordelia Hasenbach had picked her watcher for skill at arms and loyalty, not diplomacy. A mistake of some scale, as it turned out, for protracted campaign had tired the patience of everyone and tempers were beginning to flare more and more frequently.

"The Dominion *is* worrying me, all jests aside," Prince Rodrigo of Orense spoke up. "They seem most unstable, Princess Malanza. Lord Marave's scheme to attack the enemy camp was a failure, yet we are now expected to heed his plans once more?"

Rozala inclined her head in acknowledgement of his words, not in the least troubled by the question. After all, they'd arranged before the council for him to ask it.

"He spent only Dominion soldiery, if you'll recall," the Princess of Aequitan said. "Not ours. And this is not merely his own design – the Grey Pilgrim is at his side, preparing to fight the enemy we cannot."

Even an oblique mention of the Black Queen was enough to chase any trace of mirth out of the tent. There were some here who'd not been at the Battle of the Camps, who'd not seen the crowned warlord of Callow split the clouds and drown men like flies or make sport of entire bands of heroes. There were some here who'd whispered behind closed doors that Prince Amadis Milenan and his armies had simply been cocksure and caught by surprise, and in the wake of that sloppiness tried to weave wild tales to avoid the blame. No one whispered such things anymore, Rozala thought. Not since half the people in this room had seen that spit of a girl tear out of the sky in a ripple of darkness only to nonchalantly set herself in the way of an army thousands strong without ever baring a weapon. Without raising her voice, or doing anything but smoking her eerie bone pipe and giving calm warning. Princess Rozala still thought of that afternoon, sometimes, of the death she's seen in the other woman's smile. It still had her shivering. The Black Queen was mad, but hers was a madness

that had broken every army in her path. The Princess of Aequitan would not test her again without great care and many preparations.

"It's still a fool's notion, this night attack," Princess Leonor of Valencis opined. "Chosen don't hold ground, Princess Rozala. They can't be relied on. When we take a swing at that palisade, the enemy will have goblins and drow waiting for us."

Arnaud pompously cleared his throat.

"We don't know for certain if drow see in the night, Leonor," the Prince of Cantal chided, tone condescending. "Let us not make unwarranted assumptions."

"They live underground, Arnaud," Prince Louis sighed. "We can assume they see in the dark without it being unwarranted."

"They could have very fine hearing," Princess Bertille drawled. "Or mayhaps like bats it is their cry that is their sight."

"Indeed, Bertille, indeed," Prince Arnaud enthusiastically agreed. "My point exact."

Sometimes Rozala wondered what it was like to be Arnaud Brogloise, the kind of person whose triumphant vanity would allow to take anything but the most obvious of mockeries as affirmation. It wasn't like the Princess of Lange had even bothered with much of a pretence.

"The Chosen will be sent to match the Damned, Princess Leonor," Princess Rozala said, dragging the conversation back to the earlier path. "We will not be relying on them for the fighting. I assure you, we have accounted for the drow."

"That'd be why our priests have been in talks with the Lanterns for the last sennight, I take it," Princess Leonor replied, eyes narrowing. "You won't be saying more?"

Rozala flicked a glance at Louis.

"Lady Dartwick, the Black Queen's spymistress, has agents in our camps," the Prince of Creusens said. "We've caught and hung ten of these 'Jacks' already. As a result, it was decided that secrecy is to be paramount. If the enemy catches wind of our stratagems beforehand, I need not detail how much of a disaster this could become."

"But you are aware of the details, Prince Rohanon," Princess Leonor pressed. "And consider the notion sound?"

"I do," Louis replied without hesitation. "Risky, but soundly planned and perhaps our only chance at winning this without tossing away fifty thousand foot taking that palisade."

"Gods be merciful, then," the Princess of Valencis sighed, "and ward us from the reaching claws of Below."

"We will begin our advance two hours before dawn," Princess Rozala informed them. "Camp fires are to be kept alight to mislead the enemy, and there will be no horns sounded for assembly. You will be all be tasked with seeing to your own soldiers, while I've appointed Prince Louis to command over the levies furnished by Her Serene Highness."

"Glorious command indeed, my prince of Creusens," Princess Bertille smirked.

The Princess of Aequitan's eyes narrowed.

"As you've shown such spirit tonight, my princess of Lange, I expect you will have no trouble leading the tip of the wedge," Rozala calmly said.

The other woman's smirk vanished.

"There will be use for our horse then?" she said.

"We're sending everything we have," Princess Rozala grimly replied. "So is the Dominion. We'll win or lose on the knife's edge that splits night from dawn."

Dark tidings, that, but they were Proceran and so they still toasted to the madness before dispersing to their duties.

—

Juniper, fresh awoken and only half-dressed, did not bother to ask Aisha if she was serious. Her Staff Tribune would not jest about such a thing, or wake her without being entirely sure it was happening.

"Their military intelligence shouldn't be this bad," the Marshal of Callow said.

She wordlessly leaned back to allow Aisha to tie her aketon, letting the Taghreb's deft fingers handle the delicate clasps she could not reach. The touch was not distracting, but not enough that Juniper could not concentrate through it.

"Catherine's readings of the Grey Pilgrim have been inaccurate before," Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara noted. "It might be that these... goddesses from the Everdark have obscured the truths of the drow from our opponents."

"If we're lucky that'll be the case," Juniper grunted.

With the aketon properly on and no need for full armour quite yet, distance between them resumed and the Marshal of Callow's mind turned to safer avenues than the golden glow of her old friend's cheeks in the light of the torches.

"If we're not lucky," the Hellhound continued, "and that is to be our working assumption, they have a hard counter to the drow."

"We are not without cards of our own," Aisha reminded her.

"It's still playing to the enemy's tempo," Juniper said. "I don't like giving them what they want, Aisha, and that would be what we're doing."

"Should I order the Fourth Army and the assigned Legions to hold the palisades instead?" she asked.

The Hellhound breathed out, considering the lay of it. Would keeping the drow in reserve until the enemy had engaged better the situation? There was no way to tell, honestly. It'd be more prudent to bait out whatever plan the Grand Alliance had prepared early so that a defence could be mounted with it out in the open. Her warlord had made it clear that the tribes of the 'Firstborn' were heavies in the league of a Court's field army, after night fell, but that kind of strength tended to be unreliable in Juniper's opinion. She put more trust in overlapping lanes of fire and steady shield walls than in powerful but disorganized hordes.

"Keep them in reserve near the front," Juniper finally said. "We'll let the drow take the first crack at the enemy. But Aisha?"

Her Staff Tribune smoothly turned, eyebrow cocked.

"Sound the full muster," the Marshal of Callow said. "Everyone in gear. This is *it*. I can feel it in my bones."

—

Moro Ifriqui of the Brigand's Blood, heir to Vaccei, checked on the leather strap keeping his javelins from jostling around his back with every step. It needed tightening, and though it was awkward to paw at the strap while keeping pace with the other skirmishers he forced himself anyway. Better a small embarrassment now than a mistake that might cost him his life in the heat of battle. The Vaccei warriors around him slowed when they approached the edge of the enemy's range, where the spears of flame had been thrown at them from a great distance during the day. Knowing his role in this, Moro took the lead and bared the serrated sword that was sheathed at his hip.

"Honour to Levant," he screamed. "Honour to the Blood. Honour to Vaccei!"

Screams repeated his words back at him, and twice more he repeated the ritual to fray the edges of fear and replace them with ardour instead. Only then did he scream for the advance, and the warriors marched into the field. Above them the Proceran priests wove miracles, globes of Light that cast down a glow over the stretch of plain leading to the palisade. Moro kept the beat of his warriors' march steady, knowing it was not yet time for the charge proper, and as he moved forward cast wary looks at the pit traps the day's fighting had revealed. Grimly, he thought to himself that without those being unearthed and the Proceran miracles lighting the way his charge would be little less than hurrying to honourable death. When the same massive sorcerous spears of flame that had been used during the day lit up the enemy camp, the heir to Vaccei felt a thrill of excitement and fear both running through his veins. Fear, for if he were to be touched by one of these his death would be instantaneous. Excitement, for there were no more spears now than there had been during the day and that meant...

Spread among the Vaccei warriors, the Lanterns laughingly called out their battle-hymns and jagged arcs of Light sprung upwards – fifteen, seventeen of them scything through the darkness of the night. They impacted the enemy's sorcerous flames with a sound like claps of thunder, and though the miracles broke so did the enemy's magic. Moro laughed, the battle-joy lending his feet wings, and picked up the pace. Behind him his warriors followed suit, the dauntless vanguard of the Dominion, and it was singing couplets from the Anthem of Smoke that the heir to Vaccei passed into the killing yard: the suspected outer range of the enemy siege engines. And it was true, for a mere two heartbeats later projectiles near invisible in the gloom began scything through the lines of his men. First the long darts and round stones of the ballistas, skewering flesh and shattering bones before a scream could even rip free of the throat.

"Scatter," Moro yelled.

Had they been the lumbering, heavily armoured armsmen of Alava his warriors would have broken and died. But they were the followers of the Brigand's blood, light-footed and fleet, ghosts in the dark and killers in the wet earth: the formation vanished in a heartbeat, becoming a loose mob of warriors charging forward at backbreaking pace. Moro laughed and veered wildly to the left, barely avoiding the geyser of snow and earth that was the introduction of the first enemy trebuchet. A woman behind him screamed when the large stone kept rolling and caught her, though the sickening crunch that followed told of a merciful quick death in the heartbeat that followed. The paints on his face running with sweat, Moro of the Brigand's Blood forced his aching limbs to quicken and with another shout urged his warriors onwards. Through the first hail, and the most vicious. The enemy scorpions fired their long javelins with deadly accuracy that only cursed goblins would be able to muster in the dark, snuffing out lives wherever the whim took them. But beyond that, the warrior saw, there was open field.

At too odd an angle for the engines to be able to kill, too close to the palisade. In the glow of the Light globes he could glimpse the dry moat before the enemy's rampart, and with a proud shout he ripped one of the javelins clear of his back. It was time to have the enemy taste Vaccei's steel. Yet above the palisade, he saw, it was not legionaries that awaited but instead the grey-skinned devils his mother had told him were truly drow from the Everdark. Their gear was shoddy, he saw with a sneer, and would be no proof for a good javelin. Even better. One more step he took, and then a hand was laid on his shoulder from the front.

"Chno sve noc," a guttural voice said.

Before the words were even fully spoken, his arm was gone up to the shoulder along with the javelin he'd been holding. Turned to dust, already gone in the wind. Moro opened his mouth to scream as a cold silver-blue pair of eyes contemplated him. The drow, for Ashen Gods it must be a drow, smiled and he saw a flash of obsidian before – before there was a spray of grayish blood all over him, and the creature fell split in half.

"Look alive, boy," the Saint of Swords idly said, flicking the blood off her blade. "We're just-"

Moro did not see her move, but suddenly her sword was angled differently and she was flying back, while a ringing sound like another blade had hit her echoed. Not, he saw with dismay, not another blade. The grey palm of a drow's hand was extended where the Saint had stood, and slowly the creature straightened its back. The abomination was ancient, Moro realized, its skin horridly creased and its thick black veins visibly ridged. It wore a strange tunic of obsidian rings, belted at the hip, and its hair was snow-white and long.

"You again," the Saint of Swords snarled.

The drow glanced at Moro.

"Boring," it said in broken tradertalk. "Boring south cattle, no better Procer cattle. Run now."

In the distance the rest of the drow began a strange ululating prayer. Rumenarumenarumena, they went, some sort of heretical hymn offered up to the sky. As the ancient drow turned its attention to Saint of Swords, Moro took the advice he'd been given.

He ran.

—

Sitting on a stone, legs folded, the Grey Pilgrim watched the battle and waited. For now, all was unfolding as he had foreseen.

So why, Tariq wondered, were the Ophanim murmuring so worriedly in his ear?

# Interlude: Death They Cannot Steal

> "Ah, the classic imperial dilemma: which caused the other, the rebellion or the tiger pit?"
>
> Dread Emperor Callous

There were two kinds of horror to be found in war, Razin Tanja had learned.

The first he had met and fought in the streets of shadowed Sarcella, the dark dismay of loss being dealt by the hand of a surpassing foe. Even outnumbered and ambushed, thrust into the backfoot, the Army of Callow had snapped out with jaws of steel and turned what should have been a dazzling victory into a brutal and exhausting slog of death. The heir to Malaga had seen that same skill put to work tonight, when the foot of the Grand Alliance had tried the enemy's fortifications. Volleys from myriad engines of war scything through warriors of Levant and Procer alike, long darts skewering even the most heavily armoured of soldiers. Worse than those had been the stones of the trebuchets, whose frightful nature lied not in the first impact but in the skill of the engineers using it: most the time, the angle let the massive stones bounce and keep rolling, crushing ten times the warriors even the best-aimed of collisions would have reached. No, this Razin had all watched from atop his horse with clenched fingers and clenched jaw but he would not dishonour the bravery of the dead by mourning the necessity of their deaths. They had known, these warriors, what it *meant* to charge a position held by the armies of the Black Queen. That no one of the first wave would ever make it to the palisade, and likely none of the second either.

They'd come forward anyway, though. Captains of Tartessos and Malaga first, and the pride of that last one had choked him for those armsmen had fought the Black Queen's own favoured army before, they understood exactly what awaited yet they'd come forward without flinching, without hesitation. Both Lady Aquiline and he had swallowed unkind words on the subject of Proceran courage when they'd found the commanders of their Proceran allies gambling over which of theirs would take the lead, taking it as attempt to pass off the duty. It was good that he had kept his tongue from wagging, though, for

he learned moments later he'd had the wrong of it. They had all volunteered, every last one. The officers, men and women from half a dozen principalities, had turned to the dice to settle the matter for none was willing to concede the honour of the vanguard to another. *Arlesites*, Lady Aquiline had murmured in an aside to him, praise and condemnation both. These were of the same breed of soldiery that'd once invaded Levant in a relentless tide of butchery. But the two of them, one of the Slayer's Blood and the other of Binder's Blood, could understand looking at these people why Levant had been taken at all. Why their forbears had been needed, to humble an empire that could boast soldiers like those. Razin was certain he'd caught one of them – a tanned woman of southern stock, not even thirty but already high officer with a face that was a ruin of scars – cheating at the dice game used to determine who would lead.

It was such a small detail, he thought, and yet as he watched the horror ahead he could not help but fixate on it. That woman had gone as far as using loaded dice to claim the honour, and now she might very well be dead. To the second kind of horror, the hateful one. The dreadful, animal fright that came from witnessing something so far beyond you it could not be fought. Couldn't be bargained with, or even fled. All that was left was to kneel and pray, to hope for its own reasons it would deign to spare your life. Razin had known that terror once before, truth be told. It had watched him from a river's bank, wreathed in shade and might, and judged him with cold eyes. There had been no doubt, in that gaze, that his life could be snuffed out with a thought. No fear that the hatred burning in his blood could ever be a peril worth regard. No, in that moment that was the wake of death, the air still filled with the screams of the drowning, the Black Queen had for her own unfathomable reasons decided to spare Razin Tanja's life. The heir to Malaga had clung to that, while his father took the Blood's Scourge to his back, for what earthly torment could be half as shameful as the knowledge the greatest villain of their age had *not found him worth killing?*

Yet it was of that woman whose name he'd never learned cheating at dice Razin thought of, when the drow unleashed their malevolent works, and not of the frightful Queen of Callow. For a heartbeat it had seemed like the assault on the palisade would be a siege as that kind of battle was known to them: harsh and costly, but not beyond victory. Then the devils of the Everdark had struck, and not from the palisade. The drow did not sally out like warbands or armies. Instead they rose from the shadows among the ranks of the Grand Alliance's warriors, and without warning or mercy they began to slaughter. There could be no other word for it than that, Razin thought. There were not so many of the enemy, perhaps a mere hundred, but they were tearing through warriors like an axe through kindling. Darkness rose in shapes and armaments, rained from above and swept from below, a hundred different sorceries for a hundred different drow, but whatever the singular craft each was an exquisite art of war. Polished and without flaw, for even when dozens and even hundreds charged at the enemy all that changed was the number of corpses made. Within the first

quarter of an hour, Razin Tanja thought, almost two thousand warriors must have died. Not, not died.

Been swatted out of existence, like bothersome insects.

That quarter of an hour was what it took for the Grand Alliance's answer to be brought to the fore, and all Razin could think was that it was a quarter hour too late. The sight should have moved him, and he could feel the sharp breaths and fervent prayers of those awed by the sight, but even as a scattered line of priests opened shuttered lanterns the sight of that casual slaughter stayed with him. And with the worry of how easily they could return to such horror, should their answer fail. It didn't, Razin saw with relief. No, instead across the entire strip of night where the golden Light kept within the lanterns was revealed the drow flinched. Their strange sorceries weakened, lessened in scope if far from broken, and the Dominion of Levant began its counterattack. Slayers, the tempestuous retinue of the Lady of Tartessos, strode forward. Fewer than five hundred, all in light leathers and bearing the sharp tools of their trade and their ghastly face-tattoos of green and bronze. The Silent Slayer's own colours, and those of her Blood after her. Above perhaps all others, the slayers of Tartessos espoused the most ancient and honoured tradition of Levant: the killing of monsters.

Even as the deathly gifts of the Praesi engines kept raining down on the advancing warriors, the beast-killers spread out in bands and began plying their trade on the darkness-wielding drow. Razin's fingers had begun to loosen, though they tightened again when one of the enemy's trebuchet stones landed far beyond what should be possible. Then out of the spray of earth and snow came blood-chilling laughter, and massive figure wearing a carapace of darkness strode out. It batted the head off a soldier almost casually, and without missing a beat began tearing through the centre of the army's lines. This would break them, Razin realized, mind racing as he saw what would follow. Lantern-bearing priests retreating to weaken the monstrous drow, only to leave a hole in the line at the front that the lesser monsters would take advantage of. After that the slaughter would resume, and...

"Captain Elvera," Lady Aquiline calmly said, turning to her second. "You have command."

"My lady," the old woman said, "you cannot mean-"

Aquiline Osena removed a lantern from the saddlebag at her side, and hooked it on her belt without opening it. There would be Light within, Razin decided.

"I am of the Silent Slayer's Blood," Lady Aquiline replied. "I cannot mean *otherwise*, Elvera."

Foolish, Razin thought, for she was not just a fleet-footed slayer but the commander of this entire host. Still, Aquiline's line was not one known for wits. All the founders had granted different gifts to their Blood, Akil Tanja had once told his son. Valour for the Champion, cunning for the Brigand, skill for the Slayer, wisdom for the Pilgrim – and that grandest of bestowals for the

Binder's own, that privilege known as knowledge. Or so the heir to Malaga thought, until he caught the high esteem all of Aquiline Osena's captains were not watching her with. They not only approved, Razin realized, but they had expected it. *Let neither queen nor prince rule over our dominion*, Farah Isbili had once said. The second of the Holy Seljun, and first true ruler of Levant, for her father had not lived to reign for long. *For while crown devour honour, one's blood is not so easily gainsaid.* Razin had been raised to understand this as the truth of blood being the true nobility of Creation, what set apart the wheat from the chaff. In having a past to measure up to, a litany of deeds, the great families of Levant were made worthy to rule. They must prove this worth anew with every generation, true, but they always did for blood was not so easily gainsaid. Yet now Razin thought of a woman who'd cheated at dice to earn the privilege of being among the first to die and wondered.

*Would you be proud of us, Honoured Ancestor?* the heir to Malaga silently asked the night sky. *Of the works of my father, of his father before him and his mother before that. Will you be proud of mine, you who stared down an empire with nothing but death and indignation tattooed on your back?* He thought of the legends he'd been raised to, of the five heroes who'd snapped the arrogance of Procer over their knee. He thought of that day's own council, of Yannu Marave's blade opening Father's throat and the vicious barbs traded by the others. Would any of them truly be proud, Razin wondered, of what the Dominion had become?

"Captain Fustan," he said. "I give you command in my stead."

The bearded man, most respected of his father's captains, looked at him in surprise. So did Lady Aquiline.

"Your intent, Tanja?" she asked.

Razin inclined his head towards the dark-clad creature in the distance, scything through men like a sickle through wheat.

"It took five to topple an empire, Osena," he simply replied. "Two ought to be enough for a single drow, no?"

*No*, he echoed in his own mind. They would not be proud, not a single one of them.

—

That creature, Laurence de Montfort mused, was going to take a lot of killing.

"Bring out your weapon," the Saint of Swords said. "I'll even let you, to even things out."

A lie, that. She fully intended on sending the drow's head rolling on the ground if it got even slightly distracted. She spoke the untruth without hesitation, for she'd never been encumbered with the delusions of fair play that plagued some of her peers. The moment you bared a blade on someone with the intent to kill, there was nothing else left to consider. Honour was just a way to pat yourself on the back, a pretty face put on the ugliest of all weaknesses: un-

certainty. Her opponent face creased with amusement when it bared its teeth, putting in relief the painted stripes of ochre and gold radiating from its lips.

"Why would I need one?" it spoke in guttural Chantant. "Children are disciplined by hand."

The Saint looked into the thing's silver-blue eyes and recognized the glint within. It had fury waking up her blood. She'd last seen it on that woman's face, when she'd glanced at Laurence's spilling entrails and sighed without even bothering to say a word. *Is that all*, the glint whispered. *Is this the sum of you?* It was the gaze of something ancient and fearsome taking it the brief glow of a firefly before it died, only to dismiss it as of only passing interest. She was going to enjoy cutting this one very much, Laurence admitted to herself. Without another word, the Saint of Swords struck. Two steps forward, half-step to the side, her entire withered frame coiling to put full weight behind the blow at the end. But the drow, this Rumena, it moved just as swiftly as her.

Its hand slapped the side of her blade, and it spun low – Laurence, without missing a beat, leapt up. The open palm that would have slapped her knee passed through only void, and she twisted so she could angle her body in midair and strike once more. Instead of having its skull split in two, the creature dropped even lower and waited a beat for the tip of the sword to pass it. *None of that*, the Saint thought, and this was not the first time she was tasked with killing something with better reflexes than her. The slightest piece of her Name's power had her kicking at air with enough strength for her swing to swing back just as Rumena began to rise, the drow immediately sinking into a puddle of shadow and vanishing from under her. It rose again half a dozen feet from Laurence, just as she landed lightly in her feet.

In the distance, its fellow abominations were singing its name. Behind her, the Saint's crusaders were opening lanterns filled with golden Light. Neither of them paid any heed to the audience, for they mattered less than dust.

"Have your godlings taught you anything but how to flee?" Laurence mildly asked.

"Your pale idols are worse than wrong," Rumena replied just as mildly. "They are *prey*."

They'd gotten the measure of their opponent with the first pass, so there was no caution in how they began the second. The drow foot tapped the ground, once, and beneath the Saint the ground blew up. She was already in the air when it did, leaping forward, and over what felt like hours but took less than a heartbeat she sunk into her aspect. **Listen**, she thought, and the word reverberated through her. And she did, the same way she had when straddling the line between life and death all those years ago. Hearing the Ranger's footsteps as she walked away, and only then understanding how deaf she had been all her life. Moving against the rhythm of Creation, when she should have been moving with it. The Saint of Swords pricked her ear, and heard the dissonant cacophony of the drow striking at her.

She moved with purpose. A flick of the wrist created a wound for her to push off of, angling her descent so Rumena's extended hand would pass her flank, then another to take the arm off before the shoulder and even as it drew back – quick, strident tempo – she leaned forward so the next stroke would slice neatly through the neck. The head tumbled on the ground half a heartbeat before she landed, but she did not sheathe her sword. There had been no silence, no precipitous fall. The drow was not dead. A wild, discordant slide, like a fiddle being struck, and the Saint was almost too slow. A prick against her shoulder, like the touch of a needle, and through that fine vessel she felt a sea of death and decay. Millennia of red slaughter and careless rot made into a gnawing bite. Laurence's blade cut through just enough skin for blood to gush out, and just in time. Even half an instant later and her entire body would have become a pile of blight and bile.

She took the drow's eye on the backswing, for its impertinence in trying an ambush on her. Carved through the insolent blue stare with relish, and smiled as the roiling darkness in Rumena's socket failed to heal her cut.

"Careless," the drow smiled.

The song hacked out a tempo like crows cawing, and before Laurence could move the air in her lungs turned to acid.

—

Ten of them, armed and readied and bearing a golden lantern, struck at the beast.

Seven slayers, a binder and two of the Blood. Not even drakes and manticores could have lightly ignored such a war party, but the darkness-clad drow tall as an ogre moved like lightning and struck like thunder. Razin's sword was in his hand, his breath steady, and as his binder baited their foe he waited for his moment. A screaming salamander made of starlight and snow screamed at the enemy, and within a heartbeat its large head had been dispersed by a massive fist. The darkness-clad arm went straight through and hit the ground, which was the signal. Lady Aquiline opened the shutter and the golden Light touched the enemy. It screamed in pain, and its carapace visibly thinned. The slayers moved, then, feet whispering against the snow. One, two, three – the harpoons tore through the weakened darkness, giving solid purchase to the long ropes tied to them. In woodlands like the Brocelian, Razin knew, these would be fastened to trees to trap the hunted beast and restrict its movements. Open grounds like these, though, required different tactics. All three slayers pulled at the arm, to trip the creature forward, while the remaining four smoothly split into pairs and moved to flank it.

"Attack," Razin ordered his binder, gauging the time to be right.

The woman gave no sign she'd heard him, but her horse whinnied in fright and cold and the bound soul of the salamander dispersed, slithering back to the tattoo it was bound to. The sorcery was replaced by an arrow-like burst of translucent magic that flew for the drow's head, leaving the darkness shuddering on impact. Even where he was seated, the heir to Malaga felt a ripple

go over his skin. He wondered how many thundering roars had been stitched together, to make that curse. Whatever the number, the spell distracted the drow even as it was beginning to recover from its surprise. The rope-holding slayers dragged it down and forward, and then the others struck on the exposed flanks. Long barbed spears were thrust into the sides and cracked through the carapace. The drow screamed again and without needing to be ordered the binder tossed at it a blinding orb – sunlight caught and woven. Sniffing a kill, the slayers on the sides unsheathed their straight long sword and prepared for killing blows.

With a deafening wail the drow's carapace of darkness detonated outwards.

Razin paled as he saw what the wave of sorcery had wrought: the four slayers who'd been closest were half-gone. Their leathers and armaments untouched, but flesh and bone outright evaporated where the drow's darkness had touched them. A grey-skinned silhouetted landed in the snow, harpoons still in its arm, and fresh darkness bubble out of its skin as it laughed. Blood cooling, Razin Tanja sheathed his blade and dismounted. From his horses' side he claimed three long knives, which he hooked to his belt, and a small orb of ivory. The binder glanced at him, face tainted with worry at the way their hunt had turned debacle in the span of a single breath.

"Distract it when you can," Razin simply said.

He rolled his shoulder – still tender from goblin steel – and approached at a measured pace. The remaining three slayers were struggling to bring down the creature before its armour-like darkness could be formed anew, two abandoning their rope for barbed javelins to be thrown. The drow snapped out to catch one with its teeth, breaking the steel tip with a loud crunch before spitting out the remains, and the other javelin went straight through. Or so it seemed, for it never emerged on the other side. A heartbeat later it was spat back out the drow's chest headfirst and took the slayer who'd thrown it right in the eye. Razin winced at the sight.

"Ready, Tanja?" a voice spoke at his side.

The heir to Malaga glanced there and his brow rose. Aquiline Osena wore no mail not plate, only a tanned vest of leather going up to her throat. Trousers of thick dark linen with small plates of steel sown on went down into good leather boots, though it was not the clothes or even the slayer armaments on her back that were the most striking part of the ensemble. Beautiful patterns of green and bronze war paint covered not only her face but every inch of her skin. Lady Aquiline looked half a fae, though one born for the hunt. Razin calmly unsheathed his sword.

"Shall we, Osena?" he shrugged.

The barest trace of a smile touched her lips.

"Let's," she agreed.

The drow roared, and under the golden Light of the lantern they advanced.

—

Laurence de Montfort stumbled.

She fell to her knees, hands trembling, as she began choking on the acid filling her lung while it burned her form the inside. Her sword slipped her fingers, and Rumena smoothly closed the distance. Its sound in the song was too light, the Saint thought. It was another fake, like the one she'd killed earlier. What a cautious bastard. Mind sharpening through the atrocious pain she was in, the Saint of Swords joined her will to the current of Creation. **Decree**, act and outcome in the same word. Tariq had told her this was a domain, once, but he did not understand it like she did. It was simply her own faith, a tenet made absolute and so perfectly harmonized with Creation. She had decreed that 'Laurence de Montfort is a sword', and so she was. It'd taken her decades, to make this as true a part of her as flesh and breath, but in the far north fighting the ratlings she had shaped that decree so that it covered every part of what she was. She could have decreed more, she knew, other rules and laws, but the purity of a single truth would have been lost.

A sword did not need to breathe, neither did Laurence de Montfort.

A sword did not burn or dissolve, neither did Laurence de Montfort.

But a sword cut, and so did Laurence de Montfort.

The shadow-thing that the drow had sent to approach her was split in two by a finger and she rose with her fingers steady and holding her sword. What had once been within her was gone, for it no longer aligned with the decreed truth of Creation, and as it had never been there no wounds were taken. Standing in front of her, hands folded within sleeves, the painted drow waited patiently. The eye she'd cut out was growing back – it'd ripped out the wounded flesh so it would, the song told her.

"Come, drow," the Saint of Swords said. "Let's see if your faith is strong enough even I cannot cut it."

"Come," Rumena replied, "before *one* of us dies of old age."

—

Razin's knife slid uselessly against the dark obsidian-like carapace, failing to find purchase even after the third time he stabbed at it. The drow beneath shook him off effortlessly, not even paying attention, and the dark-haired warrior only half-succeeded at landing on his feet: he fell backwards after touching the ground, cursing, and the only thing that saved his life was that without a pause he rolled to the side. A bladelike appendage punctured where he'd been a moment earlier, leaving a smoking hole in the ground.

"The eyes," Aquiline yelled. "Aim for the eyes."

She was not speaking to him but to their binder, who tossed a bolt of hazy heat close enough to the drow's eyes that it drew back. Razin rose to his feet, rolling his still-tended shoulder to limber it. What had once been a humanoid carapace silhouette in a carapace, if a large one, had since grown into something rather more monstrous. Two crablike legs made of a strange hardened darkness not unlike obsidian now held up an armoured torso of the same, while what had once been arms had turned to something reminiscent of an insect. Like a mantis, Razing thought, and damnably quick. Of the three harpoons

that had first stuck the drow, only two now remained though with the way it has shifted they now protruded from its shoulder instead of arm.

Aquiline Osena ran across the snow, a flicker of fluid movement and even as the drow struck out she caught the end of a rope in hand. *Slayer, silent-sworn*, he thought. Moonlight and miracle's cast caught on her clenching arm, painted bronze and green, as she tugged at the monster and threw a barbed javelin at its eye. *Grace and terror, peerless in hunt*, Razin remembered from the Anthem of Smoke, and the sight was as burned into his eye. It had not occurred to him, until then to find beauty in either the act or the woman. Now he could not unsee it, and something in him trembled at the knowledge. The javelin caught the corner of the drow's eye, and it screamed in pain, but there was a cry – the last of the remaining slayers was torn through, and thrown at Aquiline. The rope slipped her grip, and Razin began moving without thought. The lantern had fallen off her belt so he tossed his knife aside and snatched it up even as she rose to her feet behind him.

"Take the kill," he called out as he passed her.

The drow's obsidian eyes turned to him and it struck without hesitation, bladed limb tearing at the ground as Razin laughed and danced to the side. No binder he, even if the Binder's Blood, but he had spent hours in the training yards to make up for that shame. Now those hours were sparing his life. It leaned forward to strike again, and this time they were so close there could be no true avoidance – the drow ripped through bone and shoulder flesh, but the heir to Malaga had avoided just enough to...

"Honour to the Blood," Razin Tanja hissed, and smashed the Light-bearing lantern in its face.

A heartbeat later, Lady Aquiline's sword went straight through the heart of the flare of light as she screamed a war cry, and wet black blood sprayed on Razin's face. The creature fell back, its darkness collapsing on the snow to reveal a slumping corpse with a sword through the forehead, and the lord and lady fell exhausted on their knees to each other's side.

"Lady Aquiline," he greeted her. "You made a good kill."

"We, Lord Razin," she replied, eyes hooded. "We made a good kill."

The look shared overshadowed even the bleeding pain of his shoulder, for a moment, but it turned to horror when with a wet squelch the drow's body began to heal and spat out the sword. It began to rise, as did they, but it paused as if struck

Far above them all, light had begun to bloom.

—

It was time.

The Grey Pilgrim could feel it: if he acted now it would be an intervention safeguarding those in his charge. Sitting with his eyes closed, he could still feel the growing weight on his shoulders. The vigor – always sweet, always passing – of a younger man filling his body. The writ of this had not been offered to him by the Choir, it was no tragedy unfolding caught by Mercy's myriad eyes and

made known to his own. This tale had been of his own making from beginning and it would still be that when the end came, Gods forgive him for it. With every death the burden on his Role, the stakes of his existence in this story, had increased. Now, though his spirit felt like a spine on the eve of cracking, he had the necessary reach. It was a bitter irony that the deaths of soldiers had been the balance's harsh swing in his favour yet the true burden he must bear had been of no consequence at all. Catherine Foundling had given the slip to every story that could bind her to an *ending*, and so left herself only one path: reign eternal, consumed and consuming, a herald of long prices and hard measures having made mantle of the woes of Creation.

The Black Queen had wriggled out of every binding and shackles, broken the sole irons he'd once set around her wrists. No redemption could be demanded by one who had forsaken her, not even for a greater good, and the broken oaths between them were yet another finger on the scales. Not so heavy, he knew, that it would doom him. But she'd be always a little luckier, a little harder to reach so long as that imbalance stood. In a less dangerous villain that would be merely inconvenient, but this one? She'd always had an astonishing intuition in those matters, and whatever else the Everdark had made of her it had also made her *cautious*. Patient enough to take a step back and let others take the lead if it meant offering fewer openings to foes like the Pilgrim.

"I wish that you had answers for me," he said. "That you knew whether in my efforts to prevent our doom I am forging the very instrument of it."

The Ophanim murmured in his ear, mournfully contrite. Before, in Callow, the Choir of Mercy had been able to see through the skein of her. Where threads may lead, choices that may or may not be. And with his own eyes, his sight of what moved the Queen of Callow, together they had considered what she might yet become. Now, though? There were entities at her shoulders that did not brook such perusals. And what entities they were, colossal towers of misery and murder stitched together with prayers to Below. Goddesses of wails and horror, swimming in a shadowy sea of their own kind's blood. The Black Queen had clasped hands with these abominations, and from what he could tell done so willingly. Knowing what he knew, not knowing what he did not, what choice was there but the ugly business of this night? If there was even a single chance that Catherine Foundling would be the keystone to the death of Calernia, Tariq must ensure it would not come to be. And so now Tariq was forced to countenance this hour of barren deaths, lest a thousandfold worse might be allowed to pass.

The Grey Pilgrim opened his eyes, looking up at the darkness before the dawn.

"We have sung together before, old friends," he softly said. "Will you sing with me, once more?"

Murmurs, worried.

"I will not die," he reminded them. "It will hurt me, this is true."

His gaze moved ahead at the battle where so much blood was being spilled.

"Yet so does that," he said. "And this will end it."

Comforting hands on his shoulder, and with that assent he let out a weary breath.

"Pilgrim of grey," Tariq sang.

The Ophanim hummed along, a choir distant and melancholy. A chorus of ever-weeping eyes who were charged with ever seeing the worst of Creation, yet still ground their fingers to the bone saving what they could. The hummed along to the Anthem of Smoke, that song that was the flesh and blood of Levant.

"Fleet-foot, dusk-clad, the wanderer,

His stride rebellion and stirring ember."

It did not feel like peace, when they hummed with him. They were no servants of that, neither Choir nor man. Theirs was the duty of steering the world away from the brink, and none could be spared in the observance of that work. It was an endless procession of bitter choices, of lesser evils in the service of greater goods they might never witness. It felt like a lullaby, gentle and wistful but never without disquiet.

"In his grasp the light of a morning star,

Tattered his throne, tattered his war," they sang together.

They called it the dawn star, in the Free Cities. In Procer it was morning's herald, in Ashur the sun's prow. In Levant, though, in the land of Tariq's birth, though it had once been known as the morning star it was no longer called that. It was said that the Proceran prince who'd ruled the southern reaches of the Dominion had laughingly told the people that naught by the sky falling would ever make the Principate surrender its conquered prize. It was said, too, that the first of the Grey Pilgrims had been among those listening. A mere boy, when he heard, but he never forgot. And after Above clad him in grey, the boy become a man returned to that laughing prince and, plucking a star from the night sky, lit the first bonfire of rebellion from the tyrant's palace. In Levant for many years now it had been known as the pilgrim's star: the peregrine. Tariq was not the first Grey Pilgrim to wield it, and he would not be the last. From the first of his Bestowal, there had been one inheritance and in the wake of the song the old man softly offered it up to the sky.

"**Shine**," the Peregrine said, and the peregrine did.

Blood burning from the Light coursing through like a river, Tariq gasped out in pain and only the merciful hand on his shoulder kept him from collapsing. Miracle and aspect wove themselves together, the single greatest working of his life, and his vision dimmed with exhaustion. Above him the morning star hung in the sky, and with it dawn had come. The drow broke, creatures of the night that they were, and the battlefield held its breath.

"Now," Tariq croaked. "Now you have no choice, child, lest they sweep through your servants."

She would bring nightfall where he had brought dawn, and their powers would find each other matched. It would be neither day nor night but an eclipse in passing, and the Black Queen would be as shattered by the scale of it as he

was. It would be a stalemate, a draw, and Gods willing the pattern of three would be set in stone – as would be the victory promised to him, so grimly earned.

Instead the air tore open in front of Tariq and a man rode through.

No, not a man. One of the fair folk, astride a steed that seemed half marble and ice, and that fae's eyes were cold where his smile was warm and friendly. His red hair was like a streak of flame as he inclined his head in greeting, hand never nearing the sword at his belt.

"Pilgrim of grey, I bring to you greeting and missive from my most tenebrous of lieges," the fae said.

The Pilgrim rose to his feet, slowly, and took the scroll being offered to him. It carried the royal seal of Callow, he saw. He broke it, took the parchment from the leather and after reading the single paragraph rocked back like he'd been hit. Surrender. Catherine Foundling was offering unconditional surrender. It would be a great victory, if he accepted. *Victory*.

Gods damn that vicious child.

# Interlude: And Pay Your Toll

> "Oh no, please stop wrecking everything! Like that urn in the corner, with the djinn bound inside. No, the other one, with golden – oh, woeful day, this wanton destruction of priceless artefacts is so inconvenient to me personally and absolutely no one else."
>
> Dread Emperor Irritant I, 'defending' the palace of the High Lord of Aksum from heroes

Tariq did not reply. He knew hesitation was herald of defeat, in contests such as this, yet he could not hasten to answer. Not with the stakes at play here – he, this army, this entire continent, none of them could afford a misstep here and now. A surrender had been offered, but could still be either accepted or refused.

The Pilgrim's first and deeper instinct was to accept. If it was a lie she'd offered, a trick being played, then accepting would allow him to turn this spin of the yarn on her. A false surrender, when he still had the forces in motion that he'd sent out? The backlash of such a ploy would be bloody for the villain who'd played it. But that was the wrong way to think about this, he decided, because it assumed that Catherine Foundling was a fool. And she wasn't, unfortunately. She was reckless often and at times arrogant, but also frightfully prone to learning from her mistakes – those, at least, that were not born from the flaws at the very heart of her. It was possible, he considered, that she'd pit providence against the weight of his broken oath. Wagered that events would not tumble forward in a way that allowed him to uncover the conspiracy, should there be one. Yet it was not a good wager, for her, since taking it at all meant she'd fallen into the role of the Grand Alliance's villainous adversary. No it was nearly certain that the offer of surrender was genuine, which only made it all the more dangerous.

It would break the pattern of three, if he accepted. A victory for her, in claiming back her teacher's body through ploy, and then a much greater victory for him this night, in scaring her into surrender – that would be the end of it. It was a draw that would take Tariq where he needed to go, arm him with the only blade left that might still be capable of killing Catherine Foundling should it prove necessary. If she'd opposed him more directly in this battle, even made act of presence, the Pilgrim would have come forward as well and leaned on

the weight of their pattern to nudge events towards the certainty of a draw. But she'd remained veiled, hidden and plotting. *And she saw right through me*, Tariq thought, abashed. For all that he had told himself he had the measure of the Black Queen, evidently he'd been wrong. If he was to avoid compounding his mistakes, he must discard that belief and approach the situation with fresh eyes. Catherine Foundling had caught sight of the pattern of three he'd spent so long arranging, and most likely suspected the importance of it to him. Should this, then, be seen as an olive branch?

She would not allow a foe the power over her Tariq had sought to obtain, yet she understood why he found the need for it. And so a concession was made, surrender unconditional on the field, offering to his old hands the thread that might just untangle the thorny knot that was the confluence in Iserre. A knife bared, his purpose denied but then a lesser prize offered. It fit, as it would not be the first time that the Black Queen dealt with others using that blunt but potent approach.

Like an old mule he'd been approached, and this was the apple dangled: an end to Iserre that would be to the benefit of the Grand Alliance, in matters earthly. With refusal, then, would come the stick that would be used to thrash him. A more provisional offer might have allowed the Pilgrim grounds with which to refuse, but *unconditional surrender* meant that the burden of consequence had been passed entirely to him. There could, to be put it bluntly, be no better offer. If it were a trick that would not matter, for to be Good was not to be the kind of fool that fell into every trap: even devils could cite the Book for their purposes. But if it was not a trick, as he believed, then by refusing Tariq would be tossing to the side every sacrifice made tonight. Every death that had pressed down on his shoulders so he could bring morning's light to the sky. Would the miracle wane and die? The Ophanim murmured uncertainly in his ear, even they unknowing. He suspected not, but it would at least be made fragile. Judged hollow by Creation, and so become exactly that. The Black Queen's answer, the coiling darkness that lay at the heart of her camp and had been carefully woven into a theurgic ritual, would rip through it. Perhaps reverse the situation entire, unleashing her drow anew in the fullness of the might.

The Grey Pilgrim was no leader of warbands but he had known wars and felt the power of the Everdark's children fill the night. If they struck out again with their strength restored, the battle would resume with her forces at a distinct advantage. A second victory for Catherine Foundling would end the pattern of three just as surely, which meant his choice was now effectively between two different unmakings of a plan that had taken more than a year to carry out. Exasperation welled up at the thought. All that toil, broken within months of her return to the surface as if on a whim. Tariq leaned into the emotion, let it course through his veins and then pass out of him. There was no use to growing angry at being outplayed: on the contrary, that kind of fragility tended to lead Bestowed into a spiral of decline. He'd seen too many times to count. Mind clear again, the Grey Pilgrim considered what the Black Queen wanted him to

believe was his choice. Victory for him, on her terms. Likely victory for her, still on her terms. The old man's brow creased as he considered it. There was something about this... theatricality that rubbed him wrong. For a villain, he thought, Catherine Foundling had always been admirably reluctant to sacrifice soldiers on false pretences.

What she considered those to be was where the villainy began, but that was another story. *Ah*, Tariq hummed. *So there it is.* The Black Queen had spent lives in her service, those of the drow, by sending them into the fight suspecting a miracle would snatch away their powers and leave them exposed. Unusual for her, and she would not do it without a reason. So why *had* the drow been sent, he mused? To force his hand with the bringing of dawn, certainly, but there'd been no need for such a brutal display as what had taken place. Thousands dead, so quickly, was not war: it was a point being made. They had been sent to make an impression. To swat down multitudes like flies and add weight to the choice the Pilgrim must now make. To create, in a word, urgency. Such a thing would only be necessary, he decided, if there was a deception afoot.

"Where is your liege, Hunstman?" the Grey Pilgrim asked.

"Another question was not the answer sought, Peregrine," the fae languidly replied. "Your verdict?"

She wasn't in Creation, Tariq grasped then. Admittedly the surrender offered had only been for those under her command and not the Queen of Callow herself so her presence was not strictly required. But if she wasn't here, how did she expect to bring down dawn should he refuse her surrender? There might be other drow with power enough, but none with the requisite *weight* to carry it out. If the Hierophant had still been at her side then Tariq would not have considered the matter further, but the boy currently was in the depths of Arcadia making a ruinous altar of his grief. The Wild Hunt could not wield miracles of darkness, and who did that leave? No one but Bestowed or the most powerful of warlocks should be able to weave a working rival to his, leaving the confines of story, and the only place where the Black Queen would have been able to encounter such a helper since her disappearance should be the Everdark. It was, he reflected, deeply unlikely anyone but Catherine Foundling on her side could bring an end to his dawn – her patron murderesses notwithstanding, for should they intervene directly so would the Choir of Mercy. Old mule that he was, he'd been offered the apple and the stick. But it appeared that the stick might be little more than glamour, a shadow on the wall. If he refused, and dawn held, then...

That would be contingent on her failing to return, but her absence was telling: whatever her scheme, it required her to see to something else. Instead of an olive branch extended, he thought, this might instead be the affected nonchalance of a villain raising the stakes on a bad hand. Trying to scare the opposition into retreating by displaying unflinching certainty. The pieces were there, Tariq thought, for this to be the answer. Yet it was not *certain*, and in assuming that the Black Queen was gambling he would be doing the very

same thing. If the only consideration was whether it was possible to obtain a promised victory on Catherine Foundling, then this was the choice to be made. Refusal, and pushing through. That was not, however, the only consideration. He could it be, when Keter was on the march? Could he truly justify, the Grey Pilgrim asked himself countenance refusing such an offer of peace? Refuse it when it delivered all he asked save for a knife at the throat of the very woman offering it – a knife, it must be said, that he now stood little chance of obtaining no matter his decision. The scope of the scales, Tariq thought, were close to beyond his ability to grasp.

The Black Queen that could be would be the end of Calernia. Between the Kingdom of the Dead and the Kingdom of the East, the continent would be made a ruin of endless war. Yet in combating the Black Queen that could be, was he blinding himself to the truth of the Black Queen that was?

Could there be any justification for the tossing away of the only pattern of three he would ever have with Catherine Foundling? There might not be another way to kill her if she further grew beyond Tariq's means. By staying his hand he might be letting slip an entity he could no longer put down.

In refusing an offer of peace from Callow when the Dead King was on the march, was he not aiding the Hidden Horror regardless of all other concerns?

Innocents were going to die.

Innocents *had* died, some by his own design.

The Ophanim were at his side, helping his tired old bones stand straight, and though in their whispers there was sorrow there was also something other. Trust. They trusted him, the murmurs said, to make the choice. They had seen as he saw, tread in his wake for the seemingly endless days and night he had been the Peregrine. They'd been at his shoulder for his every mistake, his every bitter triumph, and still they trusted. Sometimes that was the only reason he woke with dawn, the knowledge that hand in hand they could still do more. Sometimes that was the weight that pressed down on his chest and choked his lungs, the strain of that unearthly trust. Tariq had tread with angels in his wake for so long he'd forgot how it had felt before.

"Should you not have answers?" he asked, voice choked. "Are you not the Watchers Kindly, the burning wisdom of many eyes?"

*Old friends*, he thought, *help me. Help me see, for once more I am lost.* But they had no answers for him, would not take the burden from his shoulders. But they stood at his side, holding up his tired from, for in the end they were the Choir of Mercy and though they could not save him they would at least share in his suffering. Tariq thought of the city of his birth, suddenly, of that summer so long ago when the plague had choked it with death. In those days where it had all been so simple, when healing could be the sum of him. When he'd not been charged with clawing Creation back out of the darkness' hands, just to bring a little light into it. Tariq, who had last felt true warmth before the final breath of the woman who'd used to smile as she called him of no import, looked up at the sky and watched the star that shone there. Somewhere along

the way, he thought, he had gone from bringing small lights into this world to bringing great ones.

Sometimes he wondered if Creation was truly better for it.

"Do you really," he murmured, "trust me to make that choice?"

The Ophanim thrummed. Agreement, absolute in that way only angels could be. The Grey Pilgrim turned to the Black Queen's messenger.

"Tell the Queen of Callow I accept her surrender," he said.

—

"This," the Kairos Theodosian mused, "appears to be a goat."

Hakram kept a calm look on his face, remaining as dignified as an orc could be while hanging upside down tied by the feet. The Tyrant's outriders had clapped him in chains and dragged him back to the League's army in them regardless of his claim to be an envoy from the Queen of Callow, though it wasn't until the Tyrant himself arrived that Adjutant was forced to watch a procession of gargoyles drag in a tall tripod and trip over each other assembling it for what had to be at least half an hour. He'd then been hung upside down from the centrepiece, and only now had his gag been removed.

"Greetings, Lord Tyrant," he serenely said. "I am the Adjutant, here as envoy from your ally the Queen of Callow."

"She wrote some very unkind things about me, Hakram," the Tyrant accusingly said.

He tapped at the parchment his soldiers had taken from the orc's affairs along with the goat, the same missive he'd both penned in Catherine's name and been charged with bringing to the League when given the signal. The process had been more tedious than difficult: the barren plain this corner of Arcadia had been turned into meant he'd been able to see their columns arriving from miles off, though that hadn't quickened his journey in the slightest.

"I am sure," Hakram lied, "that they were meant in a spirit of friendship."

The goat he'd had confiscated looked at him and bleated, which the orc had to admit was fair. It'd been a hard sell. No one seemed to have thought to leash the creature, so it was ambling around this formal war council of the League of Free Cities at will and tracking cheap white paint over the furniture.

"What kind of things?" a tanned woman in dark robes asked, leaning forward with interest.

"Magister Zoe," the Tyrant gasped. "That is most inappropriate to ask. That man is a known spy, he could be peddling all sorts of calumnies."

The formal war council of the League of Free Cities, Hakram thought, was about as much as flaming wreck as he'd expected given the fractious nature of that alliance and the general reputation of the Tyrant heading it. The orcs jaw tightened when his suspicion was confirmed and the woman who'd spoken was revealed as a magister of Stygia – what a dignified word for a *slaver* – thought at least it made placing the others easier. The gangly old man at the very right of the long table who was putting the proceedings to ink was likely to be the representative from Delos, a member of its Secretariat. The young

ruler of Nicae, Basileus Leo Trakas, was recognizable as much from the formal apparel as the drawings the Jacks had obtained. The two richly-dressed men glaring daggers at each other should be the rival Exarchs of Penthes, the last two survivors of the shambles the Carrion Lord had made of that city's ruling class. A middle-aged man in ill-fitting armour was looking rather confused and kept looking over his shoulder like he expected someone to be standing there. The representative from Bellerophon, Hakram suspected. That left only one city without a seat at the table, though someone had nailed what looked like a tome of the Book of All Things to the back of a chair just to the left of the Delosi scribe. Interestingly, the Hierarch himself did not seem to be in attendance.

"Lord Deadhand, it is most uncouth of you to be staring so at the honourable delegate from Atalante," the Tyrant suddenly chided him.

He was, Hakram realized with horrified fascination, talking about the book.

"I apologize," Adjutant said. "I have never seen anyone from Atalante before."

Kairos Theodosian grinned, like he was mischievous boy, and leaned forward before lowering his voice to a conspiratorial pitch.

"It's actually the Book of All Things nailed to a chair," the Tyrant of Helike confessed. "I just have a gargoyle read a verse once in a while, I don't think anyone's noticed the difference."

Before a heartbeat had passed, Hakram had decided how to tailor his approach. Like dealing with a drunk Catherine, if the jokes about hanging people who irritated her were actually deadly serious.

"Have you considered having a puppet made?" Adjutant replied in the same tone.

The Tyrant snorted out a giggle, his bad arm trembling under his robes. Hakram kept his distaste off his face: the villain smelled like sickness and crazy, both of the dangerous kind.

"I like you," Kairos Theodosian smilingly said, but then the smile vanished like mist in morning sun. "Is what I imagine she thought I'd say, anyway."

Hakram remained calm. The boy was unstable, but not without cunning, and Catherine had already taken the measure of him. She would not have sent him here, at the Tyrant's mercy, if she thought it would get him killed.

"She does seem to enjoy taking up broken toys, your mistress," the Tyrant of Helike mused. "A filthy habit that, if you'll forgive my language."

The villain cocked his head to the side, his sanguine red eye unblinking.

"But by the looks of you, Hakram, you were debris long before she got her hands on you," he idly continued. "Magister Zoe, what do you call it again when they just *look* like a person but lack every other meaningful characteristic of one?"

"Foreigners," the Stygian drily replied.

The Tyrant of Helike shot Adjutant a friendly, complicit look with a grin that good as whispered *see what I have to deal with*, like moments earlier the villain hadn't been feeling for a weakness with his words like water poured on

glass in search of fault. This was, Hakram thought, a man as dangerous as he was mad. He smiled back, keeping his fangs hidden by his lips.

"You really are a piece of work," the Tyrant of Helike admiringly said.

"Pieces, by now," Hakram replied without missing a beat.

The madman cackled loudly, and even a few of the others smiled.

"So tell me about this goat," Kairos Theodosian said, "and why it looks like it was half-heartedly painted just before it was brought here."

"And in wickedness does Evil sow the seeds of its own defeat," a gargoyle mewled, staring up at a page of the Book of All Things.

Everyone ignored it.

"Your ignorance is understandable, my lord Tyrant, given the recent isolation of Callow," Hakram said. "This is not a goat: he is, in fact, a purebred Liessen charger."

Stares moved to the goat, which bleated fearfully at the sudden spurt of attention and ran under the table – she smeared white paint all over the robes of the Stygian magister before being chased away with a kick, which Adjutant silently approved of.

"*She* has udders," Basileus Leo patiently said. "Goat udders. Because she is a goat."

"Leo, you'll cause a diplomatic incident at this rate," the Tyrant replied, sounding appalled. "Besides, my dear ally the Queen of Callow has personally sent me a mount. How could it not be a splendid destrier of Callowan stock?"

Interesting, Hakram thought once more. It had been one thing for him to call the Tyrant of Helike an ally, another for the king to admit it. The orc had been under the impression that while there was an elected Hierarch, foreign diplomacy was their strict prerogative and to go against that would be treason. Yet none of the others seemed bothered by the implicit admission in the slightest – which meant either the Tyrant's plot were known and permitted, or the Hierarch's authority was a sham and Kairos Theodosian was the true ruler of the League. Something many had suspected, including Hakram himself, but did not align with Catherine's own impression of their relationship.

"I wash my hands of this," the Basileus sighed. "Do as you will, Tyrant."

"So, Catherine wants us to take a crack at the Grand Alliance," Lord Kairos said, completely ignoring the other ruler in favour of Hakram. "Interesting offer."

There was a pause.

"I refuse," he added nonchalantly. "So, now that that's done with, tell me true: if you had to be drowned, would you prefer it was in wine or in oil?"

"We were afraid you would hesitate to act, given the circumstances," Hakram amicably said. "No grudge will be held, I assure you."

"Circumstances," Lord Kairos mildly repeated. "Such as?"

"The battle ought to be over by now," Adjutant said. "The Grey Pilgrim will have woven a miraculous star and broken the strength of the Firstborn, forcing my queen's unconditional surrender."

A pregnant pause.

"She doesn't have that much give in her," the Tyrant said, red eye narrowing.

"My lord," Hakram grinned, baring his teeth, "I penned the letter for her."

The villain peered at him closely, as if looking into his soul, and the orc had to refrain from flinching. There was something... discomforting about the intensity of that mismatched gaze.

"It appears someone will have to saddle my goat," Kairos Theodosian mused, "for we now must ride out in glorious battle."

# Interlude: When Iron Rests

> "What poison is to medicine, war is to empire: apportionment is the balance of life and death."
>
> Extract from 'The Ruin of Empire, or, a Call to Reform of the Highest Assembly', by Princess Eliza of Salamans

Word of the surrender had rippled through the ranks, drawing out cries of dismay and anger before they both turned to disbelief.

There'd been tension between the Legions and the Army of Callow, when some loudmouths in the former had started to say this was just an elaborate way to sell out the Legions of Terror to the Grand Alliance, but Vivienne had been ready to quell such stupidity. Plants in the ranks had done as instructed, gone on the offensive and accused the complainers of being traitors in Grand Alliance employ. Enough of those arguments had turned to brawl that sergeants got involved, so now the most volatile of the rank and file were cooling their heels under arrest until this could be played out to the end. On the side of the Army of Callow there'd been mostly outrage and laying blame, which to Vivienne's mix of grief and amusement had been laid along predictable lines. Callowan recruits blamed the Hellhound, or more frequently Marshal Grem One-Eye – whose role in the Conquest still had him closely associated to national wounded pride. Most of the eastern recruits, though, both the fresh and those brought in from gutted legions after the Doom, tended to point the finger at Vivienne Dartwick.

Hardly unexpected: she the most visible civilian authority over the Army of Callow, a known former noble and former heroine. And for the greenskins, most damnably of all she had no famous feat of violence to her name. It was something to look into remedying, in the long term, though it was hardly a priority at the moment. The amusing part of all this, of course, was that while it'd been Catherine who'd pulled the rug out under everyone's feet with that sudden turn no one seemed to be blaming her in the slightest. Vivienne had absolutely no intention of changing that, since there were only a few things keeping the Kingdom of Callow together and one of them was the myth of the Black Queen undefeated, the kingdom's own crowned villain whose uninterrupted string of victories had become the backbone of a nation. It would have to be maintained, Vivienne thought, in the years to come – marshals and generals and even the

Woe could lose, but the Black Queen could not. But that was beyond the horizon, and Vivienne Dartwick's troubles were current.

The solution she'd found had been to let the current of older faith guide the rumours she sowed. This was not a defeat, it was a trick being played by Queen Catherine on her enemies. And Gods be merciful, Vivienne thought, but she couldn't even be sure that was a lie. The drow had been laid low by that sudden star in the sky, all but the most powerful of them battered into slumber for at least a few moments, and even the highest of these 'Mighty' had been forced to flee in the face of the enemy's swiftly resuming advance. Legionaries had moved to hold the walls in good order, but within moments of that Marshal Juniper had been informed that surrender had been offered to the Grey Pilgrim and then accepted, bringing this battle to a close. Vivienne had spent the following hour putting out fires, but now the situation was stable enough she'd finally been able to head the general staff's pavilion. Truthfully she could have done more, and would have preferred keeping her finger on the Army of Callow's pulse, but Juniper's last messenger had mentioned a message from Catherine with the royal seal. Those summons she could not deny, and so she had come.

"Adjutant's still missing?"

Marshal Juniper looked vaguely irked at her immediate question, though not enough to chide her for it. What Vivienne had expected to be a formal war council in how to deal with the fact that the Grand Alliance had fully surrounded the camp and was now ordering disarmament and the bringing down of the palisade turned out to be rather less crowded. Marshal Juniper, with her perennial accessory Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara, Grandmaster Brandon Talbot for the Order of Broken Bells and Marshal Grem for what some had begun to call the Legions-in-Exile.

"Whatever duty Her Majesty sent him out on, Lord Adjutant is still discharging it," Tribune Bishara said.

Vivienne kept herself from grimacing. Hakram had been a useful interpreter of Catherine's occasionally seemingly outlandish decisions even before the Everdark, but nowadays the orc's talent for understanding the thoughts of their leader had become a priceless asset. The journey into that dark place had changed Cat in deep ways, and much could be argued of whether all these changes had been for the best, but regardless of debate it was undeniable Catherine kept her cards a lot closer to the chest than she'd used to. Adjutant's presence would have been a boon, Vivienne already suspected, for what was to come. None of the others were seated, so she remained standing as well and simply joined them at the table.

"Now that everyone's in attendance," the Hellhound said, flicking a displeased glance at Vivienne that was met with a raised brow. "This was handed to me by a rider of the Wild Hunt, along with knowledge of the surrender and instruction to abide by it."

The orc tossed out a leather sheath bearing the royal seal of Callow, which Tribune Bishara daintily picked up afterwards.

"Unless there is an objection?" the Taghreb politely asked.

A round of shaking heads. Talbot might have objected, Vivienne thought, it if it'd been another officer but he'd always been a little sweet on the Hellhound's helper. The wax seal was broken, parchment taken from the sheath and carefully unfurled. The dark-haired Callowan caught a glimpse of the curved, eye-pleasing calligraphy and repressed a snort. Hakram's hand, that, not their queen's. Which might be for the best, considering most of the time Catherine's handwriting only skirted the edge legibility. She'd actually been taught properly at the orphanage, Vivienne knew, but Cat had always written like her thoughts were trying to crawl out through a hand too slow to keep up.

"I, Catherine Foundling, anointed queen of Callow by the grace of the Heavens and first of my name-" Tribune Bishara began.

Marshal Juniper cleared her throat.

"The meat, Aisha," she growled.

The Taghreb's head dipped in acknowledgement and she shifted halfway through the sentence.

"So, there's an old story about the Ol' Unconquered," Aisha Bishara said, "that they call Theodosius' Dilemma."

The Taghreb's tone was cultured and elegant, if so very eastern, but the words she spoke reeked of Catherine's slow, almost lazy drawl. Vivienne knew it to be at least in part an affectation, as their queen was perfectly capable of formal address in her crisp Laure accent. She liked to use the casualness, the thuggish country bumpkin swagger, to prey on people's expectations. Noble expectations, mostly, Vivienne privately admitted. Their queen had spent most her life carrying a sharp contempt for the aristocracy that becoming the foremost aristocrat in Callow didn't seem to have changed in the slightest. Something wordless fluttered through the pavilion at the tribune's words, though, sparing only Grem One-Eye. Backs straightening, shoulders loosening, even half a vicious smirk tugging at Grandmaster Talbot's lips. They had not been left behind, that was what their stance said.

The Black Queen had a plan in the works, and someone else was about to have a very bad night.

"So in the First League War – which is a horribly inaccurate name, actually, because the League of Free Cities proper hadn't even been founded yet and, wait, Hakram, scratch that whole part out, they don't need the history lesson," Tribune Bishara said.

She added, in a carefully unamused undertone, that the Lord Adjutant had not in fact scratched out anything.

"So in the First League War, Theodosius kept slapping around southern Procer like it was his deeply unloved goblin stepchild until it'd lost so many battles it'd gotten physically impossible for the princes to deny they were losing the war," the Taghreb read. "At that point, the First Prince was getting worried

about losing a third of Procer without war even having formally been declared, so you all know what happens: the Highest Assembly votes to 'defend the south from foreign invasion', everyone sends armies to reinforce and the First Prince makes a pointed suggestion that someone be appointed to run this mess that Theodosius *hasn't* already cheerfully brutalized."

Vivienne' eyes swept the tent, and found most were raptly listening even though most should already know of this bit of history. It was certainly... colourfully narrated, but otherwise common knowledge in those who had some learning of history. And even beyond that. The life and deeds of Theodosius the Unconquered were a favourite of young boys and girls with dreams of military glory even in cities where no Helikean had visited in living memory.

"That gets us Isabella the Mad, and sets up Theodosius' Dilemma," Tribune Bishara spoke. "Because Isabella, she doesn't offer a pitched battle or take back principalities: she just tosses one wave of soldiers after another at any forces that splits from Theodosius' main army. And Hells, his people win most of those skirmishes and Ol' Theo gets a few ambushes in himself. But every time he wins, he loses soldiers and Isabella loses nothing much. He's winning so much it's destroying his army, and so he has to make a choice."

Vivienne's mind raced ahead, for while she was not great student of military affairs she could see the shape of the dilemma outlined. It was not as important, she reflected, as the fact that instead of instructions Catherine had chosen to repeat a lesson that most of the people in this pavilion already knew. Would Marshal Grem? Maybe, as odds were that the Hellhound and Tribune Bishara had learned of this at the War College and the older orc was said to have been influential on the lay of the lessons taught there. Which meant the story was most likely meant for her or Brandon Talbot.

"Theodosius could fight a battle that couldn't be won against nearly five times his number," Aisha Bishara said, "to force a decisive outcome to the war. Or he could keep tearing through Isabella's detachments for months and months, hoping for a better chance as his own numbers dwindled with every victory. We all know, famously, the choice he made."

The Maddened Fields, to this day considered the only defeat ever inflicted on the first Tyrant of Helike.

"Theodosius bet on his legend, on being able to beat the odds and forge a miracle," Tribune Bishara continued. "Isabella bet that she could ride attrition to a symbolic victory, and it was a brutal wager but she got what she wanted. They say that when Theodosius' army retreated in good order, there were more than a hundred thousand corpses on the field."

The tribune's brow rose in surprise.

"Less than twenty years later, Jehan the Wise hung seven princes and one," Bishara said.

Before the implications of that could properly sink in, the Taghreb repeated a stroke of madness.

"I grant to Vivienne Dartwick the title of Lady Dartwick, with all assorted honours and privileges; in addition I name Lady Dartwick the heiress-designate to the crown of Callow."

Vivienne closed her eyes, ignoring the stir from the others in the tent. Why? No, that could be picked at later. Why *now*? The granted titled was clearly just a way to legally allow the second part without making her a member of the ironically-named House of Foundling. So what, as heiress-designate of Callow, could Vivienne do that she hadn't been able to do a moment ago?

"Lady Dartwick," Grandmaster Talbot quietly said. "The Royal Guard no longer exists, nor any knightly order save mine, yet-"

*Yet I am, theoretically, equal in status to a princess of Callow and first the line of succession,* Vivienne thought, opening her eyes. *The Shining Prince, in all but name, and those were the Marshals of Callow before such a title existed.*

"- yet the laws never excluded the Army of Callow nor any other addition to our forces," she finished softly. "Which means I am, in the queen's absence, the supreme commander of all armies sworn to Queen Catherine."

"You can revoke the surrender," Juniper said.

In the moment that followed, Vivienne almost did. It might just be Catherine's plan, a surrender to check some advantage of the Pilgrim's while she schemed some way that allowed her to both surrender in good faith yet keep her armies fighting. Diabolist could still use the wretched ritual that would bring back the drow to the field, and now the enemy's armies would be surprised and in disarray. *Less than twenty years later*, Vivienne thought, *Jehan the Wise hung seven princes and one.* That was a warning. About winning wars at any price, about what came after. About Callow further humbling a weakened Procer and-

"Oh," Vivienne Dartwick breathed out. "*Oh*."

"Lady Dartwick?" Marshal Grem asked, brow cocked.

"I'll need a horse and an escort," she said. "I'll need to talk with the Grey Pilgrim and Lord Marave besides."

"Why?" Juniper asked.

"Delay disarming as long as possible," Vivienne instructed the Hellhound absent-mindedly, "and keep the soldiers ready for fighting."

"Dartwick," the Marshal of Callow growled, "what are you doing?"

"If I'm right," Vivienne said, "then I'm about to trade the full release of our armies for our help against the League of Free Cities."

—

"Now, Hakram, I want to be perfectly clear," the Tyrant of Helike announced.

Adjutant was still hung upside down by his feet, though given that the tripod was now being carried forward at a brisk pace by a swarm of chittering gargoyles the motion had set him to rotating. He patiently waited until the turn brought him face to face with Kairos Theodosian before solemnly nodding.

"Your mistress, I fear, intends to betray me most immediately," the Tyrant said, not entirely succeeding at hiding his tone of deep approval.

"That does not seem like her at all," Hakram lied.

The boy gestured dismissively, though with a trembling hand.

"It was a delightful bit of pettiness from her to send me someone whose fingers I cannot meaningfully break, after that little affair with my kataphraktoi," Lord Kairos idly continued, "but that is that and this is this. Should the Black Queen turn on me – and she will – I will brutally murder you, if you'll forgive my language"

"You are forgiven," Hakram calmly said. "Though this seems absurd. Catherine Foundling has ever been a close and trusted ally to you, my lord."

"You're not even afraid," the odd-eyed king complained. "I really should have listened to what my father said about Callowan spite, this is most unreasonable of her."

"Your father had words on the subject of Callowan spite?" Adjutant asked, cocking his head curiously.

"I wouldn't know," the Tyrant cheerfully said. "After I cut his throat all he could manage was wet gurgling noises."

Hakram made a mental note of the admission. It would go into the growing archive the Jacks kept on the Tyrant of Helike, though whether what the boy had said was true or not remained debatable. The orc found him exceedingly hard to read even for a human. Silence lingered between them, though in the distance the hum of raging storms served as canvas for it.

"I cannot help but notice, Lord Tyrant, that we are not heading out into Creation," the orc ventured after a moment.

Unlike the rest of the League's armies, he left unsaid. The last of the armies, a ramshackle mob moving in old infantry formations Hakram was fairly sure hadn't seen use since the Humbling of Titans, had marched through a well-illuminated breach almost half an hour past. Of the hosts of the Free Cities, all that seemed to be left was the Tyrant's own personal guard of a thousand. And gargoyles, admittedly, too many and too similar in appearance for the orc to be able to count. Kairos Theodosian looked amused, his red eye suddenly twitching shut and remaining that way.

"I have sent all I need to send," the Tyrant of Helike said. "General Basilia is more than a match for the Pilgrim's pet countrymen and the unpleasant surprise your mistress is still sitting on."

"Might I inquire as to our purpose, then?" Hakram politely asked.

"It would be a terrible blunder to feed a spy my most secret schemes," Lord Kairos chided him. "Do you expect me, Deadhand, to immediately unveil my every furtive advance merely because you showed a modicum of polite interest?"

A moment passed.

"Yes," Adjutant replied.

"Is this what loves feels like?" the Tyrant mused, then raised a hand. "Don't answer, Hakram, it's not like you'd know."

The orc cocked his head to the side. The insult did not particularly sting. Perhaps if it'd been slung in the early days of the Fifteenth, when he'd still wondered if the wariness in Juniper's eyes when she looked at him was not uncalled for, but now? Those doubts were long buried, and it would take more than a madman's jeering to unearth them. It was not, however, the first time the Tyrant of Helike jibed of Hakram's leanings towards detachment. That he would keep prodding from an angle that would yield nothing was interesting, and suggested two things: first, that Catherine had been right on the subject of Kairos Theodosian having some skill related to perception of others. Second, that what the Tyrant was seeing in Adjutant unsettled him enough to keep picking at it like a scab.

"Soon, I do think," the Tyrant of Helike said, looking up at the ruinous sky.

"Soon what?" Hakram dutifully asked.

"You see, Adjutant, the histories will speak of tonight as a triumvirate of treachery," Kairos Theodosian airily explained, "but that will be most inaccurate. Your mistress and I are having the most delightful match of shatranj while the Pilgrim and his kingdoms of the blind stumble around waving swords and miracles."

"But, Lord Tyrant, is the Grey Pilgrim not the Named currently closest to victory?" Hakram asked, purposefully keeping his tone as dull and unenthused as possible.

He was, the orc guilty admitted to himself, beginning to enjoy this a little too much.

"You would be most wrong, Adjutant, most wrong," the Tyrant said. "Tariq Isbili's mistake is that he believes because he set the initial terms of this fight he still knows all of them. And so he putters around down in the snow and mud, while the real prize of the night is around us. He could get everything he desires, Hakram – and indeed I suspect your mistress is inclined to grant most his wishes, save those that inconvenience her – and still be made of fool of."

Adjutant kept his face calm, though for the first time that night his heartbeat had quickened.

"Oh yes, my dear green friend," Kairos Theodosian grinned. "I know what your mistress is up to. Seven crowns and one, yes? She has the recipe for the making of a Court, and the Hierophant provided the final ingredient of that heady brew by cutting an unclaimed realm from the fabric of Arcadia and casting it down towards Creation."

Hakram stayed silent, unwilling to risk revealing too much through the lie he chose to speak.

"Here's a secret for you, Adjutant," the Tyrant of Helike whispered, leaning closer. "The thing that waits for you in the depths of Liesse stolen isn't *just* your friend. I would be a great deal more wary of what it intends, were I you. For if this night does not go to the Black Queen or to myself, well, it is another friend of mine that will get his due."

The boy retreated, loudly cackling.

"Ah, but I digress," he said. "I did say that your mistress and I were playing shatranj while poor old Tariq was stumbling, did I not? Allow me to elaborate. The Pilgrim anticipated there would be trouble in Creation, Hakram, and so tossed a ball up and out of sight so that providence might allow it to land when it was needed, should it be needed."

"You are saying," Adjutant said, "that he sent a force through Arcadia."

"Exactly," Lord Kairos agreed. "And, old hand that he is at turning tides, he kept a heroic charge up his sleeve in case matters were truly dire."

The orc's jaw tightened. In the distance, coming out of the storms with tall banners, a glittering tide of horsemen advanced. Proceran banners, Levantine banners, the full horse of the Grand Alliance's armies. Including, Hakram thought, every prince and princess in the hosts.

"What is that delightful Callowan saying again?" the Tyrant of Helike mused. "Ah, yes, I remember now."

The boy's eye shone wet crimson, when he turned to grin at Adjutant, as if it had already partaken of the blood about to be spilled.

"Finders keepers," Kairos Theodosian said.

# Interlude: So We Shot Him

> "One hundred and twenty one: it can be wise to make a truce with a villain to deal with greater threat. Never forget, however, that fear does not make someone trustworthy. Merely afraid."
>
> "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

Captain Elvera could not have drawn her sword even if there was a need, for oaths still bound her and so uncertainty was staying her hand. It had been a very fine line she'd walked these last few weeks, one finer than she was truly comfortable with. Elvera had sworn not to make war on the Black Queen nor her allies for the span of three months, and that span had not yet ended, though Lady Aquiline had made use of her regardless. The letter of the oath had been observed: the prisoners released under oath had never left the reserve or bared blade. Elvera herself did not formally hold command, for that might be impugning her word, though her 'advice' was obeyed so faithfully this was mere pretence. The old woman would not pretend the spirit of the oath had not been broken, regardless, or that service of her lady excused the act. Even if the Black Queen had likely expected no better of them, it did not lessen the shame of being so feckless. Yet when duty and honour pulled different ways, which one was to be heeded? Elvera had no answer, and her lady was understanding, so here she was straddling a charade instead of declaring for either.

"Those are the Spears of Stygia, we have confirmed it," Captain Onaedo grimaced. "Ashen Gods, just when the night was turning around."

Onaedo, second only to her in years of service to Tartessos, held command of the host in the absence of Lady Aquiline – who was, at the moment, still having her wounds seen to. Along with Razin Tanja, who she'd insisted would be healed at her side. That'd raised more than a few eyebrows, and likely would again in days to come. If they survived that long, Elvera thought. Which given the way reputable armies had taken to appearing out of thin air at their rear was seeming less certain by the moment.

"And they are facing the Procerans," Elvera slowly said.

The League of Free Cities had struck... oddly. Perhaps in part to obscure its numbers, which were still very much in doubt, but their array was unusual. The Spears of Stygia, perhaps the finest infantry that region had to offer, had appeared and formed up for advance at the back of Lady Aquiline's command.

Not facing the Alavan heavy infantry of Lord Malave to the north, which might be understandable if a swift rout was what was meant to achieved. Yet it was a hardened army of twenty thousand Procerans, an army who'd already fought that same slave-phalanx in the past, that they'd formed up in front of. There'd been much easier meat to prey on, if the Stygians had wished: the famously lightly-armoured warriors of Vaccei, or perhaps the hodgepodge mixture of fantassins and levies that was the northern Proceran contingent. Elvera had seen to it that even while moving to encircle the Black Queen's camp her lady's army had not overextended, so theirs was not a weak position to assault. Why, of all places, had the Spears of Stygia been put in front of the largest knot of veteran Proceran soldiery on the field? A rider approached, breaking up her musings, and conferred quietly with Captain Onaedo. She glanced at him, brow raised.

"The Black Queen's surrender seems to be holding," he told her.

The Grand Alliance would have folded like parchment if it hadn't, Elvera grimly admitted to herself. Even now, in the distance, she could see the buckling lines of her lady's host when it was fighting on a single front – two would have ended them in an hour. The Stygian phalanx was pushing through the Procerans inch by inch, unflinchingly, and with few losses. On the left flank the Bellerophans were being hacked into by eager Tartessos captains, though the enemy's formations were so dense it was like wrestling with a boulder. Elvera would have spared a moment to be impressed by the way conscripts with only spears and old armour were holding up so well in front of proper warriors if the Bellerophan stubbornness wasn't in the course of losing her this battle. Delosi forces held the other flank, facing Malagan warbands, and though the scribes themselves were nothing to worry of the mercenaries they'd hired had stiffer spines and sharper blades. The Malagan captains were only barely holding on, and if they broke it would turn into a massacre. The Procerans at the centre would be encircled and choked by the Stygian phalanx while Elvera's left flank remained stuck and unable to help. Until the centre collapsed as well, anyway, and it was swept through as well.

"We won't be winning this battle," Captain Elvera bluntly said. "All we can do is hold and hope for Lord Marave to beat back the rest of the League."

"What would you advise, then?" Captain Onaeodo asked.

"I'd throw everything we have in reserve at our right flank," she said. "And pray it'll hold long enough."

It wasn't an order, oath forbade it, but it was treated like one.

—

"I expect," Yannu Marave calmly said, "that you come bearing a threat."

Had they been dealing with a lesser villain, Tariq thought, then the Lord of Alava would have been correct. If there'd ever been a time for the armies of the East to turn on the Grand Alliance, it was now. Debacle was unfolding down south, while a mere mile outside this tent a hard battle was being fought. Helike's army had swept out of Arcadia like a tide, hammering at the right flank unexpectedly, and even as Lord Yannu redeployed to meet the threat two

more blows had come in quick succession: the soldiers of Penthes smashing into the left flank while those of Nicae poured out in the centre. The first half hour had been one sided butchery, for the Alliance's army had been taken utterly by surprise, but now that it'd had time to form up a brutal stalemate of shield walls had formed. Yet all it would take was for the Army of Callow to resume firing its siege engines at the army, and the battle would be over. Odds were that Catherin Foundling would never again get advantage so heavy and undeniable over the hosts of the Grand Alliance, and if she were a fool then she would have instructed her followers to take advantage of it. The Grey Pilgrim saw no such thing within Vivienne Dartwick, and that brought forth just as much fear as it did relief.

"Queen Catherine offered the surrender in good faith," the young woman replied just as calmly. "It stands, regardless of circumstance. I have come to discuss terms of ransoming."

Tariq almost laughed at the audacity of that. Lady Dartwick had ridden into her enemy's camp with nothing but a cursory escort, unarmed, and sat herself at the table across one of the most powerful men in the west without batting an eye. Like she did not doubt for a moment that she belonged there, though the Pilgrim's eye told him she was not without doubts. They were not, however, woven into every part of her as they had been the previous year. Instead now there was a pulsing sentiment that split the difference of ambition and yearning, and it had nestled deep at the heart Vivienne Dartwick. The dark-haired woman, Tariq thought, had quite clearly lost her Bestowal. She was the Thief no longer, both his eyes and the whispers of the Ophanim had so ascertained. And yet, in the bargain of that loss, she had gained something altogether more dangerous: belief.

*Am I*, the Pilgrim thought*, looking at your successor, Catherine Foundling?*

"Ransoming," Lord Marave said, tone flat. "You wish to have some of your forces released?"

"I have come to bargain," Lady Vivienne pleasantly smiled, "for the ransoming of every force that surrendered to the Peregrine."

Whispers, sharp and urgent. Not because of the woman's words, for those were no surprise, but for something unfolding. There was, the Ophanim conveyed, to be another great breach between Creation and Arcadia. Soon, and it would be calamitous in some way. The Peregrine closed his eyes, feeling out the miracle he had woven over the sky. It was on the edge of passing, though it would be a natural death: Creation's true dawn was about to begin, and it would chase away his own conceited mimicry.

"That is not an offer mine to accept," Yannu Marave said. "But the terms must be interesting, for what you offer to be worth so many soldiers."

"The aid of said soldiers," Vivienne Dartwick replied. "Against the League of Free Cities."

Left to it, Tariq thought, they would keep fencing for some time. Careful and wary both, even as death bloomed out on the fields. Not without reason,

but the situation was on the edge of taking a grim turn. The Tyrant of Helike might have been called here by the Black Queen's ploy, but he suspected even she did not truly understand what she'd unleashed. She'd let the fox into the henhouse, as reckless as ever.

"Lord Yannu," the Pilgrim quietly asked. "Can this battle be won without their assistance?"

The other man's lips thinned.

"If our last hand is played," he said.

"It is, I think, about to be snapped over the Tyrant's knee," Tariq said.

"Then it is not impossible, yet the path is narrow," the Lord of Alava said.

"Then we have an accord, Vivienne Dartwick," the Pilgrim said.

There was a flicker of surprise on her face, though she mastered it swiftly.

"There is a mage among my escort," she said. "If I might be allowed to send a signal?"

"Do so," Tariq said. "And hurry, for-"

Creation shivered, to a sound like glass breaking had the glass been screamed by a hundred thousand voices. The Grey Pilgrim was on his feet in a heartbeat, leaving his words unfinished even as he raced out of the tent. The Ophanim's voices rose in a chorus of anger at the thoughtlessness of what had been done, and he could only agree. A breach fractured the plain between the armies fighting, shaped like a thick pane of glass shattered by blow – spinning out in cracks. Through it fell thousands and thousands of horsemen, the very same he had sent into Arcadia. Lady Dartwick came to stand at his side, face gone pale.

"Send your signal," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Before it is too late."

Cursing his weary bones, the Peregrine straightened his back. First he would need to enlist Laurence, but after that? There was a villain among the rain of soldiers that was being carried down by a swarm of gargoyles. The Rogue Sorcerer should be able to hold him until the two old hands arrived.

Kairos Theodosian had been allowed to run rampant for too long, and an end brought to his scheming was long overdue.

—

It wasn't even much of a drop, Hakram thought, but then it hadn't needed to be.

Ten, twelve feet the orc estimated. He'd seen horses jump half that without hurting themselves, though admittedly not horses in armour and bearing armoured riders. Still, he suspected it'd been the angle of it more than anything else: like the floor dropping off under and entire army. Their return to Creation had been accompanied by a horrifying song. Horses by the thousands screaming for their broken limbs, falling to the side and rolling over soldiers crushed by their weight. Horns and trumpets as the Procerans and Levantines who'd remained unharmed tried and failed to assert order, and all the while Kairos Theodosian laughed convulsively. **Rend**, the red-eyed boy had ordered Arcadia, and beneath the hooves of the west's cavalry the earth had been rent

asunder. At least the Tyrant seemed half-dead for it, Adjutant thought. The orc had seen higher sorceries of this calibre before, but only once before an aspect destructive on such a scale: the Carrion Lord's own, when he had wrecked the doomsday fortress made from Liesse. Lord Black had been near killed by the overreach, however, where Kairos Theodosian remained conscious. Feverish, yes, exhausted and drenched in sweat. Yet still very much awake.

"It appears," Adjutant said, "that you've repelled the enemy."

The Tyrant did not reply, slumped and breathing laboriously. The villain was seated on his throne still, a gaudy thing bejewelled and set on a platform almost as luxurious. The platform itself had been carried down by a swarm of gargoyles, along with the wooden frame holding up Hakram himself. And more, too: Lord Kairos' personal guard had been held up by pairs of the constructs, slowing their fall by enough the descent did not wound them. It'd allowed Adjutant a read on the amount of gargoyles that existed in whole, which to his eyes was somewhere between three and five thousand – mostly likely on the lower end of that span. It was still a colossal investment of resources to have made so many of the creatures, especially for a city-state, and should they ever be broken Hakram suspected it would be a crippling blow for the villain. Something to pass along, when he returned to Catherine. Lord Kairos did not reply to his comment, instead sending out further swarms of gargoyles with an anemic twitch of the arm. Adjutant's eyes narrowed. The thousand-strong retinue of Helikean soldiers was making a slaughter of the horsemen in disarray, methodically scything through the wounded and the frightened, but it was not them the constructs had gone after.

"Better than repelled," Kairos Theodosian rasped out. "*Captured*."

Fascinated, Hakram peered at the swarms that were causing such a racket further down the shattered enemy column. There were seven of them, spiriting away seven prisoners. Seven crowned princes and princesses of Procer, he thought, snatched by the gargoyles in the midst of the howling chaos that'd been crashing down onto Creation.

"And now-" Lord Kairos began, but a wet cough tore out of his throat.

The boy's lips, Hakram saw, were flecked with blood.

"And now," the Tyrant croaked, "dawn."

The orc looked up, in time to see the shining star that held back the night wane, and the truth of Creation replace it. The drow were struck down anew, before they could even properly stir.

—

Akua Sahelian watched dawn rise, a crow on one side and a well on the other.

They had watched it all unfold from the highest point in the camp of the Army of Callow, the graceful dance that'd spanned a night and brought them to this very moment. The shade who'd once been the heiress to Wolof had been taught the arts of treachery since the cradle, and taken to them like few others, so perhaps she was the only person in all of Iserre who could suitably appreciate

what Catherine had done. The seamless sequence, born of an understanding of her foes that had been like an astronomer's prediction of spheres in their orbit. Akua had glimpsed but a fraction of the preparations that arranging the stretch of a single night – no, not even that, barely even a bell in duration – had taken and so what she saw was not the luck of meddler but instead a net whose weaving had begun weeks ago, if not months.

"O Goddess of Night," the shade said. "You walk along her thoughts, do you not? How much of it did she truly anticipate?"

"Enough," the Eldest Night said.

Though the urge to press the matter burned on her tongue, she did not purse. Akua was not Catherine, to chastise and wheedle entities far beyond her ken with that fearlessness that was sister to folly. Even without moving a finger the shade could feel the towering weight of the goddess who had been born to the name of Andronike, the millennia of blood and screams she had woven into apotheosis. It felt like even just an irritated glance from the half of Sve Noc would be enough to make dust in the wind of Akua, for one's presence was mountain and the other feathers.

"And now I am called on to do my part, leal servant that I am," the shade murmured.

In the sky a streak of coloured light stretched, the signal from Lady Dartwick that surrender had been turned into effective – if still temporary – alliance.

"No servant of mine," the goddess said. "You wield, but do not make covenant."

"Alas, O Goddess, my heart has already been taken," Akua smiled.

"This is humorous, for you imply romantic feeling when in truth referencing grievous bodily harm," Andronike said, tone smug. "I have mastered your ways, shade."

"I am helpless before your guile, Sve Noc," she replied, tone the slightest hint of dry.

The crow cawed in high-handed agreement.

"There will be need of a word, to bring it forth," the goddess said. "Have you chosen?"

"I have," Akua said, lips quirking. "I believe she would approve."

"Then we begin," Andronike said.

Her work was not as crude and unpolished as to require physical contact to be wielded: proximity and binding were sufficient. She who had once been the Diabolist allowed herself to sink into the sea of Night, the receptacle she had filled with the might of the Mighty night after night. Akua had known men and women, in Praes, who would have sold half the world to have such power at their fingertips. And it'd been entrusted to her almost as an *afterthought*, like it was a chore instead of the kind of privilege children would murder their progenitors for without hesitation. No oath stayed her hand, now, and no chain held her so closely that with this in her grasp she could not sever it. She could turn on the woman who'd slain and bound her. She could even bring this entire beautiful house of cards tumbling down on her head simply by doing nothing.

Instead, Akua Sahelian opened black-rimmed eyes and bared a smile like a blade of ivory.

"Fall," she said.

A torrent of darkness shot up in the sky, and from dawn wove an eclipse.

—

Princess Rozala Malanza woke disoriented, her leg throbbing with pain. She groaned and almost panicked when she realized she could not move her arms or legs – she was bound by rope – but mastered herself before she could scream. She would not give the Enemy the pleasure of her fear before it took her life and sent her back to... No, this was not Cleves. It was Iserre, it was dark, and for reasons unknown she was hanging upside down from a rope.

"Ah," a familiar voice gravelled. "I thought the prince from Cantal would be first to wake, on account of the thicker skull."

"Deadhand?" Rozala croaked, her mouth cottony and vision swimming. "You've captured me?"

She forced herself to concentrate, and after squinting for a moment saw through the gloom.

"Not exactly," the Adjutant ruefully replied, just as she realized the orc was hanging upside down a mere foot to the left.

Gods, her throat was parched. Wiggling in her bindings, Rozala saw she was in hallowed company indeed: to her right was Prince Arnaud, and from there a procession of royalty continued. Every prince and princess of Procer in her host was strung up there in a neat row from a raised beam, like venison left to dry.

"Who-" she began, turning to the orc, but then she remembered. "Merciful Gods, the Tyrant. We were thousands and..."

"Shhhh," a young man called out. "The gallery doesn't get to talk, Rosalie."

"Rozala," the Adjutant said.

"Oh, who cares," the Tyrant of Helike dismissed. "Proceran royals, eh? There's so many of them, why even bother? She can complain to Cordovan Hallenban if she feels insulted."

The Damned, she saw, hadn't even bothered to turn to address them. He was sprawled on a lumpy throne set atop a platform. Likely for some eldritch reason a goat was standing at his side, allowing herself to be petted while he fed her grass from his palm.

"Cordelia Hasenbach," Princess Rozala coolly corrected. "First Prince of Procer and Warden of the West."

Hasenbach was not and never would be bosom friend of hers, but she would not let the elected ruler of the Principate be mocked by a twisted little shit like Tyrant of Helike.

"If Rosalie talks again, my lovelies, eat one of her eyes," Kairos Theodosian absent-mindedly ordered. "You can choose which."

Rozala's blood ran cold when she saw a gargoyle's animalistic visage peer out over the edge of the beam from which she hand, chittering eagerly. There was a bleat from the goat and the Tyrant snorted.

"No, not *you*," the boy said. "You're a terrible horse."

Rozala eyed the Adjutant, wondering whether a whispered question was worth the risk of losing an eye, but the orc suddenly stiffened. A heartbeat later, there was a burst of light as a cut was made through thin air and in a gust of stormy wind three silhouettes emerged in front of the Tyrant's throne. Rozala knew them well, had fought at the side of most.

"Tyrant," the Grey Pilgrim greeted the villain. "This has gone on for long enough."

The Damned idly flipped the jeweled scepter in his hand, catching it by the handle.

"Give me a moment," the Tyrant of Helike said, cocking his head to the side. "I'm trying to think of an answer that involves a goat pun. Just kidding? No, that's sloppy. I hold myself to higher standards than that."

"It will be a mercy to put an end to you, lunatic," the Saint of Swords said.

"I bet you didn't even make that one on purpose," the Damned laughed.

"There's sorcery being used," the Rogue Sorcerer told the other two. "Still distant, but. . . "

"Cutting the head of the snake will serve, for a start," the Peregrine said.

The old man raised his staff, and as the air thickened with the weight of Chosen preparing to battle a small sound ripped through the tension. It was, Rozala realized, a match being struck. Off the ornate helmet Prince Arnaud still wore even unconscious. Nonchalantly lighting her pipe, the Black Queen flicked the spent match down and offered up a sharp-toothed smile.

"So," Catherine Foundling said, "we've got about an hour before everybody here ends up enlisting in the Dead King's army the hard way."

She shrugged, and leaned against the Adjutant's tied form.

"But hey, by all means don't let me interrupt."

# Chapter 32

# Woven; Weaver

> "And so Triumphant laughed, saying: 'You spellsingers, wisdom of stars and weavers of fate, know now despair. I will break you so utterly even the remembrance of your wholeness will suffocate, and where rose your tall spires there be only the barren sea I made of your defiance.'"
>
> Extract from the Scroll of Dominion, twenty-fourth of the Secret Histories of Praes

Gods, but it'd been close.

More than once we'd tread the edge of the cliff, and every time it'd been all I could do not to pull the trigger on all of my most horrifying contingencies. If the Pilgrim had refused the surrender, proved himself someone it was hopeless to work with under any circumstances. If the Tyrant had refused to send forward his armies, proved willing to sacrifice even his own plans to prevent truce being made in the west. If Vivienne had fallen even slightly short of the kind of woman I believed she could be, and chosen the early gain over the slow triumph. Every time I'd sat with Komena on my shoulder, watching them face the crossroads and knowing if the wrong choice was made all that was left would be the hardest of measures. And yet, even as I pulled at my pipe and let trails of wakeleaf escape my nostrils, I saw them all turn towards me like sunflowers to the sun and understood bone-deep why someone like Dread Emperor Traitorous could exist.

I'd tasted heights in my life, more than most ever got to experience. Nights of pleasure with men or women who knew their way around a good time, and subtler pleasures of luxury too: a cup good wine and a crisp pipe, meals exotic and exquisitely prepared. Different sorts of satisfactions as well. Evenings by the fire with people I would love until death took me, but also sharper edges – victory in battle, death and terror inflicted on enemies I despised. Enjoyments that soothed the soul but others that had your teeth clenching in harsh, spiteful vindication. And while I knew it was passing, that like a spasm of pleasure or

the ephemeral bliss of a drug it would die out and leave the body strained for it, there was a moment where I saw it in their eyes. The knowledge that to get here, in this moment, I had played them for fools and done it remaining one step ahead of them the entire time. The blend of hatred and fear and respect, but most of all of something that was kin to awe, it was like nothing else I'd ever felt.

If someone had distilled and bottled victory, I thought, it would taste something like this.

What a dangerous thing this sensation was, and how careful I must be to avoid falling in love with it. Else I would become another Traitorous, another Irritant, another mad murderer who cared more for victory as an end instead of a methods. For the triumph of cleverness at the expense of all else, like it was enough to simply beat the others.

"Black Queen," the Peregrine greeted me tiredly. "That is a considerable claim you have made."

I pulled at my pipe once more and discretely glanced at Hakram. Prince among men that he was, he understood what I needed from him without a word.

"Atalante," he whispered. "Hierarch. Knows about Zeze."

The forces at the Tyrant's fingertips that were still missing, along with something he should have no way of knowing: the final pieces to the sharp-edged jigsaw puzzle that we'd all made of this night. My instincts had been right, then. Kairos was making a play for the shard of Arcadia, using another madman and the most powerful priests in his armies. He still thought he was playing me, I thought, smiling at the villain on question. But he'd actually given me the last puzzle pieces I needed to be able to run a spit through his guts and hold him over the fire like a wildly treacherous goose.

"Kairos can vouch for me on that," I drawled, pushing myself off Hakram. "After all, he's been talking with the Dead King throughout this entire campaign."

The Tyrant gasped theatrically as everyone's eyes turned towards him. Leaning on my staff, I limped forward and left behind the hanging royals as well as Adjutant. It'd not escaped my notice that Kairos had seven crowns and my closest friend in the world hanging from that wooden beam. I might have been amused by that, if not for the implicit threat to the gesture: that he'd kill Hakram the moment I made a play for the shard, that I could only snatch that prize from him if I was willing to make Adjutant my *one*. A heartbeat passed and the odd-eyed villain started tittering, putting his trembling hand over his heart in an expression of repentance.

"You got me," the Tyrant of Helike snickered. "I tried to sell you all out to the Dead King… and for that, I sincerely apologize."

The sincerity, I thought, was cast somewhat into doubt by his broad shit-eating grin.

"Though, in my defence," Kairos continued, "it's the Black Queen's own court warlock who decided to read the entire Kabbalis Book of Darkness and got himself... inconvenienced."

Huh. I wondered if he genuinely didn't know that Masego had actually gotten his hands on much, much worse than that – Neshamah's actual memories, harvested from an echo in Arcadia – or if he was simply keeping that under wraps for later use.

"By inconvenienced," the Tyrant added in stage whisper, "I mean he went crazy and ate a city's worth of souls and now the Dead King is riding him like a mule, if you'll forgive my language."

I could have tried to cut him off before he got all of that out, but I didn't bother. For one, the longer he kept talking the least likely he was to notice I'd ordered my Lord of Silent Steps to take care of a few loose ends. And, most importantly, I *wanted* him to out the facts that it was Masego who was, uh, getting slightly rough with the fabric of Creation. Nobody here trusted the Tyrant the slightest fucking bit, and this would be taken as an attack on his part – which meant that might my reply, which admittedly stretched the truth a little, would be granted a lot more good faith than anything coming out of my mouth usually would get.

"The Hierophant attempted to find a way to kill the Dead King, at great personal risk to himself," I said, carefully avoiding mentioning that Masego would have taken a bite out of his own liver for that knowledge regardless of all other considerations, "but whatever it was the Ashurans used at Thalassina, it wounded him. The Hidden Horror seems to have taken advantage of that."

*But it wouldn't have happened if the lot of you hadn't gone a'crusading and started a battle that wiped a major city off the face of Creation*, I left unsaid.

"That is unfortunate," the Grey Pilgrim said, "yet-"

"If the next sentence that comes out of your mouth is *we might have to kill him*," I mildly said, "we're going to have a problem."

That didn't win me any favour with the heroes, from the way their backs straightened. I wasn't feeling all that threatened by that, to be honest. The Saint had tussled with Rumena, so she was far from fresh, and like the Tyrant for all his fronting the Pilgrim was dead tired. The only hero that was in fighting fit was the Rogue Sorcerer, and if it came to that I could bury him in a swarm of Mighty. I didn't intend on outright dictating terms here, but I had no qualms with disabusing *them* from the illusion that they were in a position to dictate a single fucking thing to me. Including the death of one of my friends, no matter his current state.

"Shut your mouth, child," the Saint of Swords said. "You-"

I glanced at the Peregrine.

"Tariq," I calmly said. "Do muzzle your hound, before I decide to take offence."

The old man's face tightened, but he laid a hand on his attack dog's shoulder and spoke to her in a whisper. I turned to the Tyrant, who was watching all

of this happen with a kind of pure malicious glee I'd only ever seen in goblins before.

"Now would be a good time to order your armies to retreat," I told him.

"I'm no general," the odd-eyed boy said, "but we do appear to be winning."

I could have pointed out that the drow had been strengthened by the eclipse Akua had brought at precisely the right time, and that now that bargain had been struck my armies would back those of the Grand Alliance against his. But that'd be missing the point, because none of this really mattered to him.

"Kairos," I patiently said, "I understand you think that by standing here and mouthing off you're serving as a distraction for the Hierarch claiming the shard unhindered, but you've been had. So call off your damn armies, and let's have all of us a civilized conversation."

The Tyrant of Helike gazed at me in disappointment, one eye shining red and the other teary from tiredness.

"Now, if I did have such a scheme," Kairos Theodosian said, "and I do not, for I assure you I am most defeated and at your common mercy, but if I did... then the most elementary of steps would have been ensuring that the Dead King could not in fact see such a blow coming. That, in this most theoretical of worlds, though I am such a villain's inferior in many ways distance and the nature of our bargain would blind him to the knife until the very last moment."

His leg twitched restlessly.

"Now, Catherine, in this abstract, are you still suggesting that I was seen through?" the Tyrant asked.

"No," I said. "I'm not clear on what exact measures you took, honestly, but I'm fairly sure they worked. Which is why I'm telling you that, while you launched your attacks here, I pre-emptively sold you out to Hidden Horror."

His face went blank at my words, and I enjoyed the sight a lot more than I'd thought I would. It hadn't even been all that complicated, to be honest. Not once I'd figured out that Neshamah had his finger in this pie anyway. Masego was the only angle he could feasibly have used other than myself, and that meant all it'd taken to pass a warning about what I suspected the Hierarch of being capable of was putting it to parchment and having one of the Wild Hunt carry it as far into the Arcadian wasteland as she could without getting killed or captured. Something like a shiver went through the Tyrant of Helike's sickly frame at my words, though I could not be certain whether it was fear or excitement. Or, for that matter, something as mundane as exhaustion.

"Well," Kairos Theodosian mused, "it seems we truly do have about an hour to live."

He spared a look for some of the throng of gargoyles ever surrounding him, some of which flew away with urgent chittering.

"Queen Catherine," the Pilgrim said, tone sharp.

"I'll give you the broad strokes," I said. "Kairos can fill in the parts I'm uncertain about. Won't you, Kairos?"

Most of the time it was a damned pain to deal with intelligent opponents, but once in a while it had its uses. The Tyrant looked at the heroes, face twisting into a thoughtful frown as he asked himself what use I had for the heroes. It could not be to kill him, since he had to know just the same as I did that he'd slip away like an eel if we tried. He had symbolic hostages, had just finished making a broad splash in the story pond with a plan and so he was very much due a beating at heroic hands – followed by him scampering away to fight another day. So no, I wasn't trying to use the heroes as a borrowed knife. I was even, tacitly, inviting him to be part of this as something other than an enemy. Which meant...

"There are six of us," Kairos noted, eyeing me as he wagged a finger chidingly.

"Adjutant will stay behind," I replied.

"Not even one of them," he laughed. "Ever bold, Catherine. Put this way, how can I refuse?"

My gaze returned to the Pilgrim, whose face had grown cold as the back and forth continued. The light tone of the exchange must have grated on him, considering people were dying as we spoke. *You can't act like that with the Tyrant*, *Tariq*, I thought. *He'll pounce on that kind of weakness every time.*

"The block on scrying is what gave it away," I told the Pilgrim. "I'd been given details before that allowed me to catch on, troubles at the Observatory and my mages theorizing that the sky was already in use and that was why the rituals didn't work. I thought it was a side-effect, at first, of whatever Hierophant is being tricked into doing, but it was just too *convenient*."

The Rogue Sorcerer stirred.

"The scrying troubles are a consequence of the Keter's Due of some great working," he said. "That much I have confirmed."

"Figured it might be that," I said, "because Hierophant picked up the ruins of Liesse on the way here, and I'm no scholar of sorcery but I do know there's one thing about that weapon that makes Akua Sahelian a legend: it made use of the Due."

Instead of the turning Liesse and its surroundings into a blighted wasteland, Diabolist had used the wild release of wasted energy that accompanied every spell to power the city's flight. That did not mean, however, that the artefact could not be shaped anew until the release served other purpose.

"You're implying the Dead King, through the Hierophant, intervened to prevent scrying from being possible in Iserre," the Pilgrim said.

He flicked a glance at the Rogue Sorcerer, who nodded a concession it was possible for that to have been the case. I didn't need to tell the Peregrine much more than that: he might not have been in the middle of anything like this before, but given how long he'd been kicking around he would have been in the middle of a lot of things that were a *little* like this.

"We were meant to bloody each other," the old man quietly said. "The Grand Alliance, the Legions of Terror, your Army of Callow. By cutting off the rituals,

negotiation was made difficult and *you*-"

A coldly burning gaze turned to the Tyrant of Helike. I sympathized with the sentiment. The Pilgrim and I had both known we were doing the Dead King's work for him, by fighting here in Iserre, but neither of us had grasped quite how literally that was the case until tonight.

"Me," Kairos grinned. "I've had eyes in the sky this entire time, in a manner of speaking. And on occasion, I spoke with a dear friend of mine about... common interests."

Which explained why the armies of the League and of Helike in particular had been able to dance around Iserre flawlessly, never encountering any true setback until I'd arrived on the surface with Sve Noc at my back: perhaps the only entity in the principality that could veil itself from the ritual Neshamah was using. And to make it even worse, with that knowledge Kairos had undertaken the collection of even more. Since he'd known where every army was, he'd been able to make deals with them for even more secrets until he was the only person in all of Iserre who truly knew what was going on. Which had made him, in turn, even more useful to the Dead King who needed an agent in the region to keep stirring the chaos and escalate the mess. I suspected he'd used that need a chip to learn quite a few things he shouldn't. Likely the information about the Bard he'd traded me initially came from Neshamah, and for him to know of the specific price to my bargain with Larat – as he quite obviously did – meant the chances were good most of what Masego knew had been spilled and passed on. It did smack of the Dead King's ironic touch, to be selling my secrets instead of his.

"Of course, they *are* villains," I said. "Which means the Dead King always intended to kill him, and Kairos always intended on stealing the Dead King's victory at the very last moment."

I cast a curious glance at the Tyrant, since I was still unaware of the full details of what Neshamah was up to. I'd figured out that if no one ended up claiming the shard it would have no anchor and so just keep falling – you know, until it *crashed on us* – but I doubted the Dead King was just going to let that lying around afterwards. Though after making corpses out of the core armies of the Grand Alliance, the East and the League he should definitely have some further means to meddle.

"He planned on turning this lovely little ruin-realm into a fresh Hell, I do believe," Kairos mused. "After binding our souls, raising us from the grave and unleashing us against all he opposed anyway. He's got classic tastes, our friend up north."

"Neat," I flatly said. "So, Kairos here wanted to snatch the shard from the Dead King using the Hierarch and Atalante's priesthood."

"It was going to be beautiful," the Tyrant sighed. "Terrible for all of you, of course, but absolutely glorious for everyone that matters. I'd even been looking into the practicalities of crashing it into the Serenity."

He'd *what*? No, now was not the time to let him distract me.

"Won't work now," I said. "The Dead King's been warned. But, as it happens, there's still a way to prevent this from killing us all."

The Tyrant leaned back into his throne with a vicious grin.

"Now, this is the part I've been looking forward to," Kairos Theodosian cheerfully said. "Go on, Catherine, I want to see how you'll be selling the birth of a fae court sworn to Below to the *Peregrine*."

The Pilgrim's hackles went right back up, not that they'd ever gone down all that much. Might be more accurate to say the crux of his indignation had been pointed at another villain, for once. He didn't accuse me, at least, though at his side Laurence looked both triumphant and remarkably eager to run me through. I rolled my shoulder to loosen it, the same way I'd used to do before fights – in a way, this was one. Without blades having been bared, but it counted all the same. All my plans meant nothing, if I couldn't convince the Peregrine that backing me was the right choice. The Saint was a lost cause, and I knew next to nothing about the Sorcerer, but they'd both fall in line if Tariq gave his word. Leaning against my staff, I gestured upwards at the darkened firmament.

"Now, a realm has been carved out of Arcadia and sent careening down into Creation," I said. "There's no changing that, there's not sending it back and destroying it would be worse: it's close enough to us by now that if we broke it the aftershocks would likely kill everyone in Iserre. Which means that realm needs to be seen to, anchored, and there's only three stories for us to craft that fate from."

I raised a single finger, then jammed it towards the north.

"The Dead King's story is a kingdom of death, made for the reigning king of the same," I said. "Its herald was the folly and blindness of mortals, who willingly sacrificed themselves at an unseen altar to allow the blooming of calamity."

I paused.

"It also involves everyone here dying and returning as a Revenant in his service, leading his armies in the conquest of Calernia," I added. "Not, I feel same in assuming, anyone's first choice."

I shrugged.

"Now, there was a second story," I said. "Woven by the hand of our very own Tyrant."

Kairos nonchalantly waved, which had the Saint's lips thinning in anger and her hand visibly reaching for her sword. It was almost unsettling to see that directed at someone else.

"His was the madness-"

"-visionary wisdom," the Tyrant corrected.

"- of the Hierarch woven into the very fabric of a realm," I continued. "A vessel of revolt, an instrument for the sowing of strife uncivil. That story, however, was broken."

"She sold me out to the Dead King," Kairos complained to the heroes. "You really can't trust anyone these days."

"The last story is mine," I said. "It is made of crowns and debts, the desperate trick of a fox chewing through its own foot for fear of the night."

"Then it is true," the Grey Pilgrim grimly said. "You want to make a Court of Night."

"Oh no, this is where you have me wrong," I smiled. "What I want, Peregrine, is for us to make a god."

My smile turned sharp, almost blade-like.

"Then to *murder that god* and make of his bones a highway for our armies."

# Chapter 33

# Concord

> "Ambition without principle is greed, principle without ambition is mediocrity."
>
> Clodomir Merovins, ninth First Prince of Procer

"An empty throne, raised over a land of crossroads," the Grey Pilgrim said, voice wary.

As it should be, I thought. It was not trouble for the faint-hearted that I was proposing to seek. Larat, now huntsman but once a prince of the Winter Court, had in those days schemed to slip the leash holding the fae to Arcadia by binding himself to Creation instead. Seven and one, a pattern that'd echoed around Calernia long enough for it to have the proper form of binding, and behind it the weight of earthly crowns laid at his feet. It'd been a clever enough scheme but also a risky one, not that he'd had much of a choice. As the King of Winter and the Queen of Summer wed and their war abruptly ended, with it changed the landscape of Arcadia: a single court, and with it different stories that meant Larat was running out of time if he ever wanted to wiggle his way out. Desperate measures had seen him lead a ramshackle Wild Hunt – born of nothing, for Spring and Autumn had not come and might never again – to swear itself to my service, and so avoid entanglements in Arcadia. Doubly clever he had been, the once-prince, for it was to a court contained within my frame he had sworn himself and his fellows. Like fish in the sea, the fae had been content to keep swimming in that familiar power until I gathered the crowns I owed and completed Larat's scheme for him.

Then the Everdark happened and the power running through the veins of the fae had been ripped out, the reborn Night injected instead, and it had all begun to go awry.

At the moment, my Wild Hunt was not fundamentally all that different from Mighty. Oh their tricks and bodies were different – though I suspected that with time and the full settling of Winter within the Night, the Firstborn would begin taking one fae-like traits – but that was just the shape of their

mould, so to speak. The material in those moulds was the same for Hunt and Mighty both, namely Night, which meant that Sve Noc could snuff them out at will. As the Sovereign of Moonless Night, I'd leaned on the oaths to get obedience from the fae because I did not have the know-how to use their connection to Winter as a leash. Given a few decades or a century I might have learned, but Larat would have been long rid of my service by then and so of this trouble as well. Sve Noc, though? They had built their apotheosis from scratch, and though the manner and nature of it had been nothing less than horror they had built it nonetheless. They could end the Hunt with a thought, and the fae had suspected that much from the moment they'd felt my surrender to the Sisters. And so they'd kept their oaths to myself and my subjects, even though they were no longer bound by them, for if they became an enemy I might be troubled to look into the practicalities of ending them. A shame for them, and for Larat, that I'd found out anyway.

"Gates, for the proper toll," I agreed. "Paths through a realm without the... risks of Arcadia, but similar peculiarities. The armies on this field could turn a march of months into weeks instead, and intervene north before the fronts collapse."

"And you would beget this through the murder of one in your service," Tariq said, not bothering to hide his distaste. "Could accord not be reached instead?"

There was a sound like someone choking down laughter, which served to inform me Kairos apparently knew a thing or two about the fae.

"That is not in his nature," I said. "And fae do not *change*. It is inevitable. Larat who was once the Prince of Nightfall will rise once more, ruler of a court of dusk, and turn on those that raised him. And when that happens-"

"- inevitability," the Grey Pilgrim echoed. "A band of five, like few this world had seen, to smother that infant god in the cradle."

The last words had his face going ashen, for some reason. I supposed the scope of what I'd suggested was beginning to sink in. In the interests of diplomacy, I refrained from mentioning I figured if any Choir was going to be in favour of infant-smothering it'd be Mercy. You didn't get to make a greater good without laying a foundation of lesser evils, and the greater the scale of that good so with the evils that were its bedrock.

"Tariq," the Saint hoarsely said. "You can't seriously be considering this."

She looked, I thought, like someone had upended her world.

"It sees to our every need," the Peregrine said, and turned rueful eye on me. "How neatly you have tied us with the strings of necessity."

I met his gaze unblinking.

"Should I apologize," I said, "for making this a victory for others than myself?"

He turned away at that. Both at what I'd said, and at what was implied: that'd he been so set on being my enemy I'd had to work against him to help him. Silence stretched for a tense moment.

"Black Queen," the Rogue Sorcerer said, politely inclining his head. "I have questions, if I may?"

Funny how they got all polite when they no longer had the upper hand. No, that was unfair of me. I was in no position to cast stones on the subject of civility. Beneath the swaying leather coat and the practical chain mail beneath, I could not help but notice that the Sorcerer was rather short. Still taller than me, I was forced to admit, but not by much. I'd had a glimpse of what he could do with the intricate casting rod he kept, and it'd been a notch in power and skill above what I'd seen out of any but the most powerful of Praesi warlocks. Fire-based, I'd vaguely remembered, but there must have been more to it than that: his unremarkable brown pupils were discreetly rimmed with colour, one scarlet red and the other verdant green. Akua had fought him while wearing me the once, but like me she'd failed to tease much out of him. Which meant most his tricks were still unknown, and all his aspects. Both Tariq and Kairos would shoot up as threats the moment they became members of our band of five instead of my spent opponents, Creation itself conspiring to make sure they were fit to participate in what followed, but like the Saint they were mostly known quantities.

I knew nothing of the Rogue Sorcerer, save that he'd repeatedly scrapped with adversaries seemingly his superior without ever taking a wound or revealing any of the dangerous tricks mages tended to hoard like magpies. That alone was enough to make him dangerous.

"Ask," I replied.

"You will need seven crowns, as the price," the hero said, his Lower Miezan smooth and accentless. "This I understand the logistics of."

The gaze he flicked at the seven Proceran royals and Adjutant visibly hanging behind us made his point clear.

"It is the one, however that interests me," he said. "Seven for weight, but the last to shape. It will be, in a sense, the most important aspect of what you propose."

"The one we'll bring with us into the deeps," I said. "To be bestowed only at the heart of it."

The Rogue Sorcerer's lips thinned, obviously not considering that to be much of an answer, but in a sense it'd not been him I was speaking to. Tariq and Kairos both cast glances at me: one wary, the other gleeful. Yeah, there were three of us who could still qualify for the 'one'. Kairos Theodosian was Tyrant of Helike by Name, but king of the same by title. Tariq was, in the eyes of many of his countrymen, the rightful ruler of Levant. And I had more than a few titles to throw around, these days, but the one that mattered most was Queen of Callow.

"As you say," the hero murmured. "On the subject of roads and tolls-"

"It won't be like Arcadia," I admitted. "That is beyond my remit. It'll take more than a powerful caster with the right tools to access it. We'll have to raise

gates in Creation, and bind them to the realm. After that, though, journey, should be seamless when the tolls are paid."

"And the nature of said tolls?" the Sorcerer pressed.

"Blood," the Pilgrim quietly said. "Isn't it?"

It was Akua's best guess, yes, and the Sisters were being ambiguous in their answers but implying that might be the case.

"Freely given," I clarified. "One cut to enter, the other to leave. A sliver of life to sustain the crossroads realm."

"And anybody could pass the gate," the Rogue Sorcerer. "But very few would know how to *build* one."

I smiled, and did not answer. The Sorcerer might be able to figure it out, I knew, especially if he was at hand when the realm was born. But aside from him? Maybe five people would have the know-how in all of Calernia, and most of them answered to me to some degree.

"We should kill her now," the Saint of Swords calmly said.

My fingers tightened around my staff, but beyond that I gave no visible reaction. I glanced at Tariq and raised an eyebrow, silently letting him know that Laurence of Montfort was his fucking problem at the moment but that if she became mine he wouldn't like what followed.

"I understand your worries, Saint-" the Rogue Sorcerer began.

"No, you don't," she bluntly said. "Because you're barely even thirty, and you still think because she compromises once or twice it changes what she is. It *doesn't*."

"I would not swear truce with her beyond the Dead King's end," the Rogue Sorcerer replied, tone touched with strained patience, "but to refuse an arrangement right now would be worse than a sin, it would be a *mistake*."

"Do you know who the most dangerous villain I've ever faces was, boy?" Laurence de Montfort casually said. "There's a few people would consider the obvious contenders. I fought the first Horned Lord to wake in five centuries to a draw. I crawled in my own blood after a bout with the Lady of the Lake and put down the Drake Knight after his mind went. All of those would have butchered their way through half a legion of soldiers without batting an eye, all were monsters at the peak of their mastery. But the most dangerous villain I ever faced was my first: an alchemist so sickly he could barely hold a sword."

She was arguing for my death, I was well aware, but this was still rather interesting so she had my full attention for more than one reason. The Jacks hadn't put together nearly as much as I would have liked on the Saint, which only made sense if she'd spent most of her years wandering around Calernia as a cantankerous armed vagrant.

"I caught him early," the Saint idly said. "People were going missing, and I looked into it – bandits and criminals, as it turned out, but he was still keeping them in cells and using them for bloody research. Yet it was for antidotes, for ways to end plagues and heal the worst of injuries. He was just the Salutary Alchemist, I thought, and so young. Not some hard-eyed vulture, and his

Damnation looked like it was half an accident. Bad methods, but good ends. So I slapped him around some, made him pass his prisoners to the closest city's gaol and told him he could use animals but not people. Then I let him off with a warning."

Slowly, the Saint of Swords unsheathed her blade. She tapped it against her shoulder, striding around the Sorcerer but her eyes remaining on the Pilgrim the whole time.

"Gods, but the boy was brilliant," she said. "Five years later and keeping to the rules, he distilled an essence of life – a potion that kept people alive past their time. When the secant pox hit Valencis he moved there to cure it, and stayed after. I thought, maybe it didn't have to be a war all the time. That in some places, sometimes, we could have peace. Make exceptions."

"Salutary," the Rogue Sorcerer slowly said. "The word can mean beneficial, but the older meaning is *health-giving*."

"Aye," Laurence de Montfort grinned, old yellow teeth bared. "And give them health he did. Let them live past their time. Except he was the only one with the recipe. And it only bought them a few months at a time."

I almost let out an impressed whistle, seeing where she was headed with this.

"The prince was old, and so he was owned," the Saint derisively said. "And with every passing year someone else was in his debt that was old but also rich and powerful. Or sick in a way priests can't see to, or wanting to look young or a hundred other paltry fucking things that could be fixed with the right brew. I heard nothing about the people who'd started to go missing again, in Valencis, until I ran into one getting grabbed by the fucking *city guard*. And when I asked questions they all covered for him, all closed ranks, because he'd gotten his claws in them and what were a few dead nobodies for his research when that research was so useful?"

In Procer, I remembered, they knew the Saint of Swords as the *Regicide*. For her very public slaying of the Prince of Valencis, many years ago.

"He was a helpful lad, the Salutary Alchemist," Laurence de Montfort softly said. "Helped with his tonics and philters, when the going got rough for Chosen, never swung at blade at anybody in his life. And if I'd left him to it another decade, he would have owned half of Procer without anyone being the wiser."

The Saint of Swords pointed her blade at me.

"There can be," she slowly enunciated, "no truce with the Enemy. Not even when they are reasonable, helpful – especially then, because if you let the rot take even a moment then you will *always* have to amputate the limb."

The Tyrant of Helike, never one to let an occasion to be a shit pass him by, enthusiastically clapped at the end of her tirade and called for an encore. I glanced at the other heroes. The Rogue Sorcerer's face had gone blank, which to me reeked of hesitation. It made sense, didn't it? Because to me Laurence was a zealous old biddy who regularly tried to kill me and my friends, but to the heroes she was the prickly, unpleasant grandmother they didn't want but

always stepped in when they were in trouble. And sure, she thought with her sword, but most of the time that kind of simplicity paid off for heroes. It lent them strength, got them through the worst villains brought to bear against them and if the Light was anything like the Night then conviction had a lot to do with how well you could use it. The Grey Pilgrim was the one that mattered, though, because where the Saint was respected the Peregrine was *trusted*. And even when he wasn't, well, if he made a decision then the rest of the Grand Alliance couldn't really break it without breaking itself given his pull in the Dominion. And I wasn't sure Laurence would give a damn about that, given who she was, but I suspected the Rogue Sorcerer was a different story entirely.

And the Pilgrim slowly shook his head.

"I will not break the world that is to spare the world that could be," the Peregrine said.

"Tariq, how many of these 'turnabouts' have you seen over the years?" the Saint hissed. "How many Damned made their apologies, swore they'd never meant to hurt anyone, said that they would help you keep the peace instead."

"Dozens," the Pilgrim said.

"And how many kept their word?"

"None," the old man tiredly said.

"And still you want to make bargain with her? The battle's not done, Tariq. It'll get ugly, true enough, and thousands will die. Likely one of us too. But we can still win, and though we'll be a ruin after we'll be a ruin that can recover," the Saint harshly asked. "But if we compromise, here and now? There'll never be any recovering from that. The taint will be in the cause until it runs its course. So *why*?"

"Because we are not animals," Tariq softly replied. "Because we do not shy from compromise simply because it has burned us before. Because if we are willing to break armies for a point of theological purity, then that it is us that deserves the breaking. But most of all, Laurence?"

His eyes were bright as he turned to her, but there was no warmth to them. Only a cold, patient light like the distant radiance of a star.

"Because I will not brook unnecessary suffering," the Grey Pilgrim said.

The two heroes stared each other down, tension mounting with the silence. The Saint had not sheathed her blade, and though the Peregrine bore no weapon to unsheathe in turn that hardly meant he was unarmed.

"Boo," the Tyrant called out. "Booo. Just terrible. Bring back the other act."

"If we bend, we will break," Laurence de Montfort said.

I breathed out slowly, and though I did not begin to call on Night – that would have drawn attention to me, painted me as the aggressor – I shaped the working in my mind. It would have worked better in Arcadia, but if the Saint turned on me here there'd be no choice but to resort to it in Creation.

"If you still believe that, by morning light, then we will put it to judgement," Tariq said.

The old woman's jaw tightened in displeasure, but after a moment she gave a tight nod. She eyed me, spat down in the snow, but then sheathed her blade.

"Lovely," I drawled. "What a treat you are, Laurence. Shall I take that as agreement on your end, Pilgrim?"

The Rogue Sorcerer glanced at Tariq, who nodded. The other man sighed but did not argue.

"Bargain is struck, Black Queen," the Grey Pilgrim said.

"Bargain is struck," I acknowledged, dipping my head.

"That's nice," Kairos said. "But here's something none of you have considered."

The Tyrant of Helike caught the scepter he'd idly been flipping all this time, and blindly pointed it over his shoulder. Gems incrusted in it began glowing, and an intense beam of fire shot out – before I could so much as move, it burned a hole straight through Rozala Malanza's forehead.

"Should have sold the villain on the deicide first," the Tyrant chided me.

I didn't reply, simply raising an eyebrow, and only then did Kairos's red eye narrow and he turned to look back over his throne. Where 'Rozala Malanza' had dissolved into shadows.

"Ah, the drow," Kairos mused. "Is there even a single one of them left?"

"What kind of a second-rater do you take me for?" I asked.

Adjutant should be in the my army's camp right about now, safely escorted there by the Losara Sigil after my Lord of Silent Steps spirited him away and left behind illusion. As for the royals, though, I had other intentions.

"I suppose we should discuss terms, then," the Tyrant cheerfully said.

"Pilgrim?" I asked.

"I will listen," the old man said, promising nothing.

"Best you're going to get," I told the odd-eyed king.

"It's all I need," Kairos Theodosian grinned. "Now, as you all know, I am an ardent proponent of peace."

I was reluctantly impressed by how confidently he stated what everyone else here knew to be an outright lie.

"This entire little tiff has been nothing but a misunderstanding, I'm certain," the Tyrant idly continued. "As such, a peace conference would be in all our best interests."

That part I'd known he wanted for months now. But now he'd lay out what it was he wanted along with the rest of us at the same table, and that I remained deeply worried about.

"But," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Speak up, Theodosian."

"It seems that an agent currently in the employ of the First Prince of Procer has committed heavy crimes while in the lands of the League of Free Cities," Kairos smiled. "A complaint was lodged with the Hierarch, who now requires that criminal to stand trial before peace can be discussed."

My eyes narrowed. No mention of whatever it was Cordelia was dredging out of Lake Artoise? Had that been a red herring, or was this?

"A name," the Peregrine said.

"I believe he goes by Hanno of Arwad," Kairos said.

"The White Knight," the Rogue Sorcerer said in disbelief. "You want to put to trial the chosen of the-"

The Grey Pilgrim raised his hand.

"And if this request is granted, the League of Free Cities will observe a truce until both the trial and the peace conference are at an end?" he asked.

"Of course," Kairos said. "I am, after all, a man of timid and tender disposition. If not for our beloved Hierarch's indignation at such brazen offences, this war would never have-"

"For an objection to be lodged with the Hierarch himself, the ruler or representative of one of the member-cities of the League has to do it," I interrupted. "In this case, who did it?"

"I believe it might have been the representative from Helike," the Tyrant mused. "What an unlikely coincidence."

So, Kairos' play was centered around using the Hierarch against the White Knight then. That gave me something to work with when it came to thwarting him, though I couldn't do it from here or tonight.

"I am willing to accept that condition," the Grey Pilgrim said, "on behalf of the Grand Alliance."

"Oh?" the Tyrant said. "Yet the head of this crusade is Her Most Serene Highness Cordelia Hasenbach. Can you truly speak on her behalf?"

"In this instance I will," Tariq said. "He would come regardless, Theodosian."

"That's reassuring to hear," Kairos affably replied. "Yet it has been brought to my attention you've this nasty habit of breaking oaths, Pilgrim. I will require a guarantor. Now, Catherine, I do remember you promising me in writing that-"

"I lied," I told him without missing a beat. "You know, while positioning you to overextend in battle and selling you out to the Dead King."

"That was most unkind of you," he agreed. "Yet we are, I believe, allies."

"Of course," I lied.

"Then I will require you to be guarantor of our greying friend's oath," the Tyrant of Helike said, odd-eyed gaze grown cool. "And to kill him personally, should he break it."

"That's all?" I frowned.

I didn't like making empty promises, but this little bastard had been puppeteering half the armies of Calernia into killing each other while the damned Dead King was invading up north for the better part of a year. When we had shared interests, as in against the Wandering Bard, I did not mind working together. Otherwise he was at best a potential threat and more likely an outright enemy. Hells, the Peregrine had tried to kill me a few time and I still considered him to be more of an ally.

"That oath, and yours as guarantor, will have to be taken before every one of importance in all three armies on this field," the Tyrant casually added. "Proper ceremony and all that."

Ah, and there we were. Like I'd turned the screws on Razin Tanja a while back, he wanted me to give my word in front of enough people it'd seriously damage my reputation if I broke it afterwards. Of course, killing the Grey Pilgrim regardless of circumstances would sunder the Grand Alliance and most likely sink the Liesse Accords. But if I made and broke an oath before the same people I'd then need to convince to sign those same Accords, I was taking a torch to the worth of my word for those I most needed to believe in it. He truly was a vicious little prick, wasn't he? I glanced at Tariq, who met my gaze and slowly nodded. He'd realize the trouble inherent to breaking his own word, I thought, but would that stop him if he thought it was necessary to do it? Probably not. *But this needs a foundation of trust to work*, I thought. And he'd extended it first, even if I had to twist his arm to get there.

"Agreed," I said.

"Then we are all friends once more," the Tyrant of Helike said. "And I believe there was some talk of crowns. Shall you have them sent for, Catherine?"

"There's no need," I said. "Ivah?"

The illusory curtain of shadows went down, and seven princes and princesses of Procer were revealed to be standing wide-eyed a mere twenty feet to our side. They had, after all, heard the entire conversation from start to finish.

# Chapter 34

# Seven

> "Never once have I betrayed, for such an act first requires the extension of trust."
>
> Dread Empress Foul II, the Forthright

Now, far be it from me to even remotely imply Kairos Theodosian was not at best the worst ally anyone would ever have and at worst essentially a malignant disease inflicted on Creation. That said when it came to, uh, the sheer number of crowned heads gathering in the Principate at any given time then he almost had a point. I'd had Hakram drill me on the names and attendant principalities, and still I was pretty sure I had at least two of them confused. Both Princess Bertille of Lange and Princess Leonor of Valencis were women in their late forties with dark hair and tan skin, which considering I'd never spoken a word to either did not make differentiating them at a glance easy. Still, it wasn't them that'd matter in that throng of royalty. The keystones here were two, princesses both. One of them familiar by now: Princess Rozala Malanza of Aequitan, who was still glaring at the Tyrant of Helike for his casual murder of her illusory form. Kairos seemed genuinely delighted at the prospect of having made yet another powerful enemy. The other I'd met only once before, when we'd had that pleasant chat under afternoon sun where I'd politely asked her and a few thousand riders to turn back. Princess Sophie Louvroy of Lyonis, one of Hasenbach's staunchest partisans in Procer and I suspected the check sent on Rozala in case her command of a large army so close to Salia prompted... ambitions.

Where Princess Rozala was dark-haired and dark-eyed, tall yet curvy in the way that classical Arlesite beauties tended to be, Princess Sophie was a pale blonder with blue eyes and a narrow face. The Princess of Lyonis was a few years older, I knew from the reports of the Jacks, but it was hard to tell at a glance. They were not the oldest of the seven royals standing revealed in the eclipse's gloom, nor those ruling the wealthiest or most influential principalities, yet there were no denying it was they who shared the reins of authority.

Princess Sophie did so as the First Prince's eyes and ear in the south, while if Vivienne's spies had it right then Princess Rozala was considered the informal heiress to the coalition of crowns that Prince Amadis Milenan had laboriously assembled. Since the Battle of the Camps said Prince of Iserre had been cooling his heels in the hands of the Kingdom of Callow as a prisoner, so given the ever-fluid nature of Proceran politics it was only natural a successor had emerged. They could do worse, silently conceded. Malanza was a skilled commander, and though no great diplomat she was not without allure. It would be easy enough to contrast her solid military record to Cordelia Hasenbach's own lack of anything similar and reliance on her uncle the Iron Prince for all things warfare.

I doubted they'd ever have the votes to seriously threaten Cordelia in the Highest Assembly, but as a bloc of opposition headed by Princess Rozala they could be a force to reckon with.

"This is rank madness," a dark-haired woman said.

That accent was Alamans, not Arlesite, which should mean I was looking at Princess Bertille of Lange.

"It is certainly dubious," Princess Sophie of Lyonis agreed, watching me warily.

That sounded like a refusal in the making, and from one of the two people I would much prefer to be in agreement instead of opposition. It would establish whether what followed would be known as a grave diplomatic incident or a heroic bargain struck in the face of despair.

"The exact meaning of giving away a crown are still unclear," Prince Louis of Creusens calmly said.

The Prince of Creusens was one of Amadis' – now Rozala's perhaps – and somehow managed to make a suit of armour quite obviously fitted to him look too large for his frame. He had a scholarly look about him, and his russet eyes were calm even if half his face was a swelling bruise and he was being careful not to put weight on one of his legs. Too delicate-looking a man for me to find him attractive, I thought, but he was not unpleasant to look at.

"Would it mean abdication, Your Majesty?" he asked me outright. "The surrender of our sovereign lands to one of the fae, or even yourself? An offer so imprecise cannot truly be entertained."

"A trinket will have to be offered," I said. "But what you will be surrendering, in truth, is rather more abstract: it is you 'right to rule'."

"To clarify," Prince Louis calmly said, "such a gesture will not in and of itself mean abdication?"

"It most definitely does not," the Tyrant grinned. "And don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

"It will, save if you are fools," the Grey Pilgrim said.

For once, the sight of every prince and princess there unconsciously shifting to face him more fully did not bring out irritation. The respect that Tariq

commanded and one of the oldest and perhaps the most famous living hero on Calernia was, for once, aiding me.

"Chosen," Princess Rozala said, "I would request your guidance in understanding this. I cannot and will not condemn the people of Aequitan to a grisly fate, not even for victory this day."

"Hardly a victory, that we dance one and all to the Black Queen's tune," the Prince of Orense scoffed.

Early fifties, this one, and the long brown hair that went down to his shoulders was also bound in a bun behind his head. Prince Rodrigo of Orense, of who I knew very little save that his open scorning of the First Prince in a formal vote had been the talk of the Principate in my absence – and not in a manner that was flattering for him, considering it was Cordelia Hasenbach who'd put an end to the Levantine raids that'd ravaged the south of his principality.

"You never were much of dancer, Rodrigo," Prince Arnaud of Cantal disdainfully said. "Leave this to your betters, would you?"

Ah, *that* fucker. Though not one of the royals here with true authority, Prince Arnaud Brogloise had raised my hackles more than once in the past. He was, at the very least, a prodigiously skilled actor. After the Battle of the Camps, when I'd still had the benefit of fae senses, I'd noted that his heartbeat never rose even when he was seemingly furious or busy shouting.

"Arnaud," Princess Rozala sharply bit out. "Chosen, I apologize for the interruption."

The Prince of Cantal look appropriately chided, though a mite resentful, and once more I wondered how much of it was an act if not the whole cloth. Rodrigo of Orense's lips quirked a tad smugly, but seemingly content with that intervening victory he pursued the conversation no further.

"You are forgiven," the Tyrant magnanimously allowed.

"Though the earthly crown will not be taken from your brow, save if you yourself do so, you will have lost the authority of a ruler in the eyes of the Heavens," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Lingering in that role after discarding it before Gods and men can only bring calamity."

"I figure it'd be subtle at first," I said. "Small nudges. Crops get a little worse, people listen a little less. If you keep holding, though, then it's a different story."

"Disease and strife," the Peregrine said, "and they will only grow, so long as authority is kept."

"To clarify," Prince Louis spoke once more, echoing his own words, "abdicating in favour of kin would ward off this... curse?"

"It would," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Though ever bearing another crown would birth it anew."

The Prince of Creusens then, to my surprise, turned to me as if seeking confirmation. I nodded, as to the best of my knowledge it was true. His lips thinned, and I caught his muscles twitching as he stopped himself from looking at someone for guidance. By the looks of it, I mused as I gauged the angle, it

would have been Princess Rozala. One of hers, then. Said Princess of Aequitan was standing tall, fingers clenched, and met my gaze eye to eye.

"Foundling," she said.

"Rozala," I replied.

"This... lunacy of a land you speak of making," the Princess of Aequitan said. "Will you allow passage through it to any who would use it to fight the Dead King?"

"That will not be mine to decide," I said, "but I will bare sword to enforce such a term, should it come to that."

"The Kingdom of Callow and its allies will refrain from making war on the Grand Alliance, until the peace conference is ended?" Princess Rozala pressed.

"Safe in Callow's defence, or that of its allies," I agreed.

The other woman's jaw grew tight, eyes burning with something that was half fear and half fury.

"There is horror to the north, Catherine Foundling, the likes of which you cannot yet grasp," Princess Rozala Malanza said. "We war now against the Crown of the Dead not for *pride* or *right* or *faith*, but for the ugly prize of scant survival. In that struggle, Black Queen, do you claim to be friend or foe?"

"If your Grand Alliance makes accord with me, Princess of Aequitan," I softly said, "oh, what howling ruin I will visit upon the King of Death. I have dooms in my arsenal that the world will shake of them."

She breathed out shakily and straightened her back.

"Your word, Foundling," Rozala Malanza asked, eyes on mine.

"On my oath," I quietly replied.

Fingers steady, she unmade the claps of her helmet and ripped it off her head. Tossed, it flew and landed at my feet in a sprawl a snow.

"That's one," the Princess of Aequitan. "Ram it down his fucking throat, Black Queen. Hard enough that even in Keter they will hear the sound of our coming wroth."

"Malanza," Princess Sophie hissed, "you cannot simply-"

"It would be," Rozala said, "cheap at twice the price."

In the heartbeat that followed, I saw the lay of the royalty around them clear as day. Those whose gaze held admiration, but also misgivings: Louis of Creusens, Leonor of Valencis. Those who were moved to contempt instead, Bertille of Lange and Rodrigo of Orense. Arnaud of Cantal's face was befuddlement incarnate, though the sudden turn had surprised him enough the confusion for once did not reach his eyes. As for Sophie of Lyonis, she was a battlefield of fear and shame. *This*, I thought, *is why you are followers. Why even though the First Prince fears and mislikes her, it Rozala Malanza who was given the command.* And I would not let bravery, let sacrifice, pass unremarked. Not when I had the means of doing otherwise. Leaning on my staff, I limped forward and bent the knee long enough to catch the edge of Malanza's helmet. Catching her eye with mine, I tossed it back. She caught it, I thought, out of reflex.

"Foundling-" she began.

"Ivah," I simply said.

My Lord of Silent Steps without a word, and stepped out of my shadow as if it'd been laying within it. In its hands was held a crown of ivory and gold, the front set with a heavy topaz upon which a heraldic griffin had been carved. Behind me, Kairos began softly laughing. I held out my hand, and the drow placed the crown on it before offering a bow and vanishing behind a fresh veil of illusions.

"The crown of Iserre, offered by Amadis Milenan," I said. "Rozala Malanza alone of seven did not flinch, when sacrifice was asked. For that, she keeps her crown."

I could have waited until the others had been talked or coerced into giving their own crowns, but I'd felt in my gut I should not. I was not certain, though, whether this was one of the instincts that'd served me so well when navigating stories or simply because it would have been beneath all involved to give Rozala Malanza the honour her due as a trick instead of a forthright display.

"*Connerie*," Princess Bertille sneered. "You do not dictate to sitters of the Highest Assembly, Damned. Let Malanza waste her rights as she so desired, for I will not give mine."

"You presume much, Bertille," Prince Rodrigo snorted. "Not even ally to her cause, and you are to be exempt? I think not. At least I-"

"Enough," Princess Sophie snarled. "I will not have such disorder. The Princess of Lange is correct in that a foreigner may not speak to the affairs of the Principate. We will, among ourselves, discuss who should be exempt."

I looked at the Princess of Aequitan, then and what I saw on her face grieved me. Nothing in the loss of a crown moved me to sorrow, for I had little taste for mine and no reverence for those who'd earned their own by mere happenstance of birth. It was the raw, bleak disappointment I saw in a respected adversary as she stared the truth of her home in the eye. That, even as the sky was falling down on their heads, there were princes and princesses of Procer who would rather squabble than look up.

"It could be put to a vote," Princess Leonor of Valencis hesitantly said. "As is our way."

Something in Rozala Malanza's eye dimmed a little as the fourth voice of seven gave weight to the dispute. From the corner of my eye I saw the Tyrant of Helike writhing as if having a harsh episode of the shakes, but it was only barely held in laughter that had him convulsing. He silently mouthed thanks at me.

"Shame on you all," the Grey Pilgrim quietly said.

For a moment, the old man's resounding disappointment gave them pause. But only for a moment, because even a hero's chiding weighed short of a crown kept on the scales of the powerful.

"Chosen do not rule, in the Principate," the Prince of Orense said. "Much less those born in Levant. With all due respect, Grey Pilgrim, you have already

overstepped tonight in presuming to speak for the First Prince of Procer. Let us not further-"

A bundle fell at my feet with dull thump. A straight-edge cavalry sword, wrapped in a cloak.

"I had," Louis Rohanon pensively said, "genuinely believed myself to be a decent man, until tonight."

The silence in the wake of his words was loud.

"And still I hesitated," the man who'd been the Prince of Creusens ruefully said. "If this is the truth of us, my friends, then we have no business wearing crowns."

"A delicate heart ever bleeds," Princess Bertille snorted. "Bled all the way out, it seems. Keep your empty sentimentalities to yourself, Rohanon-"

"Shame on you all," the Grey Pilgrim said, and the light in his eyes as he spoke was the coldest manner of mercy.

The old man took one step forward, the butt of his staff leaving the ground.

"Raise your hand to a sitter of the Highest Assembly and there will be war, Levantine," Prince Rodrigo warned.

"He's right," the Saint of Swords casually said, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Go for a walk, Tariq."

"Laurence-"

"You, Sorcerer," the Princess of Lange barked, face gone pale with fright. "Are you not a chosen of the Heavens? Will you simply allow this lunatic thug to murder-"

The knife sliced her throat open without much of a spill, for Prince Arnaud Brogloise of Cantal had a steady hand.

"*Arnaud*?" the Prince of Orense gulped out.

The Prince of Cantal waited until the Princess of Lange had fallen to the ground before kneeling at her side, ignoring her dying gasps in favour of opening the clasp of her sheathed sword and taking it off her belt. He tossed it at my feet.

"Will this suffice?" he calmly asked, wiping his bloody knife on his forearm.

"It will," I agreed.

"You'll get the Regal Kindness for this, Brogloise," Princess Sophie darkly said. "I'll ask the First Prince the right to force it down your throat myself."

"Unlikely," the Prince of Cantal noted, pawing at his armour and producing a small scroll stamped with a seal. "By the decree of Her Most Serene Highness Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer and Warden of the West, I have been granted prior and absolute amnesty for all actions taken in the preservation of the Principate, as well as plenipotentiary power to treat with foreign powers in her name."

"You were one of hers," Princess Rozala faintly said. "Gods, Arnaud, for how long?"

"Hers, yours, Milenan's," the Prince of Cantal bitingly said. "What childish way of thinking. My only concern, Rozala Malanza, is the preservation of the Principate of Procer. What could possibly matter even remotely as much?"

Cool eyes turned to the other royals who had been bickering, until moments ago.

"Must I murder every last one of you, or will a blade at your throat prompt a sudden swell of heroism?" Prince Arnaud mildly asked.

"I like him," Kairos mused. "He's got that, what do you call it?"

"Cold-blooded ruthlessness," I said.

"No, that's not it. Ah, a *knife*," the Tyrant of Helike said. "He's got a knife."

Princess Leonor of Valencis had taken off her gauntlets, and her fingers were working on her ornate silver-enamelled helm. What I had taken for a decorative circlet soldered onto it turned out to be a silver tiara cleverly set into furrows. The Arlesite princess tossed it onto the pile at my feet, smile mirthless.

"What a slaughter of thrones you have made of this night, Black Queen," she bitterly said. "A princes' graveyard, shallow dug at your behest."

I looked at her then, truly looked at her. She had been among those who had admired Malanza's character even as she balked at emulating it, and for that she had earned more than simply my contempt. No layabout royal, this one, for closer survey revealed hands calloused from the arts of war and scars on her skin that had the make of blades. Her eyes were not cowed, even in loss, and even in her earlier quibblings she had not been spineless. *And yet*. I looked at Leonor of Valencis and what I saw was good blood, old blood, conqueror's blood – gilded history, ancient triumphs erected into throne. I saw a woman who'd been taught of *rights* alongside right, privilege perhaps not unkindly borne but never once questioned. I thought of the High Lords, then, and of something Hakram had once told me under a moonlit sky. *And they expected to win, too*, he'd said, speaking of our enemy. *Don't they always? Sooner or later, better blood wins out.*

And I couldn't mend that, I knew, because it was not in my hands to shape this world like clay – and it was, perhaps, for the best that it was not. It belonged to more than me, that sprawl of terror and wonderment, of pettiness and valour. It would take more than an orphan girl from Laure to make something new of it, no matter what powers I came to wield. But now and then, I thought, now and then I could wield the knife my father had pressed into my hand all those years ago. And if it was not always given to me to bring something beautiful into Creation, then at least I could expunge some unseemly piece of it. *You are part of this, Leonor of Valencis*, I thought. *Of this land of robber princes and hungry wars, of a tapestry of rapacious ambition so despised it took Akua's Folly for you to be trusted again. It might be that among your kind you are one of the betters ones, but even should you not be guilty you would remain complicit.*

Let them be thankful I had only taken crowns, for I could have taken a great deal more and lost not sleep over it. The only inheritance I'd ever cared

to claim was steady hand and an indignant rage that had cowed kingdoms, and within it there was not a speck of mercy for the likes of Leonor of Valencis.

"Tremble then, o ye mighty," I coldly replied, "for a new age is upon you."

Rodrigo Trastanes wrapped his sword in a banner, before adding it to the pile. Sophie Louvroy ripped twin ornate silver wings off her gorget and shot me a burning glare after dropping them. Arnaud Brogloise, face betraying not a flicker of amusement, offered the knife still freshly touched by the lifeblood of the Princess of Lange. And with that, seven crowns had been laid at my feet – they were, now, mine to pass on if I so wished. I went looking through my cloak, producing a bundle of wakeleaf that ended up nestled nicely in my pipe. I passed a palm over it, added a flicker of Night shaped into flame and inhaled with a little sigh of pleasure. Expectant gazes had been turned on me, now that my scheme had borne first fruit. Pilgrim, Saint, Sorcerer, Tyrant. And myself, nameless but high priestess of unruly goddesses. I blew out a stream of smoke.

"Now," I said, "shall we go on an adventure?"

Behind me a breach into Arcadia tore opened.

So it began.

# Bonus Chapter: Peers

> "It was then I understood: it is a fundamental flaw in Creation that other people can disagree with me, and I must fix that mistake."
>
> Dread Emperor Imperious

The sack over his head was gently removed, which meant the hand was not the Saint's. Dear old Laurence liked to surprise him with the glare of daylight against his unprepared eyes, when she could, and Amadeus last remembered being spelled into slumber at evening time. As always, the former Black Knight took a languid moment to assess the state of his captivity: feet bound, chest bound but, to his surprise, though his hands were still bound they were no longer behind his back. Interesting. They'd never done this before.

"It is not a kind thing to say, but I've always found autumn in these parts to be a foul season," the Grey Pilgrim said.

Amadeus did not immediately reply. Their surroundings, he thought, were worth a second look. Under a gate of raised stones – three slabs of granite, the capstone supported by the other two almost incongruously large – he'd been propped up against one of the supports and arrayed so that he would be looking at an endless expanse of starry night. They were atop a hill or man-made barrow, he decided, for the sodden plains below were distant. If they were still in Iserre, which Amadeus suspected to be the case, then this should be one of the 'Mavian prayers' he'd read of: old Alamans tribal monuments many an Imperial scholar has suspected of being tied to the fae in some manner. Well, this was a pleasant surprise. He'd meant to have a look at one while he passed through the region, but the demands of the campaign had not allowed.

"It was always an interesting time, where I was born," Amadeus noted.

Autumn had been the last gasps of the war season, in the Green Stretch. Once upon a time that'd meant raiding parties from the Blessed Isle riding east under the banner of the White Hand, or companies of miserable legionaries trudging down the old Miezan roads to their winter quarters facing the Wasaliti. His birthland's status as the granary of Praes meant its freeholders were under the protection of the Tower, and so spared many of the issues farmers and villagers would usually face when soldiers passed through their lands. That protection was no shield for the consequences of paladins and legionaries

skirmishing in the region, though, or of the sharp rise in banditry that would often follow larger clashes between Callow and Praes. Still, for all the roving wolves on two feet Amadeus had much preferred autumn to spring. Soldiers, even deserters, could be bargained with. Not so the floods that followed broken levees, or the thick morasses of cloying mud they left behind. His family's freehold had not been so close to the river as to risk yearly flooding, but the scuttling and swarming vermin those disasters had brought had been just as dangerous in some ways.

"I'll confess no surprise to the revelation that Proceran weather suits you ill, however," he added.

Green eyes flicked down to the bemusing sight of the Grey Pilgrim stoking the flames of small fire but a few feet to the side, trying to prod wet logs into burning like dry ones. Cautiously positioned under the large granite capstone, the two of them along with that campfire would be safe from the rain Amadeus' damp clothes suggested had burdened their day.

"Don't get me wrong," the Pilgrim said, "the night sky around here is a wonder. It's the miserable, cold wetness of it I can't stand. Sinks into my bones, these days."

"I am told it will not snow even at the peak of winter, in most of Levant," Amadeus said, genuinely curious.

Most of the few books entirely dedicated to the region where the Dominion now stood dated back to the golden age of Praesi scholarship, under Dread Emperor Sorcerous. Which meant that while at least they accounted for the changes that'd followed the creation of the Titan's Pond by the strife between Triumphant and the Gigantes, they were also on average seven centuries old. More recent works were either pieced together from the accounts of traders or outright borrowed from foreign sources, such as the notoriously unreliable Proceran scholars.

"Not exactly," the old man laughed. "We'll get snowfall south of Tartessos, now and then, but it rarely lasts the day. Melts quickly. Once in a blue moon a blizzard will tumble down the slopes of the Titanomachy and the afterbirth will touch a shore of the Pond, but that is a much rarer occurrence."

"I'd never seen true snowfall before my first winter in Callow," Amadeus admitted. "It was quite jarring."

"Mine was in Orense," the Pilgrim fondly said. "I was pursuing this Arlesite warlock who'd cooked up a scheme to hold towns for ransom with this swarm of insects he'd enchanted to be full of diseases."

"I take it they were not enchanted to be cold-proof," the dark-haired man said, openly amused.

"Whole swarm died overnight," the Peregrine chuckled. "He tried to make the remains into some sort of disease-carrying monster, but I caught him halfway through the ritual."

"I was never impressed with the fibre of Proceran villainy," Amadeus noted. "Malicia and I looked into making alliance in the region, when it became clear

the crusade was inevitable, but it was bare picking all around."

"There's a pirate on the Segovian coast, I believe," the Pilgrim said.

"The Ghastly Marauder," he agreed. "Wouldn't hear of taking either gold or information from the Tower, said it'd bring down either yourself or the Saint on his head. There was a promising sorceress in Tenerife, but the Tyrant had her captured and sealed in a barrel full of leeches."

The older man winced. For a hero who must have tried some rather nasty lairs over the years, he was still surprisingly tender-hearted. Amadeus himself had been inured to the sight of spiders eating people alive before he'd reached twenty. On the rare occasions when Nefarious remembered he was supposed to rule the Empire, he often had a few members of the Imperial court tossed into the arachnid pits and attendance had been, in a sense, mandatory – the Chancellor would pass along the names of any absent to the point the Emperor at them when he next felt like stabbing at shadows. No, after so many years in Praes the mere mention of a cruel method of execution would buy no reaction from him.

"That boy has a nasty streak even for a Theodosian," the Pilgrim sighed.

"Ours is an uncivil time," Amadeus replied, tone droll.

"Aren't they all?" the hero tiredly said.

Even as they conversed, the Duni continued to consider his situation. He could hear, in the distance, the sound of the rest of the party settling in a camp of their own. Given that he was currently atop a hill surrounded by water-logged plains, escape was unfeasible save if heavy rain started to fall. There was not even a drizzle, at the moment, though by the thick humidity of the air Amadeus suspected it was only a matter of time until the autumn showers began anew.

"It is not my execution you intend," the green-eyed man calmly said. "If so, there would have been better occasions."

And it was unlikely the Grey Pilgrim himself would do the deed, Amadeus did not say, for when Catherine returned from her journey that might just lead to the Peregrine's skull splattered all over Proceran grounds. She was not particularly prone to mercy when cut deep, and while Amadeus was rather amused that he posed more threat to the Peregrine as a dead mentor to be avenged than a living former villain in the man's custody he doubted the hero was unaware of the fact. He might be, of course, which was why Amadeus had said nothing. If he was to be killed, it might as well be of some use.

"No," the Grey Pilgrim calmly said. "That is not what I intend."

Amadeus cocked his head to the side.

"Is this an attempt at redemption, then?" the Duni drawled. "Truly, Tariq, I am flattered by the implicit compliment but-"

"I can see in you, Amadeus of the Green Stretch," the Peregrine softly interrupted. "Repentance is foreign to your nature, as it often is the worst of your kind. I would not waste either our hours on such a fool's errand."

He cocked an eyebrow.

"Then what, exactly, is your purpose?" Amadeus asked, honestly puzzled.

"You are one of the oldest living villains on Calernia," the Pilgrim said.

Alaya was older than he by a year and eight months, the Duni thought, and Hye by a great deal more than that – though it would be an oversimplification to call Hye Su truly one of Below's, in his humble opinion. It seemed, Amadeus thought, that the Pilgrim was in fact correct. Every other villain he knew of was younger than him by either years or decades.

"So I am," Amadeus said. "Though that was an observation and not an answer."

"Come dawn, Laurence is going to sever your soul from your earthly coil," the Pilgrim calmly said. "What will follow that, you need not know, but I will say that this may very well be the last time we will ever speak."

The Duni's eyebrow arched.

"Alas, and our acquaintance had barely begun," he replied.

"In a way, this could be called a vigil," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Yet I will confess to more selfish motive – you are, perhaps, the closest equivalent to a peer I have in the service of the Gods Below. It would be a waste, to never speak more than a handful of sentences to you."

Amadeus cocked his head to the side, thinking of the last conversation he'd ever had with Ranker. A Marshal of the Legions of Terror, true, but that was almost the least of what she had been to him. And the last he'd ever seen of her was as a gasping, bloody ruin on a sickbed through an unsteady scrying mirror. The man who'd birthed the plague that took her, that took the two thousand soldiers Amadeus had led into the trap only he had been deemed *fit* to survive, was now addressing him like the thin pretence of civility between them was anything but that. A pretence. *If you can see in me, Pilgrim, can you glimpse the thoroughness of the extinction I will visit upon you given chance?* The man who had been the Black Knight smiled, affably, and the sight of the other man's eyes tightening was the only answer he needed.

"By all means, Pilgrim. I am your captive audience," Amadeus said.

"The others will not-"

"How like a hero," the dark-haired man casually interrupted, "to first name me a peer and then proceed to treat me the simpleton."

There was no apology in him for the sharpness of his tone. The Peregrine and his delightful right hand the Lady de Montfort had spent this entire journey keeping him away from the younger members of their band, there had never been any question of any of them now being in attendance for this indulgence of the Pilgrim's. The man in grey robes wryly smiled.

"Not unearned," he conceded. "I assume that there will be terms, Carrion Lord?"

"I am hardly that anymore," Amadeus amusedly replied. "I offer you the fairest terms I know, Pilgrim: a question for a question."

"That is civil of you," the older man replied without a hint of irony.

Amadeus made himself think of taking in hand a stone and smashing it against the Peregrine's skull until it burst open like an overripe fruit. He considered the matter vividly, seeing to every detail, and then smiled amicably at the hero.

"That," Tariq said, "was a great deal less civil."

"Your turn," Amadeus replied.

Though these days his body was a simple sack of meat with infuriatingly feeble senses, the Duni had been careful to watch for any use of Light or artefact and caught sight of nothing. Which meant this little trick of the hero's was either an aspect or a gift from Above. At the very least, it did not seem to be outright mind or memory reading. Perhaps a particularly discerning sort of empathy, Amadeus considered, though given the man's age, breadth of travel and ties to a Choir it might be something more exotic or outright unheard of.

"I am told," the Pilgrim said, "that you are an intelligent man, and prize reason."

Amadeus' lips quirked in dry amusement.

"Intelligence is simple memory and cleverness, neither of which are half so glorified on their own," he replied. "It should be no different with the pairing of them."

"But the prizing of reason you do not deny," the Peregrine stated.

"Insofar as the application of it is useful," Amadeus acknowledged.

"Then, to be a villain and so cast your lot with them, you must believe in the teachings of the Gods Below," the older man replied. "What it is, I ask, that you find of worth in them?"

The dark-haired prisoner laughed.

"Simply by asking that question, you have already failed in what you seek to accomplish," he said.

The Peregrine's brow creased, but he did not grow irritated with the answer. He would be, Amadeus suspected, a particularly boring man to needle. The Saint was much more entertaining in that regard.

"I do not understand," Tariq admitted.

"You consider Below as if it were simply a wicked mirror of Above, and seek to understand it by terms it fundamentally does not recognize," Amadeus said. "Considering the differences in how Named of our respective... sympathies form, I suppose that is an excusable mistake but it is one that precludes ever gaining perspective on the matter."

"You are a villain," the Pilgrim slowly said. "You are, therefore, a champion of Below. What is it that you champion?"

They both knew Amadeus to be Nameless, though the Duni suspected that was considered a minor detail compared to his decades as the Black Knight.

"You have put your finger on the crux of the matter," he said. "As a mortal you championed the ideals of Above – or at least some middling section of them – and fit a particular grove, which as a consequence saw you bestowed power as a blessing to further that cause."

"A gross oversimplification," the Pilgrim soberly replied. "Though technically not incorrect."

"I was – am, I suppose – a villain," Amadeus said. "And as a mortal, by acquiring power I became worthy of blessing. That is the fundamental difference between your kind and mine, Pilgrim: your Name was a coronation while mine was a confirmation."

"You argue, then, that the only teaching of Below is the acquisition of power," the other man said.

"Teaching," the prisoner sighed. "You speak the word anew as if repetition will make the saddle fit the beast. There are no teachings, Pilgrim, that is the point exact. The exercise of power, of will, is not *given* meaning. It must be ascribed. That has led to some rather unusual or horrifying uses, I'll concede, but in my eyes that is more a reflection of human nature than of Below's."

"You would absolve your Gods of guilt?" Tariq said, sounding surprised.

"You would absolve humanity of responsibility?" Amadeus asked, scornful. "The deferral of consequence to higher power is the deepest form of moral cowardice conceivable. Even your precious Book agrees, Pilgrim – we have a *choice*."

"And knowing this, you still choose to commit evil," the Grey Pilgrim said.

"And there we reach impasse once more," he noted. "For you seem to consider some form of goodness our natural state, and so committing an evil a willful deviation from that state. I find such a notion utterly repugnant."

"Are we born evil, then and only taught to be good?" Tariq pressed.

Amadeus felt a sliver of irritation and willfully curbed his tongue, knowing this lack of sympathy for slow students was one of the reasons he was particularly ill-suited to teaching.

"We are born nothing, and taught a set of... rules for a lack of better term, that allow us to determine what is acceptable behaviour and what is not," the prisoner said. "What irks me, Pilgrim, is your insistence that these rules are a set of virtues inherent to the fabric Creation instead of covenant between mortals for mortal purposes."

"Your conception of Creation," the Pilgrim said, "is utterly barren of morality. It is without principle, without faith, without a single ounce of justice. Is it, in a word, *dirt*."

Amadeus had no intention of engaging on the matter of justice – the last time he'd ventured an argument on the subject, the Seraphim had slapped him down through a paved street and left him to bleed to death.

"Indeed," he casually agreed, unwilling to pursue the debate that if any of the things the Pilgrim had named were inherent instead of ascribed, they became utterly meaningless. "Now, I do believe I am owed quite the question given how your own has considerably strayed."

"So it has," the Pilgrim amicably conceded.

"I have made a study of you," Amadeus said. "And though you've left mostly rumour behind I believe you've operated in southern Calernia, as well as the

upper reaches of the Principate, for more than forty years. You came into your Name before Dread Emperor Nefarious claimed the Tower."

"More than forty years is accurate," the Peregrine drily said.

"In that span of time," the prisoner casually said, "did any villain in those regions achieve particular prominence?"

The Pilgrim cocked his head to the side, considering the matter.

"The Barrow Lord threatened to take the northern half of Levant for the better part of a summer," he said. "The Princess of Cantal was murdered and then impersonated by the Face-Thief for half a year before they were caught."

"In summation, the highest peak was a secret victory that did not even last a year?" Amadeus asked.

"Arguably," Tariq agreed.

"Interesting," he murmured. "My thanks."

The Pilgrim frowned.

"Why did you ask?" he said.

"Merely a theory of mine," Amadeus said.

He knew the hero would glimpse in him the intent to wound, yet also that it was no less true for it. Curiosity, he thought, would do the rest.

"And that theory is?" the Pilgrim patiently asked.

"That you, and to a lesser extent the Saint of Swords, are at least partly responsible the current invasion of the Dead King," Amadeus said.

The older man stared at him unblinking, for it was not the dark-haired man's body that would be of interest but whatever sight he used to truthtell. The prisoner smiled, discerning the very moment the Grey Pilgrim realized there was not so much as a hint of a lie. His face went ashen.

"Why?" the Levantine croaked.

"You have been a singularly effective agent for Good in broad and your Choir in particular," Amadeus said. "To the extent that you've just admitted to me that for a span of at least forty years you effectively snuffed out effective villain in over half of Calernia. Did you truly think, Tariq, that this would go without *consequence*?"

"The Hidden Horror has ignored longer stretches of peace in the past," the Pilgrim said. "And Praes achieved resurgence."

"So it did, in a manner of speaking," Amadeus noted. "It was the only Calernian surface region where you and the Saint weren't active, after all. Though, of course, as soon as the civil war in Procer ended the Tenth Crusade was declared and the last major active Evil polity on Calernia risked being ended. Perhaps permanently, given the lessons of the last crusader occupation of the Wasteland."

"Callow could not be allowed to be consumed, Carrion Lord," the hero harshly said. "All that suffering was brought by the very Conquest you led."

"It must be infuriating, to realize that sometimes the balance swings the other way," the villain smiled. "That victory can be perilous for your side as well."

The Peregrine's hands tightened.

"I could be wrong, of course," the prisoner said. "It is only a theory, though one informed by facts and my decades of experience as a villain."

"You could have kept this up your sleeve," Tariq said. "Is that not your way? Secrets hoarded until they can be used?"

"Her name," Amadeus mildly said, "was Ranker of the Hungry Dog tribe. She was a vicious and mistrusting and often unpleasant, but she was also my friend. I loved her, you see, in my own crooked way. And she died choking on her own blood from your plague."

"She was a soldier," the Grey Pilgrim said.

"She was," he agreed. "And so I do not cry of unfairness. And yet."

The prisoner leaned forward, green eyes glimmering with something cold and hateful and utterly patient.

"So sleep well, Tariq Fleet-foot, wondering what *utter ruin* your good intentions might have wrought," Amadeus hissed. "For I loved her nonetheless, and she is dead by your hand."

# Chapter 35

# Colloquy

> "Forty-three: if your band is split during a harrowing test set by a villain or ambiguous entity, you may safely assume you will next be reunited in some sort of cell or unfolding sacrificial ritual."
>
> "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

It was a funny thing, perspective. What Hierophant had stolen from Arcadia was a drop in the ocean, a piece of eternity that became something less by being removed from the whole. Looking at it with my own eyes, though, the scale of what he'd wrought was worthy of awe. A kingdom's worth of badlands, consumed by howling squalls and the aftermaths of sorcery until the very grounds were made barren. I'd walked only the very edge of this land, but it'd been enough to tell me that it would take weeks if not months to go from one end to another. And it would fall on Creation, a cataclysmic doom on Iserre, if anchor was not fashioned before the tipping point. To accomplish that most important of tasks, an army would have been too much but a single person too little. And so, in a pattern nearly as old as the First Dawn, a band of five had been called. Of those chosen few I would not speak of myself, but the others? It was not small names – or Names – that had been assembled to turn back doom.

The Tyrant of Helike, an odd-eyed madman who'd pulled at the strings of nations and tricked an entity older than the city that'd birthed him. Weak of constitution, sickly and feeble, he did not walk with the others but instead leisurely sat a throne held up by a throng of eerily-intelligent animated stone gargoyles. The ornate scepter in his hand was the least of the artifacts at his disposal, though the only visible, for the villain had inherited a veritable trove of lunacy and wealth from the Theodosians of centuries past. And yet, for all that, I suspected the deadliest things remained his tongue and the mind that but purpose to it. As if making of mockery of this entire war, the Tyrant wore not armour but instead kingly brocaded robes in gold and scarlet, match for the ornate ruby-set crown on his brow and his misformed eye even deeper red.

The Grey Pilgrim needed no introduction, I supposed. The oldest living Calernian hero and favourite agent of the Choir of Mercy. There was a terrifying amount of power in that wizened frame, and the crooked staff of ashwood he bore, but it was the Peregrine himself that was the true terror. He was a weaver of stories in dusty grey robes with second sight and a choir's worth of angels whispering secrets in his ear. He was incorruptible, implacable and while in body he might just be an exhausted old man his deep knowledge of miracles and deeper well of power allowed him a mystifying breadth of capabilities that only strengthened when exercised to save another. Though near a king in the eyes of his people, his shoes were worn leather and he wore not a single adornment save white locks atop his head.

What more need be said of Saint of Swords, after saying she had once cut the fabric of Winter itself? Oh, like the Pilgrim her years were slowing her down but the vitality of her prime had been replaced by the kind of unbroken certainty that in a Named was a hundredfold more dangerous than muscle. I would never like her, but the Saint was a heroine who has faced sword in hand and slain things whose mere sight would put lesser souls to flight. She was one of the finest blades alive, capable of cutting through sorcery and steel and the fabric of Creation with the plain longsword at her hip, and she had tempered her soul and body into a domain whose existence made her halfway unkillable – and explained why she disdained armour in favour of a plain pale tabard over a darker collared tunic.

The last one, the Rogue Sorcerer, was taciturn mystery who'd faced two of the most infamous villains of our age – in all humility, Akua Sahelian and myself – without taking a wound, revealing an aspect or ever being in danger of death. He'd been able to fend off Diabolist's ritual attempts to find my father, proved capable of guiding armies through a dying shard of Arcadia and was, to my knowledge, the only person not complicit or in my service to have figured out it was a Keter's Due that filled the sky. That someone so plainly competent was almost unheard of meant the man was being purposefully discreet, and given my teachers I knew how lethal Named who went out of their way to keep their abilities quiet tended to be. The long coat of leather over practical chain mail and less practical silks of many colours was kept close to his frame, though there were shapes to be discerned beneath. Over his shoulder was hung a heavy bag bearing seven mortal crowns, carried on my behalf.

It should have been a formal affair, this journey, something solemn and dignified.

"So is it true you used to knock boots with the Iron Prince?" Kairos cheerfully asked. "I'm not usually one to bring up salacious rumours, but-"

I ignored the bald lie he'd spoken and instead kept a wary eye one the Saint's sword hand. Which was, unsurprisingly, on the pommel of said sword. That tended to happen whenever the Tyrant talked, though to be fair we'd only just entered this realm and already I was tempted to let her. I glanced at her face, though, and found it wrinkled as usual but also irritated this time. *I bet*

*it's true*, I thought. *All those late evenings killing ratlings under moonlight?* Hasenbach honestly wasn't much of a looker – though she wasn't exactly plain either – but her uncle might wear those broad shoulders a little better.

"Black Queen," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "Am I correct in presuming that the broken tower is our destination?"

He was speaking a little too loudly for this to be entirely about him asking me a question. Still, he was pointing in the right direction so I actually followed his finger and nodded after a confirmatory look. The wasteland here was not entirely plains with a few distant mountains, there were other inclines. It was simply hard to see them, sometimes, buried as they were in ash and dust and smoke. Even far out from the great storms as we were, the winds would be slapping great heaps of those at our sides if not for the small glow dangling from the tip of the Pilgrim's staff like an amulet of solid Light. Unlike the protection Sve Noc had taught me to make, his did not impose a bubble of stillness around us. It... eased the winds into slowing, so that when they reached us they were little more than a warm breeze carrying nothing at all. It was a more elegant solution, though when we'd get to breaching the great storms I suspected my method would be more effective.

"It is," I said. "I'm impressed you can recognize it as a tower, to be honest."

If I hadn't been there earlier with my Hunt in attendance, I would not have. All that was visible of the tower now under a hill's worth of ash and dust was a square house of stone with a broken tile roof jutting out form the grey. There'd been glass windows on the sides once, but they had not survived the first catastrophe to hit them years ago and even the last sticking bits were like ground-down teeth in an open maw through which the wasteland's winds poured through.

"The slate tiles and sandstone are not unfamiliar to me," the hero said. "They were a noticeable feature of Liesse."

The nicer parts of it, anyway, I mentally corrected.

"You've been there before," I said.

"Once, years ago," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "I had hear that the secret tomes of the Wizard of the West had been found, and were to be auctioned by a Liessen guild."

Not one of the legal ones, I thought with a snort. Books written on the subject of magic had been heavily restricted under Black and confiscated whenever found, though there'd been monetary compensation so Callowans hadn't really cared unless they were wizards. In which case they already had greater reasons to be afraid of the Carrion Lord than books, no matter their subject. This, though, a hero's ancient tomes put up for auction in largest southern Callowan city but also the only one under an Imperial governor? Knowing my teacher like I did, that story could only be headed one way.

"It was a trap," I said.

"It was a trap," the Sorcerer sighed. "I nearly died twice fleeing the 'auction' and lost a fortune's worth of..."

He paused.

"No matter," he said. "Still, the city was a memorable enough sight."

I glanced at him.

"Did you get one of the books?" I asked.

"I did," the hero disgruntledly said. "It was only a transcript of some Praesi trial involving tapirs, and to add insult to injury the Warlock wove a tracking enchantment into it."

I very carefully hid my smile. I had some suspicions as to who had chosen the contents of the book, at least. Regardless, we had arrived. We'd also pulled slightly ahead of the others as we talked, though they caught up quick enough.

"- in a way wouldn't that make you Cordelia's aunt?" Kairos enthusiastically said. "You're practically royalty yourself, Laurence."

The Saint's fingers twitched, but sadly I still needed the Tyrant and he was bound to have some contingencies that'd cripple us if he was actually attacked – I doubted he would have agreed to come otherwise, or kept taunting the old zealot so insistently. Gritting my teeth I prepared to step in, but before I could the Grey Pilgrim quietly laughed. The sound had the Saint's shoulders loosening, though the Sorcerer's tightened instead.

"I knew your father, Kairos," the Peregrine quietly said. "Were you aware?"

"You've not exactly been chaste in the array of stories you'll get involved in, Tariq," the Tyrant amusedly said, flopping a wrist dismissively. "Though I'll assume that was before the two of us had our pleasant chat on the matter of succession."

"You remind me of him," the Pilgrim said. "He, too, felt the need to fill silences at any cost."

The Tyrant of Helike went still for less than a heartbeat, and was smiling after as if he'd never ceased, but he'd not been quite quick enough to hide the glint of frozen rage that passed through his eyes at the Pilgrim's words.

"Already a little less bored," Kairos Theodosian grinned. "Not so kindly after all are we, my kindly stranger?"

"If a child pricks his hand picking a rose, it is not maltreatment," the Grey Pilgrim mildly said. "It is a lesson."

Considering that unlike the Tyrant I hadn't just had an old wound prodded at and the wise old man tone was still tiresome to me, that was a sign I needed to step in. I didn't have much sympathy for Kairos, but it would be preferable if every member of this band at least made it to the antechamber of the peril ahead. It'd just be poor form otherwise.

"We've arrived," I called out.

The old man and the young king kept their gaze on each other for a long moment even after I spoke, and I cleared my throat progressively more loudly until they both looked because it sort of sounded like I was choking.

"Now that I have your attention," I rasped out.

I raised a finger, then breathed out a little. Though I was high priestess of Night, unlike the rest of these people I didn't have the ancillary benefits of

Name easing my way through this journey. When ash got into my lungs and mouth, I still choked like a mortal. Still didn't regret that transition in the slightest, mind you. You just couldn't put a price on enjoying a good cup of wine, and not occasionally going mad with Winter.

"When the Hierophant brought Liesse into this place, it was roughly done," I said. "Roughly enough that pieces of the city were sown all over this wasteland."

The Rogue Sorcerer inhaled sharply as he realized where I was headed before the rest. The benefits of having an education in matters magical, I thought, and made note that while the Tyrant's eyes had narrowed he didn't seem have figured it out. I was honestly uncertain whether or not the villain was a mage or not, since I'd never actually seen him use sorcery except through artefacts. At the very least, though he was gifted in his understanding I was now fairly sure even if he was a mage he had not reached High Arcana.

"In Creation that wouldn't mean much, but this place is adrift," I said. "I won't get into too much detail, since it's all very technical-" and even after speaking with Akua twice I still only barley understood what she'd said, "- but given the fluidity of laws this place, and the strength of the story we're riding, the law of sympathy can be leaned on pretty heavily to provide a shortcut."

"That is... inspired," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "We came through Creation, but to emerge elsewhere in this realm we would be walking the boundary between it and Arcadia instead."

I smiled and kept my fingers from clenching. It was a good thing I was intending on remaining on good terms with the Grand Alliance, because if it came down to a fight this one might be too dangerous to keep alive. It'd taken Akua Sahelian, a sorceress that even a one-in-a-century kind of talent like Masego considered brilliant, a direct look at my Lord of Silent Steps using something similar in nature to figure this method out. Ivah had begun something close, that it called 'skittering', back in the Everdark and had refined the trick since into a very dangerous tool. The Rogue Sorcerer had figured out from a bastard description in a matter of moments, and though that didn't mean he'd be able to reproduce the feat that was still a rather nasty knack for comprehending my side's bag of tricks. I'd wanted the Tyrant in this band of five because of the Sorcerer, but now I was wondering if that was going to be as affective a scheme as I'd believed it would be. Not that this was ever going go be anything but a risky roll of the dice, considering there was no one among my fellows I could truly rely on if things went south. Still there'd been no way but leaving Adjutant behind: I needed both the Tyrant and the Sorcerer among the five, since it both gave me the shape of the former's inevitable betrayal and allowed me to get around the diplomatic debacle that would be robbing people I needed to be allies with. No matter how badly they deserved to be robbed.

"Foundling," the Saint of Swords said. "You admitted earlier that your Praesi warlock is possessed by the Hidden Horror, yes?"

"Influenced," I corrected.

"Bit of downplay, that," the Tyrant snorted.

"As far as my people have been able to tell, the Dead King isn't in control most of the time," I said. "Though there seem to be small bursts where he is, it's true, but always for less than a quarter hour. Though for simplicity's sake, it would be best to consider the Hierophant as bewitched."

"And how do you intend to break that bewitchment?" the Saint bluntly asked.

"I can't answer that without crippling the chances it'll actually work," I replied. "But rest assured, I do have a method."

"If he's half as powerful as all," the Saint gestured at the wasteland around us, "this seems to imply, he needs to die. If the Dead King has a way in, he'll remain a risk after even if-"

"Laurence," I interrupted, tone eerily calm, "allow me to be perfectly frank with you: if you so much as scuff his robes, I'll put you down without batting an eye. It's not diplomatic, or all that practical, but I do not tolerate rabid animals snapping their jaws at the people I care about."

She glared at me, eyes burning. I stared back, unblinking. The Saint was exactly the kind of heroine to nip what she saw as a looming threat in the bud by the edge of her sword. The same traits that made her capable of accomplishing that also made her a lot more likely to try it, in my eyes, which was rather the issue with Saint in essence wasn't it? The moment there was no longer a hand on her leash, the truce went up in smoke.

"Queen Catherine," the Pilgrim intervened. "The question was not meant as an attack. It needs to be asked: if there is no other way, if your own method has failed, a decision will have to be made."

My fingers clenched, but I forced them to loosen.

"In that very narrow situation you've mentioned, then I'll take action," I said. "But let's be perfectly clear: if any of you use what I just said as a pretext to kill the Hierophant, I will take it as an act of war."

Gods, it was a heavy-handed approach and I might as well be painting a weakness in bright red for the wolves among this flock but it needed to be said nonetheless. I wasn't sure either the Saint or the Tyrant would actually have their hand stayed by the threat I'd just made, but the sword I'd just hung above the head of this truce should be enough to have cooler heads intervene instead of stand back and watch if either acted. The Grey Pilgrim, anyway, I grimly thought. I didn't have a good grasp of the Rogue Sorcerer yet.

"As I was saying," I began anew after a few beats of silence. "We will be taking an unusual path, whose nature is kin to a threshold. There are advantages to that. Through Hierophant, the Hidden Horror would attempt to strike at us if we approached the city openly. But in that more fluid place we will travel through, I suspect it will lurk as well. Waiting."

"The first crucible," the Pilgrim calmly said. "Not one, I think, of arms."

"When assault the stronghold of a villain," I said, "watch out for three things: a monster, a trial and a pivot."

"And you believe this to be the trial," the old man said.

"I believe that everyone here has a few bodies buried somewhere in their past," I said, eyes sweeping across the heroes and villain. "And something they want badly enough to listen to the devil when he'll come calling. And make no mistake, I have encountered the Dead King before. It isn't with threats and screams he'll approach. It will be with a pleasant offer for a most reasonable bargain."

Gods, much as I hated to admit it the Saint of Swords was the one I had most faith in to blow straight through. Even Neshamah would have a hard time cracking open that protective shell of hatred and arrogance. The Pilgrim shouldn't be an issue, either, but there were a lot more levers to move him than I was comfortable with, especially considering the Dead King was bound to know a thing or two about angels. The Tyrant was going to sell us out, that was a given, but that was fine. I'd planned with the inevitability in mind. Once more, it was the Rogue Sorcerer that was the unknown. I glanced at Tariq and caught his eye, then subtly dipped my head towards the youngest hero. Just as subtly, the Pilgrim nodded. He was either reliable, then, or good enough to fool whatever means of second sight the Peregrine used. Either way, it was too late in the span to do anything about it.

"It was a beautiful speech, Catherine," Kairos called out. "It greatly raised my spirits."

I rolled my eyes and limped up the hill of ash and dust until I stood by the side of one of the broken windows. Running a hand across the warm stone by the windowsill, I breathed out and let the Night flow through my veins. The shivering line between realms was no domain of Sve Noc's, but the darkness within the broken house was a threshold I could use. Night poured out of me like a flood, until I breathed out and withdrew my palm. I turned to them, straightening my back.

"Into the deeps," I said. "We will meet again on the other side."

# Chapter 36

# Bid

> "Peace is the killer of empire, for when strength is not spent outwards it is instead spent within."
>
> Ghislaine of Creusens, twelfth First Princess of Procer

I couldn't ever remember being afraid of the dark, even as a child. Of what might be lurking in it, sure, but the dark itself? No. Long before I'd acquired patrons whose dominion was night, I'd liked a little shade. The fights at the Pit had often taken place late – even after lining the pockets of the city guard, Booker had been warned to keep her business out of sight – and summer after sundown was where the coin had been best at the Rat's Nest. Legionary leave did not change no matter the season, but come summer a lot of dockworkers earned a little more coin by fishing in the Silver Lake and a lot of that coin ended up spent on cheap ale. Which was, to my remembrance, the only kind the Rat's Nest ever stocked. I wondered what Harrion now... I frowned at the drift of thoughts, unsure how it'd started or where it was headed. Did it even matter? Oh, I was standing surrounded by thick and cloying darkness. And it was soothing, serene. It would have been so pleasant to just... float away, leaning into dreamlike thought. *Snow, tears and barren laughter*, I suddenly remembered. I'd laid down to die, once and the world had refused to take me.

There would be no takebacks.

"More fruitful than a direct assault would have been," I acknowledged out loud.

I struck at the ground with my staff, and the dark rippled out. Like a stone tossed into a pond, my will wrinkled the fabric of this half-world outwards in a wave. The span of what surrounded me was endless, I thought, and my act had been little more than a shout echoing in a gargantuan cavern.

"Is that to be your trick?" I asked the dark. "Obscuring the path? It won't work."

I cocked my head to the side and pricked my ear. The utter silence of this place was broken only by my own breath, which in this strange stillness seemed

almost crassly loud. I was afraid, for a moment, that it would drown out what I was waiting for – but it was an empty worry, more born out of nerves at the calibre of my opponent than grounded thinking. My deliverance came in call harsh and hoarse, a distant cawing. I followed Komena's echoing caw, and limped forward into the dark. The Youngest Night left as swiftly as she'd appeared, for we'd agreed that she should avoid the Dead King as much as we could afford to. Neshamah would not be as dangerous working through Masego as he would be in person, but Hierophant was plenty dangerous enough on his own – and not without experience in the matter of disciplining lesser gods. My hobbling steps forward felt purposeless, without a destination to behold, but I forced myself to keep moving. If I could not trust the Sisters to guide me in the dark, then who *could* I trust? And, after what could have been either half an hour or an agonizingly long day, the trust bore fruit. The darkness rippled, and not through my will: I'd made enough progress, it seemed, to warrant refinement of the trap.

I almost stumbled when I my good foot came across a step, but I caught myself on my staff. I felt around cautiously and found out it was the first of what seemed like sprawling stairs going up. If this realm had been the Tyrant's to shape I would have taken this turn as a petty slight to make my life more difficult on account of my bad leg, but somehow I suspected the Dead King believed himself above that. I made my way up the stairs, observing from careful groping by foot and staff that at least they were broad and lightly sloped, and only halted after a long flight up when I felt this place grow... shallower. Frowning, I slowly raked my fingers through the air and let the fabric of this half-world thinner on my fingers. I exerted a pinprick of will and the small ripples than ensued had less to rippled through – and, more interestingly, they revealed some sort of veil in front of me. The way, as always, had to be forward. I stretched up my arm and tore down the veil, flinching at the wave of sound and light and colour that washed over me. I had, it seemed, exposed a doorway. I took a moment to compose myself, to let my eyes grow accustomed to the change in light, and only then tread through the threshold. Immediately, looking down I felt shaky for the height. I had come to tread over what looked like a gargantuan pane of glass, like a skylight put up through the sky.

Above me the sky was darkened by eclipse, a blinding ring of light with a hollow of night at the heart of it, and the clouds around us were a hazy penumbra of light and shadow. Below, though, thousands of feet below, three great armies were warily observing a truce. The League of Free Cities was milling uncertainly without a camp of its own, its large baggage train spread over the plans and guarded by knots of soldiers from half a dozen different city-states. The Army of Callow and the Legions-in-Exile had retreated back into their camp, though leaning down with a wince – Gods, the ground beneath me felt too slippery for this height – I noted that Juniper hard ordered the siege engines to be turned on the League and the drow to be recalled behind the palisades. It was the armies of the Grand Alliance, though, that found their

situation most uncomfortable. Split in two by my own host and the forces of the Free Cities, even after the night's losses they remained the largest of the armies on the field but also the worst-positioned. The calibre of officers on either side had told, I thought. Many of my commanders were young and fresh to their ranks, but they'd also been trained to lead a professional army. The Dominion's war leaders were clever and brave, but also clearly outmatched.

"This has been most entertaining."

My eyes flicked up, and I found I was no longer alone on this expanse of glass. I had expected to be looking upon the King of Death, but what I found instead was Neshamah. In the flesh, as he had been in the long ago days of the Kingdom of Sephirah he'd ruled and ruined. His appearance was from late in his reign, I thought, perhaps as late as that dark day where Keter's Due had gotten its name. Scholar pale and thin, he was closely-shaved but his dark hair was messy. Full red lips quirked as I met his gaze. Just like I remembered this eyes were a shade of light brown that the glow of the eclipse made into molten amber. On his brow, the copper circlet that was the crown of a kingdom long dead sat high over one of those strange Sephiran tunics: one sleeve long and broad but the other short and tight, the patterned bronze and red cloth sweeping down to his ankles with a broad sash belting it around the waist. He had, I suddenly realized, spoken in Ashkaran – that dead tongue Masego and I had stolen learning of from Arcadian echoes, along with most of what I knew of the Hidden Horror.

"You know I don't speak that," I said. "Dead King, we meet again."

"My apologies," Neshamah replied in Lower Miezan, lips twitching. "We meet again, Black Queen."

Staff rapping against the glass-like ground as I moved, I limped in a half-circle around him. I would not be allowed, I suspected, to leave this place before conversation was had. But that hardly meant I had to remain his captive audience, rapt and unmoving.

"Your manoeuvres below were worth the watching," the Hidden Horror idly told me. "It was an inspired skein of treachery, and a victory deserved."

"Night's not over yet," I said. "Though I have to say, you're being a great deal more civil than I expected."

Neshamah idly traipsed across the glass sky, the clouds above him making his eyes shift from gold to bronze like passing seasons set in an ageless face.

"I am a mannerly man, Catherine," he lightly said. "And you have given me no reason to act otherwise."

It almost felt like I was back in the Pit, for a moment, an opponent and I slowly circling as we took each other's measure. Waiting for an opening, for a weakness. I remained painfully aware that I had a lot more of either than the Hidden Horror.

"No?" I mused. "Yet you called an immortal, when we first met, and well. . . "

I shrugged, raising an arm in a nonchalant display.

"I'm hardly that, these days," I said.

The old monster's face was like a mirror, I thought as I watched him for a reaction. There would be nothing there to see I had not placed there myself.

"Are you not?" he smiled. "High priestess and herald of an apotheosis you ushered into this world by your own hand – would something as base as age or disease take you, Catherine Foundling?"

"The years will kill me, one of these days," I said. "If nothing else gets around to it first."

"Ah," the Dead King smiled. "But how *many* years would it take?"

I didn't answer that, for the truth was that I wasn't sure. My body now was no stronger than it'd been before I came into my Name, not without Night being woven into it anyway. Pain and exhaustion and so many things that'd felt... distant while I was Sovereign of Moonless Nights had been returned to me in full, but I had not taken sick since being proclaimed First Under the Night. As for age, though? It hadn't been long enough for me to be sure of whether or not my aging had resumed in earnest. It didn't feel the same way as it had under my Name, when I'd still grown but there had been something contrived about it – like I was matching a vision, not following nature's writ. And it was absolutely nothing like it'd been after Second Liesse, where I had been frozen and fixed unto myself. My blood was still red, and had not become gray nor dark, so it might be that I did not share the stretched lifespan of the Mighty who partook in Night. On the other hand, I had come into the priesthood of the Sisters after the devouring of Winter: it was unprecedented grounds we were treading.

"Priesthood is not godhood," I said. "That path you claimed I would walk, I set aside. You are not all-knowing, Dead King."

"Do you believe the Intercessor's strength lies in martial might?" he amusedly asked. "Or mine? You traded a power that shackled you for one whose burden and perils others will bear in your stead, while binding them to you in purpose. Winter's theft earned you regard, however accidental its execution, but it is your work in the Everdark that suggests you could in time be a peer."

He chuckled.

"Making peace with the dwarves and wheedling an army out of those unruly sisters in the bargain," he said, tone approving. "You traded that ill-fitting mantle for more than fair price. One of these days we will have to trade secrets, Black Queen. I rather wonder what you traded the Kingdom Under for a stay of invasion."

My heart skipped a beat. Was he implying I'd made actual peace between the dwarves and the drow? Or rather, was he implying that the Firstborn still held the old Everdark? I hadn't, though, the overwhelming majority of the drow was marching in exodus towards his own northern borders. Did he *not know?* It could be a trick, I thought. *I only have the smallest slivers of Sve Noc with me*, I thought. *The rest is with their people*. That would allow them to move unseen to most sorcerous means, and it was true that with his armies investing

the Principate the Hidden Horror's attentions might currently be elsewhere. Unless he was lying to me, I thought. But if he wasn't...

"Agree to disagree," I warily said.

Anything more elaborate than trite vagueness might get me seen through, given who I was dealing with. I'd rather seem a little slow than tip my hand if he truly didn't know about the exodus.

"In at least one instance we do agree," the Hidden Horror said, "The night isn't over yet, Black Queen."

Looking into those patient golden eyes I almost shivered. He was speaking of more than the dawn Akua had held back for a few hours. Night was coming for Calernia, the kind that would be followed by no morning if it ever fell.

"Patience has never been my strong suit," I spoke with false calm. "Even less so when it pertains to my Woe – one of which you've gotten your skeletal hands on."

"It was not I who sought him," Neshamah demurred. "And what could do I but answer, when my presence was so earnestly petitioned?"

"You've had your laugh," I said. "And while you came close to breaking the armies below, the scheme was outed. There is no point in you lingering, Dead King. Leave him. Leave here. This is not the field where you want this contest to take place."

"You demand of me what was willingly given," the Dead King chided. "And offer nothing in return. What reason do I have to grant your wish, save that you wish it?"

"I have forged," I said, "a band of five."

"You have botched a band of five," he replied, amused. "How many do you believe will still serve your purpose, when choices are to be made?"

"Enough," I said. "I chose them knowingly. I demand nothing from you, and if it was a threat I'd offered I am not known for my subtlety in their speaking. I am stating that you have nothing left to find in this place save defeat, and not even the useful kind."

"I suppose," Neshamah mused, "that I should simply snap the Hierophant's neck and retire, then."

My fingers tightened around the ebony staff. I'd known going in that he would try that angle. Whether or not he could actually do that was in doubt, but I had a parry anyway. So long as the Grey Pilgrim lived to the end of this, so would Masego. I'd not forgotten the sight of the Peregrine wielding resurrection with but a word at the Battle of the Camps, unmaking the death I'd snatched from my clash against the other heroes. I almost forced a smile, but that would have been a mistake. No, let him see how the prospect of my friend being snuffed out like a candle grieved me. Let him believe I was willing to fight him anyway.

"If that is what it takes," I roughly said. "Gods forgive me, if that's what it takes. Too many lives are on the line."

"Ah," he smiled. "There we are. One more mooring, snapping for the tide. How many would be needed, before you truly took the plunge?"

Nonchalantly, he waved a hand.

"A conversation for another day," he said. "We have nothing but time. Let us speak, instead, of lives."

"Your plan has been outed," I said.

"One plan," he said. "One winter. One year. And how many deaths will it have cost you, even should prove the victor here?"

"You speak as if you were the invaded and not the invader," I said.

"You speak as one who sought to bargain with me," he mildly said. "For one such invasion."

I'd fully intended to betray him when offering that pact, though he'd known that from the start. Still, I almost winced. It was an incomplete truth, but still a damning one. I wish I could say that I'd not understood the scope of what I threatened to unleash then, and I supposed I hadn't. But I'd suspected, even back then, that it would be a horror unlike any other. I'd been willing to bargain with the King of Death to keep the Grand Alliance at bay, and that I'd been outmanoeuvered by Malicia in the attempt was the sole reason I wasn't my signature on the treaty that let's the monster out of its lair. And the truth was, looking down at the fragile truce below me, that I still felt I'd been *right*. Now that there was a greater threat for all to behold, all the petty games of power and story that'd condemned my home to be either a ruin or pack of tributaries had gone by the wayside. Oh, there were still other considerations but it was telling that while I was just as much the Arch-heretic of the East as last year suddenly everyone was willing to cut compromises and deals with me. It was the breathing room I'd needed, an opportunity I would never have had otherwise. If I'd known before leaving Keter that it would all work, even with these horrid costs, would I still have done it?

It was more damning than anything I'd done that I wasn't sure what the answer was.

"No such bargain was made," I said. "I understood what would come of it, if too late, and slew the one who made it. At least one time too few, but how many people can claim to have killed Dread Empress Malicia twice?"

I was not a fool, so I would not admit to such an ugly truth when the Dead King might be displaying this conversation for anyone to see and hear. With the way a grin flickered across his face, gone in the heartbeat it took for his eyes to pass from gold to bronze, I suspected I'd just neatly sidestepped exactly such a trap.

"We were speaking of lives, I believe," Neshamah said, circling me as I circled him.

His footsteps were a whisper on glass, a contrast to my trudging boots and sharply tapping staff.

"So we were," I agreed.

"Rhenia has fallen, did you know?" he asked. "Hannoven months ago, but the Lycaonese hold nothing but the last fortress of Twilight's Pass. After it the heartlands of Bremen will fall, and with them the armies that would defend Neustria. It will be the end of them."

"They've held you back in Cleves and Hainaut," I said.

"For now," the Dead King said. "How long can that last? No, the simple truth is that the Principate was not prepared. And then that delightful Theodosian child struck at its allies and its back. Even if you bring Callow to their aid, you but delay the inevitable."

"Would you say," I cheerfully replied, "that you are invincible, and your victory is assured?"

"A bold attempt," the Hidden Horror commented. "Though it makes a poor evasion. Do you disagree with my words, Black Queen?"

"That the Grand Alliance spent a horrendous amount of soldiers etching a bitter stalemate in Callow?" I said. "No. That its loss is written in the stars? Hardly."

"Imagine what you might do with ten years," Neshamah idly said. "If my armies withdrew, and truce was observed unfailingly. If you were allowed to truly muster this continent for war, instead of piecing together foes and friends in a broken coalition of mistrust."

And there it was, I thought. The bargain to be made. And it was quite the prize, wasn't it? Gods, what I could *do* with ten years and the promise of a war with Keter at the end. The League could be brought to heel and then into the fold, the Tower brought down on Malicia's head and the Liesse Accords made to bind even her successor. A decade of recovery for my bruised kingdom who'd known constant war for years now, and once the recalcitrant to the east and the south of the continent were brought into line we'd have a solid, lasting peace – the First Prince would not countenance war where a single soldier might be lost that could instead be sent to hold back the Kingdom of the Dead when it returned. It got me everything I wanted and saved what had to be hundreds of thousands of lives. I'd warned the others that the Hidden Horror would approach us with tantalizing bargains, all the while thinking myself beyond that temptation. And I couldn't, wouldn't, shouldn't make a pact with him. But Gods, what a prize it would be.

"Ten years," he mused. "No, perhaps a decade is too little to move you. Would you like, Catherine Foundling, to purchase a *century* of truce?"

I flinched. That was a different prize, and perhaps even more tempting.

"If you are truly as a mortal as you insist, then the dead will not trouble Calernia in your lifetime," Neshamah idly continued.

"And what would you want in exchange, Dead King?" I asked.

"A paltry concession," he smiled. "I would require the keeping of what lands I have already seized."

Which would be what? Rhenia, Hannoven, parts of Bremen and Hainaut. The Principate would be losing more than half the Lycaonese principalities,

which was a chunk of territory, but to be blunt it was mostly mountains and fortresses assaulted by the ratling warband every spring. Hainaut was more of an issue, since it was a foothold for Keter on the southern shore of the Tomb, but what little word I'd had of that front implied the principality was on the verge of collapse anyway. I'd offered him rights to more than that when I first sought to make a bargain, though admittedly it'd been under false pretences. If the Dead King kept his word, though, the Principate would have a hundred years of peaceful northern border to prepare. If the First Prince agreed, and if it spared her own people annihilation in addition to all the rest I genuinely thought she might accept. And I'd back her, in the aftermath, to the fucking hilt. To expand the Grand Alliance, and then every step of the way.

The two of us, and the Pilgrim if he could be talked into it, we could get Calernia on proper war footing. With ten decades instead of one, the situation with Praes and the Free Cities could be properly seen to instead of hurried. The drow would need a home, but Masego had helpfully ripped a chunk out of Arcadia that could be put to use. This could work, I thought. Of course, it was possible Neshamah would just let the ratlings pass straight through the northern principalities he'd occupy and disrupt the peace without breaking his word. And there'd be benefits for him as well, I thought, or he would never have made the offer in the first place. I was about to bring up the Chain of Hunger when I realized what I was doing and closed my mouth. I'd been considering the practicalities, working out the details. About to try finding his angle. I had, in essence, already accepted the deal he'd offered.

Gods. I'd known what he was doing from the start, and still here we were.

"We will speak of it again, Black Queen," the King of Death said. "At this peace conference you hve schemed."

There was a deafening crack, and the glass floor beneath our feet began to splinter.

"You did not test me," I said.

The Hidden Horror met my eyes, and for the first time there a flash of irritation in the golden gaze.

"Am I chattel, Black Queen, to be led to the altar with blinders on my eyes?" he said. "Am I to willingly embrace the ways of defeat simply because we are at odds? I think not."

He leaned forward, face cast harshly.

"This game, as all games, I will play on my terms and only that," the Dead King said. "I have learned what I wanted from this communion, and when I have taken what I wish from this ruin I will forsake it as well. Not a moment before, Catherine, and petty tricks will not force my hand."

Neshamah flicked a wrist dismissively.

"Remember that, when we speak again. Youth only earns so many allowances."

In rain of glass I fell through the floor and passed through air and darkness until I landed in another place. Light was peeking through cracks in a door

before me, and I opened it. Above me dark clouds pulsed with rings of sorcery, but beneath my boots were the still-paved streets of the ruins of Liesse. My hands were trembling, I saw. I grit my teeth, and put the inarticulate dread that'd sunk in my guts aside. I still needed to find the others wherever they'd come out in the city.

The night was not yet over, even the monster of monsters agreed.

# Chapter 37

# Accessory

> "To keep a friend, avoid sharing these three: coin, cup and crown."
>
> Nicaean saying

Three times now I'd come to Liesse bearing a sword.

Once to take it with the Fifteenth at my back, to smother the last embers of rebellion in my time and bury the Lone Swordsman. Again with my father for only company, sneaking in through darkness and death to quell the terrible madness of Akua Sahelian. The city that had once been the thriving heart of southern Callow had been ravaged and ruined years before today, and being ripped from Creation then cast down atop tall peaks had done nothing to mend that state. The sight of the crown jewel of the south reduced to this still had my blood boiling even now. When the Fifteenth had taken Liesse it'd been a sprawl of broad avenues covered in flowers and trees, a beauty in stone pale and tan that seemed at times like it was half churches half mansions. There was nothing of that left now. The third of the city that'd been outside the old walls, mostly tanners and dyers and the poor, had fallen right off when Diabolist raised the city into the sky. The blood and sorcery that'd followed still resonated in this place, the trees were long dead and the slender towers of the basilicas petulantly snapped. Liesse still thrummed with death: it was like a cloying scent in the air, a strange heartbeat coursing through its broken streets. And at the end of the road, in what had once been the Ducal Palace, some fresh madness was blooming. Masego awaited in the ancient hall of the Dukes of Liesse, turned fortress and ritual heart by the Diabolist.

I did not have to look far to see the first touches of his work. In the eldritch sky above us sorcery had been shaped in a great working, like colossal panes of bronze glass. It brought to my mind a telescope, for it was like a collection of increasingly larger glass lenses pointed outwards. Whatever sight they were meant for I was not certain, but on the surface of the panes I saw the barren storm-wracked wasteland of below. Compelling as the sorcery was to watch, I had no time to spare for contemplation of it. I was, it was becoming increasingly

clear, far from alone in the streets of Liesse. From the moment I'd stepped out of the dark there'd been the weight of eyes on my back, and the tension had only thickened in the moments that followed. What had once been known as the City of Swans was now the City of Ash and Dust, and it was through the stuff of it that my boots scuffed as I began limping forward. Lingering here would serve no purpose: none of the others would emerge where I had. There would be need to stitch back together our little band before it was wielded against our common foe. Passing through the wreck of what had once been a guild hall, its walls broken so thoroughly that all that remained upright was low ornate pillars of plastered marble, I heard the whispers of an ambush about to be sprung. I caught sight of them, I thought, too easily. A scuttling creature of red-brown fur with long iron claws had been revealed in the shade where it hid, a ray of light playing off a cloud above us laying it bare.

It was devil. I'd even fought this kind before, at the Battle of Marchford and even the ambush that preceded it. At least as clever as a child, and capable of speech in the Dark Tongue as well as some of Creation's languages. My discussions with the foremost diabolist of our age had since made it plain to me that these were lesser servants, as far as the Praesi saw it, but still commonly used for their wits and ease of binding. And their numbers: the *bonsam*, as their kind was called, were thrown at enemies not as lone individuals but in packs. My advance slowed by a pillar, and I caught a glint of iron in the carpet of ash that filled this gutted guildhall.

"This doesn't end well for you," I called out in Mthethwa. "Flee now and I will not pursue."

In bursts they came out of the thick layers of ash where they'd lain waiting, and others leapt down from the nearby rooftops where they'd been watching me. In the heartbeat that followed, I counted seven. Four on the ground, dark-eyed and wild and coming at me split evenly from the sides. Three above, two who'd been huddling in mangled bell tower and the one I'd caught first pressing down its body in the hollow of a parapet. It came laughably easy to me. My hand, by happenstance, was already near where I wanted it to be – all I needed to do was let the Night pour through and flick my wrist. By happenstance still, all I would need to elude half my attackers was slip around the pillar I'd reached, and my foot was already halfway there. It was like Creation wanted me to slaughter them, and do so almost effortlessly.

"I gave fair warning," I said, wrist already moving.

Two of those leaping were, as I pivoted around the pillar, for a moment perfectly lined up. The fine needle of Night I'd sent burst through the flesh and fur of the first like it'd been filled with munitions, and the last of the impact ate halfway through the head of the devil behind it. Two of the *bonsam* on the ground were now on the wrong side of the pillar to strike at me, and began to turn, while the other pair found I'd smoothly flanked them. They had long enough for their eyes to widen in surprise before with a flick of the wrist in the opposite direction I let loose a second sliver of Night: slight tendrils of

smoke that slipped through their nostrils, and they dropped in the instant that followed. It'd turned acid inside their bodies, and melted what there was to melt. The sequence continued, almost dreamlike, with the third leaper landing atop the pillar to my side, two-sided claws scraping at the stone. My hand fell on the side of my staff, as if carried by my last flick, and at the very moment where its weight was drawing back from the landing the tip of my staff struck its chest. It toppled, I knew without even looking, on top of the other two who'd been trying to go around the pillar. With another languid step I finished my way around the pillar, arriving to the sight of two devils snarling at the third as they tried to push it off their side. It was the one who'd fallen that looked at me, letting out a shriek when it saw I'd raised my hand.

I snapped my fingers.

A droplet of Night formed in the middle of the three, and from it a razor-thin pulse emanated. It cut through the heads of the two *bonsam* on the ground, and through the waist of the one I'd nudged down. They were all three dead before I could bring my staff down to lean on, and I breathed out slowly. The whole scuffle had taken the span of perhaps five breaths, and required me to call on so little Night I'd not even noticed any strain.

"So this is what it's like," I murmured. "Having a story like wind in your sail."

It was even more insultingly leisurely than I'd assumed it would be. How could any hero lose a fight, when Creation conspired a hundred coincidences to give them an edge? I mastered that burgeoning irritation, for it was one of the uglier parts of my inheritance, and set it aside. There was no point in whining about the opposition's arsenal when instead I could be figuring out ways to use their tools more frequently. There'd be time for that later, though. For now I needed to find the others, which ought not to be too difficult if providence was willing to lend a hand for once. I resumed my advance into the deeper city, treading different shades of ruin as I did. Some the work of devils, some of wights, some of the soldiers who'd once taken Liesse in my name. I did not encounter any more of the *bonsam*, though once or twice I caught shadows looming on rooftops or watching through the cracks of walls. None approached, though it seemed that courtesy was not being extended to others: I heard a great crack in the distance, and watched with a wince one of the seven basilicas of Liesse toppled inwards. Well, that was as much of a sign I was going to get I supposed. I put some spring to my step and headed towards the collapse. It couldn't have been more than two alleys of walking until I ran into where my waiting companion had emerged from the aborted crucible: there was a neat line of dead jackal-headed devils, all nine of them cut cleanly through at the waist by the same blow. I glanced at the way the corpses had fallen, and let out a reluctantly impressed whistle when I realized they must have been walking in a file when the Saint of Swords had struck and she'd killed the lot of them before they could even turn. That this was Laurence de Montfort's work there could be no doubt.

She'd cut off enough my limbs I'd acquired an eye for the look of it.

Though not particularly enthused by who it was that I'd found first, I quickened my limp a little more still. If nothing else, the Saint's company should make getting around this devil-infested city significantly easier. Not safer, of course, because there was no guarantee that she wouldn't decide now was the time to clean up a loose end like me, but certainly *easier*. It wasn't all difficult to follow the path she'd walked, since she'd sown corpses seemingly ever step of the damned way. It was like there was something about her that attracted the devils like flies, because by the third time I turned a corner only to find a pile of at least twenty dead or dismembered devils – the limbs everywhere made it harder to count – I was forced to conceded this couldn't possibly just be a string of bad luck. By the fifth mess of corpses I ran into it wasn't just ironhooks and jackalheads I was looking at, but higher breeds that Wasteland diabolists had used for war in years past. *Walin-falme*, the leather-winged devils that had been a favourite of binding-inclined Dread Emperors and Akua's own choice of troops for the Folly, and *akalibsa*. The latter had been prized by Taghreb tribes, Aisha has once told me, for their raids on their Soninke neighbours to the north. Given that the fanged devils bore rough armour of stone and iron weapons, I could see why. Not that it'd stopped the Saint from slaughtering them.

I would be more or less true to say I saw the fighting before I heard it: further into the city, I saw swarms of walin-falme and smaller gargoyle-like hairy creatures swarming down towards the same plaza. When I got closer the baying of the hound-like *akalibsa* told me that the Saint was very much under siege, and I grit my teeth as I picked up the pace. Hurrying through a house that looked like some whimsical giant had slapped it down before leaving, I came upon the collapsed basilica and saw that I'd strained my bad leg for no reason at all. There must have been, I thought, easily two hundred devils in the city square I could see past the fallen basilica. The Saint of Swords was alone, and nonchalantly tearing through a the force like it was made of paper.

Pale tabard spinning around her like she was a dancer, the old woman moved among her opponents like the wind. On the ground the scythed through the *bondam* and the *akalibsa* like it was sport, smoothly using them as shields against each other as she carved through necks and limbs with unerring precision. The Saint of Swords only put weight behind her blows when the winged devils came for her, the wind left by explosive strength of her strikes sucking them like birds in a storm. I saw her, with my own eyes, cut the air and leap up onto that mark only to kick up and catch a *walin-falme* in the face, use it as pedestal to twist and carve through the skull of another devil and catch a third one by the throat – she tossed it, casually, against the cut she'd made in the air and it was severed in two halves by the impact. In the heartbeat that followed that insanity she ripped free her longsword and leapt back down into the swarm below, never once having hesitated or broken stride. *Merciless Gods*, I thought. *She might as well be a meat grinder.* As I walked through the rubble of

the basilica, a shadow was cast ahead of me by the *walin-falme* who'd thought to take me by surprise and I flicked a wrist backwards without turning. The slithering rope of Night caught it by the neck and tightened before turning to black flame. A charred head and corpse landed behind me a moment later, but I would not be so easily distracted. I suspected that the Saint could keep at this all day without tiring – I'd yet to feel from her more than the occasional flicker of Name power – but devils kept pouring in and there was no end in sight.

We needed to move this along before we got bogged down, and I might as well get two birds with one stone. I supposed I could have reached deep into the Night and unleashed a large working that would have slain many and scattered the rest, but I was disinclined to waste power so early in the fight. Especially when there were more... creative solutions to be had. I left the Saint to her slaughter and crouched against the ground with a pained wince, leg throbbing. Holding onto my staff with tight lips, I ran a hand through the ash and black dust that covered the stone. I closed my eyes, let out a slow breath and let the Night fill my veins. As I'd thought, as I'd felt, there was still power in this place. Deaths by the thousands, as the alchemies of Still Water sunk into innocents and a spark of magic set that corruption ablaze. Other great sorceries as well, Akua's own works of grand hubris and what Masego had made of this place since snatching it from its Callowan cradle. There were echoes here, and they were not gentle ones. Eyes fluttering open, I swept aside enough of the filth that I could lay my naked palm against what had once been the stone floor of the basilica.

"I saw the birth of you," I murmured. "Heard the reverb, even then, though I did not yet have ways to heed it. I do now, though."

I let the Night bridge the gap, felt the wailing held within swell with anger, and gasped as my chest tightened.

"Sing for me," I whispered.

And though I had failed them I was still their queen, anointed in the halls of the Fairfaxes and the fields of war, so sang for me they did. To my ears it felt like a muted buzzing, at first, something so large and deafening my ears could not truly fathom it. But as the first heartbeat passed, a wave of something eldritch filled me and I tasted of the nature of it. Rage, unbridled and strident and blind: wights killed and killing. But the echo went deeper, to what I had sought. The terror of the inevitable, the helplessness of doom already sown and coming. The shivering moment where the greatest evil of our age had been committed by a woman now in my service. I partook of it, and let the city sing that chorus. It would not last long, I thought as I withdrew my palm and wearily rose to my feet. Maybe thirty heartbeats, and the further away the less keenly it would be felt. But here, now? Even as Laurence de Montfort stood unmoved among a whirlwind of devils, the flock of bound creatures *scattered*. Fled to the winds, taken by panic and rage that they were not truly able to understand. I'd spared the Saint as much of this as I could, but in truth I'd doubted she would be affected. And, I saw as she calmly turned to watch me,

I'd been right. There was no waver in her eyes, no weight on her shoulders. Like water off a duck's back the tumultuous rage and fear of over a hundred thousand souls rolled over her and found nothing to hold on to.

"Black Queen," the Saint of Swords greeted me. "Finally. Where are the others?"

"Heading this way, I'd wager," I said, limping up to her.

I kept some distance. Enough that, if she chose to strike, I'd have long enough to be aware of the blow. That ought to be enough, given my preparations, though in matters like this nothing was ever certain. Much less when it came to a heroine as old and ridiculously lethal as the Saint.

"After that trick you just pulled, there'll be more than blade fodder headed our way," the old woman said, then spat to the side. "Might as well have raised a banner for everyone to see."

"It'll get the Grey Pilgrim here, as least," I said. "Perhaps the others as well."

Laurence's eyes narrowed.

"Whatever sharpest killer the Enemy's got as well," she said. "But you did that on purpose, didn't you?"

I did not deny it, since it was true.

"I've had to assault that palace once before," I said, gesturing at the looming structure in the distance. "And that was when it was just the Diabolist that put up wards and traps. We don't want to have to fight whatever monster's waiting while in there, you can trust me on that."

"I don't even trust you to breathe," the Saint curtly said. "But the decision's not entirely senseless."

"You sweet talker, Laurence," I deadpanned. "Stop, you'll make me blush."

She eyed me up and down, though there was nothing suggestive about the assessment taking place. That was the gaze, I thought, of someone deciding how it'd be easiest to kill me when the time came and was rather looking forward to getting around to it.

"What did he offer you, in there?" the old woman brusquely asked.

My jaw clenched. Did I want to have that conversation with Laurence de Montfort, of all people? No, I did not. On the other hand, there were risks to dismissing her question. I studied her carefully. If I refused, would she take that as me confession to collusion with the Dead King and strike? I honestly wasn't sure. And unless I wanted to risk a fight anyway, I couldn't hesitate much longer than this.

"A hundred year truce," I finally said. "For the lands he's already taken. You?"

If I was going to answer, so was she. The Saint smiled unpleasantly.

"Never even showed up," she said. "It got dark, I got impatient and cut my way out. So much for your test, Foundling. Didn't figure it *all* out, it looks like. I wonder what else you're wrong about."

I hummed, cocking my head as I listened to the last echoes of the song I'd asked for. I could follow the… tide of it, with a little effort, and it was telling me interesting things. For one, it parted around the Ducal Palace like a tide around rocks. The end of our journey most definitely awaited there. There was, however, another hole in the city. Much smaller, but unlike the palace instead of being exempt it was violently repelling the song. And that small presence was not far ahead of us, coming in our direction.

"Not about the monster, I'll tell you that for certain," I said. "We're about to have a guest, Saint."

Her gaze sharpened.

"Then move ahead," she said. "I will not have you at my back, Black Queen."

"Why?" I frowned. "I'm not the one who's a walking domain. I can't – wait, are you implying I'd stab you in the back?"

She sneered, which was answer enough.

"Seriously?" I said. "Are you incapable of being halfway reasonable without someone holding your hand? I've had more cordial conversations with gods-damned angels, Laurence. *Angels*. Let that sink in."

I did not see it until it was too late. My mistake, growing irritated enough most my attention had been on the Saint instead of where it should be. My heart quickened and I felt goosebumps crawl along my skin as I saw a single-edge blade of bronze swinging for my eyes. It had been a mistake, I realized, to assume that the song would allow me to accurately keep track of the enemy. Then there was a flash of radiant Light, and the creature that'd been about to take my life was shot out by the impact like a ballista bolt. I blinked out the blindness, absent-mindedly noting that the enemy had been thrown straight through two houses and a sculpture of Jehan the Wise before stopping.

"We appear to have flushed out the enemy," Tariq said, lowering his crooked staff.

"Thanks for that," I croaked out.

He dipped his head in acknowledgement. My heart was beating wildly and my fingers felt faint. Gods, but it'd been a while since I'd come that close to dying – without anything like Winter to get me through it. I'd almost forgotten what it felt like. I fell in with the Pilgrim, the two of us advancing to join the Saint. Her eyes were on the plume of dust and ash where the enemy had been thrown, and together the three of us looked upon the silhouette that emerged. Utterly pristine even after being thrown, its bare feet padded across the ashen ground. It wore nothing but a loose long-sleeved shirt of white satin, with trousers of the same, and its extended arm held out the bronze blade at a horizontal angle. It was not human, I thought, and I knew that without needing to study it in greater detail because I'd encountered it before.

"Well now, as I live and breathe," the Saint said. "That looks to me like an elf."

"Bestowed, too," the Pilgrim added.

"It's called the Spellblade," I calmly said. "And it's one of the Dead King's own Revenants."

I felt the weight of the other two's attention, though neither looked away from our enemy, and the unspoken question that went with it.

"In Keter I tried to destroy it, with Hierophant and Thief," I said.

"And?" Tariq calmly asked.

"I landed about one good hit that whole fight, for which it vaporized half my body," I replied. "We ran as soon as we could. It's nasty in the elf way, and it can makes blades out spells as well. This is going to be a ride, I can tell you that much.."

"Good," Laurence de Montfort said, smiling a wolf's smile as she began advancing. "Then this ought to be decent practice for Dead King."

# Chapter 38

# Pinnacle

> "For the left hand is strife and the right hand is ruin, and only one may be clasped. The worthy take, the worthy rise; all else is dust."
>
> Extract from the Tenets of Night

The Saint of Swords wasted no time and no words: forward she went, an arrow shot. There was not a motion wasted to the way she moved, a sort of flowing gait that was neither run nor walk. The Spellblade simply walked barefoot through the ruins to meet her, utterly indifferent to the sight of one of the most dangerous heroes alive with her blood up.

"A known weakness?" the Grey Pilgrim conversationally asked.

His eyes had never left the Revenant, and neither had mine.

"Not ice, I'll tell you that much," I muttered. "Or stabbing. To this day I'm not even sure if I baited an aspect out of it or if it's just that ridiculously powerful."

"He, I suspect, not it," the Peregrine noted.

There'd been nothing particularly male about the dead elf to my eyes, either now or then, so he probably knew something I didn't.

"Suspect?" I repeated.

"There is an old story," the hero said, "about Death taking the Forever King's only son."

I'd never heard anything like that, and unlike Tariq I'd been born in a kingdom that bordered the Golden Bloom. On the other hand, he had decades of going around Calernia nudging villains to their deaths and unearthing secrets as well as the Choir of Mercy whispering in his ear. So, the Spellblade had been a prince once. Assuming elves saw kingship as we did, which was anybody's guess: what went on in the depths of that forest was a mystery to anyone but the elves.

"Doubt the dangling parts are going to affect this any," I shrugged. "But good to know."

"Knowledge is always of use," the Peregrine agreed. "No particular weakness, then. Unfortunate. That will prolong the matter some."

I almost told him he had a gift for understatement before I caught sight of the look on his face and realized he was deadly serious. That, to him, a millennia-old elven Revenant was simply a vexing delay on our way to the end of this journey. The serenity on his tanned, creased face was not forced or posturing or an attempt to reassure. It was simple certainty that he would be the victor, regardless of the odds. I was surprised, still, by how utterly infuriating I found the sight. Because if a hero that old, that seasoned, could feel that way? Then there was some truth to the attitude. And though that strength on my side tonight, there was still something at the heart of me revolted by the nature of it. *No wonder it's impossible to bargain with you, when you have a mandated from Above to always get your away*. I was, I supposed, my father's daughter in the regrettable ways as well as the rest. I took my hand off my staff and it stayed still and standing as I rolled my shoulders to limber them.

"Let's get this going, then," I said.

A moment later, two of Calernia's finest swordsmen had their first clash. If I'd not woven a sliver of Night into my eyes, I would have missed half of it. It was not that they moved that quickly, I thought, though while the Saint was drawing on her Name and the Spellblade made a mockery of mortal means simply by being who he was. I'd faced fae quicker than them, and likely some with more strength behind their swings as well. It was, for lack of a better term, the timing of their movements that was at their craft's pinnacle. The Saint feinted high and right, the Revenant stepped to the side and somehow that led him to be behind her and swinging at her neck: then, even as the Saint pivoted on herself and aimed a cutting blow at the side of his own neck, the both withdrew a step. I took me a heartbeat longer than them to understand why. It would have been a double kill, I realized, if they'd both finished the arc of their swing. So instead they'd withdrawn, and gone for a second pass. I almost let out a whistle. I doubted I'd ever like Laurence de Montfort even if I didn't end up killing her but I could certainly admire her skill.

Black was the one of the few people I'd ever seen move like that – it was how he'd beat Captain when they sparred, even though she'd been massively stronger and quicker on the swing – though on occasion Archer got close to it as well. She still relied on an aspect to get there, though, her **Flow**. Ranger would be more than match for either of these, I thought, but though rather skilled with a blade I'd never been even remotely in their league. Impressive as the spectacle of the two of them trading not-blows like dancers was, I'd not come here to be a spectator. The tricky part would be, I knew, intervening without getting in the Saint's way.

"All is Night," I murmured in Crepuscular, wrist flicking outwards. "The left hand is strife and the right hand is ruin, only one can be clasped: I call on you, Komena, war-bringer and red of deed, breaker of spears and devourer of hope. In your name I curse my foe."

A brush like feathers of my cheek, the flap of wings, and distant cawing laughter. She approved, it seemed, as she was want to do when I spoke words from her Tenets. Night flowed through my veins, like a cool shadow cast on a spring morning, and I released the working on the two fighting in the distance. Tariq stiffened, for the barest moment, though the tension ebbed when he saw that the Saint had not been hurt by what I'd done. It was a subtle touch, at first. The shadows of the ruins where they were duelling lengthened a little, and the air began to swell unspeakably in that way it did before a storm. Neither of the combatants took notice, for after four bouts they'd now taken each other's measure and were now going for blood. I waited patiently, and only struck when I found my opportunity: the Revenant's bronze blade had been cut through by the Saint's longsword, and when it burst in a flash of flame that blinded Laurence she drew back. The elf's hand extended and the air began shuddering as rust-like flecks were attracted to its open palm and began to form a fresh blade.

"No," I replied.

And the flecks went grey, the shivering air went still and the Revenant's eyes snapped straight to me from across the field. *That's right*, I thought. *Look at me. I just swung decay and entropy at you look a bludgeon, look at how irritating I am.* The burst of flame hadn't even finished dying when tip of the Saint's blade went straight through, going half an inch into the Spellblade's throat before he could react. Laurence's footing shifted, she began to pivot on herself, and even as the elf took a fluid step back she finished tearing her sword out through the right side of his throat. Too shallow to have caught the spine, I saw with disappointment. Eyes flashing with fury, the Revenant's left hand shot out and with an open palm he struck at the Saint's arm – there was a thundering sound of iron being bent and she flew back a dozen feet from the strength of it, the angle of her upper arm making it clear the bones must have been broken badly enough it tore up through skin and muscle. The Revenant's other arm rose horizontally and moonlight clustered around his fist.

"Still no," I replied.

The Night clustered around his fist smothered the gathering glow before it grow strong enough to contest that ending. Visibly irritated, the Revenant shook its fingers free of the power and took a step forward that brought it in front of the Saint – just as her arm snapped back in place, wisps of Light swirling around it as the Pilgrim's work bore fruit. The heroine was ready when the blow came, nudging aside the elf's forearm with the pommel of her sword and then angling her wrist. Her foot circled back, her body twisted, and the Saint of Swords swung her blade halfway through the neck she'd already cut before a familiar shiver of power began. I knew that feeling. Last time I'd felt it my entire face and the forward half of my body had ended up vaporized because I'd been too close, and whatever this was the Revenant had been able to use it again on the massive pile of blocks Hierophant had tried to bury it under. *Come on*, I thought, and gathered the Night to pit it against the shiver.

There was maybe a tenth of a heartbeat where the forces were even, and then to my horror the Revenant's working plowed right through. All the Night I'd sunk into the area went into smoke, fully and instantly and harshly enough it felt like someone had ripped off a chunk of my skin.

"**Shine**," the Grey Pilgrim hoarsely said.

I forced Night into my eyes even though the sensation was unpleasant and it felt like they were boiling, as I was wary of being blinded even for a moment and the radiant shine of the star the Peregrine had just unleashed would have robbed me of sight without it. It almost did anyway, for even though Tariq had unleashed only the palest shadow of the morning star he'd hung in the sky in Creation even that shred was terrible to behold. A ghostlike shimmering globe had appeared between the Saint and the Spellblade, for an instant, and some sort of massive pressure had swatted the Revenant trough the paved ground. I still caught a glimpse of the heroine's face and saw that all the way to the bridge of her nose the flesh of her face looked like a blanket of acid had been laid over it. It was the same with the entire flank of her body that'd been facing the Revenant most fully, though strangely her clothes were untouched. In the moment where the Night had fought the shiver I'd learned one thing for certain, that it was in fact an aspect, and taste of the nature of that power. Looking at the Saint's tabard and tunic I frowned: they were, I thought, looking too pristine. And with the harsh taste of the power I'd fought still resounding, I suspected I'd put my finger on the face of that aspect: it related, one way or another, to 'purification'.

Gods, elves were such assholes. It looked like Ranger had come by it honestly.

Body unmarred by any of the wounds that'd been inflicted on it, the Spellblade leapt out of the wreckage it'd been smacked into, a half-formed blade of light green scales in hand. My working had been scattered, so there'd be no shutting that shutting the door on that quick enough. Time to go on the offensive, then, I grimly thought. A panting Tariq strung healing Light around the Saint once more, and as he did I snatched up my staff. Or would have, were it still there. For a surreal moment I looked to see if I'd simply missed it while reaching but no, the alarm welling up in my stomach was quite warranted and it was nowhere to be seen. *Shit*. With the amount of power I'd sunk into that, over the months, this was not the kind of artefact I would want in anybody else's hands even if it wasn't also my contingency for the Saint. I tapped a foot on the ground, sending out a pulse of Night. If it was close I should get something out of that.

"Pilgrim, there's another-"

I had gotten something out of the Night pulse, though by the time I did it was pointless because my eyes had done the work already. I'd glanced at Tariq, when beginning to speak, and so caught sight of the Revenant standing behind him. It was hard to even tell she was dead, truth be told, for her tanned leathery skin and the single blond tress going down her back were strikingly

lifelike. This one too was an old friend: the Thief of Stars looked no worse for the few hours she'd spent as one of my own Thief's possessions. Though, if the harsh look she flicked at me was any indication, she hadn't forgotten that bad turn either. More interesting was the way she was holding my staff, pointing it directly at the Grey Pilgrim's back. Strange, since in her hands it might as well be a walking stick: she wouldn't be able to do anything with it. Well, unless she had – and there it was, the shiver of an aspect being used. Something to facilitate using what she'd stolen maybe? It didn't matter. I raised my hand as the Thief of Star roused the Night in my staff-that-was-not-a-staff, baring my teeth savagely.

"Mistake," I said in Crepuscular, and snapped my fingers.

Night lashed out viciously and the sound of talons rending flesh rang across the plaza. The Thief of Stars' upper half splattered the ground, entrails trailing like grim garlands, but there was no hiding that a gaping chest wound had split her in two. As if some great bird's talons had snapped out of the sea of Night awaiting within the staff, where they had been waiting. They must have thought I was a fucking idiot, making something that dangerous without putting in contingencies – like the attention of the angrier half of the goddesses that artefact was linked to. She might have managed to flee with it, though certainly not remain hidden. Using it, though? That was opening a door for Komena to express her displeasure. It'd had absolutely nothing to do with my fingers being snapped, but given such a beautiful opportunity to pretend otherwise why would I *not*? Posturing aside, I sent out a simmering coil of Night to catch the staff before it fell and dragged it back to me. I'd just slapped into my palm when I slammed onto the ground, biting down on a scream as my bad leg gave and rolling fruitlessly to the side. A vivid green sword seemingly made of scales was swung down at my head, though with a grunt the Saint carved through the damned thing. Foul-smelling droplets flew everywhere and I wove a spinning top of Night above me that proved to be the right reflex: wherever the liquid fell, it smoked and ate at whatever it'd touched.

"*Move*, Foundling," the Saint of Swords snarled, slapping aside a blow with the side of her sword.

I almost did, but then I paused. This slugging match with an effectively indestructible and inexhaustible demigod wasn't going anywhere, and it was a losing fight for us. Sure we were pulling slightly ahead right now but both the heroes would tire eventually and the Peregrine had already dropped an aspect once. Engaging the Revenant like we were storming a bloody wall was just going to get us killed. What did I know about my allies? Tariq I had a read on, could play off of, but the Saint... **Sever**, I realized. She had that brutal little aspect still. If she was given an opening, she could use I to remove the source of our troubles. I just needed to... Halfway into rising to my feet, I theatrically groaned and flopped back to the ground. The Spellblade saw that as the opening it was and struck again, so it'd just made a tactical mistake. I was prone and crippled, the Saint was having an increasingly harder time fending off its

blows and I pointedly did not get up. I stayed there on the ground, hilariously unarmored and basically just asking to get killed. The Saint, though it must be said she did so with considerable ill-grace, heroically defended her fallen ally in a doomed venture. I suspected she was going to cut her losses soon, but that was fine. I'd gotten what we needed.

"What are you-" Laurence started, but she was interrupted by the Grey Pilgrim nailing our opponent.

It was easy to forget that, for all his power, Tariq was not meant to be the tip of the spear in a band or even the healer. He was, by Role, a helping hand. He was at his strongest and ablest when serving as that hand, as demonstrated by the fact he'd been able to once more use an aspect that he should have thoroughly exhausted earlier to save the Saint's life earlier. Now, the radiant beams of Light bit into the side of the Revenant harshly and as the better part of his left shoulder and kneecap were incinerated, it called on its favourite trick. The air shivered as it drew on its aspect, and the Saint of Swords' own blade fell on the floor with a clang. Breathing out sharply, the old woman swung nothing at all and the Spellblade *screamed*. That aspect had cut Winter, elf or not he wasn't getting through that with a shrug. And, while we were at it, I killed the pain in my bad leg with a sliver of Night and pushed myself up with my staff. The Revenant was staggering back in apparent pain – and disbelief at the fact that it could *feel* pain, I suspected – while the Saint looked like she was about to keel over. She'd be out of it for at least a bit, so best to tip the scales a little further. The Spellblade's eyes fell on me just as I leaned forward and rammed my hand through his chest.

"What," he croaked. "What are you-"

"*Restocking*," I replied with a feral grin.

I'd had a knack for taking from my foes even *before* I'd become the herald of goddesses who'd made theft of might the central tenet of their culture. Now? I'd had tutors in the art, patrons who'd touched the godhead and a Wastelander of the old blood. My fingers, coated in Night, dug through its soul and skimmed over the raw ruin the Saint had made of the first bundle. Another two were there for the taking, one still faintly vital and the other necrotized for centuries if not millennia. I could only get a vague idea of what it was I was taking until I'd taken it, but there was no room for hesitation. The aspect still in use felt like some sort of wheel, or maybe a kaleidoscope. The dead one felt like... nothing. Absence, maybe. Denial or gamble? *Double down,* I decided. A little too late to start playing it safe. Letting out a hissing breath, I withdrew my fingers from the Spellblade's chest and found they were holding a slim branding iron. **Ban**, I knew sure as my own breath, and cackled. I called on the Night, and began pushing it into the iron.

"Hold him," I yelled.

The Pilgrim wove shackles of Light around the Revenant's limbs but we were the winning side, now – it tore through them effortlessly. But where Role and story failed, Laurence de Montfort instead scathingly said something in

Tolesian and carved straight through the elf's right knee with the longsword he'd already picked up. But already it'd formed a blade out of some eerie pulsing red haze, and instead of attacking one of us he stabbed himself – only the blade broke, and fresh flesh began to sprout where the Saint had cut him before the severed limb even began to fall. But I'd been sinking Night into the brand this whole time, and though the symbol it depicted hurt my eyes to try to discern I could still see smoke was wafting from it. It should suffice. Even as the Revenant dipped forward from the sudden loss of limb, I shoved the branding iron against its chest. The moment it touched the satin shirt it went straight through, and though I saw the Revenant's skin blacken around where the brand touched the flesh it did not react. It would not feel pain from this, I thought. Or, indeed, anything else. The red pulse shattered, the flesh ceased growing and the elf flinched back once more. I supposed it was rather in shock at the way I'd used his dead aspect to kill the other one. I stepped back and smiled.

"All yours," I told the Saint.

She was a fearsome one, but he was still an elf and an old one.

It took her seven blows, before his head rolled on the ground and the Dead King lost his second Revenant of the night.

# Chapter 39

# Looting

> "Thirty-four: it is not graverobbing if it was your destiny to have that artefact, just proactive inheritance."
>
> "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

The Spellblade had taken an awful lot of killing, but he was finished. With the Thief of Stars having tried her hand at stealing something a goddess had her hand on and gotten about what one would expect for the trouble, that left the three of us masters of the field.

And so I was worried.

I had a finer nose for trouble than most, given the amount of times I'd come a hair's breadth away from death, but it wasn't a physical threat that had me growing unsettled. I knew for a fact that the Dead King had more than few Revenants to throw into the breach, so why was it two I'd encountered before that were guarding Hierophant? And that wasn't even getting into the way that I'd bet rubies to piglets we were going to run into the damned Skein skulking somewhere around here before this was over. No, setting that aside for now why was the King of Death putting up dead Named I had some knowledge of instead of any other from his millennial treasure trove of undead heroes? The Spellblade hadn't been an easy mark, by any means, and it's cost us heavy use of exhausting aspects from two aging heroes to put him down, but I didn't buy that Neshamah didn't have some Revenant around that wasn't about as much as a heavy hitter and completely unknown to me. *Are you tying off loose ends, Dead King?* Sacrificing servants I was familiar with so that knowledge couldn't be used against him down the line? It seemed wasteful, given the calibre of Revenants used. The elf could probably have torn through a Lycaonese border fortress by himself, and if the Thief of Stars was even half as handy as Vivienne had been when wielding a cousin Name she could easily have wreaked havoc on supply lines.

It was true that the Dead King's method was, in essence, never to leave an opening that could be exploited no matter what it cost to play it safe. On the

other hand, it didn't feel like a coincidence that I could feasibly make use of both the Revenants we'd encountered today. The Thief of Stars had, back in Keter, wielded an aspect that lit up a constellation above her head that was known in Callow as the King's Crown. It'd been suppressed by my domain, as Winter could snuff out anything given long enough, but if I went digging in our little friend's split halves I might be able to seize whatever that'd been. The Spellblade, if Tariq was right, had once been a prince of the Golden Bloom and presumably heir to its throne. Of seven crowns and one, it was perhaps viable to seize the last from either the broken Revenants at our feet. If the Dead King was in Masego's head – and he had to be, to an extent, to have been able to pass on so many of my secrets to the Tyrant – then he would know of my recipe to make Larat into something greater. Could I assume that, since he'd since had opportunity to speak with Kairos, he knew of everything I'd revealed so far? *Yes, it'll be safer to*, I decided. So he knew I needed one last crown, presumably, and... No, that was the wrong way to think about this. Both the Revenants couldn't feasibly recent additions to this mess, they must have been here for some time.

So why would the Dead King send a pair of possible crowns into the mess, of all his possible guards to post around Hierophant?

"Black Queen," the Peregrine interrupted me. "We should not linger."

"It's a trap," I pensively said.

"What is?" the Saint flatly asked.

"I don't know yet," I muttered. "But he laid a trap for us."

The last crown, the 'one' of the 'seven and one', it was the most important of the eight. As the Rogue Sorcerer had said: *seven for weight but the last to shape.* Was this the nature of the snare the Dead King had laid? That if we took a shortcut, attempted to bring a crown from outside our little circle rather than surrender one of our own, we'd be giving him a foothold into this place? The Revenants, after all, were of his make now regardless of what they had been while living. It was tenuous thread, to be sure, but given that my opponent was perhaps the finest sorcerer to ever grace Calernia and had more than ten centuries of experience on me in Namelore even that fine thread might be enough. Given the largely unprecedented nature of what I sought to accomplish tonight, there was still much that I did not and perhaps could not know about it. *Or is that your trick within the trick, Neshamah*? I suddenly thought *While I go in circles pondering of stories and deep schemes, you use it as shell to strike a more precise blow.* Was he offering me a pair of crowns so I would sour on the use of them out of fear, and so force a loss? The right to rule of one of three would be gone, if so: Tyrant, Pilgrim or Queen. Any of them would result in an opponent of the Dead King losing a measure of earthly influence.

"We cannot withdraw," the Grey Pilgrim bluntly said. "It would mean the death of three great hosts, and possibly of Iserre itself."

"Getting afraid, Foundling?" Laurence nastily grinned.

Her, I ignored. We were no longer fighting, which meant she'd gone from massively useful to at least something of a pest and possibly a liability. The Peregrine I needed to keep his eyes on the prize, though, so to him I replied.

"I'm not suggesting withdrawal," I said. "But the Hidden Horror has a game afoot, let's all take a moment to acknowledge that. There's too many coincidences beginning to pile up."

Tariq was no youngblood, but that had advantages as well as the opposite. His eyes sharpened.

"The Revenant you fought before," he said, and it was not a question.

"Revenants," I corrected, flicking a glance at the other mangled corpse.

The old man's face went stiff. Though not, I understood when he began speaking again, for the reasons I'd expected.

"He must hold you in high esteem," the Grey Pilgrim blandly said, "for having assumed from inception that it would be your arrangements that would win out and lead us here."

Yeah, now was not even remotely the time for that. The oddly cordial relationship I had with the foremost monster in Calernian history was not a matter I intended on discussing here – with Tariq, ever – so I put down my foot as firmly as I could on this before it could lead anywhere.

"Or, more likely, he planned for every eventuality and we're simply seeing the contingencies related to my intentions," I said. "You'll remember that the Tyrant has been feeding him everyone's secrets for months now – the Dead King's not the kind of creature to have only one string to his bow."

"And how are we to be sure, Damned, that you're not one of those strings?" the Saint said.

"You sure you didn't speak with him?" I mused, forcing my lips to stretch into a friendly smile. "Because starting a fight within the band seems like exactly the kind of thing a villain would manipulate someone like you into."

The old woman's face blanked, the tightening of her features pressing the creases together in a way that made them look like some surreal mask of flesh for a moment. The loathing she glared at me with was bright and burning. I cared little for it, though, since the reminder that by turning on me she might just be advancing the Dead King's schemes was enough to have her fingers leaving the pommel of her now-sheathed sword. A little heavy-handed, as far as handlings went, but I suspected anything too subtle would be lost on the likes of Laurence de Montfort.

"What is it that you suggest, then?" the Pilgrim calmly asked.

"I'm going to be taking those," I said, flicking a hand at the two broke Revenants. "In case they might be of use. But the identity of the third Revenant we encounter will tell us how we need to approach the end of our journey."

"You have met others, then," Tariq said.

I had. Two more, to be exact. The nightmare that was a Horned Lord with oracular insights, the creature known as the Skein. And one I had not fought at all, and would rather not: a man who'd once been the Good King of

Callow, Edward Fairfax the Seventh. If it was the former that was waiting on our path to the Ducal Palace, then Neshamah's game remained opaque to me. If it was the latter, though? It'd make three crowns that had been set in my way, increasingly obvious ones. It was an almost insultingly blatant bait, which while shedding no light on what decision should be taken at least would make it clear what the crux of the snare was. Assuming, of course, that this was not all governed by whim and the third Revenant wouldn't either be one I'd never before encountered. Or that there would be no third at all.

"It should be either a rat or a king," I said. "The rat means we're in trouble. The king means dice might need to be rolled."

"A rat," the Saint slowly said. "Do you mean. . . "

"Yes," I interrupted. "Like that one you fought."

"You've fought one of their kind before?" the old woman said, eyes considering.

"I survived it, with the help of others," I retorted. "Still on the fence as to if whether where we are right now will make it more or less dangerous."

There was no Threefold Reflection to spin us around with here, but the Skein wouldn't be confined to a single room either. It'd had a lot more room to manoeuvre, and freedom in choosing when and where to strike. Given that oracles were agonizingly difficult to deal with even when they weren't also massive more or less indestructible murder rats, it was not promising grounds either way. I was rather hoping for King Edward even if that path involved the dice having another go. Shit, if it was the Skein then had we been anticipated every step of the way? No, I decided. I knew for a fact that Choirs could affect those sorts of things, and the Pilgrim was sworn to one. Sve Noc would obscure me to most things unless they wished it otherwise, including possibly the Skein's weakened remnants of a Name, and there was also the very madman that Kairos had been using as a shield this entire campaign: the Hierarch. No, it shouldn't be possible for the Skein to have followed the entire thread flawlessly given that much interference. It should still have been able to glimpse possibilities, though, which would be dangerous enough on its own.

"The rat has something in common with Cordelia's cousin," I delicately said, glancing at Tariq.

The old man's lips tightened, and he offered me a nod.

"I suspect the both of us will hinder that," he said. "Though not half as much as Laurence does simply by being who she is."

I raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"What does she do?" I said. "Cut the future?"

*Gods*, I immediately thought, *please don't let her cut the future*. She was already ridiculously difficult to handle.

"Winter was predictable," the Peregrine said, "but never, I believe, predicted."

My brow rose further up, and I glanced at the Saint – who seemed displeased we were trading information to her. I couldn't honestly blame her for

that, since a handful of secrets was often the difference between Named beating all odds or being buried. The Peregrine seemed to be implying that since Laurence had made herself into a domain, more or less, then trying to predict her was the equivalent of having tried to predict my own domain back in the day. So, the Saint would muddle predictions simply by being involved in them. Useful, that, and it went some way in explaining why no one had been able to spring an ambush on her over the years. The Heavens really had shaped a fine executioner, hadn't they? No one would see the Saint of Swords coming until she was there and by then it would be much, much too late.

"Understood," I said. "If the two of you would keep an eye out, I'll clean up these loose ends."

I dipped my head at the Revenant remains. The Pilgrim's face flickered with hesitation until he spoke up.

"Your Majesty," he cautiously said, "you do not intend to eat them, do you?"

I choked.

"Do I –"

*What*?

"No, I'm not going to eat the fucking corpses," I hissed. "Why would you even ask that?"

"Drow are known to take from the dead in some manner," the old man said. "And you are closely allied with orcs and goblins, whose habits are well-documented."

"Corpse-eating isn't how the Firstborn do it," I grunted. "And for the Clans it's actually a pretty complicated issue that's been shaped by generations of – you know what, now's not the time."

"The goblins?" Laurence de Montfort asked.

She seemed honestly curious, though that didn't mean she wasn't also being kind of a prick.

"Goblins will eat *anything*, Saint," I tiredly said. "It's not like corpses are miraculously excluded from that just because it's distasteful to think about."

'Distasteful' was never a word you wanted to speak when discussing that particular subject, as it happened, if Robber was around. He would be very swift to inform anyone fool enough to do so that human corpses were actually very savory even without being cooked first. And that in Ater you could get that sort of meat rather on the cheap if you knew where to look, from grave-peddlers whose corpses had not been bought by necromancer and were starting to ripen. There was a reason that Black had told me never to buy grilled meat off a stall in the streets of Ater if you hadn't seen the animal it came from killed and cooked, and it wasn't just because it was a possible avenue for assassination. Unwilling to participate in that wreck of a conversation any longer, I hobbled my way to the nearest corpse – the Spellblade's – and knelt. Its flesh felt strange to my touch, not like a human's at all. Rougher, almost like bark, though I had no notion of whether that was a consequence of elvishness or of being made a Revenant. Regardless, even a glancing touch was enough to tell

me there was nothing salvageable in there: none of the three aspects there'd been were in a state to be taken. The one Saint had severed was a ruin, and when I'd used Ban on the undead's own third it had shattered the former and faded the latter beyond use. Fair enough, I thought. Given that I'd already taken from him once, I wouldn't have been able to anyway.

The head and leg that'd been cut off I put back in place, though mending those wounds was beyond me save in the most gruesome of ways. I wove Night in a pall over the elf's still form, and as the veil of darkness thinned and dispersed so the sight of the body disappeared was revealed. I leaned on my staff to rise, feeling the Pilgrim's patient gaze and the Saint's belligerent one. The heroine idly strolled up to me as I headed towards the remains of the Thief of Stars.

"Melted it, did you?" she said. "Useful knack."

It was difficult for her to seem as casual as she clearly thought she was being when she was clearly itching to get at me. I almost looked t Tariq – was this some misguided attempt to insert a little cordiality into this relationship? *Go on, Laurence, go up to the Black Queen and say something nice about her wicked and blasphemous powers.*

"I'm keeping them in the Night," I said. "Matters of burial can be addressed when this is all over."

"So it's a pocket trick, like a sorcerer," the Saint unpleasantly smiled. "Like I thought. So why, Foundling, did you make the Rogue Sorcerer carry your crowns?"

*Because I needed bait for Kairos, juicy enough to ensure it was the Sorcerer he struck at*, I thought. *Because the only way I'm getting my father's soul back from you people without a fight is if I do not, in fact, get it back from you people.* So I let out a little noise of surprise, and smiled all regretful and dim at the Saint of Swords. Eyes a little wide, like I was a touch slow but all harmless.

"Oh Hells," I ruefully said. "It completely slipped my mind."

"You're up to something, Foundling," Laurence de Montfort quietly said. "And I won't let you get away with it."

"Right now," I said, coming by the mangled halves of the second Revenant, "what I'm up to is having my time wasted. Walk it off, Saint."

I flicked a dismissive hand at her, which from the way she went red in the cheeks was more insult than anyone had tossed her way in a long time. Gods, if they'd had Black around her for weeks or months they must have kept him gagged the whole time: given the ease of her temper and how viciously he could spin a sentence, if they hadn't the body I'd claimed would have fewer limbs. Another painful crouch and ah, it seemed that the feel of the other one's skin had been on account of elvishness after all. The Thief of Stars's flesh was like a fresh corpse's, which was rather uncomfortable to think about so I did not linger over it. Her I could still take from, I found. One of the aspects tasted like... flight, cold and in the dark. The starlit one? Hard to tell, my senses in this were hardly exact. The second I studied tasted familiar, and I immediately

judged it to be what she'd called on in her attempt to use my staff. It felt like the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle clicking together, though there was something else. Rarity? Some sort of limit, I thought, though given the way I made of aspects artefacts with a single use that didn't particularly matter to me. Still, if it was like I suspected and this was a trick that allowed one to use most anything then it didn't particularly appeal to me. Boots scuffed the ground at my side, but I bit my tongue at the last moment when I caught a glimpse of them and saw it was not the Saint who'd returned but the Pilgrim.

"She wasn't always like that," the old man quietly said.

Oh, were we going to have that talk now, under cover my seeing to the body of a fallen foe? I wasn't interested in being sympathetic to the Saint of Swords, so he was barking up the wrong tree. What Laurence de Montfort might once have been weighed less on the scales than what she now was, and that was trouble. The third aspect, I found, had been ripped out. And the... fabric around it had been almost burned, for lack of better term, perhaps to ensure that not even a speck of what had been there before remained. Interesting, I thought. Neshamah's work? That implied a much greater degree of control over how Revenants became what they were than I'd assumed he had. And, more intriguingly, that whatever that aspect of the Thief's had been he'd judged it trouble enough he'd cut it out before making her into one of his undead. That aside, my remaining choice was being the aspect that tasted of running away and the one that felt like well-placed hands. *You can never have too many ways to leg it*, I decided, and took the first. I leaned forward, allowing my cloak to drape over me and hide the sight of the small carved wishbone the aspect had taken the shape of from the Pilgrim even as I palmed it. My other hand moved to distract him, pulling down a veil of Night over the broken body.

"If you insist on having this conversation," I said, "let's have it on the move. I'm done here."

# Chapter 40

# Entreaty

> "The priests lie, my friend. A bargain with a devil does not pervert your meanings, or seek to twist your nature. Why would it need to, when the honest desires of men are already so wicked?"
>
> Kayode Owusu, Warlock under Dread Emperors Vindictive I and Nihilis

When I'd told Tariq that if he wanted to talk about the Saint we'd have to do it while walking, I'd meant it as a way to put him off. Considering we were in a broken ruin of a realm infested with devils, undead and whatever else had might have been summoned and bound, it seemed foolish to have such a conversation when we should be keeping our eyes out on our surroundings instead. How silly of me not to realize that I was dealing with the Grey Pilgrim: he was more than willing to take my words at face value if it got him his way, and I couldn't even recant. Not without seeming like I was the one out to get the heroine, anyway, which would win me no favours with the heroic three fifths of our party as well as quite possibly turn into a liability down the line. It was one thing if I killed the Saint of Sword in my own defence or that of Masego's, another if just like when I'd snatched back Black's body I was baiting her to better take a swing. One would be a tragedy that could be mended, in time, but the other would eat away at the foundation of the alliances I wanted to make. So, when after a few traded whispers with the Peregrine the Saint went on ahead to scout the way through, I sighed but did not object when he fell in at my side. Quite a pair we made, the winded old man and the dusty cripple.

"I had a conversation with your teacher, before his soul was cut out and sealed," Tariq Fleet-foot suddenly said.

He'd meant to catch me by surprise, which made the way I was just a little too slow in keeping that surprise off my face all the more irritating. My limp faltered, and the way I turned it into a painful longer stride wouldn't have fooled me – much less an old hand like the Pilgrim.

"Did you?" I blandly replied. "Interesting."

Like a horse about to bold, there was now no telling where this was headed. If he'd wanted my undivided attention, well, he godsdamned had it.

"He is," the Pilgrim agreed. "The qualities that steer him could be considered virtues, in a certain light. Had he chosen to serve the cause of Above instead of Below he would have made a great champion."

My lips quirked, though it was mockery and not amusement that moved them. All I could think of was green eyes burning with something mad, in a little room in Marchford, and that implacable anger that was at the heart of him. Amadeus of the Green Stretch, carrying the banner of the Heavens? No, it would go against every grain of who he was – he was capable of doing great good, he truly was, in that Tariq had grasped him exact. But his disdain for Good was set in the marrow of his bones, and there would be no changing that without changing every other part of him.

"I expect if you told him as much it was not well-received," I said.

"I believe he made his finest effort to wound me with words alone," the old man said, sounding unmoved.

I threw an assessing glance at the Grey Pilgrim, finding his tone just a little too blithe. His face was the same, so tranquil I could not help but wonder if it was forced. I'd known Black to twist or break people with but a few calculated sentences, and though the Peregrine would be made of sterner stuff than these he would also have a graveyard's worth of skeletons in his closet. On the other hand, Black had cultivated his reputation – his legends – into as much of a weapon as the rest of him. It was always hard to discern what he could and could not do, which had always been the way the man liked it.

"Yet his insights, though harshly delivered, have allowed me to shed different light on things I once believed myself to fully understand," the Pilgrim continued. "In the east, I believe a distinction is drawn between *Name* and *Role*."

"The Book of All Things does to begin with, if you read into certain parts," I pointed out.

For a beat I sought the exact passage, one of the few I'd actually learned by rote.

"To every soul, great and small, purpose will be tendered," I quoted. "Through crucible of choice are lives shaped, and one's mark on Creation defined."

The passage went on to say some pointed things about villainy being a twisting of that tendered purpose, and so Evil as well as evil, but I'd always taken the Book with a grain of salt. It was a beloved and well-worn story in Callow that some ancient Count of Denier had used that very passage to argue that it was in fact impious not pay taxes promptly and in full. Once words were put to ink, anybody could put them to use and those particular words were so old none could say who'd first written them – more than simply the purposes, I suspected that the words themselves had shifted over the centuries. They couldn't *not* have, after all, considering no one in those days had spoken Lower Miezan before said empire came to Calernia and the Callowan manuscripts of

the Book were in that language. No translation could be perfect, my expanding repertoire of spoke and written languages had made painfully clear. The Grey Pilgrim's glance at me was openly amused, which was when I was forced to acknowledge I'd just quoted scripture at a man who rubbed elbows with angels. Ah. Awkward.

"As you say, Queen Catherine," he said. "I must commend whoever it was that saw to your religious education."

I wondered how he'd take if I told him I'd drifted through most sermons at the House and only begun studying the Book with any seriousness at the prompting of the wicked servant of the Hellgods better known as the Black Knight. Or, for all that matter, that the only person I'd comprehensively discussed theology with in the last few years was Masego, a man whose main interest in the matter was the practicalities of deicide. *In all fairness*, I thought*, that's turned out surprisingly pertinent to our lives.*

"In Levant, we speak of it simply as Bestowal," Tariq said. "A gift from Above or a curse from Below. What is done with these is our choice, and the strength of the mark left on Creation is but the illustration of the character of they who were bestowed. One who cultivated customs leading to greatness will leave great legacy behind, deeds worthy of recording. One who allowed mortal failings to remain paramount will be but a line in the ledgers of the Blood, soon forgot."

"I'd noticed," I slowly said, "that your nobles – your Blood – seem particularly set in their ways."

"We seek to emulate admirable people, Queen Catherine, but those people are long gone," the Pilgrim sadly said. "And their wars, their foes, their disasters are no longer our own. In being inflexible of virtue we have made virtue of inflexibility, often to our detriment. It is a way of thinking, you see, that exalts great deeds done in the name of the Heavens without giving though to their aftermath. Their consequences. At our finest – and make no mistake, for all its flaws the Dominion has rendered great and righteous service for no rewards at all – my people are an assembly of heroes, Bestowed or not. At our worst, we seek glory heedlessly and recklessly kill over matters of honour."

Which, while a fascinating look into the Dominion from a man who knew it like few others could and likely ever would, had little bearing on the Saint of Swords or even Black that I could see.

"I had thought myself, through the nature events that shaped me, freed of these fetters so common to my people," the Grey Pilgrim quietly said. "I was, it has become clear, terribly wrong in this."

After the first surprise he'd sprung on me I'd grown careful to mask my thoughts, but hearing the old man that was arguably the most accomplish hero of our age – and likely a century or two before that – bluntly admit he'd made a grave mistake almost put another stutter to my steps. There was regret in the way the Peregrine had spoken, but mostly it was an honest admission of error. And that was, I thought, why even when he sought to end me it was difficult

to hate the man. Because even when he dipped into hypocrisy, even when he dug in his heels long past the point he should, the Grey Pilgrim was trying to do good. And when he failed in that, he looked the truth of it in the eye and owned it.

"I do not regret for a moment my service of the Heavens, Black Queen," the old man honestly said, "but my blindness to the consequences of it is on my head. In doing merciful work I have sown the seeds of reprisal far and wide and though *never once* will I bend my head to Evil for fear of contest, more should have been done to prepare Calernia for the storm."

It sounded, I thought, like he was blaming himself for the Dead King's stirring. Which seemed backward to me, considering I was fairly sure it was Malicia who'd first opened the gates for his intervention in Creation. Oh, I'd sought to make a bargain as well after receiving envoy from Neshamah but she'd been wearing a body in Keter long before I arrived. If my suspicions were correct and the Dead King avoided intervention save at the invitation of another Evil – to place, in a way, the burden of opposition to Good on another – then it was the Tower's hand and not any hero's that was at work. *On the other hand, would he have moved if he'd not seen opportunity?* I wondered. I doubted an invitation was all it took to secure the aid of the Dead King. Perhaps the Grey Pilgrim was right, and in some eldritch way his works had paved the grounds for the King of Death's coming. But even so, fuck the idea that the old man was *responsible* for the slaughter that ensued. I'd stood on the opposite end of the field from the Pilgrim more than once, but I could only praise the vast majority of what he'd done over his many decades of holding a Name.

"You've been a helping hand," I replied. "Sometimes I question the soundness of the causes you've helped, but not your intent."

"That is kind of you," Tariq said, bowing his head. "And you are not wrong to say I was hand, and mayhaps on occasion a finger on the scale. I was offered chances, you see, to intervene when there was still contest to be had. When the balance had yet to swing."

He paused.

"Laurence de Montfort was sent forth, for near as many years as I, when there was absolutely nothing left to save," he gravely said.

And there we were at last, I thought. The song and dance to convince me to stay my hand if a moment came where she turned on me. That the Pilgrim had pressed so hard for this conversation to happen in the first place told me everything I needed to know about the odds of it happening.

"So she's seen the deep end," I said, unimpressed.

"No, Queen Catherine, she has *swum* in it," the old man sadly said. "When we first spoke in Callow, years ago, you told me you were tired of killing children because they were on the wrong side. Asked me if I was. And I am, Black Queen, Heavens forgive me but I am. Yet mine was still the lighter of the burdens, for even Laurence's victories have only ever come in the wake of disaster."

My brows furrowed. If I was following his meaning correctly, he was implying that while his role had been snuffing out disasters before they could fully form while the Saint of Swords had been... well, cutting of limbs when the rot took.

"You see her now, after a life of holding back the darkness, and find only bitterness and distrust," Tariq said. "I do not expect these to endear her to you, Your Majesty, or even for cordiality to be attained. But I ask that you see her bared fangs for what they are: the scars left behind by a lifetime spent facing down the horrors of Calernia so no one else would have to."

His voice wasn't pleading, not exactly, though knowing what I knew about the Peregrine if he thought that tossing aside his pride would save the Saint's life he would discard it without a second thought. In that sense he was remarkably similar to my own teacher, seeing little worth in personal dignity when it stood in the way of results. But though shy of a plea, there was no denying that a suit was being made.

"I know better than most what it costs someone to tread through ruin," I acknowledged. "And many of mine were of my own making. But that must be owned, Pilgrim. It does not abnegate responsibility – *especially* not in the powerful."

"Those ties got both ways," the old man said. "There is not a soul on Calernia, Black Queen, that has not benefitted from the toil that clouded Laurence de Montfort. Sword in hand, she has danced with death for the sake of others a hundred times. From the windswept plains of the Chain of Hunger to the silent deeps of the Brocelian Forest: she has drowned plagues that would have killed dozens of thousands in the blood of hundreds, slain beloved heroes who sunk into madness and slaughter, sent scuttling back into the dark all manners of old gods whose hungers grew wicked – though not before they had their taste."

His blue eyes grew hard as steel, when he met mine.

"All this she has endured, and endured for so long that Creation itself tempered her into something beyond breaking," the old man said. "I have known souls sworn to Endurance that would weep at having lived half her life – and for this she has asked no reward, no riches nor titles nor honours. Not a single thing, for above all things Laurence de Montfort believes that strength must be put to righteous purpose."

The Grey Pilgrim let out a long breath.

"She is not kind," he admitted, "for Creation has burned kindness out of her. She is not forgiving, for there are graves sown across many lands that taught her to cast forgiveness aside. She is not witty or brilliant or fascinating, those traits that so often make the worst of us seem forgivable. She is rough and brusque, mistrusting, and there will never be a day where she does not see you as a seed of the Enemy."

The Peregrine, old and bent as he was, held himself with the presence of ruler when he so wished. This was not one of those times, for he did not try to

tower over me or browbeat into acquiescence. He was asking, as an equal or something close to it.

"And still," he said, voice growing rough with feeling, "I ask you to see you for what she is: a woman who saw evil preying on the world and took up the sword in its defence. Selflessly, without once grudging what such service would wreak upon her soul."

And I could see, through the grief in his voice, that there truly was a tragedy there. Because he might be a decent actor, I thought, and perhaps a liar of some skill if there was cause for it, but he had not taken to it the way some of the people I knew had. The tremor in his voice was genuine, coming from someone who'd never learned to fake it so perfectly they'd blurred even to themselves the difference between truth and lies.

"It may be," the Grey Pilgrim said, "that for the harrowing life she has led Laurence will be given place of honour at the feet of the Gods when death finally takes her. That for greater service greater accolade will be rendered unto her. But that is the debt of the Gods Above, Black Queen, and that realm known only to the just is beyond our mortal understanding."

His fingers twisted into a symbol I did not recognize, though he did not even seem to notice their movement.

"Those are not the Gods to which you keep, regardless, and so I do not ask you to keep to their ways or their dues," Tariq said. "I speak to you instead as one of the living. We who still tread Creation, who have benefited from her shattering labours. We who owe better than a shallow grave to this woman. Not for what she might still do, though few are better suited for war on the Hidden Horror, or for the expedience of earthly alliances. We owe it for what she has *already done*."

It was, I thought, a touching speech. Well spoken and from the heart. It might just be, too, that every word he had spoken was true. That for all that I'd thrown my castigations in the face of these heroes when the Tenth Crusade came baying at my door for their temerity in coming to offer their *salvation* more than two decades too late, I'd still lived in the shadow of their protection. That these two old killers had borne the weight of half this continent on their back and these days had nothing but scars and bared swords to show for it. It would have felt right, to follow the course of that thread to the conclusion that what had shaped Laurence de Montfort excused who she'd become. *And yet.*

"You ask me, in essence," I said, "to extend the courtesy of a stayed hand because what has sharpened her to a fault was beyond her control."

"No," the Pilgrim said, "you mistake me. She made the choice to-"

"I understand you perfectly," I said. "Just the same as your Blood, her character has led her to this place and this strife. That character is good, and so you ask me to excuse her."

"How carelessly you reduce a life of doing good to a single sentence," he said.

"It does weigh on the scales, what you say she did," I admitted. "But I have to ask, Pilgrim: this courtesy you ask of me, will you extend it in turn?"

The old man blinked in surprise.

"I too have my bevy of broken souls," I said. "And oh, they're a vicious lot. No denying that. Savage from their days in the wild, but they're learning. One step at a time."

I thought of the Doom, of the same woman who'd let her madness drench the world in blood whispering of the sacrifice she'd made and the woman it'd made her into.

"Some are beyond redemption," I admitted. "Others…"

*Half the world, turned into a prop for the glory of the other half*, spoken in a burning whisper. A sardonic smile beneath pale green eyes. And a knife into his ribs, after the Folly, that I could not regret.

"Have declared their own war on despair, and mutilated themselves in pursuit of victory," I continued. "I've gathered them to me, by fate or happenstance, and they're my responsibility. Even the one high up in the palace, whose grief has sent into a dark not even his eyes can see through. So I ask you again: when the time comes, and they are to be judged, will you return the courtesy you ask of me?"

Blue eyes in a tanned face assessed me, wondering. He did not reply.

"I thought so," I replied. "Then were are allies in convenience, Pilgrim, and you earn no courtesy from me. If she bares her blade at Hierophant or myself, I will snuff her out."

"I had thought," the old man said, "that agreement could be reached."

"You didn't offer an agreement," I calmly replied. "You asked for a concession."

"Then a barter," Tariq said, "though we are both lessened for it."

And it shamed me just a little when he said. That it'd come to this, but also the entire span – every intrigue I'd woven through and around the Tyrant, every trick I had yet to ply. And this man, I reminded myself, had mere hours been trying to leash me with the threat of death through a pattern of three. Not even a day had passed since we'd been at war, and still the disappointment in his gaze stung just a bit. *I've disappointed people I love*, I thought, meeting his gaze. *And that did not stay my hand. Neither will this.*

"You are in need of an eight crown," the Pilgrim said. "To cast down yours now would endanger your efforts, for war is ill-time for succession. Kairos Theodosian will fight you over his to his dying breath, for there is nothing he loves half as much in this world as the legacy he embodies and stripping him of right to rule would rob him of this."

I inclined my head to the side in silent concession.

"I was once Tariq Isbili, of the Grey Pilgrim's Blood, Honoured Son under the Seljun of Levant," the old man said, and his voice rang with quiet authority. "Though stricken from the ledgers I have raised rulers of Levant and I have cast them down. My word has been taken for law, and my honour for the honour of the Dominion. If I took the Tattered Throne, the bloodlines would rally to my

banner and acclaim me Seljun by right. That crown I promise you, for the life of Laurence de Montfort."

My fingers clenched, then unclenched.

"If she kills Masego, I will murder her without hesitation," I told him, meaning every word.

He grimaced, but he must have understood that there was no concession in his power that would possibly make me effectively concede the right to the Saint to kill one of my dearest friends without consequence.

"If she does not kill the Hierophant," he said.

"Then we have a bargain," I said.

We shook on it, amongst the ruins of what had once been a great city. It was not long after that the Saint returned, the Rogue Sorcerer looking harried and bloody as he leant against her. The Tyrant of Helike, he announced, had betrayed us.

*Finally*, I thought.

# Chapter 41

# Ante

> "It is the nature of gambling that the scope of one's victory is proportionate to the scope of all others' defeat. So is it with empire, and near as subordinate to chance."
>
> Dread Emperor Venal

I studied the Rogue Sorcerer closely as he hobbled forward, not out of any great affection for the man but because the state of him was a piece of information that'd allow me to discern the nature of Kairos Theodosian's game. When the Tyrant had turned on us, had he gone for the kill or for a more amicable form of betrayal? The Sorcerer's face was a canvas of bruises and scratches and he looked like he'd been sent tumbling down through a thicket of brambles, but aside from that and a wounded knee I could see no great damage inflicted. While the Pilgrim saw to the other hero's pain, I considered the private conversation that Kairos Theodosian and myself were having through the particulars of the Rogue Sorcerer's escape and return. If he'd wanted to break with me permanently the Tyrant would have killed the man – or at least made a serious attempt to do so, which did not seem to have been the case – to lure out the Pilgrim's lone aspect-resurrection. He'd taken the crowns, that much was obvious, and likely whatever artefacts the Sorcerer had been carrying on him. That appeared to include the casting rod, and likely Black's soul as well. Kairos had deigned to use the opening I'd left for him and done it without burning bridges with myself or with the heroes in a way that could not be overcome down the line. Which meant he was still open to turning on the Dead King in our favour, if we seemed the horse to back at the latest hour. Assuming he didn't turn on both us and the Hidden Horror in favour of some still-inscrutable aim, which given who we were dealing with was very much possible.

"- he had me thrown off a balcony by gargoyles after declaring that was the last we'd see of me," the Rogue Sorcerer said, snatching back my attention.

*Really, Kairos? That's a little on the nose even for you*, I thought. If the Tyrant was going around throwing heroes off of cliffs then he definitely wasn't

trying to kill anyone. I paused for half a beat and looked the absurdity of what I'd just thought in the eye, though being absurd made it no less true. I tapped the bottom of my staff against a broken pavement, claiming the attention of the returning hero.

"He took the crowns," I said.

"He did," the Sorcerer agreed. "And-"

The man flicked a hesitant glance at the Pilgrim, who nodded in allowance.

"- my teacher's soul," I finished instead. "That cat's been out of the bag for some time, wizardling."

He watched me warily at that, as if the revelation that he'd been going around with my father in a bottle would be enough to have me strike at him out of nowhere. While even these days I relied on being underestimated to get away with gambits, on occasion it was irritating to be taken as this kind of second-stringer. I wasn't some cackling Dread Emperor from the Age of Wonders, Sisters bless, and even if I'd actually intended on betraying these people I wouldn't have been an *amateur* about it.

"He intends to coerce you with it, I suspect," the Grey Pilgrim solemnly said.

There was sympathy in his gaze I did not particularly deserve or want. Not from the man who'd ordered Black's soul cut out and bottled for his own manner of coercion. I might hold Tariq in higher esteem than Kairos, but I'd say this for the Tyrant of Helike: when he slid the knife, he did not pretend it was anything but that.

"He'll try," I simply said. "Sorcerer, did he speak anything else before throwing you off the cliff?"

"Balcony," the man corrected.

"She's right," the Saint grunted, almost amusedly. "If a villain tossed you down, it's a cliff in every way that matters."

I suspected the old killer had been thrown off, or leapt down, more than a few in her time. The dark-haired man cocked a brow but did not argue.

"He loudly lamented your lack of foresight," he told me. "In some detail."

So, Kairos had left a message for me. Kind of him.

"In what way specifically?" I asked.

The Grey Pilgrim grimly smiled.

"You think he revealed his plan by monologue," the old man said.

*I think that if he took the bait I offered, it was for a reason,* I thought. *He just gave me a way to get everything I want the way I want it. He won't have done that without a reason, and if we're to continue negotiating through you then he needs to have his counterstroke made known*. If the Pilgrim wanted to take that as Kairos making a Name-induced mistake instead of moving through something that had the shape of one, then that was his miscalculation to make. I dipped my head the slightest bit, then silently invited the Sorcerer to keep talking.

"He castigated your ignorance of precedent, Black Queen," the hero almost apologetically said. "And insisted there are reasons people don't 'go around pulling swords from stones, if you'll forgive my language'."

It took me an embarrassing four heartbeats before I put the pieces together. Shit. *Shit*, that heinous little bastard. There was no way he should be able to know about – no, Hells, he'd been talking with Neshamah for months now hadn't he? And Neshamah could pick Masego's brains whenever he wanted. It was quite possible that the Tyrant knew when I'd pulled the sword from the stone at First Liesse I'd done so while presenting myself as the heiress to the tacit king of Callow of two decades: Amadeus of the Green Stretch. That was a crown, one I'd not considered until now and one I could not afford to lose. If my teacher was inflicted the curse that was losing that 'right to rule', who was going to unfuck Praes into a halfway reasonable nation for me? I'd come to trust Akua to an extent I would have thought inconceivable a few years ago, but I couldn't trust her anywhere near the Tower: it'd be like locking a drunk who'd just begun weaning into a wine cellar. And Malicia, well, regardless of the political considerations that prevented allowing her to remain in that seat if the Empress had wanted this to end in any way but one of our heads on a pike then she shouldn't have started assassinating my friends. I needed Black as, if not Dread Emperor, then someone in a position to resolve the mess in the Wasteland before the cauldron tipped over and fucked us all over while we were stuck looking north.

"He's threatening to have Black as the one, to cut the grass under our feet and give Larat his due," I said. "Possibly in my name, possibly on his own – hard to tell at this point. I shouldn't need to tell you that'll be a disaster."

"You mean the most desirable way for this to end, save you chucking down your own crown," the Saint of Swords bluntly countered.

"Laurence," the Pilgrim chided.

He did not, I noted, disagree. Of course he wouldn't. Tariq had considered Black enough of a threat that he'd been willing to unleash a plague to corner him, even if I was right and he'd gone after my teacher with the deeper intent of baiting a pattern of three between us. The Pilgrim wasn't the kind of man to resort to those means unless he thought the enemy dangerous enough to require it. The heroes knew my teacher as the Dread Empire's red right hand, the monster who'd torched the heartlands of Procer to starve an empire into collapse when he'd judged he could not defeat its armies on the field. And he was that, it must be said. But he was also a great deal more: the architect of the Reforms, the lid that'd been put on the worst impulses of the Wasteland for nigh forty years and a stubborn madman who'd fought a bitter, thankless struggle to end the cycle of death that'd bound Callow and Praes for millennia.

If I was to have peace in the east in my lifetime, and the kind of peace that would last *beyond* my lifetime, then Black was one of the keystones for it. As Warlock had once told me, for all that the man saw himself as a replaceable cog in a great machinery he was in truth the beating heart of the dream for

a different Empire. If I lost him, there simply wasn't anyone else who'd do his work anywhere a well, as comprehensively or as reliably – more than just personal ability, there were his personal *relationships* to consider. Who else had his pull on the Legions, on the Clans and the Tribes? Had Kairos glimpsed that, I wondered? If so, he was even more dangerous than I'd suspected for he was perhaps the first of my foes to truly understand the world I wanted to make. Or it might be simpler, I thought, a scheme as plain as it was effective: I would want to preserve my father, the heroes would want to cripple him. Conflict would ensue, sure as dawn rising.

"Theodosian can't be allowed to get his way," the Rogue Sorcerer spoke up. "Especially if what the Black Queen suggests is true."

"You walked through the same empty towns as us, boy," the Saint harshly said. "The further the man who wrought that is from a crown-"

"We do not want the man who schemed that to *shape this realm*," the Sorcerer hissed back. "That is the last crown's purpose, Gods be merciful, and we'd trade what – a petty blow at a woman trying to be our ally for what could be bloody disaster?"

Huh. I'd genuinely not seen that coming.

"Roland," the Pilgrim intervened, tone calming. "No such decision was made. There is no need for backbiting among us."

"There is, Peregrine," the hero furiously said. "I've kept my tongue through low ebbs – and there have been a great many of those, since this wretched crusade began – but what sort of black madness is it that the only one here who has attempted to save lives over the last months is the damned *Black Queen*?"

I wondered what it said about me, that instead of being touched by that I was immediately suspicious. If you sat in a high seat long enough, I thought, trust sickened and died until all that was left was the strange kin to it that Malicia has famously coined: trusting people to act according to their nature. And I did not know enough of the nature of the Rogue Sorcerer – Roland, to hear Tariq put a name to him– to trust anything coming from his lips. Gods, though, even if he might be playing me it was nice to hear someone say it.

"She's playing you, Sorcerer," the Saint told him.

The echo, I thought, was ironic in all the worst ways. My father would have laughed of it until tears came and muscles ached.

"I don't care, Saint," the hero said. "This is... this is beneath us. All of us. That even in the face of doom we take each other as foes instead of a having a single forthright conversation to protect the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who put their lives in our hands."

"There is a conversation to be had," the Pilgrim tiredly conceded. "Yet now is not the time for it."

"Respectfully, Peregrine, I disagree," the Rogue Sorcerer said.

Though his knee had been healed by the Pilgrim along his bruises, it must still have been tender by the way he was careful when turning towards me.

"You have a plan," the dark-haired man said. "This has been evident since you cowed two armies into truce and stripped rule from a third of the Highest Assembly. What is it that you need done, Queen Catherine, and how can I help?"

And it might be, I thought, that he was honest. That the was speaking from a place of genuine disgust for the way cloak and dagger struggles were still being had even when, as he had said, hundreds of thousands of lives hung in the balance. If that was true, if the Rogue Sorcerer really was as appalled by it as the glimmer in his eyes said he was, then this was the first breath of the newborn Liesse Accords. An agreement, however implicit, that there were some monstrosities that even foes should and would band against. That a form of restraint could be enforced, by the fear of utter opposition from all others if nothing else. It was something I longed to hear, more than any praised or recognition of my bitter efforts to avoid bloodshed, and so damned as I was I distrusted it immediately. Because I'd seen him hobble back to us, leaning against the Saint in quit conversation. Because I knew near nothing of the man under that sweep of dark curls, and if I was trying to trick Catherine Foundling I would have done it just like this. Splitting with the others on root of principle, not for sympathy of the villain but contempt at the actions of my own side. That he'd been a little too castigating, a little too bitter, only made it all the more believable: I'd learned from High Lords that anything too smooth was likely to be false. It might be, I thought, that this was all play by the heroes to get a better glimpse the lay of my intentions.

*Does it matter?* I thought, taking a cold-eyed look at the practicalities of it. I was, in the end, surrendering little I would not have to reveal down the line. And if I was wrong, if this was an earnest tirade, then that early surrender was well worth the price of encouragement. I breathed out, slowly, and then slipped two fingers to my lip to whistle. The shrill cry sounded loud and far, followed by silence and veiled gazes.

"I need a company to tear through the Ducal Palace's front door, loud and hard and drawing attention from the dagger," I said. "Which will slip in through a hidden path, to get at the Hierophant directly and pry him awake from the Dead King's influence."

"I tread close to the palace," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "It's a fortress of wards and enchantments. Brute force will flounder, but I have ways to finesse the locks."

"Good," I said, inclining my head. "I'll be there, as the moment we're in we'll need to move on the Tyrant and I've some notion of how to deal with him."

"This *dagger* you speak of," the Grey Pilgrim said, "if you do not guide it through the hidden path, how will it know of it?"

"Who do you think told her about that to begin with?"

Saint's blade had cleared the scabbard before the end of the first word and even the Peregrine shifted his footing to have an easier time slinging Light if it came to a fight – which seemed, if anything, to amuse Indrani all the more.

To have come so soon after I whistled, she must have been shadowing us from even closer than I'd thought. Archer's long leather coat whispered against the ground as she moved to lean against a half-broken pillar, hazelnut eyes bright in the gloom of this city she'd seen both breaking and broken. The way her fingers rested on the handle of her long knives was too casual to be a threat, but there was not a hint of fear in her bearing at the thought of tangling with any of the heroes.

"Archer," the Pilgrim said, inclining his head in greeting. "How long have you been trailing us, I wonder?"

Indrani grinned, sharp and unpleasant.

"I'm just here to guide you poor lost souls through this nightmare of a city," she said. "Nothing to read into."

"Should I be appalled that even after all this you had yet another card up your sleeve?" the old man said, glancing at me. "How many more are left, Your Majesty?"

"One more, Tariq," I said, lips quirking. "That's the trick: always one more."

"Spare me," the Saint of Swords said. "Fine, if you need warm bodies for a dagger crew then I'll bite."

"You'll be a lot more useful in the assault crew," I politely replied. "The Pilgrim would be a better fit."

"We don't trust you not to cut our boy's throat at first occasion, 'cause you're vicious old bat," Indrani cheerfully translated. "You're not going anywhere near him without Cat to keep an eye on you, get me?"

I glanced at the Pilgrim. We had, after all, struck a bargain. The reason for which he might hesitate to leave the Saint alone with me – she'd try to end me and run headlong into grounds I'd prepared to kill her – should be seen to now.

"I am sure young Archer will prove sufficient muscle for the pair of us," Tariq agreeably said. "We both know, Laurence, that your talents are best suited to less subtle tasks."

"Getting your way in all of it, are you?" the Saint darkly said, matching gaze.

"Wouldn't have to, if your way wasn't so godsawful," I replied.

"You might be the single worst ally we've ever had," Indrani told her, sounding kind of impressed. "And I'm counting secret Malicia in there, since at least she had panache when batting us around."

"Secret Malicia doesn't count, she was just impersonating an ally," I said without missing a beat.

"So that's the Woe," the Saint said, eyes flicking between us and her lips quirked into a hard and unimpressed smile. "Murderers and sowers of ruin, but that's all right because you're *clever* and you're *droll*. Like that's not just a fig leaf on the obscenity of what you are."

"Gods Above, Regicide," the Sorcerer said, "how much time must we lose to incivility in the face of cataclysm?"

"You want civil tongue, boy?" she snorted. "Fine. Foundling, what has you so convinced that the dusty vagrant you just revealed can do a single damned thing to 'wake' the Hierophant? What is she going to do, put an arrow in him in a friendly way?"

Hardly that. There was a story between the two of them that was old and worn and could be put to purpose, but it would have been stripping bare something of Indrani in front of strangers that were still half foes. I saw no need to sate the curiosity of Laurence de Montfort at the expense of one of mine.

"There's a method," I flatly said. "You don't need to-"

"There's two people close enough to Masego to pull him back from the brink," Archer interrupted me without hesitation, "and of the two I'm the one in love with him."

Ah. Well. I kept a wary eye on the Saint, for if she laughed now I thought that Indrani might very well try to kill her. She was proud, my friend, and to have something so fragile mocked would sting all the more. Instead the old woman silently nodded, face shuttering closed.

"For the dagger to have chance at making it into the deeps without running into entrenched resistance, the assault crew will have to wreak the kind of havoc that simply can't be ignored," I said, passing over the discomfort with forced composure. "Sorcerer, you said you have a method to pass through wards?"

"I can bring them down," the hero agreed.

"Then, given who it is that's going to be making up this crew, I'd say the time for subtle has passed," I frankly said. "Let's smash through the front door and pick every fight there is to be picked."

It would, as an additional boon, attract the Tyrant the way honey would flies. He'd never be able to let pass an opportunity to meddle in that kind of a brawl, not even if it was to his advantage, and he and I still had a conversation to conclude. I'd put out the crowns and the soul though the Sorcerer, and he'd claimed that. That was the seed of a story, Kairos betraying us and my recovering crown and father from his grasp when we fought. He'd offered the mordant rejoinder of taking them but making it clear he was ready to spend them all before I could reclaim anything. If he'd genuinely meant to go through with that, though, I wouldn't have received a warning. Which meant he was, in his own way, inviting me to make a counteroffer when we next met. Which gave me until then to figure out what it was that the Dead King had offered him – besides the pleasure of betraying us – and beating that with an offer of my own.

"Now you're talking my language, Black Queen," the Saint of Swords said, crooked teeth bared. "Into the breach we go, blade high and let the dark cower at the coming it."

# Chapter 42

# Twined

> "The Lycaonese are a grim people though not without a dark sort of humour, as became evident when I was first told what a 'northern burial' is. The inhabitants of these parts do not bury their dead, for fear of the Kingdom of the Dead, instead burning their own and spreading the ashes on consecrated ground. What the locals refer to as one of their burials is, in truth, someone being eaten by ratlings from the Chain of Hunger."
>
> Extract from "Horrors and Wonders", famed travelogue of Anabas the Ashuran

This would be the second time I assaulted the ducal palace of Liesse, and it would have made three if the Lone Swordsman hadn't picked a dainty little eldritch church as his last holdout. Gods, now that I thought about it, hadn't I brawled with Akua every time I'd stepped within city limits in the past? Sometimes it was hard to reconcile the smirking woman I'd hated so bitterly with the Diabolist I know knew and on occasion even liked. Hells, I was pretty sure she'd once implied that some ghoul she was sending after me was Kilian, back when we'd been a couple. An arrow more pointed than plausible but then Akua's knack had always tended more towards striking deep than striking true. I dismissed the thought as the three of us began our approach down the Caen road, the broad avenue that led directly to the gates of the city's ancient seat of power. The gates were wide open, having fallen off the hinges, and the stone round them had been eaten into brutally.

"Someone assaulted this before us," the Saint said.

I grimaced.

"My own work," I said. "From when I last took this city."

"Akua's Folly," the old woman said. "The stories began trickling across the border after the Camps."

I did not reply, even though it was rare for her to engage save through threat and insults. I did not owe her a discussion of that catastrophe. Not to her, not to anyone. The breadth of the scope I'd failed my people by no longer

choked me day and night, not the way it had before heading into the Everdark, but the Doom of Liesse would never be anything but a bitter brew for me. That I seemed fated to walk it again and again was perhaps cruel, but then by my hands I had earned that cruelty. I'd still my tongue to it and take what was nothing less than my due.

"They say you bound the Diabolist to the heart of the ritual," the Rogue Sorcerer quietly said. "And then broke it on her head, extinguishing every speck of her soul."

"It was the Black Knight who struck at Akua Sahelian's work," I brusquely said. "And it nearly killed him too. It doesn't matter, save that we should not touch a ward until the hall where the Diabolist once laid her first threshold."

I was saved further talk by stirring in the sky, though at the sight of them I almost wished we were still rubbing salt into my old wounds. The colossal panes of bronze-like glass I'd seen earlier – how could anyone *not*, given how starkly they loomed above the city? – had began to shift. Like those beautiful jigsaw puzzles of glass and metal I'd once stared at in the markets of Laure, the pieces began moving like some intricate interlinked mechanism. Given the descending side of the panels they'd brought to mind a longview when I'd first thought of it, and it seemed that Masego was using them for purpose kin to that: rim glowing with massive carved runes I could not seem to understand, the panes began turning on themselves as if being adjusted for some arcane purpose. As it had earlier the first and largest pane of glass showed clear sight of the barren wasteland below as if it were being scried, but the angle of view and the closeness of the sight seemed to change in impossible ways according to the whims of spins.

"Rogue," I quietly said. "The runes, I can't keep them in my memory – that means they're High Arcana. What are they *for*?"

"I don't know," the hero admitted.

I waved a hand irritably.

"I know the upper arcane stuff is personal and unique for everyone, but I know there's usually some bridge of understanding there," I said. "I'm not asking for a treatise on what he's up to, just some broad strokes."

"Black Queen, I cannot understand High Arcana," the Rogue Sorcerer bluntly said. "I can hazard some guesses at the purposes of this device – I suspect every glass-like pane is a different scrying ritual and the largest one serves as a sort of receptacle for all that is seen, allowing variety of sight – but I cannot know anything for certain."

I glanced at the dark-haired man catching that he was faintly embarrassed. His pupils had been ringed in red or green, earlier, but that now seemed gone. A simple unremarkable brown, not so dissimilar to my own, was all that remained. I was a little skeptical of his words considering his record when it came to the fights and that at the Battle of the Camps he'd been directing the enemy wizard against my own mage lines led by Masego, who'd been dabbling in High Arcana long before I met him. Still, what did he have to win by lying

to me here? Nothing worth the candle, I thought, and I knew better than most that Names could be tricky things: he might have some help from his in these subjects from his. Or, from that matter, the very opposite. It wasn't unheard of for transitional Names to serve as a set of shackles to be surpassed down the line and – and this was a rabbit hole I did not have to spare tumbling down. I glanced one more time at the pane, and near flinched when an eardrum-shattering shriek sounded across the ruined realm. I'd heard them before, the interwoven four cacophonies that followed, like old metal being twisted and warped. One after another, the angled Hellgates opened in the sky above and devils began pouring out.

"Lesser Breaches," the Rogue Sorcerer murmured. "Yet four of them. That is... remarkable. And absurdly dangerous. The Hierophant is taking a knife to the already chewed up fabric of this realm."

"Look at the larger pane," I urged, "if it's like the last time then there'll-"

And there it was, clear-cut in view on the bronze glass in a way it had not been when I'd attempted to look at it with my own mortal eyes: a glittering array of runes that hurt to look at, forming a circle at twice the height of a man. I glimpsed a ghostly silhouette within the circle, but before a heartbeat had passed there was a flash of blinding light and a gargantuan detonation in the distance. I'd looked away in time, though I noticed that both the Saint and the Sorcerer had looked through the glare uninterrupted. Leant on their Name for it, I guessed, though I'd never found how to work that particular trick myself back in my Squire days.

"I don't suppose either if you can shed light on that," I said.

"It is no coincidence the Hellgates opened before the other part of the ritual," Roland told me, turning to match my gaze.

Well, would you look at that. Around one his left pupil, the slightest tint of azure blue was beginning to form a circle. Name or sorcery, I wondered? The more I learned of magic, the more I understood that there were as many ways to practice it as there were languages under the sun.

"Meaning?" I asked.

"That the stuff of the Hells is being drawn in at first, then given shape by the circle of runes we saw," the Sorcerer said. "It is an attempt, I believe, at making something – though whatever was made seems to have been deemed unfit and so immediately annihilated. I would say those failed attempts are responsible for the Due that was used to occlude scrying in Iserre."

My throat caught. Not at the subtleties of the sorcery at use slowly being peeled back, but at what the hero had told me without knowing it. Masego was drawing from the stuff of Hells and trying to give it a shape through High Arcana – a form of sorcery that was, by nature, deeply personal. That shape looked human, or close enough, and he was being obsessively exact even by his standards when it came to the results of his work. The Warlock had been slain at Thalassina, it was said, and having passed to the place beyond there was no sensible way for Hierophant to bring him back. But Masego had once

told me that devils did not die, not truly. They merely dispersed, returning to the primal stuff of the Hells where another of their kind would be born when the whims of those unearthly realms demanded it. Masego was brutalizing the world with sorcery until it gave him back the only one of his fathers he could reach. And he was, heartbreakingly, failing.

"Your Majesty?" the Sorcerer quietly said.

"Grief and miscarriage have seeped into the bones of this place," I said, voice grown rough. "And damn the Dead King, for having given him hope where there can be none."

After all, if the hero was correct it was the Due from this that occluded scrying then Neshamah was have seen to it that this was an exercise in futility: the Hidden Horror would need this to continue for months, if not years. Perhaps there was the slightest sliver of a chance, I thought, but how many lifetimes would it take for Masego to succeed? An obsession had been slid into the ribs of my friend, and not one he would easily be able to shake. I knew him, the way he thought. This would stay with him like an itch he could not scratch: the whisper that if he was a little more accurate, a little more inspired, if he spent another few years of research, then it could be done. That every moment where he had not yet succeeded was a failure. Merciless Gods, that old thing in Keter had wrought damage it would take years to unmake. And the middle of a war was hardly the time to do it.

"Enough dawdling," the Saint of Swords said. "The longer we wait the greater the chance the dagger will be caught."

"Agreed," I growled.

I had more than a little wroth to purge from my blood, now, and a hard fight seemed just the thing for it.

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A hard fight was precisely what I found us denied.

The avenue leading to the palace had been empty, which was not unexpected, but the way that not a soul awaited as we passed the gates was. We'd seen going in that the fresh waves of devils brought through the gates had headed for the deeper palace, so it might be that strife awaited us there, but why allow us any uncontested advance? It wasn't like they were going to run out of devils anytime soon, if the numbers brought through the Breaches were any indication. Answer to that was only found after we rose by steps and passed through halls where the marks of my anger in the face of the Doom had yet to fade until we reached a plain oaken door that was not unfamiliar to me.

"Ward," the Rogue Sorcerer said, resting a palm on it. "Beautifully crafted, though it seems to have been aimed sorely at the Fair Folk."

"How did you get through back then, if it still stands?" the Saint asked, eyeing me.

I pointed a finger upwards, where I'd once shattered the stone of the ceiling to leap into the room and slaughter the mages that'd been hiding in there. Laurence, every spry for her age, glanced at the adjoining wall once before

breaking into a smooth run – the first jump had her angling on that wall, after which I felt a small ripple of Name power and she leapt up through the hole. The Sorcerer, meanwhile, was still examining the oaken door with a gaze much too involved for it to be wood he was looking at.

"Can you break it?" I asked.

He'd said he could, after all. The dark-haired man blinked and turn to give me a sheepish look. Gods, what was it with practitioners and getting distracted?

"I can," he said. "The Saint?"

The answer came a moment later, as the old woman leapt down the hole and landed in a crouch.

"More magic upstairs," she said. "Peeked through the door and it was positively reeking of it."

"Ward?" I frowned.

"Labyrinth," she replied, shaking her head. "I'm no mageling, but I've had to go through enough of those to recognize the scent."

"Labyrinth, huh," I said, and looked straight ahead at nothing just in case it'd be able to see me through spell or prophecy. "Didn't work last time, you one-trick rat, and it won't this time either."

"Black Queen?" the Sorcerer asked, sounding alarmed.

"I believe we've got the Revenant known as the Skein on our hands," I said. "It's got a preference for those."

The Saint of Swords went still.

"The *Skein*?" she repeated. "Like in the old rhyme?"

"What rhyme?" I frowned.

"Eater endless, Shrouded silent,
Sought and lost sleeping below
Tumult tyrant, Snatcher slyest,
Dreaming still but waking slow
Skein scheming, last of five
Lords of Horn from long ago."

She was not a particularly talented singer, and I suspected she'd rushed the rhythm, but I understood it without trouble. My brow rose: the rat had a history, it seemed. I supposed I shouldn't be surprised, as the Dead King seemed to enjoy raising in his service the rare and the unusual most of all.

"Might be," I said. "It certainly goes by that Name anyway."

"I thought you'd tangled with some hasty longtail that got caught and turned, not one of the Old Lords," the Saint grimly said.

"It's tricky but hardly unbeatable," I shrugged.

"You don't lack stomach, at least," the old Proceran said, which was not disapproving if not the opposite either. "Well, if it's the same as the old legends it'll be waiting for us. Might as well have a look. Sorcerer, get a move on would you?"

"Please," I added, flicking a glance at the man.

The Rogue Sorcerer nodded, and after muttering something under his breath rapped his knuckle against the door once. The hand stayed there, after, though he opened his palm and the world shivered close to it. Huh. That'd felt like an old friend, and one I knew well: whatever aspect it was he'd just used, it was cousin to my old Take. And even more distant kin to the more abstract ability I still used as First Under the Night, though whatever similarity there'd been at the source had strayed the further I went from my Name. Interesting, though. Instead of breaking these wards, was he stealing them? It was certainly one way to interpret his Name, though given how subtle such matters could be I was reluctant to come to conclusions so swiftly.

"Done," Roland said.

The Saint of Swords strolled forward, elbowed him to the side and kicked the door down before walking through. I pushed down a snort and limped after them, gesturing for the Sorcerer to catch up to her. I slowed my steps just as I passed the broken door, bending down to pass my fingers lightly over the shattered oak. There was not, to my senses, so much as a speck of sorcery left in there. Akua had laid her ward in there more than year ago, and considering the usual thoroughness of her work it should have been exquisitely done. Yet there was not a damned trace of it left, not even some faint aftertouch. Creation rarely brooked such exactness, I thought. This was the work of his Name, not any sorcery I knew of. *I wonder*, I thought, *if there's a touch of colour around your pupil right now?* I'd master my curiosity for now, but I'd never been able to leave secrets alone for too long.

I hurried to catch up with them before anyone could notice.

—

I'd give the Skein this much, it put in an effort.

Though I did not know whether it had powers akin to sorcery or it was simply wielding the tripartite works of the old Dukes of Liesse and the two greatest Praesi mages of my generation, it tried to trap and waylay us at every turn. Of course, given that the Rogue Sorcerer seemed to be able to shatter any ward in less than thirty heartbeats and that Laurence de Montfort's answer to mazes was to cut through any wall in the way of marching in straight line it did not end up amounting to much. While I knew that the Saint would tire in time, she did not seem at the moment more than lightly winded and if anything Roland seemed haler than he'd been since hobbling back to the band. While they brute forced their way through the best-laid schemes of the Skein I kept a wary eye out, for this all seemed to easy to me. We'd yet to encounter any devils, or the Tyrant or any Revenant at all. All three of these would need to be met before we arrived at the conclusion of this journey, and indeed the shape of our story should ne nudging us towards that encounter. If we'd yet to meet them there was a reason for it, and since it was not of our own making it must be of the enemy's. That usually meant a trap.

"You ever hear of the Two Hundred Axioms, Foundling?" the Saint casually asked.

Boot against the wall, she pushed until the rectangular shape she'd carved into the wall toppled forward. Abandoned servants' quarters were revealed behind, and if I had to bet I would bet that we were closing on the edge of the western wing of the ducal palace. Soon we'd hit the inner courtyard, that heavily warded killing field that Akua had prepared to fend off any attempting to approach the part of the palace where she'd laid the heart of her ritual and her throne room with it. Hierophant was using the ritual arrays that she'd carved into Liesse, which meant he was likely in there as well. I doubted any of the holes I'd made in the defences on my way in were still there, considering the quantity of devils Masego had been calling forth. They'd turn on him in a heartbeat if they could, Dead King looming or not, so odds were fresh layers of viciousness had been raised instead.

"I have not," I said. "Some sort of philosophical book?"

"Close enough," Laurence de Montfort said. "They're best kept out of hands like yours, anyway."

"Charming," I commented, following her through the opening. "Why bring it up?"

"The only sensible solution to a maze is to not enter the maze," she quoted, tone amused. "This is close enough, I'd wager."

"And *there*," the Rogue Sorcerer hummed.

The open palm he'd laid on the wall in front of us went straight through what I'd believed to be a stone wall, revealing it to be a skillful illusion. The other half of the room, until now veiled, ended in a broken glass window overlooking the inner courtyard of the inner palace. Which was empty, save for the broken and scorched grounds where Akua had once nearly succeeded at killing me with her clever traps. Were we going to be allowed to run of this all the way to the heart of the palace? Archer had been in here before, and she'd told me the place was swarming with devils. What had-

"Wait," I said, as the Saint neared the window.

"What?" Laurence growled.

"The Skein," I slowly said, "in your stories, what is it known for?"

"Scheming," she bluntly said.

I grit my teeth. Now was not the time to get mouthy on me, Saint.

"Look, in your rhyme all five of the 'Old Lords' have some epithet that goes with their Name," I said with forced patience. "The Tumult is a tyrant, which I'm guessing means it's good at herding other ratlings. The Eater is endless, which I'd wager means even for a Horned Lord means it's *really* hard to put down. The Skein is scheming, sure, but the Snatcher is the 'slyest'. What does the Skein *do*, Saint? Are there any stories that hint at anything more?"

The heroine matched my gaze, brow creased with thought.

"It led a horde to devour whole what would become Hannoven," she finally said. "Through some secret way, using wiles. They're old stories, Foundling. There's not a lot of them and the Skein is barely in any. Makes sense, if Old Bones got to him."

Through some secret way, using wiles. It wasn't a lot to work with, and that it ate a whole ancient city didn't weigh much on the scales to my eye – it was what ancient hungry beasts *did*, what mattered was the manner of it. Hannoven was, as I recalled, one of the most fortified cities on Calernia – it was usually put in the same breath as Rhenia, Keter and Summerholm. Could I assume that even in the dawn of days it'd been a fortress? *Yes*, I decided. The Skein had, after all, used a 'secret way'. If it'd been a pack of huts, given the size of the damned thing there would have been no need for subtlety. It itched at me that the story spoke of a city, a place that was fixed. Not an army or a band of heroes, it was a city that made the tale and that was detail that resonated. In Keter, the Skein had been given the defence of a palace and it was the same here. *It might have a trick that works well with fixed positions, either both the attack and the defence.* I had too little to go on, Hells. That was the thing with the Dead King, wasn't it? Anything secret that might help in defeating him for good was long dead and buried. If not by his hand, then by sheer dint of centuries. Although, when we'd fought the Skein in the Threefold Reflection, it'd been as part of a pattern hadn't it? One Revenant per palace. King Edward in the Garden of Crowns, the Thief of Stars in the Silent Palace and the Spellblade in that horrid half-realm we'd tread trying to move between Creation and reflections.

The ancient King of Callow had been placed in a place for only the regal, the Thief of Stars assigned to spy on us in a place where every sound was muted and the Spellblade, a dead elf utterly lethal in direct combat, given watch over a place where there could be no place to hide. They'd all been posted, so to speak, in a place that benefited talents or nature they'd had before being sent there. Was is the same with the Skein then? I knew it'd used an artefact to manipulate the three interlocked realms of the Threefold Reflection, and that its oracular abilities had allowed it to do so even more dangerously, but this felt like a departure from the pattern. The Silent Palace had made it easier for the Thief of Stars to sneak around, not possible – amplification of a capacity, not crafting of a new one. It was the same with all the others, too. And if that held, then some pieces were beginning to fall into place. Gods, I almost couldn't believe I hadn't noticed: I'd already walked the grounds of this very ducal palace once and seen it gone still and bare, when I'd unleashed my domain of Moonless Nights. And then too, I'd still come across wards and traps. There was a reason we hadn't come across so much as an imp on our heedless advance through these grounds, and that was because we weren't in the palace at all: we were in the domain of the Skein.

"Saint," I said, opening eyes I hadn't realized I'd closed. "When you cut Winter, cut my domain, you were still within it right?"

"I was," the old woman warily said.

"And you could feel that you were?" I pressed.

Her eyes narrowed.

"Here, now?" she asked.

"Been too easy so far, hasn't it?" I said.

Her blade returned to the sheath and she took a moment to steady her stance and breathing. Then the world shattered around us like panes of glass, and the only hint that it wasn't her work was the slight widening of her eyes.

The first thing I noticed was that the roof over our heads and walls shielding us were gone.

The second was that the Skein in all its horned glory was nesting in the courtyard below, surrounded as far as the eye could by hordes of devils. Two silhouettes were at its feet, though in the gloom I could not make out who they were.

The third, and last, was that of us the Tyrant of Helike was being held aloft on his throne by a swarm of gargoyles while grinning like a man having the time of his line.

"My friends," Kairos Theodosian cheerfully announced, "I am grieved to inform you there might have been some *slight*changes to my allegiances."

# Chapter 43

# Treachery

> "Habitually treacherous enemies are accomplices to their own destruction."
>
> King Henry Fairfax, the Landless

I breathed in.

Fear drifted into my lungs along with the rotten scent in the air, the poisonous odour of thousands of hellspawn and one of the oldest beasts of the Chain of Hunger. Death, decay and a fight that would have been hard business even with an army at my back. Gods, but it'd been a long night and the dawn of it was not yet in sight. It'd been one thing to stare down armies when I'd been Named, when I'd been in the deepest throes of Winter, but now I was painfully aware this could all end as simply as my throat being opened by some lucky devil. The knowing of that almost numbed my limbs, when it sunk it so suddenly: I could die, in these few coming heartbeats. I could have died at any time on the way here, and even if we survived the closing jaws of this trap I might still die before the night was over. It was an arresting though, one that had my palms prickling.

I breathed out.

*Fear is an old friend*, I thought. Fear was the pain in my leg, the whispering tune of mistake and mortality and needing to always do better lest if all fall apart. How could it cow me, when I leant on it like a pilgrim's staff? I let that tenet straighten my back and took a look at my opposition. Devils, alas, in the thousands. *Walin-falme* and *akalibsa*, as we had fought before, but this was a disparate horde and there seemed no end to the assortment. It made gauging numbers difficult, given the wild variation of shape and size in the swarming throng, but it could be no less than two thousand. We moved, from there, to threats in the singular. The undead Horned Lord known as the Skein was nesting among the ruins of the courtyard and attending hall, its darkly furred strangely humanoid body folded inwards as if it were a beast at rest. Great antlers of bone jutted from the top of its head, set above golden eyes made even

more vivid by the deep red gouges beneath them. It was a creature gifted with foresight, near impossible to damage and wielding at least one aspect I knew to be capable of unmaking its mistakes – **Spool**, it had called it in Keter. At its feet stood two silhouettes, veiled to me until a sliver of Night saw to that mundane frailty.

I breathed in.

Yet more trouble, and my fingers harshly coiled. My predictions had come up short in two different ways and quite visibly so, for I now looked upon two men: one whose frayed tabard bore the twin bells of House Fairfax, the other whose pale green eyes watched all unfolding with open interest. The man who had once been the Good King Edward Fairfax, Seventh of His Name, bore old and intricate plate over which a tabard in the gold and blue of the royal line of Callow hung. He wore no helm, laying bare the face of a man in his late forties with sparse white hair and the eternal beginnings of a beard, and in his hand he held a longsword for which there seemed to be no sheath. To his side, the soul of Amadeus of the Green Stretch had been put in slender silvery stocks, his hands too far kept to reach the gag that had been put over his mouth. My teacher looked much like his physical body did, though there were dark rings around his eyes and a sort of haggard look to him I found deeply unsettling. Black had always been near obsessively neat in his grooming, but his soul laid bare was in disarray. That boded ill, though at least the sharpness in his gaze had not been dulled. A bag had been absent-mindedly tossed between the two of them, one I had with my own hand filled with crowns. That left only...

I breathed out.

Kairos Theodosian, Tyrant of Helike, sat draped over the gaudy throne his gargoyles were keeping aloft unevenly. Though he'd quite brazenly betrayed us, the odd-eyed villain had yet to bother with foibles such as armour or a blade. No that he needed them, with a flock of enchanted gargoyles obeying his every whim and a treasure trove of lethal artefacts at his disposal – to which, he'd added the casting rod of the Rogue Sorcerer, which he was currently toying with as he grinned a pearly white grin. This was all of it, I thought. Our enemy, against which stood three: the Rogue Sorcerer, roughed up and stripped of tools, the now twice-winded Saint of Swords and myself. This was not a fight we would win with swords, I thought, given the disparity in strength there. The best that could be hoped for was delay. We did, however, have one advantage over our foes. The foundations of their side were unsteady, while as long as there such a common enemy before us my own triumvirate would stand united. *How can I take your strengths and turn them against you?* Four heartbeats had passed, and as the fifth reached us Laurence de Montfort sighed. Not out of disappointment, I decided, or sadness. It was the same sigh I'd heard dockworkers in Laure make when some merchant had filled the hold with no eye to taking out the goods out and an hour-long job was going to end up taking twice as long. The Saint spat to the side, then rested her blade against her shoulder.

"That's going to take a while," she said, sounding irked.

"That's mine, you loathsome turncoat," the Rogue Sorcerer yelled at Kairos.

"I prefer to think of it as ours," the Tyrant jauntily replied. "Although, if you truly want me to return it. . . "

So, the sharper was about to blow and the moment the three of us were separated by the horde then there would be no more planning. This was it, all I had to scheme.

"Saint, how long can you buy me?" I asked.

"You got a way to win?" the old woman casually asked.

I nodded.

"Then however long you need, Foundling," the Saint of Swords told me with a hard smile.

I supposed she could be counted on to be a reliable whirlwind of destruction to anything she faced even when she was on my side, which was somewhat comforting.

"Keep them off me," I said. "I'll handle the Tyrant."

"Figures you'd go for the cripple," Laurence de Montfort said.

A helpful reminder that 'on my side' didn't mean friendly or any less generally horrid, I noted. A heartbeat later Kairos got the casting rod he'd stolen working and streaks of flame that looked fluid as water shot out towards the Rogue Sorcerer, who took off running towards them. *Godsdamnit, Roland*. It didn't matter if he could handle the sorcery being thrown at him, Kairos had hundreds of bloody gargoyles to throw at him and however good the hero's set of mail it didn't cover his face or throat or neck. I let the Night course through me and flicked my wrist, spinning a hooked chain that caught the wayward hero by the back of the coat and dragged him back forcefully. The Sorcerer had been about to reach the edge of demolished second story room we were still standing on, but the force I used in pulling him back had him half-tripping backwards. And also narrowly avoiding the knife-wielding gargoyles that popped right up from where they'd been hanging off the edge awaiting to scythe through Roland's ankles, because because Kairos being a chatty jackass didn't mean he wasn't clever. The streaks of flame I left him to deal with as I advanced – he snarled something in a language I didn't recognize, still tripping backwards, and some sort of swirling eddy of air caught them in a spin until the fires gutted out – and dismissed the chains. The gargoyles that'd come over the top milled uncertainly, knives extended into nothing, and did not even manage to chatter before I'd sent twin needles of Night through their torsos. They blew a moment later, and I met Kairos Theodosian's uneven eyes as I came to stand by the edge of the drop.

"So," I said, beginning to reach for my pipe, "how firmly rooted would you say your current allegiances are?"

It was theatrics, not directly asking what it was the Dead King had offered, just like reaching for a smoke in the middle of battlefield. I could not show weakness in the face of the Tyrant of Helike, lest he decide we were spent and

that the Dead King's victory was assured. Calm, control and even a smidgen of nonchalance. Anything less and I would not have gotten that keen glint in his good eye, the one that delighted in there still being a game afoot. For though Kairos Theodosian enjoyed a good bout of treachery, he would not commit to it without purpose and would never climb into a sinking ship. In that sense, I understood him in a way that few people could: like me, he had reached his current heights climbing over a tottering pile of victories. Like me, he knew it only took one hard defeat for it to all come tumbling down on his head.

"We are close as kin, our trust boundless and fondness without peer," Kairos soulfully said.

"Kill them," the Skein snarled, head suddenly rising up. "*Kill them all*."

I passed my palm over the head of my pipe, allowing a flicker of black flame to light it before pulling at the wakeleaf unhurriedly. I sighed in pleasure, feeling the Tyrant's gaze unwavering on me.

"Shouldn't you see to that?" Kairos amusedly asked, moving his head towards the courtyard.

Devils, Revenant, the closest thing I'd ever have to a father. A fight I could not win. *Calm, control, never miss a beat.*

"That's what heroes are for," I said.

I glimpsed, from the corner of my eye, the Saint of Swords landing in the midst of a sea of devils with her sword raised high. Screaming followed, none of it hers. So, Kairos hadn't taken the unspoken invitation I'd given to imply he was open to further treachery. Which meant Neshamah had bought him with a prize that was significant enough the Tyrant didn't believe I'd be able to match it. He wasn't refusing the prospect of turning on the Hidden Horror, that wasn't his way, but he was making it known the bidding had started high and would only get higher. *So what did he offer you?* I wondered. Given that Kairos' ambitions were still bound, as far as I knew, to the peace conference he'd forced then it had to involve the survival of the armies below. Or at least his, I corrected, for Iserre was made into a tremendous butcher's yard by the Tyrant's hand then the only the threat of utter annihilation could possibly bring either Hasenbach or myself to negotiate with him ever again. Couldn't be just being spared, though, because the Grand Alliance would be crippled by losing the armies below and so far Kairos had gone out of his way to avoid accomplishing that. I was missing something, because I could see no way in which the Dead King taking this realm benefitted the Tyrant. My fingers tightened, beneath cover of my sleeves. Was it that simple? When I'd irritated the Hidden Horror, he'd said something that now sounded anew in my mind: *when I have taken what I wish from this ruin I will forsake it as well*. If after he got what he'd come after Neshamah had no use for this place, what would he lose by promising it to the Tyrant of Helike?

I inhaled smoke and blew it outwards towards Kairos, whose nose wrinkled at the acrid smell. I couldn't beat that offer. It was a way for the Tyrant to get everything he wanted, so long as the Hidden Horror got it too. Which was, I

realized, my angle. Kairos Theodosian could not, as I'd thought earlier, afford a single hard defeat. And he had to be achingly aware here that he'd made a bargain with an entity his superior in every way, including perhaps even treachery, and that if he was crossed then he had no real way to strike back. Not alone, anyway, and when it came to opposing the Dead King then there was only one game in town.

"Well, he's lying to at least *one* of us," I pensively said. "Did you offer something worth more than a hundred-year truce?"

"You jest," the Tyrant grinned.

A little too quickly, I thought.

"I'm deadly serious," I said. "Kairos, I'll be blunt here because if he's actually sold this place to you instead of me I'll need to cut my losses and break it. Which is going to be damned hard to do a messy besides, so I haven't the time to dawdle. I got my win here in exchange for backing his envoy at the conference when the truce offer comes. One of us got peddled goods already sold, obviously, so which of us is it?"

"A truce," the Tyrant skeptically said.

"Don't be daft," I frowned. "You know what it's meant for. I'm willing to take the bet, because I'll get this continent ready for war on Keter even if I have to kill and raise every ruler myself, but I'm hardly blind to the risks."

A hundred years was a long time. Time to prepare, yes, but also for the continent to come apart. A truce meant no armies, not absence of schemes, and the most brutal blow the Hidden Horror might yet deal was to let that century come to pass and then do *nothing*. To let every willing sacrifice turn into bitter recrimination, to let his opponents devour themselves from the inside without sending a single soldier across the border. If I'd tried to weave a lie out of thin air, I thought, the Tyrant might just have sniffed me out. But this? If I were Kairos Theodosian, I'd believe it. Because I would afraid I'd been double-crossed, yes, but also because of who it was I was looking at. A woman who'd bargained with the King of Winter and Sve Noc, when the cliff's edge was reached, and Hells hadn't I headed to Keter to make another deal not so long ago? The Tyrant of Helike watched me with an inscrutable expression his face, and the simple fact that he was no longer grinning like a lunatic told me I'd drawn blood. I thought, for a moment, of feigning impatience and trying to hurry him along – an announcement it was time to cut my losses, cryptic action begun – but I stilled my tongue. On real stakes I would not gamble this way. And the more I actually lied, the more I risked this exceedingly more skilled liar catching me out.

"Speak to me, then, Black Queen," the Tyrant coolly said.

Not victory, this, but it was an opening.

"I'm not going to bribe you," I snorted. "You just knifed us, Kairos. You want back on this side? Make it worth my while to keep the heroes from putting your head on a pike. I'm willing to deal because I'd rather you sell me this place than the Dead King, but don't mistake that for actual *need*."

For a terrible moment, I thought I'd overplayed my hand. That the bluster had been too much, that I'd been seen through because I'd refused to bend my neck even if in that situation it would have been my words exact. Instead I was interrupted by a flock of steel-clad devils, whose leathery wings beat loud as they descended towards me with raised spears. My muscles began to tense and it was all I could do not to reach for the Night. But I had appearances to maintain, and Gods I was so close to flipping the Tyrant I could almost taste it. The *walin-falme* hit a hastily slapped down ward like birds hitting a window, as the Rogue Sorcerer came through for me. I did not even grin, instead pulling at my pipe as I continued matching gazes with Kairos. *Look at how in control I am*, I thought. *Wouldn't I have to be a lunatic, to stick to a bluff so stubbornly when the situation is this dire?* Airily tossing aside the Sorcerer's casting rod – Roland distantly screamed in a furious voice about it being irreplaceable and worth a fortune – and extending an open palm, Kairos was handed his jeweled sceptre by a chitter gargoyle and used it to thoughtfully scratch his chin.

"Are you lying?" the Tyrant of Helike asked, cocking his head to the side.

I grinned, all teeth and malice.

"I don't know," I said. "Am I?"

A heartbeat passed, both stares unflinching.

"I think, Catherine," Kairos Theodosian fondly said, "that you are lying through your teeth. But I still can't tell, and so it seems were are still allies."

Calmly I inhaled a mouthful of wakeleaf, and waited for the – *there it is*, I thought as the Skein's hulking shape obscured the sky, rising behind the Tyrant and myself. The stench of it was horrid, though spitting out the smoke in front of my face took the edge off of it.

"**Spool**," the Skein snarled.

And just like that/

/the Tyrant of Helike sneered.

"Fate is a tug of war, you raggedy old thing," Kairos Theodosian said, and there was something sharp in his tone I'd never heard there before. "Do you think the wishes of the conquered matter more than those of contenders?"

"You die laughing," the Skein hissed. "Or. You flee. Or. I am broken. Or. Everything burns. Or. Or. *Why does it keep changing*?"

"There's more than one reason I picked him out for this band," I amusedly said.

Was Kairos Theodosian a treacherous, unpredictable and murderous madman? Yes. Obviously. But against a particular kind of foe – say, an oracle who'd spin our of new thread of prediction from his every whim as the lunatic committed to them with ironclad will unhesitatingly – that had its uses.

"**Spool**," the Skein snarled again and/

/"Do you think yourself above even the Gods, you presumptuous relic?" the Tyrant of Helike snarled back. "Do you think you can erase *me* like chalk on a slate? Learn your place."

"Shouldn't have done that," I told the Revenant, pulling at my pipe.

"It will kill you," the Skein cackled, its laughter like rumbling thunder. "Wish, wish into the grave. How many years can you spend?"

I winced. I'd fought enough Named to recognize when one's bottom line was being crossed, and the continued attempts of the Revenant to use its aspect were definitely whipping Kairos into a proper frenzy. I could only guess at what was the cause of it, but the rage in that crimson bloodshot eye and the wildly shaking hands struck me as too raw to be a lie.

"I will confess," the Tyrant of Helike said, tone eerily calm, "that you have rather offended me. You may attend to other matters, Black Queen. This one will be settled by my hand."

"And now," I said, "for my next trick."

Because if I were an undead sorcerer with my personal Hell and forever ahead of me, if I'd taken to snatching Named and making them into my vanguard in Creation – which would mean, most of the time, that they'd be far from me and exposed to all sorts of aspects and sorceries – then there was one thing I'd make sure of. The Skein went still as the corpse it was, and pale gold eyes shone with something eldritch.

"You have been fooled, Tyrant," the Dead King spoke through his puppet. "I struck no bargain with the Black Queen."

And there it was, I thought. The gap between the man the Hidden Horror had once been and the man the Tyrant was. Neshamah had been a brilliant, sharp-sighted sorcerer whose apotheosis had been achieved over decades of careful planning with nary an opening left open. Even in undeath the heart of that man remained, made stiffer perhaps but undiminished. And the thing was, he had that same flaw that my father sometimes did. Gods, clever as they were they forgot anyone else could see the world in a different way they did. Forgot to see, I supposed, or simply didn't care. Why would they? Victors that they were, they'd gotten their way so often. But Kairos Theodosian, now that was a man of a different breed. He was Tyrant of Helike not because he wanted to change the world, to shift borders on a map or leave behind a name that would ring through the ages. Kairos, he was *villain*. He was a partisan of Below, not a warlord or a theft of godhead, and his faith was the same ruinous red thing that had rent the Wasteland asunder for more than a millennium. And so the Dead King, brilliant monster that he was, had just made his first blunder of the night. Because the moment he'd made an effort to not be at odds with the Tyrant of Helike, he'd made every lie I'd spoken irrelevant. Because, in the eyes of the Tyrant, he would only be worth appeasing if he was a *threat*. And given the choice between successfully crossing me or the Dead King? Well, one of them was worthier prayer than the other.

I met the Dead King's eyes.

"Mistake," I said in Ashkaran.

"**Rend**," Kairos Theodosian laughed, and all Hells broke loose.

# Chapter 44

# Small Slights

> "Forgiveness is a scale balanced, nothing more and nothing less."
>
> King Edward Fairfax the Fifth, the Hardhand

Aspects were telling, I'd always thought, especially those with harmful intent.

In practice they tended to have similar applications, true, but you could tell a lot about Named from what imperative it was that'd resonated with them. William had found his principle in **Swing**, which had been a branch sprung from what he saw as the most important part of who he was: the Lone Swordsman, the one who settled wrongs with a swing of his sword. Now take Masego, though, whose **Ruin** had crystallized facing the very Revenant before me. The first glance at that might lead one to think Hierophant was darkly inclined, and to be honest the thought had crossed my mind at the time. I'd led my friend into quite a few messes, and few of them pretty. The truth if it, though, was that Masego had been raised by the Calamities long before he became part of that other family the Woe had turned into. He'd learned their lessons young, even if they'd taken different shape in him than perhaps expected. To ruin something, for Masego, was to pare it down it until it'd reached the very edge of breaking. Until, in a sense, it was no longer a threat. That he'd draw the line there instead of going further into annihilation I liked to think was as much due to the empathy he'd been encouraged to embrace over the last few years as the cold practicalities taught him from the cradle. The lessons of the villains who'd crafted the Reforms, the Conquest: *it is easier to subdue than eradicate*. Less costly, and war like all things was a matter of costs and benefits.

Some were not so clear-cut: as in most things, Black was frightfully subtle under the veneer of overt simplicity. His **Destroy**, seemingly a straightforward cudgel to bludgeon the Tower's enemies with, was a glimpse at what lay at the heart of the man. Someone who, when moved to act, would not tolerate any result but the annihilation of what had stirred him to violence. There was no nuance to the word, or to its effect, because in the end to him the world was split

in half by the line he'd famously drawn for the Legions of Terror: victory and defeat, with nothing of worth in between. And so it was with that knowing in mind that I watched the Tyrant of Helike laugh his will into existence, the word he'd spoke ringing out in a way that had nothing to do with his voice. **Rend**, Kairos Theodosian had said. The splash of that decree was swift and brutal, the Skein's skull half caving-in as a tall antler broke and its right arm was so harshly snapped it came to be hanging by half a bone at the shoulder. Bones broke across the Horned Lord's body, though in a manner that was haphazard. It was tempting to ascribe that the Tyrant's whimsical nature, but I was not fooled. To rend something was not to destroy it, to break it or anything so... thorough. It was to tear something into more than one piece, to wound it. To hurt it. But never, I grasped might be the essence if it, to kill. Wound and hurt and sow enmity, but never to finish the fight. Because that was the Tyrant's way, wasn't it? Always an enemy, a scheme, a betrayal afoot. Like a spinning top, if he slowed might just tip over.

The deeper gold had vanished from the Skein's eyes before the Tyrant had even finished speaking, the Dead King leaving behind the corpse he'd inhabited without hesitation at the first indication of danger. It was the great rat itself that screamed in rage at returning to great wounds, all the while a swarm of gargoyle gathered in a chittering flock around the villain. I claimed a last inhalation from my pipe, and reluctantly poured over the last of the wakeleaf over the edge and quite likely onto some devil's head. Wasteful as this was, given how rare and expensive the herbs was out here, I'd need to intervene soon enough. Not quite yet though.

"My I assume, Black Queen, that you have a stratagem?" the Tyrant of Helike idly asked.

Shaking the dragonbone pipe one last time to make sure it was all gone, I put it away in one of the many pockets of my cloak.

"I do," I said. "The way I see it, my Lord Tyrant, our trouble at the moment is that the opposition's got an army and we do not."

Below us, wading through the sea of devils still filling the courtyard, the Saint of Swords reminding why even at height of my brute power over Winter she'd put me to flight on our every encounter. The sight of that old woman wearing no armour save a tunic and pale tabard flickering through the tide of creatures was spellbinding, because Laurence de Montfort had sallied out to fight an army on her own and she was not losing. I watched her cut through the knee of some devil of smoke and stone twice the height of a man and broad as city gate, pass under its toppling form as it fell and take with three quick strokes the head, the arm and the eye of jackal-headed devils leaping out at her. The last, still living though half-blinded, saw its face used as a steppingstone for the perfect somersault she executed to evade the furious swiping of the devil she'd hobbled. It made paste of the jackalhead, the Saint of Swords landed precisely in front of the still-bellowing devil's overextended shoulder and with a cold sneer she severed its head from its body. She'd never once broken stride

in all of that, nor had she overly hurried or strained herself. She was not using any of those wicked cuts I knew she was capable of, pacing herself in a display of utter scorn at the calibre of her opposition. Gods, if it was just her and the devils contained inside a ward she might not even lose.

It wasn't just that, unfortunately. Which meant that the Skein's snarled order to kill us all had been followed eagerly by the devils, and while a great many of them were rabidly going after the Saint there were others who'd decided on different prey. Flocks of *walin-falme* had come for me, at first, but after beating impotently at the ward the Rogue Sorcerer had put up in their way for some time they'd decided to take their displeasure to the source of the inconvenience. Leathery-winged and furious the devils converged on the broken balcony the hero had claimed as his perch, bearing armaments scavenged from the dead of the Legions and Akua's most loyal. It did them little good, for while he'd wielded wards when it came to ensuring my protection now the dark-haired man was going on the offensive. It was like watching a talented but self-taught musician at work, I thought, for while the sorceries he used were rough and raw the cleverness of the use and the breadth of his range were astounding. A swirling vortex of air that drew in a dozen devils was fed a cloud of bright yellow acid, earning screams as the creatures began to burn and melt. A large globe of translucent sorcery, much like the shields Masego was fond of using, formed around another pack and after opening a single hole through it the Sorcerer repeatedly shot sloppy but powerful fireballs within until all that was left was ash and slag.

Of the hundred or so that'd first gone after him, at first simply *walin-falme* but soon most everything winged and borne of the Hells, only half reached his balcony. Where they found the Rogue Sorcerer to have nailed small spike of silvery metal in broad circle around his position. Innocuous, at a glance, but their purpose became clear when he began pouring lighting in a stream above him and the spikes each drew a sliver of that flow in a sudden arc. By this sudden caging of himself in lightning, the hero caught the first wave and fried them in a heartbeat. Lesser devils fled in fright, but the *walin-falme* had been soldiers for the Tower once upon a time: they were made of sterner stuff. They caught and skewered some of their allies, using them as shields to pass under the lightning untouched. There they found only a ball of radiant light that blinded and burned them, scattering them as the Rogue Sorcerer reappeared atop another balcony after dismissing a glamour almost fae-like in nature. The silvery spikes were still there, and in their wounded surprise the devils were in no state to adjust the new angle: then the lightning began pouring again, none were left alive.

"Well," the Tyrant of Helike said, "one must concede they have slightly less of an army now than they had an hour past."

We both knew that was a temporary state of affairs, though. Already I could see the Rogue Sorcerer's face was flushed and dripping with sweat, his breathing hard. Mages like Masego and Akua, who used the exact amount

of power needed to make a spell function to the intended purpose, would be able to continue throwing around sorcery for longer even if it was of higher calibre. Roland, clever as he was, was bleeding power well in excess of Keter's Due and I suspected his natural gifts weren't particularly impressive besides: if he continued at this pace for much longer, he was going to fall unconscious. If he didn't continue at his pace, he was going to get eaten alive. Something of an issue, that. Meanwhile, the Saint had been forced to give ground by the sheer mass of bodies being thrown at her – you could not, after all, manoeuvre around tidal wave of flesh and claws. After that her cuts began tearing at the fabric of this realm, leaving those sharp arcs behind and changing retreat into brutal stalemate, but that was effectively flipping the hourglass on how long remained until her aging body caught up to her. Still, it was almost absurd how well they'd done. Oh they had a story at their back, enough to earn a nudge or two – buying time for an ally against hopeless odds – but most of that was still simply that there were *very* good at killing things. Devils in particular, I suspected. Above did not send its champions out into the world without first doling out a few tricks aimed at Below's favourite instruments.

"It's not a battle where there's only one host," I chided. "Proper form, Kairos."

"My apologies, Catherine," the boy grinned. "Quite right, quite right. And where do you intend to acquire such an army?"

"One was helpfully provided," I murmured, looking down at below. "Yet I need someone to be nuisance, if you will. Just horribly inconvenient in every way."

"At last, my day has come," Kairos Theodosian gravely said.

I could almost feel the eagerness boiling in his veins.

"How long do you think you can grab everyone's attention?" I asked. "Do you have a monologue in you?"

"*Catherine*," the Tyrant said, sounding deeply offended.

"You're right, I apologize for even asking that," I replied. "I'll leave this in your trustworthy hands."

"You are a dear friend and honoured ally, so I'll let it pass this once," Kairos said, waving nonchalantly. "You may proceed, Black Queen."

I squinted at him for a moment. He was definitely going to be betray me at least once more before this was over, but it shouldn't be before we'd reached the end of this. And definitely not by selling me out to the Dead King, which should make this possible – I was a lot warier of being disrupted halfway through by the Tyrant than one of Neshamah's brood of the dead and the damned. Now, to make my way through this mess on foot would take too long, even if I killed the pain in my leg and borrowed some hurt without looking at the interest. I could probably call on the Saint to carve me a quicker path, but that'd make my intentions obvious: which, given that the Dead King could be looking through anyone's eyes and could intervene through any of them, was the same as dooming my scheme. I had another way, of course, though it wasn't impossible he'd

prepared for that. Couldn't call on the Sisters for it, though, since the more I asked them to intervene the higher the chances Neshamah would get his hands on slivers of Sve Noc with all the disastrous consequences that entailed. Sloppy and imprecise it was then.

"Kind of you, my Lord Tyrant," I said, and stepped off the ledge.

The Mantle of Woe and my unbound hair both flapped as I fell, but my attention was on the Night coursing through my veins. *Like threading a needle*, I thought. The cloth was thinner than I was used to and the window to get it right would be slight, but I still had faint of memories of what it felt like to have that inborn knack Winter had leant me. Darkness spread out like an inky pool beneath me, a handful of the Tyrant's gargoyles curiously following me with eager cries and also much less endearing knives. I dropped into the dark, and for a moment it felt like plunging into cool, deep water. From the moment I touched the edge of the gate, I had less than a heartbeat to align it properly with the gate out. It was hard to describe, the act if putting it together. Like catching a faint spot of light in a dark cave that told you where the way out was, though that realization had to be paired with the instant act of will to move there lest the way out be botched. Or worst, lost. But I had it, near perfect, and-

"**Wind**," the Skein susurrated, great golden eyes like lanterns in the gloom.

I tumbled out cursing in Kharsum, well to the side of where I'd been aiming for. That godsdamned rat, if I didn't have a stripe of its fur as my cloak's collar by the end of this I'd eat my boots. It took me a heartbeat to get my bearings, which didn't improve my mood any: I'd meant to come out near Black and the Good King, but instead I was hip-deep in *akalibsa* on the east side of courtyard. Devils who had most definitely heard me swearing, form the way their houndlike faces turned to me. Armed and armoured in stone as they were I did not count them as a great threat, but given enough anything they could be trouble. Either I was going to have drawing on Night again, which was playing with fire when I had two large workings ahead of me, or-

"Ladies, gentlemen, other assorted beings," Kairos Theodosian said. "If I may have your attention?"

I suspect they might have ignored him, if the grounds beneath the Skein had not exploded in the moment that followed. I spared a glance at the mess of broken stone and dust that had appeared without warning, eyes narrowing when I glimpsed dirtied snow in there. Hells, had he just weakened the barrier between this place and Creation to the extent there'd been an impact? Had he done that precisely enough to use it as a weapon? How had he – no, no time for that right now. The *akalibsa* had turned towards the noise, and when they returned their attention to me they found I'd disappeared. Under glamour covering sight and scent I began limping to the nest where the Skein had laired, and the two men waiting there: one a corpse, one a soul. King Edward had remained unmoving throughout the entire skirmish, eyes calmly gazing at his surroundings as he openly kept watch on both my teacher and the sack filled

with crowns. Which had yet to be destroyed, interestingly enough. That implied either that Neshamah wasn't entirely opposed to my getting my getting my hands on this realm, or that there would be something dangerous in him or one of his agents breaking them. Leaning on my staff I made my way through the rubble, avoiding paths that would have taken me through knots of devils. It made the journey longer, but the Tyrant seemed to have things well in hand.

"- worry not, my blessed brethren," the Tyrant of Helike thundered, "I will be a merciful king, should any of you survive –"

Another chunk of the courtyard went up in noise and smoke. Though it didn't seem to be killing many of the devils and had only angered the Skein even further, it certainly seemed to be commanding their attention. Near everything dead or spawned of Hell was now trying to put down a cackling Kairos, who was weaving erratically in the air without having ever left his throne. Slipping across the strewn stones, I snuck up on Black and the Revenant from the side. With the horde going after the Tyrant I'd been able to put some spring to my limp, and climbing over some large block of granite I finally reached the broken stairs where they'd been waiting this whole time. The Good King twitched like he was trying to speak, but words never came out. A heartbeat later seven wooden pillars began forming around me, glamoured or not, and *shit* that was bad. I'd seen this hold the Princess of High Noon, and these days I was just a mortal with too much mouth and prayer. The moment the runes came up I'd be stuck. I managed to sneak my hand into my cloak just as four eldritch runes began to glow around me, linked by a faint circle of light. Frozen in place, I let out a sigh as my glamour shattered like glass.

"Hierophant's own magic," I said. "Ironic, I'll grant."

"The Abomination was awaiting one of you making for the crowns," King Edward Fairfax calmly told me. "And hindered my own attempt to warn you, Queen Catherine. Still, I give you greeting. It has been some time since we last spoke, yet I see you have not been idle."

My teacher was watching us, missing nothing, and if he was surprised by what had just been said his face showed no sign of it.

"Same to you, Your Majesty," I said. "Didn't think he'd let you of Keter, to be honest."

"It was something of a surprise to me as well," the Revenant said, "though I do not pretend to grasp the thoughts of that monstrous creature."

He might not, I thought, but through him I might be able to grasp a thing or two. Through what Neshamah did and did not prevent him from doing, watching as he no doubt was through the dead Fairfax. Best to flush out all I could before striking.

"- kneel in abject submission, and you will be granted the mercy for which I am well-known-"

Another deafening burst, though sooner or later that trick would run out.

"I don't suppose you know what he actually wants from this place, do you?" I asked. "It can't be the original notion of crashing it into Iserre, that'd be

pitting him against a band of five. He might win that, of course, but there's no real *winning* that if you understand what I mean."

And, more than anyone else on Calernia, the King of Death had to be wary of trading early victories for later disasters. There was no one else with as expansive a meaning for later, after all. And, as the way the knowledge of the Bard had become widespread in our age proved, it'd become a lot harder to bury knowledge after it'd been spread nowadays.

"If I could aid you I would," the Revenant said, tone regretful.

The gold of his eyes had not deepened, but then I was hardly a novice at the sleight of hand. He was in there, and it might just have been him speaking the right words to suggest I shouldn't pursue this line of conversation, that there was nothing to gain from it. Too neatly done. Which meant I had my opening, and even digging for more wasn't worth letting the opportunity slip. My fingers couldn't move, frozen as they were by the binding, and my power was bound as well. But the small carved wishbone was held in my hands and that was enough. Its power, after all, was not mine. Not bound.

"Abscond," I said, my voice lacking power.

But the wishbone broke, and it was enough: a trail of stars guiding me, I slid out of the binding and my steps took me right behind the Good King. I laid a hand on him a grinned, all teeth and malice.

"O Sve Noc," I said. "Judge me worthy on this night, that I may take the dead from death."

Night poured into the man who had once been King Edward Fairfax, and with wicked laughter Sve Noc began to wrestle away rule over the Revenant.

# Chapter 45

# Long Prices

> "Grudge is born of blood, carried by it and redressed through it. As they who came before me swore, I so swear: there will be no peace nor rest 'til the Cradle is reclaimed."
>
> First Oath of the People, taken by all in the Duchy of Daoine at age seven

I'd once had a conversation with Akua, after Indrani had hit the bottle hard enough during our 'council' that she'd ended up snoring on the table. We'd talked about him before, of course: the Dead King. The Hidden Horror, the Abomination, the last king of Sephirah – all that a hundred more titles, a treasure trove's worth of grim honours accrued over the centuries. We'd all been spinning our schemes around the ancient thing in Keter since the invitation had first reached me in Callow, and no small amount of talk and ink had been spent over the thought of what he might intend. In a sudden moment of honesty, sharing a shoddy table with a woman I still sometimes remembered to hate, I'd admitted that the Dead King's ambitions were opaque to me. Assuming he even had any. What could the immortal ruler of a near-untouchable realm truly desire from Creation? All the wants of a mortal ruler were in his hands already: wealth almost absurd, authority absolute, the adulation of the people he'd forged to worship him as their sole idol. What was there, in all the world, that the King of Death could not obtain with either a snap of his fingers or use of the patience in which he was peerless?

Companionship, Akua had eventually suggested, and perhaps there was some truth to that. When he'd spoken of the Bard it had been with an almost fond manner of respect, though they were foe in all things and more than once she had ruined him. Yet while I would not deny I'd had my moments of arrogance over the years, I would not seriously countenance that my potential apotheosis had been reason enough for him to stir the Crown of the Dead to war. Malicia's invitation had been an open door but walking through it had been his own will and the purpose of that will escaped me still. Even if he ended up

successful beyond a monster's wildest dreams, even if he devoured the continent whole and brought forth a thousand years of darkness... then what? A fleet raised, and through ships the tide of undeath was to be taken across the Tyrian Sea? Or into Arcadia, perhaps, some other Hell or for true ambition to the Heavens themselves. It was difficult, I would admit, to truly think on the scale and scope of someone like the King of Death given the comparative speck of a life I'd lived. Yet I did not believe that the soft-spoken, patient monster I'd seen make of his own home a pyre for apotheosis would choose as his path endless war on all the world.

Akua had challenged me on that, surprised by my certainty. In some ways, she'd argued, the Dead King was the pinnacle of what being partisan of Below meant. For all that the Hidden Horror had slumbered beyond his borders sometimes for centuries at a time, that only one villain in the history of Calernia had ever been his better. May she never return. How else but war was the King of Death to subjugate the entire world? It'd been a stark reminder, that conversation, that the people who'd raised Akua Sahelian had seen conquering the world as an admirable thing to aspire to. Believed that it was natural to believe so, that all others did as well. Her peers, her highest servants, her kin: her entire little world had shared that madness. It must not have seemed like madness at all, I thought, when you were in the warm embrace of that world. How could it be, when everyone who mattered believed it reason as well? But Akua was still a Wastelander, a highborn, in ways she might never entirely shake. It blinded her to the truth that the Dead King's victories had sprung from his rejection of everything the brood ever circling the Tower held dear. See, the thing with the kind of game that Neshamah was playing was that the opposition only needed to get lucky once – and they had forever to take yet another swing, praying for that golden day. And every time the Dead King went to war, Above got another shot at him.

An endless war, for Neshamah, was a long and elaborate suicide by odds.

Oh, we'd not peered at the heart of the Hidden Horror and unfurled its deepest secrets that night. We were, after all, both so young and taught to think in the terms of a war that rarely made it so far west. But it'd stayed with me, the thought that patience was not a skeleton key to the Dead King's every trouble. He could retreat back into the Serenity when he misliked the cast of something, true enough, but that had costs – in champions broken, in secrets unearthed and tricks revealed. Much of that knowledge died with those who'd learned it, so soon gone, but the important bits – those that might one day destroy him? The Intercessor would hoard them, and them dole them out to heroes whenever opportunity arose. Patience allowed him to set the battlefield as he preferred, to stack it, but the battle still had to be fought. Why offer a hundred-year truce, if not because he misliked the shape of this particular battlefield? The paramount virtue of an existence like the Dead King had to be cowardice, in this world of ours, and that meant retreating immediately and without qualms the moment it seemed like there might be a genuine threat

after him. That knowledge was no skeleton key either, though, for he remained the Hidden Horror. There were so few things that could be a threat to him, when it came down to it, and even in the dawn of days the Bard had named him adept at avoiding weakness.

The ability to take back a Revenant from the grips of the Dead King would be a strategic threat, but not an overwhelming one. Save if I was prepared to assemble my own army of dead Named to match his, which would taint my reputation beyond repair in my seat of power and antagonize near every possible ally, it was little different from losing one of his champions to the blade of a hero. Of course, I'd not simply petitioned Sve Noc to aid me in clawing back the free will of the Good King: we were doing it while the guiding will of the Hidden Horror was still inside. Now, I was no mage and my learning in such matters were still young. But I knew, from having raised corpses and bound them to my will as well, that the kind of fine control that I'd seen displayed here could not be done without *investment*. I couldn't be sure what it would cost him, if we succeeding at trapping whatever part of him he'd disseminated into the Revenant, but that hardly mattered. The Dead King was, not to belabour the title, dead. He no longer healed, in body and soul. Every loss of him was a *permanen*t loss. And so, as the might and attention of doom-crowned Sve Noc poured into the corpse of Edward Fairfax, I returned to a familiar place. Surrounded by the absolute pitch black of nothingness, I stood leaning on my staff and met the gaze of Neshamah in the... flesh, so to speak.

"I do not hold much respect for recklessness," the Dead King said.

I replied nothing. The hourglass had been flipped, I thought, and it was not for me the sand was running out. Oh, there was no real guarantee that we'd succeed at trapping him. But even if we failed it would be at a cost, and greater to him than us. For all that the King of Death had made attrition his sharpest sword in some ways, it may yet be turned on him to cut just as deep.

"Still," Neshamah said, "your use of it as a calculated measure continues to surprise."

It would have been an empty gesture to look at anything other than him, for there was nothing else to look at, so I did not bother with the theatrics. I did not speak either, though. It was not me, who had come to bargain – though I had schemed the coming of this conversation, I would not deny.

"You will require guarantees as to the Hierophant's life," he said.

I inclined my head in agreement. I'd been worried, since the start, that there might be some things that not even the Pilgrim's resurrection could take back. Or that his hand would be forced early to spend that aspect on some life I cared less for, preventing the use I needed for some lesser prize. Receiving assurances from the Dead King was preferable, for though he was no fae bound to his word he had to know that if he crossed me on this after making a promise I would never bargain with him again. Recklessness, he'd called this. Like in these struggles of ours there was meant to be a manner of cordiality, mayhaps not of fair play but at least of an... understanding that this was a game, a

play, a sport to be had. *Do not forget*, the ache in my leg whispered. *Do not forget.* I bared my teeth in a feral smile at the King of Death, the savage pupil of savage teachers, and let that pretence die. We were no Proceran princes making courtly war, for there could be no such thing as a war courtly.

"Six months," I said.

"Pardon?" the Dead King said.

"You armies will not advance a single step for six months," I said. "This, and the release of the Hierophant. That's my offer."

"You overestimate the strength of your position," Neshamah warned.

"You have," I murmured, "taken my friend and now bargain with his life while scheming the death of others dear to me. You arranged the destruction of my armies, of near everyone I've ever cared for. But for my intervention, you would have buried Iserre in death and borrowed Hierophant's hand for the deed."

"You clutch the remains of what you once were, Black Queen," the Hidden Horror said. "It does no favours to what you have since become."

"It was never really personal to me, before," I told him. "You were a foe, but in some ways an ally as well. In principle I thought it tragedy that others died to your invasions, but no one weeps for faces they never knew nor loved."

"A taste," the Dead King said, "of what is to come. They will be strangers, Catherine Foundling. One day, and sooner than you believe, they will all be strangers."

"And if that day comes, I may yet become the horror you foretold," I admitted. "But today, Dead King?"

I limped forward, into his space, with cold eyes.

"Today you are the thing that *took my friend*," I hissed. "The thing that would have slaughtered the Woe and the Army of Callow without batting an eye. I 'overestimate the strength of my position', Merciless Gods."

I struck at the nothingness we stood on with my staff, the sound ringing like a thunderclap.

"You think after this I'm not willing to try falling off the cliff together, Neshamah?" I said, tone sharp. "To gamble on which of us will find our wings on the way down? Look at my back, King of Death, and see what is writ there – when given the choice between risking ruin and kneeling, I've only ever replied one way."

A moment passed.

"Has your tirade ended?" the Dead King calmly asked. "No purpose was served by it, save the thinning of my patience."

"You have my terms," I coldly said. "Six months and the release of Hierophant."

"That is no bargain," he said.

"Aye," I replied. "It's a price. And if you know a single thing of my people, you'll know ours are always long."

"I've more than a single hostage in my possession, even if the Tyrant has once more turned," the Dead King said.

"I knifed Black when we last spoke before ordering him to find his decency," I said. "He's since arranged the starvation of several hundred thousand innocents. Try again."

"If you are to assemble your coalition against me, you will need a ruler for Praes," he replied. "You cannot tolerate the continuation of Dead Empress Malicia's reign, which leaves him your sole reputable candidate."

My fingers clenched. It'd been too much to hope for that playing it off would work.

"Amadeus of the Green Stretch and Masego the Hierophant," Neshamah said. "For assurances I will not take the life of either on this field, your crows will loosen their talons."

I breathed out.

"No," I said.

His eyes tightened the slightest bit, which on another man would have been frustration and surprise.

"Down we go, Dead King," I said. "Gods help neither of us, the fickle pricks."

"Assurances," he said. "And three months."

It meant he wouldn't release Masego, that whatever purpose he was using my friend's body for he would continue until the very last moment. But three months, Gods even just three months? It kept the Lycaonese in the war instead of letting them stumble down the slope into oblivion, and it was enough breathing room to turn this war from lost to losing.

"Night's not over," I said, matching golden eyes to mine.

"Once more, in this we agree," the King of Death said. "Bargain agreed?"

"Bargain agreed," I replied, and darkness broke.

—

The Sisters had not reached apotheosis gently, and their works were not gentle ones. Yet this was a matter of theft, of taking, and in such matters we were all well-learned. Sve Noc, discerning my thoughts as they formed, loosened their grip on the Revenant just enough that the wisp of spoke that'd been the Dead King's will slipped away into nothingness. And along the footpath the Hidden Horror had used to withdraw, rapacious Night coursed down. Imperious and grasping, it devoured what bound the man who had once been the Good King Edward Fairfax to his subjugator in Keter. Komena, I knew as she deigned to brush her thoughts with mine, wanted to claim him in the Hidden Horror's stead. To have a Fairfax flagbearer of her own, to spread the Tenets of Night wherever dusk was known. For where, among the realms of men, were more fertile grounds for her red-handed lessons than the war-torn fields of Callow? Andronike, ever cautious and calculating where her sister craved clash of arms, felt more inclined to snuff the Revenant out. Mastery over the tainted carried risks, she grasped, and brought opportunities for that most dangerous of foes who our war against was only beginning. Why chance it, when there

was little need? I disagreed. With both of them I disagreed, and though it was not in the nature of prophets to argue with prophecy or of heralds to argue with the message born, that was not the lay of our ties. It was for my contentious nature most of all they had raised me to be First Under the Night. And so when I spoke the Sisters listened, and our wills joined in miracle.

King Edward Fairfax, Seventh of His Name, breathed his first free breath since he'd died below the walls of Keter. That was the first of the two great workings I would unleash today.

"It has been," the Good King said, "many years since I last tread the streets of sunny Liesse."

Letting out a long breath, I opened the floodgates and Night begin to fill me. A rising tide of power, too much of it for me to able to shape or grasp with my own hands. In the sky above us all, deafening shrieking noises began to fill the air as hellgates were torn open one after another. This already half-ruined realm began to shudder at the roughness it was treated with, a sinking ship with yet another hole made in the hull every few moments.

"You appear to have incensed the Abomination, Queen Catherine," King Edward said.

"I tried to strong-arm him into some fairly major concessions," I admitted. "It appears he believes I am in need of an admonition."

Night continued to pour into me, a tide rising, until the world around me turned into an oil painting: imprecise, as if smudged, but no less beautifully coloured for it.

"So it does," the Revenant said. "I thank you now for the breaking of my chains, you who they name Black Queen, but I must wonder at the price of it. What dark patrons have sought my indebtment?"

"Nothing," I said. "You owe not a single thing. Miracles are not bought and paid for, even those of the Night."

"A gift," King Edward said, sounding unconvinced.

"I have request to make of you," I admitted. "Yet it would be meaningless if you did not agree of your own free will. And so there will be no talk of debt, to either myself or Sve Noc. On this all three of us agree."

"Mercy gifted without strings, yet with purpose," the Good King said.

He sounded, I thought, almost glad.

"I am a priestess," I said. "But also a queen."

And there were so very few things that a queen could afford to do with a single pure benign intent, in the end. Virtue alone did not win wars, or keep people fed through winter. In the distance, as if in an entirely different world, the Tyrant of Helike was still speaking. The devils around us and afar were boiling like a pot about to tip, stirred into a murderous frenzy by sorcerous means and now swelling in number with every passing moment. The Saint of Swords fought still, unbending and without pause, and though I could almost hear the Rogue Sorcerer's panting breaths in my ear still spellfire spun out and devils died. Yet the battle around us, coming to us, seemed almost like a

distant scene. I already knew that it was not out there victory or defeat would be found.

"Your petition, Queen Catherine," the Revenant said. "I would hear it."

Leaning tiredly on my staff, I raised up a palm and compressed everything I could of the Night in a ball. My will failed, though stubbornness made that defeat slower than it should have been. The forces I was trying to wield were simply too large. But where I faltered the will of the Sisters drew me up, and with their two grips – one deft and soft, Andronike the spinner of weaves, the other imperious and coarse, Komena the breaker of spears – an orb of pure Night formed above my open palm.

"Can you hear them?" I asked. "Our people, the echoes of them in this place. The indelible mark a terrible slaughter leaves long after it has ended."

"Like songs woven of wails," Edward Fairfax softly agreed.

"The foe who did this I slew and made my own," I told him. "Though that end is a pittance, to the madness that was the Doom of Liesse. But there is an enemy that stands before us, using her works for ruinous purpose and waging war on all the world. That, too, is a scale to balance."

His eyes flicked to the orb of Night.

"One last time," he said, "into the breach."

"It will kill you," I warned. "There is little kindness in that power, and it was not meant for your hands."

"I am long dead," the Good King replied. "And *kindness* is not what I would have of this day."

Edward Fairfax had no longer been young, when he was claimed, and I suspected even if he had been few would have called him handsome even then. But to the strong cast of his face there was a manner of regality, like it had been hewn from stone and taken the noblest properties of that make. Helmetless, his crown of white hair was the sole he wore and the sword in his hand was bare. Without a sheath to return to, for there was none at his hip, it would never be allowed to rest.

"The war never ends, Queen Catherine," he told me, tone quiet. "The faces and the borders, the foes and the friends, they are but the shallowest measure of the thing. Not all tyrants reign from the Tower, and many who have hunted the wicked partook of wickedness in the hunt."

I inclined my head.

"One should not confuse striking at evil and doing good," I quoted.

"Lest good become the act of striking," the Good King completed, tone approving. "You understand, then. That when your evil is no longer necessary, Black Queen, to linger would be to stray from the narrow path you have tread."

My fingers clenched.

"I know," I croaked out.

Dead fingers snatched the Night from my palm, clenching into a fist and letting the darkness sink into the flesh.

"Then rise, Callowans," King Edward called, voice like thunder. "Rise once more, for we yet have debts unsettled and House Fairfax calls on you *one last time*."

There was a heartbeat of silence, a stillness like death. And they answered, as they had for centuries, for even a grave made for a petty hurdle when it was a Fairfax calling you to war.

# Interlude: Repudiation

> "It is written that the Hidden Horror sent envoy to the Iron King Tancred, threatening that should he not strike the banners over Hannoven and open the gates the city would be stormed and burned to ash. So did Tancred Papenheim then send back a single torch, with on the side engraved three words: 'if you can'."
>
> Extract from 'Crowned In Iron', a compendium of Lycaonese histories assembled by Prince Alexandre of Lyonis

It was like watching two enemy Hells trying to devour each other.

The Revenant – stolen from the Dead King, she'd thought, by the grim patrons of the Black Queen – that had once been a king of Callow spoke in a voice like a clarion call and the dead of this accursed place answered. Laurence watched, jaw clenched, as a coursing tide of wraiths made of silver and shade rose from the scarred ground. Mere dozens, first, but that swelled into hundreds and then thousands before more than a handful of heartbeats had passed. Those were not soldiers, the Saint saw. There were children and elderly among them, men and women whose hazy silhouettes bore no arms save angry hands. And oh, how angry they were. The rage of them was a clamour and a song, the weight of it making the air feel taut. Thousands of voices, of silhouettes, moving like a seething river of souls to tear at devils and dead alike. Laurence splattered the blood of another devil on the ground with a flick of the wrist, catching its clumsy strike and sending its head tumbling down with the riposte, and without hesitation began to move. Not towards the Black Queen, whose lone silhouette was surrounded by an island of stillness, or the other Revenant. No, roughly forcing aside any spirit that in their advance got in her way Laurence de Montfort headed for the imprisoned soul of the Carrion Lord.

She'd seen it when they first broke through the maze of the Skein, still pilloried in that clever silver artefact the Sorcerer had crafted for them, and she could not allow it to be claimed by anyone else's hands. Allowing the Tyrant to keep it was pointless – even when Theodosian had stolen it earlier he'd not proved to be a least a modicum useful by destroying the soul himself – and it was out of the question for Foundling to be allowed to reclaim the Black Knight. Tariq had allowed himself to savour the taste of hope for the first time in too long, and grow drunk off it, but Laurence would not lower her guard so easily.

It was difficult to advance, to the Saint's displeasure, for though the wraiths were but lesser dead and ignored her even when jostled they streamed forward heedlessly. It was like swimming in death, and more than once Laurence found her sight obscured by the flows. The devils who'd been in the courtyard were ripped apart within moments, she'd seen, harsh hands clawing at them and wailing mouths biting down on flesh. The Skein was not destroyed, but from what she could glimpse it was being drowned in sheer numbers. Foundling, at least, had not moved from her perch.

Stumbling over broken stones and just one more push away from beginning to hack at the bloody wraiths no matter the consequences, Laurence finally broke into what had been the Horned Lord's nest of ruins and found Amadeus of the Green Stretch still imprisoned. And gagged, thank the Gods for that – if she had to hear a single other sly barb from that viperous tongue she'd cut it out of his mouth. Another company of wraiths flowed before her, cutting her path, and she felt like screaming but she was too close to draw attention to herself now. Only, through two passing spirits she saw a tall shadow standing by the villain. In the flickering lights she could not be sure, but Laurence could have sworn its face had been painted purple. Feeling her stomach drop, the Saint dropped all pretences of subtlety and harshly forced her way through the wraiths. Several swiped at her with angry hands, though when she continued pushing forward they lost interest and returned to their war instead of pursuing. She'd been too later, the Saint saw. The drow that'd been standing by the prisoner snapped closed the silvery artefact that'd been unfolded into a pillory, now no larger than forearm, and with an amused silver glance at her it took a single step forward into nothingness. *Bordel*, Laurence silently cursed. That was Foundling's little attendant, wasn't it? The one she'd called Ivon, or maybe Iva. The Saint, fingers tight around the grip of her sword, turned her gaze to the Black Queen.

She was still standing alone on the rise, that many-coloured cloak flapping around her from the wind of the wraiths flowing around her. Hair long and unbound, her limp grown more pronounced and nowadays leaning on some sort of walking stick, she seemed nothing like the angry mutilated child Laurence had tried to put down at the Battle of the Camps. Catherine Foundling had yet to strike a single blow with a blade since she'd returned to Iserre from her journeys, the rumours went. And she had grown more dangerous for it. All night they'd danced to her tune, the Saint thought, glancing at where the Black Knight had been spirited away before she could take him back, down to this very last note. *You don't know what you're bargaining with here, Tariq*, she appraised. *Setting a wolf on a tiger only has two beasts prowling the wilds, wounded and twice as vicious.* Yet the time had not come where Laurence would bare her blade to redress yet another mistake made by kinder or weaker souls, so her longsword returned to the sheath. Climbing up the mound of ruins, the Saint came to stand by the side of the rising villain of their age. The woman remained silent, eyes on her dead countrymen now taking the battle to the devils pouring out of the open hellgates. Among the horde, the crowned

Revenant led the charge with a shining blade.

"How did you know it would work?" Laurence asked.

The look on Foundling's face was strange, almost subdued on a face that seemed to have been carved from hard edges with the razor-sharp cheekbones and too-strong nose. Even grief looked harsh on a face like that, much better suited for the sharp grins and cold stares the Black Queen was infamously known for.

"It always does," Catherine Foundling said, "when you make it hurt a little."

Laurence's lips pulled back in disdain.

"Does it sting that much, to have had to borrow another's hand?" the Saint said. "You've not been shy in doing so tonight."

Though perhaps it struck closer to home, that even being crowned in Laure had not been enough to give the warlord a fraction of the pull the long-dead Fairfaxes had on her people. It was no great endorsement of her reign, that she'd had to use the name and Name of another for that working.

"This city is a mass grave dug by my failures," the Black Queen replied, tone remote. "And yet here I am, walking its grounds once more. How many more, I wonder, will it take before I have been made to look that failing in the eye enough?"

Laurence hesitated, for though it was a monster she spoke to in that moment she sympathized with the woman more than she'd thought would ever be possible. Because this was not a smirking, victorious puppeteer tugging at all their strings. That distant bleakness she knew well. It came from the same place that had the Saint of Swords wondering what might have changed, if she'd arrived a sennight early instead of late. If she might have slain the beast when it'd taken a handful instead of a village, if she'd found Isodorios when the dragonblood first began to decay instead of after the red had taken him. *What if*, that old and tireless flagellant's whip.

"It'll never leave you," the Saint said, not unkindly.

It was honest, which was the highest courtesy she had to offer the likes of Catherine Foundling.

"I don't suppose it will, no," the Black Queen quietly admitted.

There were a few heartbeats of silence, left unfilled by either of them, before the old woman grew impatient.

"And now what?" Laurence asked.

"We're a distraction, Saint," Foundling reminded her. "And I would say that the enemy is suitably distracted, at the moment."

"The Skein's not finished," Laurence replied. "It'll take more than wraiths to put it down."

"See to it, if you'd like," the younger woman shrugged. "Take the Tyrant and the Sorcerer if you please."

"You're not going to lend a hand," the Saint grunted. "What a helpful hand you make."

Theodosian was probably enough on his own to entirely bury the Horned Lord's oracular insights instead of simply muddy them the way Laurence's own domain would, but it'd go quicker with a priestess or ruin keeping the Revenant contained while those of them better-versed in killing the dead put an end to the abomination.

"I'll be headed inside, should King Edward succeed at breaching the wards on the inner palace," Foundling casually said.

"Should?" Laurence asked.

"Depends whose wards they are," the Black Queen grunted. "Let's hope they're still using the Diabolist's work as the base, otherwise it'll be like trying to topple a rampart by throwing eggs at it."

Further hellgates opened above them, devils pouring in. The victorious battle for the courtyard finished with the Tyrant of Helike, laughing maniacally as he shot streaks of a fire from a jeweled sceptre at a hissing and fleeing Skein swatting away the dead pursuing it – they had, Laurence saw, ripped away great swaths of fur and eaten the flesh like hungry ghosts – until the Horned Lord leapt over the cliff's edge of that was the end of the ducal palace. In the distance the dead king of Callow raised his sword at the sky filling with fire and brimstone, and grimly declared war upon it.

The dead obeyed.

Laurence waited. There was ending coming, she could feel it. And when the moment came, she would be ready to meet it as it should be met.

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Tariq had faced many a villain in his time, and not always with Light and strife. Often words could bring greater good in the world than a harsher touch, if they were the right ones, and so it might just be the truth that there was no living on Calernia who had spoken with more villains than he. The quiet ones, he'd found, tended to be the most dangerous. Those who did not feel the need to boast or fill a silence oft had greater designs occupying their thoughts, and so proved more perilous adversaries. This was no cast iron rule, however. For example, it would have been a lie to say that Kairos Theodosian was not one of the deadliest Bestowed he'd encountered over the years and the boy simply could not stomach holding his tongue. Still, the tendency was pronounced and though the Woe were as peculiar a band of villains as their infamous predecessors when Tariq had first assessed the Archer her constant chatter had encourage him to dismiss her as an ancillary threat when she was without the guiding hand of the Black Queen at her back. A skilled and seasoned killer, mind you, with a way bow in hand that might as well be sorcery. But not a true danger, like the brilliant mind behind the brutish face of the Adjutant or the eerily innocent atrocities the Hierophant had it in him to commit.

He had been wrong in this.

While it was true that the Archer – Indrani, as she'd casually confirmed she was named – was loquacious, the Pilgrim had beheld what went on behind the smiles and the swagger and it had him *unsettled*. The Archer's thoughts

and feelings shifted constantly, mercurial as the tides, yet there was a bedrock beneath them that was as subtle as it was watchful. It had had taken him the better part of an hour, for one, to put the finger on what a particular association between a part of that bedrock and amusement directed at him meant. Namely, that the smiling young woman was considering she might have to kill him in the future. Without feeling so much as a speck of guilt over it. It would have been easier to swallow, Tariq would admit to himself, if the Archer were a coldblooded devil like some of the monsters wearing human skin he'd had to face. Incapable of joy or fondness in more than shallow ways, though it had to be said that no all such constrained the Pilgrim had met were monstrous or even particularly nefarious. Yet the young woman was not. Deep affection and something like an intricate manner of loyalty had bloomed in her, when she'd spoken with the Black Queen, as well as something he had uncomfortably placed as lust. Something more romantic in nature emerged when mention was made of the Hierophant, though it was paired with a manner of wonder that implied to him the admission there was still fresh.

Indrani the Archer was, he knew by virtue of his aspect, a pleasant if hedonistic young woman would not even slightly hesitate to slit his throat if she judged him a threat or was asked to by someone she trusted. The knowledge was made even more unsettling by the way that wheedling information out of her was ludicrously easy, though the bedrock beneath that ease missed nothing of the nature of the questions being asked. Perceptive, this one, even though she was already on her second flask of Levante *monteron* since they'd left the rest of the band. That she remained mostly sober after drinking that much hard liquor was notable even in one Bestowed, though given the appearance he suspected she had murdered outriders from Lord Marave's army for them. Possibly she had killed them entirely for the flasks, for her fieldcraft was not the kind anyone with mundane eyes would easily see through no matter how skilled those eyes.

"- so we signed it as 'the King of Winter', since none of us knew the name, but the real important part here is that she called me a sullen wench," Archer said. "*Sullen*, really, can you believe that? The nerve of her sometimes."

Tariq set aside a concern, namely that he had been repeatedly outmanoeuvered by a young woman whose notion of a ruse fit to enter the seat of the Winter Court was a lie so blatant the fae would hesitate to call her out on it, and addressed a more pressing one. Such as the fact that, while Indrani was gesticulating, she was not keeping both hands on the sheer cliff they were climbing. Something of an issue, as she was the lead climber but if she fell the same rope she used to help him up would help drag him down to his death.

"Should you truly be this cavalier with the handholds?" he asked in a strangled tone.

"Don't worry about it," Archer dismissed. "We're almost there anyway."

"And that will be solid ground, yes?" the Grey Pilgrim faintly asked.

"Bit of a slope, but pretty much yeah," the young woman cheerfully said.

"Used to be a secret escape tunnel, when this was still Liesse the city instead of Diabolist's flying magic tantrum. Nobles, right? They're like moles, always digging tunnels to get out when the going gets rough."

"And you're certain it was not found by either the Diabolist or the Hierophant?" Tariq pressed.

"Like, at least half certain," she badly winked. "Seriously though, it used to lead into Hengest Lake. Had to take a swim in there to flee through, and no villain could possibly take a dip in there. Cat says there was some spare angel corpse lying around inside."

"The Hashmallim that was tricked into perdition by Dread Emperor Traitorous," the Pilgrim agreed. "It is well-known, in some circles. He was one of the only two Praesi rulers to successfully harm a Choir."

"No shit?" Archer said, sending him a serious glance. "Had no idea what kind of an angel bone it was, don't think the others did either. Anyways, Diabolist slapped a massive cliff in front of this entire part of the city when she landed it to make it easier to defend it so it was buried until Zeze stole it again. We're the only two people who know about the passage, as far as I know, which is pretty far 'cause I got good eyes."

"No shit," the Grey Pilgrim solemnly confirmed.

Though he was missing much of the context that would be needed to decipher the nuances of the information she had so easily volunteered, he was appreciative of the way she was dragging him up the cliff even as she spoke. Tariq was rather less spry than he used to be, and had never been much of a climber besides. He'd more than once fallen while climbing Sintra's balcony, though he'd never used the stepladder she'd once ordered set against the wall in what was very much open mockery. The Pilgrim glanced down the sheer cliff, not in the slightest enjoying the fresh reminder that was he was currently dangling down a rope above the height of storm clouds. If he fell down that, it would be more than pride and a planting of bluebells that would sting of it.

"So who was the other?" Archer asked, wedging her boot into a crevice and nimbly hoisting herself up.

"The other?" Tariq asked.

"Praesi ruler," the young woman clarified.

"Ah, that would be Triumphant if the old histories are to be believed," he answered.

His tone was a little hurried, as the rope had grown taut with her rising and he'd done his best to follow her path.

"Ah, Triumphant," Archer hummed. "Now there was a real horror. She's always fun to read about, isn't she?"

If one enjoyed pages depicting a procession of brutal massacres and subjugation, culminating in hubris so flagrant it moved not one but *two* empires on the other side of the Tyrian Sea to wage war on her. Which Tariq did not, for all that the learning of history was important. Praesi histories tended to be sickening, as a rule, a parade of savageries always trying to exceed the last. Dread

Empress Triumphant had been the worst of that lot by a fair margin, and one did not need to read of her attempted annihilations in the Chain of Hunger and the Titanomachy to be disgusted. Even the atrocities she'd resorted to in the cowing of the powerful Alamans tribes that'd dwelled on the shores of Lake Artoise were worthy of revulsion, and they'd been but a pale shadow of what she'd inflicted on Callow.

"If you say so," the Pilgrim replied.

Indrani did not pay his answer any heed, for she was making vaguely pleased noises and wedging herself against outcroppings – only to move swiftly from side to side, rising up as far as the rope allowed and swinging a leg over what appeared to be the ground floor of a tunnel. She rolled back and helped up Tariq, putting those muscled arms to work hoisting up his wizened frame. They unhooked the rope, after that, and the Pilgrim wove the slightest sliver of Light into a globe.

"You don't know the trick for seeing in the dark?" Archer asked him, looking surprised.

"The Light reveals many enchantments as well," Tariq told her, "and subtleties that leaning on one's Bestowal does not. Best we advance cautiously, yes?"

"I suppose," she said. "Might be the Callowans put up some-"

She paused, or perhaps it might be more accurate to say she was interrupted. Her senses were sharp, but Tariq had more to rely on that what his frail mortal shell could provide: the Ophanim whispered into his ear, urgent but not disapproving. Above them, Liesse shook and a rampant clamour was distantly heard.

"Well," Indrani said. "It looks like slow and careful just took a leap down that cliff."

"So it did," the Grey Pilgrim murmured.

"Look at the bright side, Peregrine," Archer cheerfully said. "*Nobody* does distraction like Catherine."

# Interlude: Renunciation

> "We fight not only our own wars but those of our forebears and our children, for we inherit the wounds of those before us and pass our own to those that follow. And so, fools that we are, we keep trying to fill one grave by digging another."
>
> King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

The damned rat had made a mess on the way out, though that'd turned out of some use: whatever blighted eastern sorcery kept the last stretch of the palace protected it'd been no match for a Horned Lord fleeing without much thought given to its surroundings. Its swinging tail and massive limbs had torn through walls and halls, baring what looked like a set of large private chambers – maybe the lodgings of whatever jackals had settled into this place after the Dukes of Liesse were chased out. Even eviscerated in such a way the palace was not defenceless: the first wave of wraiths to try charging through the opening had dispersed like smoke in the wind. So much, Laurence had thought, for the dead Callowans opening the way. Odds were it'd have to be the boy serving as the key to the locks again, and best he got to that sooner rather than later. It was pretty piece of theatrics the Black Queen had put together, snatching a dead king and appointing to the head of the host meant to meet the Hidden Horror's last guard. Clever, and not without worth. But if the Saint of Swords knew anything it was that pretty stories came to swift ends, and when this one collapsed she had no intention of being caught out on the open where the devils could swarm them. Foundling must have shared at least some of her opinions, as she'd sent for the other members of this band of theirs.

Roland dragged himself up the mound of ruins looking half-dead, though without wounds. The Rogue was a better hand at avoiding blows than dealing them out, as far as Laurence was concerned, though it took all sorts to reach a journey's end. Storming a villain's fortress like this wasn't really what a boy like the Rogue Sorcerer was meant for, anyway. That they'd yet to run into practitioners while pushing further in just dragged him further out of his depths, though the Saint suspected his particular talents would find sharp use at least once before dawn rose. He spoke a few words with Foundling in a quiet tone – her own was kind, Laurence noted, maybe asking about the state he was in – before coming to a discreet collapse against an upraised stone that could

from a distance be taken for him simply leaning against it. Having pushed herself to the edge of what her body could take more often than the boy had seen winter pass, the Saint was not fooled in the slightest. He was on the edge of collapse and his pride must have the lion's share of the toil of keeping him standing. Laurence approached, as they all waited for the Tyrant to join them.

"Saint," Roland greeted her without opening his eyes. "Not too worn out?"

"Unlike you," Laurence bluntly replied.

If Tariq had been there he might have been able to smooth away the rougher edges of that exhaustion with use of the Light, but Foundling had sent him to traipse around secret ways with her foremost assassin. It wasn't the Adjutant, at least: word was when the Black Queen really wanted something dead it was the orc she sent out. But Laurence knew better than most the kind of lessons the Archer would have learned at the knee of the Lady of the Lake. It'd be a surprise if any of them didn't involve a corpse in some way. That Tariq had simply accepted being split from the rest of them, where ambush from other forces sworn to Foundling might see him turned into a hostage, had riled her up more than a little. If they were dealing with some raving madman with more minions and powers than sense it'd be one thing to surrender one of their own into their custody – it was a reliable trick to get close enough to a Damned to 'surrender' yourself into stabbing distance. Foundling wouldn't make mistakes that elementary, though, and she'd played them all for fools more than once tonight. It was one thing to bargain with one of Below's servants, though Laurence still believed that dire mistake, but pretending arrangement was alliance could only be furthering that mistake.

"I have tonics," the Sorcerer said. "I will not topple, if that is your worry."

"Relying on potions is a good way to get killed," Laurence said. "Trust your Choosing, not anything that can fit in a bottle."

The boy's eyes fluttered open, the orange rings around his pupils still slowly fading. Whose sorcery had it been, that he'd been spending in the fights? Hard to say. The Saint was no student of the arcane and Tariq had told her that Roland de Beaumarais' wanderings had taken the boy far and wide: it could have been anyone's, from anywhere. There were places on Calernia where even she had not found the road taking her.

"We have different approaches, Regicide," he replied, almost defiantly.

Laurence's jaw tightened. Even now, she was not sure of this was a long game of Tariq's or if the boy had genuinely blundered into halfway trusting someone that'd spend him without a second thought. The Peregrine had an eye for detail and for the long view Laurence had never seen the likes of in all her days, so she would not put this past him. But she was uncertain of the boy was this skilled a liar. The truth might lay somewhere in the valley, she considered. A lie but spoken with real anger. There'd been too many defeats of late for a proud young Chosen like Roland not to feel their wisdom had failed. He was not, Laurence would admit, entirely wrong. It was never enough to be right: you also had to be victorious, or it didn't mean a damned thing.

"Don't be a mule," she said. "Stay in the back save when your talents are needed. Foundling and the Tyrant can take the hits until we get to the pivot."

Spreading around the hurt a bit ought to even things out, when the villains started considering sticking the knife and taking the while prize instead of keeping to the arrangement. Laurence wouldn't draw first, not when Tariq had given his word. She trusted him too much for that, inconveniently sentimental as he could be. But neither would she stumble blind into the inevitable. And if he proved to be right? Her fingers clenched.

"Do we not have enough foes, that we must ever make more?" Roland tiredly asked her in Chantant.

"Just because she's not fighting us," Laurence gently said, "doesn't mean she's not our foe."

Could be the bargain would hold for a few months, a few years. A decade, Gods forbid, though she would not put coin on that. But it would break. Foundling wanted to wiggle her way into Cordelia Hasenbach's dreams of a Grand Alliance, that much had come clear, and given the way the ventures was on fire the Saint did not mind so much. If the Black Queen wanted to do them all a service and be taken by the blaze, fighting for the last scraps of decency she still clung to, then Laurence would keep her mouth shut. But Catherine Foundling could not have a hand in shaping the world that would come after the ashes settled, lest the old sicknesses carry through to the foundation that would be laid in the ruins of the old order.

"An alliance of victors, is it?" the Rogue quietly said.

He was speaking half of a saying old and dear to their people, though some claimed it was some ancient Merovins who'd first spoken it. *An alliance of victors is like a hearth in summer*. Useless, it meant, doomed to fail. For when the covenant of need passed, the nature of men ran its course instead.

"You're young," the Saint tiredly said. "So this seems like the sum of it to you. But there's always an *after*, Roland."

"Is it not this very manner of thinking, Saint, that saw us end up here in the first place?" he replied.

"I hope you can still believe that, in a decade," Laurence de Montfort honestly said. "That we will live in a world kind enough to tolerate that belief."

*But I won't count on it*, she thought. If she did not keep a watch, who would?

"My beloved comrades, I have returned!"

The Tyrant of Helike landed atop the mound with a sick crunch, the ugly enchanted sculptures carrying his throne everywhere being ground into the stone by the abrupt landing. They chittered loudly in protest, though another gargoyle wearing the tailored robes of a Stygian magister went around swatting them into silence with a stick. Gods, that nasty little cripple was just sick in the head.

"Good," the Black Queen said, turning to address them. "We'll be breaching the last holdout, now. Sorcerer, you and I will take the tip of the spear. I have a feel for the weakness in things, and you've..."

She shrugged.

"... that thing that you do," the dark-eyed woman said, sounding amused.

"Understood," Roland said, discretely wiping the corner of his mouth.

Not quite thoroughly enough for Laurence not to notice the hint of green broth on his lip. So he'd drunk something, then, and ignored her advice. She'd have to keep an eye on the fool, lest he get himself killed overreaching his grasp.

"Is no one going to address the delicious ironic army of the dead currently warring on the Dead King's host of devils?" Kairos Theodosian said.

"You've summed it up," Foundling drily replied. "Consider it addressed."

The boy's red eye was shining wet, like it'd been dipped in blood, and his smile came too easy. Laurence knew that to be the sight of a sharpened knife being bared, and from the way the Black Queen's own eyes sharpened so did she.

"I was referring to the way that the Good King seems to be falling apart at a quickening rate," the Tyrant said. "Presumably, his army would follow him into slumber."

She'd been right then, Laurence grimly thought. Like an arrow sent flying, that ploy of Foundling's would hit the mark but then turn into little more than dead wood.

"He'll hold long enough," the Black Queen said. "Yet we should not linger. Sorcerer, with me. The two of you should keep an eye out for the Skein – somehow I doubt its leaping down a cliff has rid us of it for good."

The Saint did not reply, for it would have been too much like taking an order, but she did not disagree. It was decent enough sense, for Roland had his tricks but it was Foundling's priesthood of the wicked that had wraiths parting for them as they advanced on the last bastion. The two took the lead when the arrived at the feet of the walls the Skein's retreat had ripped open, climbing up and beginning to paw at the wards. Laurence remained below, as much to keep an eye on the Tyrant as to keep watch for the Horned Lord's return.

"Did you notice," Kairos Theodosian said, "that she now seems to have no issue spiriting away the sack of crowns where it cannot be gotten at. Strange, that earlier it had to be carried."

Of course she had. And the way that the Tyrant's passing defection – one without consequence, as well – had led to sole change that now both the crowns and the Carrion Lord were in the hands of the Black Queen. How long had she been scheming that, the Saint wondered? Still, the Tyrant was being condescendingly obvious about sowing seeds of enmity. He must think her simple, the little prick.

"Has anyone ever hit you in the mouth hard enough to break teeth?" Laurence asked.

"Alas, my friend, I am but a slave to my nature," the Tyrant grinned. "So are you, of course. It is why we are being played so masterfully by our delightful leader."

*No leader of mine*, the Saint thought, though she knew better than to give the villain what he wanted and voice any of her thoughts.

"I expect I'll get to kill you before spring arrives," the Saint casually said. "I'll admit, you wretched little shit, that I'll enjoy cutting you down a great deal."

"Interesting," the boy mused. "So what is it that the Dead King offered you, to make you so angry?"

"Your head on a pike," Laurence said, leaning forward to look the boy in the eye. "Insulting, that he'd try to rob me of the pleasure of chopping it off myself."

"You're taking all the fun out of this," the villain complained.

The Saint's fingers clenched. Too easy. That'd been too easy. She'd made a misstep somewhere, and he was now letting himself 'lose' this conversation because he'd already gotten what he wanted. Laurence studied the Tyrant, who studied her in turn with a lazy smile. Should she kill him immediately, just in case? That was where her instincts lay. Scheming villains were like termites, the longer they were left to dig the greater the damages. If she turned on a member of their band of five, loosely as that band was aligned, then there might be consequences greater than physical hostilities. On the other hand, were the consequences greater threat than whatever the boy had planned? Could be feint, she noted, him baiting her so she'd strike and he could finagle the others cutting her loose. She couldn't be sure Foundling wouldn't put keeping a close eye on Theodosian above whatever use she might get out of Laurence's sword arm this close to the finish. On the other hand, the Saint thought, it was too late for the Tyrant to sell them out to the Dead King. Which meant if he was going to screw someone, it was likely to be the one getting closest to their chosen victory. That, reluctant as Laurence was to admit it, was Catherine Foundling.

No, it was not worth making herself the truce-breaker of this story for such an ugly prize. The Saint of Swords would wait, hand on her pommel, and judge when the time came. Above them the first ward broke and the Black Queen yelled for them to catch up.

The Saint and the Tyrant had not moved from their matching stares, but it was Laurence who looked away first.

—

"I had been," the Grey Pilgrim slowly said, "under the impression your queen disapproved of necromancy."

Indrani glanced at the old man, putting away the bit that he'd apparently been able to sniff out the nature of the trouble above them through several layers of stones and wards without any difficulty. Might have been the angels, though, she corrected herself. Vivienne had been right, when she'd first said more than a year back that putting a finger on what the Pilgrim could and couldn't do was complicated even for a Named. His patron Choir made it hard to tell where his own sensory abilities began and the secrets they no doubt shared ended.

"She'd not going to put a few corpse-raisers at the back of a battlefield, no," Archer snorted. "But she doesn't ride live horses, Pilgrim. Callowan she might be, but don't forget who taught her."

The Praesi fondness for the art was as well-known as their Callowan foes' strong distaste for it, and both likely sprung form the same source. Indrani had thought for a while that Cat wouldn't mind an undead legion at all, if having one wouldn't make half her living soldiers desert without batting an eye. Mind you, Duchess Kegan's people had been stacking up dead souls for a long time before Akua got around to snatching the whole pile so when it came down to it even Callowans weren't above getting a little corpse on their hands.

"It is unlikely that I shall," the Pilgrim replied.

In the light of his, well, Light they'd been making good time through the tunnels. The bloody thing had been built to be *swum*, unfortunately, not walked. Meaning it was broken ground all around, with shapr ups and downs, and while the Peregrine was spry for a relic he wasn't going to be leaping around anytime soon. That meant every once in a while the rope came out again and Indrani dragged him up an incline, or slid him down one, though at least he was so light she barely noticed the weight of him. Seriously, he might as well have been made of feathers. Archer glanced at the old man's pensive expression and snorted. Still anguishing about the way it was the Carrion Lord who'd taught her, was he? He should have been more worried it was Akua she'd first cut her villain teeth on, as far as she was concerned. The Black Knight was sensible kind of savage, most the time. Getting into scraps with Akua Sahelian, though, taught lessons about grinding people into dust so they could never swing at you again. Akua had always been too good at squeaking out of trouble for her own good. Or anyone else's, for that matter.

"My worries amuse you," the old man said.

His tone was a tad disappointed, like she'd been unkind to someone's puppy.

"Sure," Indrani shrugged. "You're going about this all wrong, Grey. Digging for stories with me, trying to get a read on where she came from and what she's after now. Bet you put out little test for her since the lot of you entered this place, too, just to see where she fell on things."

The old man's silence sounded, Archer thought, just a little contrite. Caught him out, had she? In all fairness, he wasn't a bad hand at that game. It was deftly done, just enough give someone not looking for it wouldn't have noticed the take. But Indrani was pretty sure he was used to coming from the other side: already the darling grandfather, the trusted figure. In a word, the old man was used to being a mentor. That wasn't a void that'd ever needed much filling with the Woe, though, so any such attempt would only ever feel like trespassing and be all the more glaring for it.

"And you say such an approach would be a mistake," the Pilgrim carefully said. "It would be considered hostile?"

"More like a waste of time, and probably her a trial on her patience," Archer absent-mindedly said. "If she notices, which she will, because you've tried to

kill her a few times so she's paying attention."

She recognized this particular stretch of tunnel, as it happened. They were nearly at the end: one last climb up and they'd end up in the tragically empty wine cellar where the trap door had been hidden.

"And what would you suggest instead?" the old man asked, voice sounding a little strangled.

She flicked an impatient glance at him.

"Look, you're trying to deal with us like we're skittish fucking horses in need of your reins," Indrani said. "Throw that to the side, 'cause that ride ends with your throat cut open. Probably by me, 'cause let's face it I'm quicker on the draw than Hakram. You want to know what she wants? Sit across a table with her with a decent bottle and politely *ask*."

Archer frowned at him, just to make it clear for once she was being serious.

"And she'll tell you, Peregrine, because the moment you stop being someone trying to handle us you're back to being someone she wants to work with," she said. "Hells, Pilgrim, as far as I can tell mostly she wants things to be slightly less on fire everywhere. That really so devilish a scheme you can't stomach it?"

"There are other considerations to making a bargain with your queen, Indrani," the Pilgrim quietly said.

"If your Grand Alliance can't get its shit together long enough to *accept help* when the Dead King's about to eat the whole pie," Indrani frankly said, "then I don't get why you're so keen on it in the first place. Kind of a shipwreck, isn't it?"

The old hero's face was unreadable in the dim light of his own making, but this wasn't really her problem was it? Indrani was called in when there was trouble to be had, not to play the diplomat. Besides, but a few moments later they arrived at the end of the tunnel and what awaited them disturbed the Grey Pilgrim enough the other conversation died on its own.

"Souls," the Peregrine quietly said, blue peering up as if they could see through the trapdoor. "What awaits there, Archer?"

"A wine cellar, for the first few steps," Indrani said. "After that, well, you had it right. About a city's worth of souls, and the man who bound them as his instrument."

# Interlude: Repurpose

> "Mastery is meekness, for it is the observation of what we are intended to hold. It is the art of the supplicant. Only through usurpation can understanding be reached, for anything less is servitude."
>
> Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King

Firyal had died screaming, boiling heat washing over her. This she still remembered, sometimes, and in those rare moments of lucidity she knew terror. For while she had once been a mage some skill, the shackles around her soul were like nothing she had ever seen. A trained mind had allowed her to drift out of the dreams, once every few days, long enough to dread the return to that strange slumber where she only saw the life she had lived. Again, and again and again, for some obscure purpose. Perhaps, she had thought, this was one of the Hells. Perhaps she had not looked closely enough at all the bargains she had made, and some devil had gotten the best of her. So Firyal wondered, until she was startled awake by her shackles being ripped away. Freedom tasted sweet, for a moment, before she saw *them*. Eyes above her, burning and unblinking. As if the sun had been imprisoned in orbs of glass. Unkindly, the eyes peered through the span of her life like a bored scribe skimming a scroll.

"Useless," a calm voice noted. "Pass in peace."

The sun in the eyes died and then there was only oblivion.

—

"This is an abomination," Laurence said. "You know it, Foundling, and would still offer salvation to its architect?"

They'd torn through the last defences surrounding the sanctum like they were parchment, between the Black Queen's knowledge of their lay and Roland's knack for taking down wards, but what had awaited them beyond the luxurious quarters and feast halls was an Evil manifest. At Laurence's feet, like lake water softly lapping at a shore, the translucent and almost shimmering broth of hundreds of thousands of souls was spread out. Above them there was only darkness for a ceiling, whatever foul sorcery was at work here having warped

the nature of within into this... sickness. It was silent in here, almost peaceful, and that made the sight of it twice as ghoulish.

"Yes," the Black Queen said.

She had hesitated, the Saint thought, for barely the fraction of a moment. The loyalty of that was laudable but made a sin against Creation by who it'd been offered to. To safeguard a poisoner against consequence was to share in the guilt of the poisonings that would follow.

"Ah, well they were just Praesi," the Tyrant of Helike drawled. "It's not like the Grand Alliance hasn't been having rousing discussions of their wholesale slaughter anyway."

The Saint hadn't known that, not for sure, but then she was not particularly surprised. Tariq's chomping at the bit for them to head to Salia as soon as this was settled now made a great deal more sense. The boy-villain could be lying, of course, but that didn't matter nearly as much as whether or not Foundling would believe him. Laurence's hand casually went down to her sword. There was a pause.

"You're not even lying, are you?" the Black Queen mused, her tone wry.

She often used amusement to cloak her true thoughts, the Saint had noticed.

"An issue to settle when this is done with," Foundling sighed. "Pity for Cordelia Hasenbach is not something I particularly enjoy feeling, Kairos."

Did anyone? Klaus' niece or not, no one claimed the highest office of the Principate without climbing a mound of corpses. Some justly made, but others? Procer had grown into the kind of beast that would devour the best of intentions and taint them simply by being what it was.

"I cannot assure our safety if we wade into that," Roland piped up.

His eyes had never left the lake of souls, fascination and revulsion warring within them. Wizards, Laurence unkindly thought. Even the finest of them were only ever one swell of curiosity away from tumbling down a foul slope.

"I'll be handling that," Foundling said. "Where there is darkness there is night, and so it stands within my dominion."

*No, not night*, Laurence thought. It was 'Night' she had said, with a subtle ring of power to the word. Some blasphemous dark mirror to the Light? The Saint had believed the Black Queen's strange powers to come from a bargain made with lesser gods in the service of Below, but the sacrilege might run deeper than that.

"And where will we be headed?" Saint flatly asked.

"Why, dearest Laurence, that ought to be obvious," the Tyrant of Helike laughed. "To the throne room, of course."

No one humoured the madman with further reply. The Black Queen's staff struck the ground and before it the souls parted. *And so*, Laurence thought, *it begins.*

—

Tariq carried light into the dark, as he had sought to do for most his life.

The sliver of it was enough to push back the silvery sea of souls around the two of them, that tragedy happened and happening. The right to Behold the truth of things, that was the gift that had been bestowed upon him many years ago when he found his own base discernment too feeble a thing to rely on, but there were occasions where it was curse as much as boon. This was one, he thought, for not until the Heavens called him to his rest would the Grey Pilgrim forget this sight: an expanse of shivering souls, wounded and crying out from the sudden brutality of their demise. Shackled to Creation and kept in that torment of a half-existence, sorcerous bindings keeping imprisoned in restless slumber. And where someone else might see only the waters, Tariq... Oh, he could see them all. Every weeping child, every terrified innocent lost to a death they had not even been able to understand. For all that, the Grey Pilgrim did not look away. Someone had to see them, to refuse to avert their eyes. And to free them, when the time came, for this *would not be tolerated*.

"Huh," Archer said. "So that's what it looks like when your blood is up."

"This place is a blight onto Creation, child," Tariq quietly said. "You are no priestess, but your senses are keen. You must know it as well."

"He wouldn't have let it come to this, if he were in his right mind," she replied. "But that's what you get, when you push monstrously talented practitioner over the edge. They fall, and either they die or they make wings of whatever's at hand at the time."

"The attack on Thalassina is no excuse for this," the Pilgrim sharply said. "It does not exempt the Hierophant from responsibility for this abomination."

"You don't get to make that call," Archer calmly said. "He's not for you to judge, crusader. You take a swing at a nest of vicious diabolists, well, you get shit like this. If he crossed a line in defending his home and family then it's not the enemy that'll discipline him – it's Catherine."

"And if she simply pardons him?" the Peregrine asked.

Hazelnut eyes met his own.

"If you believe that, then your eyesight's worse than I'd thought."

The heartbeat of tension that followed was broken by the flapping of great wings. It startled Tariq into looking up, though he could barely glimpse the shape of the large crow in the gloom until it landed on Archer's extended arm. The pulsing thoughts and feelings of the young woman that'd he'd been able to behold until that moment were suddenly obscured, as if a shadow was being cast over them. The loss was discomforting, he'd admit, though that was a paltry thing compared to the black-winged horror perched on young Indrani's arm. Even a casual glance into those night-woven feathers was enough for him to hear distant screams. To smell fresh blood being spilled, as if he was standing by an altar where a throat was being opened. The Ophanim breathed into him and the haunting faded, though like a prowling beast it was not gone – merely held at bay.

"You sure?" Archer said, cocking her head to the side.

She winced before she was even finished speaking, and Tariq noted she never looked directly at the crow.

"I always get stuck with the snippy one," the young woman angrily growled. "Fine, we'll do it. Away with you, bird."

The murder made flesh flew above, and Tariq breathed in sharply when he saw its talons had left bloody marks on Archer's arm. He raised his hand, silently offering healing, but his companion shook her head.

"The Sisters don't really do nice, but they don't bleed people without a reason," she said. "The blood was taken for a reason. Also because I piss them off but Hells at this point it'd a shame to stop."

She did not lack courage, though the Peregrine found it regrettable she chose not to exercise it on worthier pursuits than recklessly provoking lesser deities born of ritual slaughter.

"And what did the Sisters request?" Tariq asked.

"Masego's nearing the end of whatever the Dead King using him for," Archer said. "We can't afford this slow a pace anymore."

"We will hurry, then," Tariq agreed.

Tired as he was, better exhaustion than inaction.

"Ah, you're not getting my drift," the young woman said. "Walking the road won't cut it."

"Your meaning?" the Grey Pilgrim asked.

"Snuff the light," the Archer said, "and stay close to me. We follow the crow."

—

Iblin had been so proud to be called to stand among the ritual even though he was young and not entirely schooled in the proper ways. Yet he had power to spare, and that had been needed most of all, and so among the circles that supported the Lord Warlock he had stood. But then it had... where was he? There'd been a light, a terrible Light, and a voice had Spoken. This was not Thalassina, Iblin realized, this was not Thalassina and – blinding eyes were staring down, releasing a pressure that had been keeping him constrained, and the relief lived only until his soul began suffering examination. Like an insect pinned and open so that the entrails could be looked upon, the last moments of Iblin's life were studied by that burning glare. He screamed, for it was an intrusion unlike any he had felt before. The presence had been calm, at the start, patient. But twice it looked upon the same moment, when the voice had uttered a word and the circle had lost control of the gathered power, and tried to look at the Warlock from where Iblin had stood but found the angle too stilted. The examination grew rougher, forceful, until the grip suddenly loosed.

"Useless," a voice impatiently said. "Leave."

Oblivion fell over Iblin like a blanket.

—

Like children wandering into the woods at night they moved in a line, everyone close enough to the one in front of them to see their back even in the gloom – save for the Black Queen herself, who gazed into the darkness with

seeing eyes even where there should be nothing to see. Under their boots the translucent liquid souls turned into solid ground, though only as long as they touched and not an instant more. The Saint had claimed the rearguard, for she would not trust the Tyrant to stand at her back – even if he were truly standing instead of letting himself be carried by his ugly creations. She'd kept an eye on him in case he warmed to the notion of striking at the Rogue Sorcerer's back, whose earlier spoken sympathies had apparently convinced the Black Queen to place behind her. If this was a ploy, Laurence thought, it appeared to be working.

"Catherine," the Tyrant of Helike said, "I've a query, if you would."

"Do you?" the Black Queen replied. "Imagine that."

Laurence noted that their pace quickened at that, limp or not.

"We are being guided by one of your crows, are we not?" Kairos Theodosian mused. "I can almost hear the beat of the wings."

The Saint could not, though she'd felt there was an air of carrion to this abominable place from the start. She'd presumed it to be either the souls of the dead or Foundling's own powers, though, not the presence of some old monster.

"I don't have crows," the Black Queen mildly replied.

She'd not outright denied having a guide, and the Tyrant hacked out a wet laugh.

"And are you not worried, my dear friend, that so wantonly parading pieces of a godhead around the Hidden Horror will have... intriguing outcome?"

"If he wants to catch Sve Noc in the dark," Foundling said, "I can only wish him good luck."

"I thought you might say that," Kairos Theodosian said. "Which is why-"

In a single continuous movement, gathering the power of her Choosing to refine her strength and swiftness, the Saint of Swords unsheathed her blade and thrust it through the back of the Tyrant's throne at the height where his heart would be. Always tempting to go for the neck, with villains, but while clever Damned often had artefacts meant to protect such a weakness they rarely bothered with more than a single layer of enchanted armour over their chest. The blow went straight through the stone and metal, but it was no flesh that was torn through afterwards. Lips thinning with displeasure, Laurence withdrew her blade and let whatever illusion had been laid over the gargoyle shatter.

"Betrayal," the Tyrant called out through the mouth of another gargoyle. "Betrayal most foul!"

The Black Queen turned to gaze upon the mess and Saint took a careful step back. If the confrontation began here, then-

"I really wish you hadn't done that," Catherine Foundling said.

"He was about to turn on us," Laurence flatly replied.

"Yes," she agreed without missing a beat. "But now we turned on him first, and that means-"

Light bloomed in the sky above them, chasing the shadows, and wreathed in a halo the Tyrant appeared – carried by a swarm of chittering gargoyles, seated on what appeared to a measurably gaudier specimen of the throne he'd previously sat on.

"- so viciously scorned, I am left no repose but to meet you all in open and honourable battle," Kairos Theodosian cheerfully announced.

"Komena," the Black Queen murmured in that foreign tongue of hers, "sate."

This time Laurence did feel the devil, or rather her absence – a weight there had been in the air vanished, even as light spread further around the Tyrant of Helike and he revealed what appeared to be a... sword? Saint opened her mouth, but Foundling suddenly extended her staff out in front of her with a glare.

"Do not," she hissed, "accept that beginning."

"What say you, blackguards – if you'll forgive my language – and reprobates?" the Tyrant shouted, openly gleeful. "Will you meet my challenge?"

The Black Queen rolled her shoulder, as if to limber it, and glanced at the rest of them.

"Head for the throne room," Catherine Foundling said. "I'm the only one who can handle what he's about to use, which I suppose is rather the point."

"How will we know the way?" Roland asked.

Foundling pointed at the Tyrant, or rather the light wreathing him.

"You'll be able to see it soon enough," she said. "Get moving. You don't want to be caught in the middle of that."

Laurence's lips thinned.

"The sword," she said. "What is it?"

"In a word?" Catherine Foundling grimaced. "Hierarchy."

—

"Well," Archer said, "that's not good."

Tariq gaze upon the light rising in the distance, chasing away the shadows, and knew that once upon a time the stuff of it had been Light. It had been... twisted, after, but the nature of it was not hidden form his eye. The Ophanim murmured in his ear, angry at the perversion but also *worried*. This was a weapon, and a dire one.

"The Tyrant of Helike has betrayed them," Tariq grimly said.

"Cat said he'd planned to steal this entire place," the young woman said. "I guess he's settled for making a grab at the souls instead."

"And this does not worry you?" the Pilgrim asked.

"We're nearly there," the Archer shrugged. "Although we're going to lose our guide soon, I suppose. Out in the open in Hierophant's seat of power she'd be meat on the plate."

"That Kairos Theodosian could claim such a great bounty of souls," Tariq clarified.

"Cat's there," his companion replied, eyebrow rising.

As if that settled the matter, as if the Black Queen was a talisman of victory. If it had been blind loyalty or even love, the Grey Pilgrim would not have found it half as unsettling. But it was trust, simple and deep. The kind he had never once seen one of Below's champions so easily extend to another. The Woe defied easy description, in both what had brought them together and what had since bound them.

"Then let us proceed," the Pilgrim said, tucking away his thoughts.

They moved swiftly, pace racing against the distant blooming of the Tyrant's light. And the found their mark, moments before the first rays chased away the lesser god that had been their guide and helper both. The Pilgrim and the Archer stood before a flight of tall stairs, roughly hewn and leading to gates of bronze slightly cracked open. Sorcery pulsed like a living thing, hear, a great heartbeat, and the wisps of it were visible in the air. Upwards they hurried and slipped through the opening and into the Hierophant's last sanctum.

—

Precision.

It had always been about precision, Hierophant dimly remembered, even before this had begun. It was the fundamental failure of humankind, the inexactitude of what it could perceive in a world that was the most finely tuned construct in existence. And so they all puttered about, sometimes blindly feeling out a segment of the greater whole and daring to call it a theory of magic. And Hierophant had been blind as well, was blind still, but in his restlessness he had found what he craved the most: sometimes, just sometimes, he could see it all. Witness it in full. And so the impossible simply became improbable, and now he must fit all the pieces together. Perfectly, or it would be worse than doing nothing at all. There had been a need for tools, and so tools he had gathered.

The souls of Thalassina, the fuel of his work.

Broken Liesse, the foundry from which he would cast salvation.

The Observatory, eyes for where his eyes could not reach.

The secrets of Trismegistus had been of great use in leashing the souls and keeping them at hand, in shattering what he needed of Arcadia and making of it what was required. Souls alone were not enough, no, they were not. And so he had ruined the realm, and from ruin gained mastery – aspect pulsing, breathing, pulsing. It was... unpleasant. His body ached, and so he had withdrawn from it. There were simply too many distractions and the work could not brook those. It needed to be perfect. But it was not, even through the Observatory. He filled the sky to see, to find the shards and reflections of deepest Arcadia, but it was not enough. Muddled, the shards were*, inexact*. Papa could not be made anew from that. And then it came to him, the understanding. He had the souls, those who had been there in the last moments of it all. He could see through their eyes, and where their own were imprecise bits of flesh his eyes would not fail. Only there were so many, many souls. And who else could he trust with this? No one.

His mind drifted sometimes, moments were lost, but that was as close as Hierophant would suffer to sleep.

The souls did not get him what he needed. Glimpses, yes, but incomplete. Not even his aspect could bridge so broad a gap. But ah, he was not done. Like jigsaw puzzles, those toys someone he could not recall had loved, he took the glimpses and put them together. Fit them until it could all be seen, and then *again*. All eyes that could be found, for anything less would mean imperfection. Yet distractions came knocking at his door. Vermin wandering through the ruin, armies and travellers. Named, even, that resisted the storms he redirected towards them. Entities, sometimes, and those he spared thought to catching – there was always a need for fuel, for the foundry was ever hungry – but they were slippery things and skilled at hiding in the shadows. Distractions, distractions he could not afford. The essence he extracted from the Hells had bleed and using old arrays he bound devils with it to put in the way of the vermin. No further thought was given than that, for Liesse was high up and defended. But now, now, there was assault. Things crawling in the dark, Named everywhere and even *contamination*.

Someone was trying to take souls, to rule them through law and faith, and when Hierophant had tried to swat them out of existence he had found the laws resisted him. They disallowed his interference and sunk further into the sea of souls, poison in the well. One of the entities was trying to contain this – and was this not a familiar presence?

*No. We cannot afford distractions.*

Hierophant had to hurry, yes. Containment would fail, contamination would spread, and it would all be made inexact. The pieces were together, though there would be more. If he kept looking, it would be perfect. As he needed it to be.

*It is already perfect. We must hurry, they are trying to break it.*

Vermin, vermin everywhere. Yes, it needed to be now. Before it was soiled. It all fell together, dozens and dozens of glimpses he had painstakingly gathered, and when they were all fitted Hierophant breathed out.

"**Witness**," he whispered.

It rang out, went out, and then it was *caught*.

"Yes," the Dead King whispered fondly into his ear, "now show me what it is that she's planning. Show me what the Intercessor seeks, Hierophant."

# Bonus Chapter: Miraculous

> "Courage is what's left when the rest is gone."
>
> Albrecht Papenheim, the Lone Sentinel

Captain Fredda squared her shoulders as she strode up the stairs leading to the summit of the Westenhaupt, her cloak tightly clasped at the neck over her grandfather's mail. She was glad for the way the cloth over her lower face hid her mouth, lest the soldiers she had been placed in command of see her biting at her lip. Though the responsibilities of command were fresh to her, and she young for them, they were not the source of her worries. She could handle leading a company, on the wall or off it. No, it was the ringing bells that were summoning her to the top of the ramparts that had her uneasy. Her soldiers should have been given six hours of rest in the depths of the Westenhaupt, where no dead could get to them and not even the constant pounding of the Enemy's mages could keep them wake, yet they'd only had four before being called back to the rampart. Father, who had been a well-known captain back home for all that he'd insisted he was a terrible innkeeper when she'd been a child, had always told her that you could tell a siege was going bad when they sent tired soldiers back into the fray. Her father who might be dead, for there were rumours going around about Hocheben Heights... No, she could not let fear win. It might be, Fredda told herself, that was seeing ratlings instead of hares. But it also might be that her father had been right, instead, and that the Morgentor was on the eve of falling.

Morgentor – Morning's Gate, the last fortress barring the way out of Twilight's Pass. The last fortress the armies of the north still held in the face of the Enemy, for inch by inch they had lost the grounds. We'll hold, Fredda chided herself. *The Morgentor hasn't fallen since the founding of Procer.* Had her mother not been a scribe, the fair-haired captain might not have known that the last time the fortress had fallen was the last time the Hidden Horror had invaded the north. As it was, the fond learning of her childhood was the dread of her later years.

"Blades out," Fredda howled, glancing back at the soldiers following her. "They don't ring the bells to make it lively."

"Where else are we supposed to earn a tune, captain?" one of her soldiers yelled back.

"Certainly not your singing, Hannah, or the Dead King would run back to Keter in fright," Fredda called out, and the lot of them hit the rampart to the sound of hard laughter.

The dead had forced a foothold, damn them all and Keter twice. A wyrm's great fangs had sunk into the crenellation and the gargantuan dead serpent's open maw was now spewing out an endless stream of enemy soldiers. Westenhaupt, the westernmost of the Three Peaks, was held by the soldiers of Neustria with reinforcements from those hard Hannoven bastards when the going got rough. There was no lack of soldiers, but Princess Mathilda Greensteel was fighting the dead in Hainaut so the Neustrians had few of the old blood to rally around. It didn't help, that the finest soldiers and officers had gone south. But they'd earn the fucking keep, and if the Morgentor was to fall it would not be through their peak.

"Shield wall," Captain Fredda screamed, raising her own.

Her company fell around her and they advanced briskly into the melee, smashing into the side of the dead. The fair-haired captain hacked down with her axe, tearing through dead flesh and smashing old bones, and as she howled her soldiers howled with her. Inch by inch they forced back the dead, until the melee was so tightly packed there was no room for the enemy trying to climb out.

"Where are the godsdamned burners?" Captain Fredda screamed. "Get that fucking wyrm off my wall."

*Before everyone here dies*, she didn't say. Were they out of pitch, she wondered for a horrible moment? It couldn't be, how else were they to get ride of abominations like the wyrms? But then screams of *Papenheim, Papenheim*, and *yet we stand* sounded and flames spread across the dead serpent's flesh. If custom hold, it would retreat now – the Enemy only had so many of those undead moving siege towers, and could not afford to lose them.

Instead, the head of the soldier to Fredda's side disappeared into red mist. *Fuck*, the flaxen-haired captain thought.

"Chosen," she yelled. "Torch the stretch."

It'd kill her and half her company, but if one of the enemy's undead heroes was allowed to linger up here they were all done for. She's seen one shred near two hundred Hannoven heavies three nights back before it was thrown down the wall. The Enemy's champion was a half-naked man, a mass of hard muscle wearing little but trousers and scarring, and even though she raised her shied her smashed through it effortlessly and grabbed her by the throat.

"*Audace*," someone screamed in Chantant, and the lance caught the Chosen in the throat.

Falling to the floor, Fredda wondered if she was dreaming. There wasn't a man or woman in the army who didn't know who Prince Frederic Goethal was – the sole southerner prince to bring his army to fight for the Pass – but the

fluttering hundreds of horsemen in red and blue silk couldn't possibly be here, could they? They held the Ostenhaupt, the tower on the other side of the Three Peaks. The dead Chosen vaulted up, even with his neck torn through, and after punching right through the head of the horseman who'd ridden him down he was run through by another three lances in quick succession, pushing him further back. Until the last had him dangling over the edge of the ramparts, and a ridiculously ostentatious man with long curls held by ribbons laughed out loud.

"Enjoy the drop, yes?" Prince Frederic Goethal said, and with his sword hacked through the lance holding up the Damned.

Captain Fredda had risen to her feet, by then and gotten her shield wall back in order. The wyrm's fangs left stone soon enough, and it slithered back down the four hundred feet it had extended to serve as a siege tower. With the Westenhaupt secured and no other captain coming forward to do so in her place, Fredda ambled forward to speak with the Prince of Brus herself. He was still atop his mount, though someone appeared to have handed him a fine glass of brandy since she'd last looked.

"Your Grace," she greeted him, and the respect was not feigned.

How could it be, when the Kingfisher Prince and his army had bled for every fortress from Volsaga to Morgentor? This would be remembered. There were Alamans, in the end, and there were *Alamans*. The man might look a fool, in silk and ribbons, but he was a fool who'd ridden down a sheer cliff to slay an undead dragon. Even the bitterest of Hannoven exiles had to approve of that.

"Captain Fredda, yes?" the Prince of Brus smiled.

The fair-haired captain was glad the cloth still hid her face, for if she'd been caught blushing by any of her soldiers she'd have heard about it until Last Dusk.

"Aye," she gruffly said. "I thank you for your help, it was a close thing."

"It was you Neustrians who sortied at Graueletter to pull us out of that mess with the beorns," the Prince of Brus replied. "An even scale requires no thanks, captain. This was *due*."

None of this is due, she almost said. *You could be safe south, but instead you're here dying with the rest of us.* But she'd been raised better than to insult sacrifice when it was so gallantly given, and so she kept her mouth shut.

"Then I look forward to returning the favour," she simply said.

The prince smiled ruefully.

"I expect you'll get the occasion before long," he said. "The Enemy seems rather impatient of late."

Fredda almost didn't ask, for it was overstepping, but when else would she get such an occasion?

"Your Grace," she hesitantly said. "I have heard that the Hocheben Heights have fallen. Is it true?"

The Alamans gazed at her steadily.

"Why do you ask?" he said.

"My father held command at Emil's Displeasure," she admitted. "And I know that letters are no longer carried, but it has been weeks since I've heard from him."

Something like grief passed through the Prince of Brus' eyes.

"I'm sorry," he quietly said. "They held until dawn and got word to Tauenberg in time."

Fredda's throat choked. Then Father was...

"Thank you," she croaked out.

Her fists clenched. The Morgentor would hold, damn them all and Keter twice. Her father had died for it, and if that was what it took she fucking would too.

—

Otto Redcrown, Prince of Bremen by virtue of having been spared by death longer than the rest of his kin, stared down at ink on parchment and saw writ there the death of his people. It might take, he thought, a year. Two, perhaps, if the Enemy spent months thoroughly razing the lowlands of Bremen and Neustria rather than forcing the Rhenian Gates. Yet the moment the fortress around him fell, and Twilight's Pass with it, the last doom of the Lycaonese had come. They'd lost Hocheben Heights, last month, and the Dead King had since begun to march hordes through the plateau. The fortress at Tauenberg would slow them down a few weeks, he thought, for but after that the dead would have no wall or host hindering their advance into the heartlands of the principality his father and sisters had entrusted to his unworthy hands. Within the month they would be at the gates of the city of Bremen itself, which was in no state to withstand a siege: it was packed with children and the elderly, all those that could or would not fight. Already the roads south had been cleared and all were being sent further south into Neustria, but once the dead had their foothold in Bremen they would begin raiding the refugee caravans and the noose would begin to tighten. The Dead King had moved too swiftly for them, Otto Reitzenberg thought, his armies little quicker on the march than those of the living but ceaseless and tireless in that advance.

Now only a single fortress of Twilight's Pass remained in the hands of his people: the ancient Morning's Gate, the last holdfast standing against the march of doom. And if it fell... Oh, Otto understood the stratagem of the Hidden Horror well. It was writ plain in the lay of the map: the last armies of the Lycaonese would be driven from the Morgentor and find in their retreat that the Dead King's armies were already waiting to the south of them. Supplies would end, the wagon-chains of grain and steel, and even should force of arms fail to end his armies hunger and winter cold would slay his soldiers by the score until none were left. The war was lost, though he could not admit it to the captains looking to him for orders. He must now see to preserving as much of his people as he could, sending them further south into Alamans lands so that a generation from now the war could be taken back to the Dead King and their ancestral holdings reclaimed. Neustria too would fall, of that there could

be no question, but further south where the borders of Brus and Lyonis ran close it might be that Lake Pavin and the marshlands of northern Brus could serve as a new line of defence. They were Alamans holdings, as well, and would have many kin to call to their aid when the dead arrived. It might be enough for a time, ff anything could ever be enough when facing the Hidden Horror.

The sharp rap of a knuckle against wood was the sole warning Otto received before his sworn swords let in the man he'd asked for. Prince Frederic Goethal of Brus was still impeccable dressed and groomed even after two weeks of gruelling fighting on the walls and the plains, his ostentatious blond ringlets kept with ribbons made from cloth he'd taken from banners of the Dead King. The Kingfishers, as the prince's retinue of horsemen had been fondly named by their Lycaonese comrades, had taken to taking the Hidden Horror's banners at every opportunity so they might have a courtly game of the most insulting use one could make of it.

"Reitzenberg," the other prince cheerfully greeted him. "Back staring at the maps, I see. Good, I've been itching for us to try a sortie."

"That is what I would ask you to consider, in a manner of speaking," Otto acknowledged.

The blond man seemed pleased.

"If you'd lend me some of the Hannoven riders, I do believe we could catch their camp near the mountain rivers unaware," Prince Frederic said. "The waters are already poisoned, I daresay, but we'll have better luck there than trying the Abomination's frontlines. Last watch insists they brought in fresh Damned and another pair of wyrms."

The Chosen dead and raised in the service of the Enemy had been leading the waves trying the walls for days now, though smashing through the ladders before they finished climbing was enough to keep most of them at bay. The wyrms were darker news, for the great serpents the Hidden Horror had crafted from corpses were worse than simple monsters: they were as undead siege towers, their insides made ladders so that the dead could climb up through them after the wyrms sunk their fangs into stone deep enough nothing could move them. Pitch fires were enough to set them to retreat, sometimes, but supplies were running low and more wyrms meant further thinning of them. They might have even less time than he'd hoped before the walls fell.

"I would have you ride in another direction," the Prince of Bremen said. "Now, before it is too late. Take forty thousand with you, and all our horse. Delay the enemy near Tauenberg, if you can, but you must take everyone you can south."

"Otto," the other prince said.

"It is ill-done of me to ask after the sacrifices you have made," the Prince of Bremen admitted, "but if you could let them into Brus, all who can will fight in its defence. If oaths must be made to you in place of the old crowns, then they will be. I have seen to it."

"*Otto*," Prince Frederic sharply said.

"I'll hold as long as I can," he promised. "And send word to the Rhenians to march everything they can through the Gates to slow the Enemy's march south. A month, at least, I can promise. Beyond that-"

"If you speak another word of this foolishness, Gods forgive me but we may have to duel," Frederic Goethal flatly said.

"We're going to die, Frederic," Otto Redcrown quietly said. "There's too many of them and even the Morgentor cannot hold forever. Thrice in two days did we come within a hair's breadth of losing one of the Three Peaks, and the moment we do our annihilation has begin. Go while you still can and take the seed of my people with you, so that one day the Lycaonese may return north."

"Of course we're going to die, Otto," the other man replied, tone gentle. "This is no surprise to me. My cousin Henriette has already been confirmed as my successor and I've tasked her with preparing our lands. What remains of the Goethal army will advance north into the marshlands to raise forts and escort your people to safety."

"It won't be enough," the Prince of Bremen said. "You are held in respect, Frederic, in a manner that will not extend to your cousin. A prince needs to lead the last of us."

"Then go," Prince Frederic languidly shrugged. "You, too, have been crowned."

"I am the last of the House of Reitzenberg," Otto Redcrown said, in a tone that brooked no argument. "So long as one of us breathes, dawn will hold."

Of that matter there was nothing more to say, for Twilight's Pass would be his grave as it had been that of greater men.

"I do not begrudge you that pride, my friend," Frederic Goethal said. "Do not begrudge me the same."

It was not the same, Otto thought. It was not the same, but he did not know the right words to speak and he would fail in this has he had been failing since the moment Elsa had pressed her bloody crown into his hand and breathed her last. Yet before he could say anything more, the door was roughly banged against.

"Your Graces! The enemy stirs!"

The two princes traded a glance, and wordless agreed to set aside the matter for now. If there was to be another assault on the walls there were more pressing concerns to attend to. Neither of them left their arms or armour save when they slept, these days, though attendants brought helmets to them as well as reports as they both made for the ramparts. The Morgentor had first been raised in the days of the Iron Kings, after the third time Hannoven fell and a ratling warband swelled into horde swarmed down Twilight's Pass looking for yet more to devour. The Rhenian Gates had held, as they always did, so with the way north into Rhenia barred the ratlings had ended up heading south towards Bremen like a tide of vermin. The battle for the lower mouth of Twilight's Pass was great victory, but a costly one. When one of the Krauff – who had ruled over Bremen, in those days, predecessors to the Reitzenberg – was elected Iron King in the years that followed, he ordered the raising of the

Morgentor to ensure when the Chain of Hunger next broke through there would be walls awaiting them. In the centuries that'd followed, every great against the Dead and the Plague had seen it built into a greater holdfast. There was no greater fortress in the north, it was said, save for the cities of Hannoven and Rhenia themselves. That was no idle boast, Otto know, for otherwise he would not have been able to hold at bay the more five hundred thousand dead the Hidden Horror sent against the walls day and night.

The Three Peaks had begun as the two great towers leaning against the sides of the pass, the third one originally raised as a simple bastion before centuries of additions turned it into a massive mountain of granite masonry. The walls between the three towers rose higher and thicker with the passing years, until it seemed like peaks made by the hands of mortals had filled the mouth of Twilight's Pass. The great gates that allowed armies and merchants to pass through were layers upon layers of enchanted steel, raised in times of peace but now fully closed since all to the north had been lost. Tunnels dug into the mountainside allowed for sorties from hidden places, though each had been built to it could be collapsed on the enemy if they found it. Otto himself had been commanding from the central peak, which was held mostly by Bremen soldiery. Prince Frederic's army held the eastern peak, while the Neustrians held the western one and the Hannoven exiles served as reserve and reinforcements for all. It was at the heart of the middle peak that Otto had set his quarters, and it would be swifter for the Prince of Brus to rise to the top of the tower and head east from there than to descend all the way down before doing the same – as such, it was together that they reached the summit of the Herzhaupt and came to gaze down at the Dead King's sea of dead.

"That is not an assault, unless I am gravely mistaken," Prince Frederic said, frowning.

Otto did not disagree. The armies of the dead had made their camp further north, among the ruins of Graueletter, where their sorcerers were less vulnerable to sorties. Not without reason. The Lycaonese had proved more than willing to trade dozens of lives, if not entire companies, for the destruction of corpse-mages since the beginning of this war. It was known from ancient lore that the Dead King could not easily replace these, and that many of his foulest rituals required their presence. The Prince of Bremen had been forced to halt the practice of late, as he could no longer afford such losses no matter the prize, but the dead had remained cautious anyway. Close to the Morgentor they had only raised forts and filled them with tireless watchers: the river poured forth only when the ramparts were tried, be that day or night. What had at first been constant bruising assaults – some of them having lasted more than a day and night in length – had since slowed in frequency, though none wise would believe that to be good omen. Yet for all that the armies of the dead had come out of the ruins to the north, none of them had advanced further than the outer forts. Among the seemingly endless ranks of corpses garbed in ancient armour, there lay greater abominations.

The wyrms, foul serpents that were monster and siege tower both. The beorns, bear-like monsters that served as the first wave of assault by climbing the ramparts and spewing out a company's worth of dead to aid their own rampage while ladders and wyrms advanced. Flocks of long-dead drakes circled above, waiting to spew their clouds of poison and acid. And among the lesser soldiers, ready to lead the dead hordes that would attempt to land their iron ladders on the ramparts, Chosen slain and raised into damnation stood still as statues. More than a dozen times now had Otto driven back that host when it tried to take the Morgentor, yet gazing upon it still sent a shiver up his spine every time. It was an army, he'd thought, raised to be the end of Calernia. And ahead of those dark ranks, a company of riders had approached under ancient banner: a circle of silver stars around a pale crown, the Hidden Horror's own heraldry. The riders bared their blades and raised them blades in salute, high and shining in the morning sun.

And then they left, and the army went with them. Not a word had been spoken, from beginning to end.

"What is this?" Prince Fredric softly asked.

"A miracle, my friend," Prince Otto replied in a hushed whisper. "Gods save us all, it is a miracle."

The dead withdrew all the way back to Graueletter and for three months took not a single step forward.

# Interlude: Reckoning

> "Fate is not a bridle; it is an arrow in flight. No hand but your own can loose it, yet once loosed there can be no desisting from the path."
>
> Dread Empress Maleficent the First

Masego awoke from his dream to a firm hand on his shoulder. The touch was unpleasant, as most touches tended to be, but not so distasteful as to stir him to action when he was so... *tired*. He'd said something, hadn't he? Just now. And it'd been important. Yet he could not quite recall, and there were other matters to have his mind aflutter. Masego could feel sights flicker just beyond the reach of his eyes, as if stolen before they ever became his.

"I would have preferred," a measured voice said, "to use means that preserved your gifts. For that I apologize, Hierophant. You are a rare talent and so this stands a great waste."

Masego had heard that voice before. Months, years ago. It was not to be trusted. It belonged to an enemy. He tried to extend his will, to claw back the sights that had been taken from him, but it was... difficult. He saw a garden and a pale woman in a dress. He saw a man with a silver coin, spinning and spinning until it dropped. He saw a crowned corpse, a grinning skull – and his will was firmly set aside, like a child whose wrist had been slapped. He struggled against it, but only weakly and ceased when the futility of the act became clear.

"It is necessary, however. If we'd had more time," the voice said, "it could have been done more cleanly. Yet your mistress forced my hand in this, however kind her intentions. So did that amusing child, though from him I would not presume kindness of any sort."

Masego had no eyes to blink open blearily, but the glinting lights of Summer's noon came alight once more. There were arrays around him, in the dozens, that he could not remember making. He wanted to study them more closely but it was difficult to concentrate. He felt exhausted and it was only worsening. Like a barrel draining out. There were other circles of rune he remembered carving himself, the necessities of bringing back his father, but they were skillfully intertwined with the stranger's work. Someone, he realized, had usurped his work. Wormed runes into his arrays and so repurposed them for a

ritual that was almost a manner of scrying, though unlike any he'd ever seen. Still, it was all derivative. There should be something at the heart of it all, empowering and empowered.

Gods, he was so tired.

"Steady now, Hierophant," the Dead King murmured. "Divination is delicate sorcery at the best of times, and we seek to unmask the greatest liar these lands have ever known. It is too early in our shared journey to falter."

The hand pulled him up from the slump he'd not known he was falling into, its grip now tight enough it hurt, the sights he was still denied began to flicker even more swiftly.

—

"We are too late," the Grey Pilgrim sadly said.

There had been no missing the colossal pulse of power that'd shivered outwards and through them even as they stepped into the sanctum. Tariq had been given pause by what awaited inside, for never before had he seen such works of magic: it was as if every surface of the great pillared hall within had been covered with runes. They had been artfully carved, no mere circles but instead almost a great mural: waves crested and broke, carved into stone, and spun into forests and peaks. The sight of it was oddly beautiful, like a painting made a hundred thousand little brushstrokes, but like rivers returning to the sea all the patterns of runes coursed back to the throne at the centre of the room. On it, a sickly thin man in dark robes was seated, sightlessly looking up at the ceiling through a tattered black eyecloth. The Hierophant, though he looked more than half dead and great strokes of manifest sorcery whirled around him like a storm.

"He's still breathing," Archer flatly replied. "Careful what you step on, Pilgrim. Follow my path."

Tariq felt a swell of grief, for he beheld the young woman's anticipation of what might yet come and it was like a flinch of the heart. The first time, he well-knew, was always the worst. And no amount of years or seasoning could ever truly prepare you for it.

"He is being used by the Hidden Horror for a ritual, Indrani," he softly replied. "Even should he survive, there will be little of him left."

"You don't know that," she sharply said.

"I know we cannot let that ritual run its course," the Grey Pilgrim said.

"If we interrupt it could-" she began.

Like quicksilver, without the slightest hint of warning, the Archer had two bared blades against Tariq's throat. He'd not even had time to blink. The cool touch of steel against skin would have been relief, after the exertions of the day, if not for the slight bite of the very sharp knives.

"You won't cleaning up any loose ends under cover of good intention, Pilgrim," the Archer mildly said.

"I did not intend to," Tariq said.

She looked at him searchingly.

"Might be that's true," she murmured. "Might be it's not, or just that it won't matter. The Lady said there's only one way to deal with your breed, so I'll speak plain now. Just between you and me."

She leaned forward.

"You kill him, Peregrine, and I'll make whatever ten corpses I need to make the Grand Alliance eat itself alive," Archer said. "You might think Cat will keep me in line, or the war on Keter, or half a hundred different other practical little worries for practical little minds. But look into my soul, Tariq. When I tell you not a single fucking thing will stay my hand, *am I lying*?"

The Pilgrim looked and beheld the truth of it.

"No," he quietly said. "You are not."

The blades left his throat, and a few spins later they were sheathed and put away.

"Glad we have an understanding, Peregrine," the young woman smiled. "Now let's find a way to wake him without hurting him."

—

"There's something out there," Laurence said.

The dark of this abominable place had been chased away by the glow of the Tyrant's own blasphemy, which brought to mind more than a few passages from the Book about Evil clawing at Evil. Not that the Book of All Things was all that reliable a guide, when it came down to it. Whoever had penned the old thing seemed under the impression that Chosen were naturally prone to holding hands and tearfully joining righteous cause, in contrast to the spirited backbiting of the Damned. Presumably they'd never witnessed two Chosen with different intentions existing in each other's presence, much less two of Above's servants coming from different parts of Calernia. Without someone like Tariq to keep the peace or someone bearing a clear mandate to unite behind like the White Knight, you might as well be throwing a whole bag's worth of angry wet cats in a half a bag. Laurence caught the drift of her thoughts and killed it quick as he could. The mind tended to wander when one tired, and she'd not been this exhausted in a very long time.

"The Hierophant, presumably," Roland delicately said. "Or our more discreet comrades."

He was looking at her like she was old, which was fair. She was. He was also looking at her like she was doddering, though, a dowager seeing monsters in shadows, and for that almost slapped him across the face. Her fingers itched with the impulse, though she pushed it down.

"There are *other* things out there," the Saint sharply replied. "And they are looking at us. Prepare for trouble, Sorcerer."

The weight of the attention placed on them did not waver even after she revealed her knowledge of it. It might be that the watchers were not hostile, she acknowledged. It might also be that they were either powerful or ignorant enough to be unmoved at the prospect of two heroes' wroth. Whatever the truth, they would not learn it by hesitation or idleness. Taking the lead,

Laurence quickened her steps as they approached the final stretch separating them from the shadowed silhouette of the throne room. The Saint bared her sword, for anything that would be offended by such a gesture already meant to be a foe. Sharp eyes picked out the watchers, and what Laurence found did not please her. There were dozens, though each stood alone as some sort of sinister of honour guard around the the Hierophant's prison-sanctum. Only one was seated, halfway up the steps leading to the gates. It was in the shape of a man, though its hair was too unnaturally dark and its lips too unsettlingly red to truly be one. It was like looking at a story made flesh, Laurence thought. Raven-haired and red like blood, something pretending it was made of flesh with a mocking smile and one eye covered by pretty dark silk cloth. On its lap there was a sword, and the thing was sharpening it patiently with a whetstone. One languid stroke at a time, the sound of it a rasp in the strange silence of this place.

Laurence knew a thing or two of swords, and that one had no need for sharpening at all.

"I bid you welcome, Chosen," the thing said. "You are awaited."

The Saint spat to the side.

"Been skulking about, have you?" she said. "And turned out about as useful as a wings on a trout."

"Saint," Roland softly hissed, having caught up to her. "We greet you in peace, Huntsman."

The old thing glanced at the boy approvingly.

"Your kind were a mannerly people, once upon a time," it said. "It is pleasing to know some of those ways remain. In the manner you have greeted me you may leave, to seek your fate beyond me."

"My thanks," the Rogue Sorcerer said.

"What's inside?" Laurence asked, meeting the faerie's eye.

She glimpsed something like darkness in there, hungry and old, but she bared her teeth and it found no purchase in her soul. The Saint spat to the side again.

"I asked you a question, scavenger," she said.

"The king of pins," the faerie laughed. "I see you, cutter. Wounding and wounded, a rag in pale grasp. How much filth can you swallow before the stains no longer wash?"

Laurence snorted.

"I've had more ominous from street soothsayers," she replied. "If you want to earn a copper at least toss around a few fumes and powders."

Ignoring the creature's open displeasure she strode forward, making sure her tabard flapped in its face as she passed it. Roland hurried at her side after making apologies to the thing, but he was only a step behind when Laurence passed through the cracked-open bronze gates.

—

"It's killing him, isn't it?" Indrani quietly said.

The old man sucked in a breath, but after a moment shook his head.

"I expect he'll remain alive," the Pilgrim said. "Though there will little left of him save a broken mind in ruin of flesh."

It was difficult to look at him. Masego had thinned, back when he'd first gotten into the Observatory and entranced himself with his own work, but out on campaign afterwards he'd reclaimed back some of the weight. Enough it didn't look like he was being starved, anyway, though he'd been nothing like the plump man Indrani had first met years ago. Now that was lost, for he was little more than skin on bones with wildly overgrown dreadlocks. He must have eaten on occasion – mage or not he'd be dead by now otherwise – but not often, and he'd likely cheated hunger with spells. His sickly frame would have been bad enough by itself, but there was a river of sorcery coursing through him that was burning his body from the inside. Whatever it was the Dead King was doing, it was not gentle to her... to Masego.

"You need to get me through," Indrani said. "If I could reach him-"

"We've tried, Archer," the Pilgrim said, pointedly looking at her arm.

*It's just flesh*, Indrani angrily thought. The swirls of pure and lingering magic around Hierophant did not *immediately* breaking through a coating of Light, but it was a near thing. Indrani had tried to speed through anyway, though she'd had to pull back. If she'd stayed any longer she might have lost the entire arm, but as it was all she'd lost was some flesh. You couldn't even see bone, it was basically a scratch.

"So we try again," she replied. "Slap some more Light onto me, and I'll take a running leap."

"You'll lose more than a part of your arm," the old man calmly said.

"Yeah, so I was thinking," Indrani mused. "Keeping up the protection won't work, we saw that, but what if the moment it break you just start healing me instead?"

As long as she didn't lose anything essential, then it didn't matter in what state she arrived on the other side. Immediately around Zeze was safe, she'd Seen it and the Pilgrim agreed. It was just the outer shell that she needed to get through.

"You may very well die regardless," the Pilgrim bluntly said. "Neither of us has the means to breach this... defence without risking the Hierophant's life. I know it runs contrary to your nature, but it would be best if we waited for-"

"We might not have that long," Indrani interrupted in frustration. "It could be moments or hours, and there's no way to know."

Though the strange whistle of spinning sorcery almost covered it, she still heard the footsteps. She already had a longknife in hand when she came to face the fresh arrivals.

"Moments," the Saint of Swords grunted, striding in sword bared. "So stop whining. What's this, then?"

—

Tariq breathed out a sigh of threaded worry and relief. Young Indrani was very much at the end of her rope – there was no need of an aspect to tell him as much, though the confirmation was not without value – and expecting of Laurence sympathy for any in Below's service was not unlike expecting that very thing of a bared sword, which would be a delicate dance to lead. Laurence, however, possessed means that he did not. Where even the most delicate applications of Light whispered into his ears by the Ophanim had failed, her sword would not. He suspected the Archer would forgive a great many things if they came accompanied by the safeguarding of the Hierophant.

"Laurence," he greeted.

It was no happenstance his tone was pitched just high enough to cut through the beginning of young Indrani's no doubt less than diplomatic reply.

"We are in need of your expertise, and perhaps Roland's," Tariq said. "It appears the Dead King is using the Hierophant for sinister purposes, and has made reaching him difficult."

"You want me to cut something," Laurence bluntly said.

He'd known her long enough to detect the amusement twined to the bluntness, though he doubted anyone else here had.

"In that art you have few rivals," he said, and immediately realized he'd made a mistake.

Mentioning the Lady of the Lake would only remind the Saint was lending a hand to the most prized pupil of that hated foe.

"Can you cut through that?" Archer asked.

She gestured towards the whirling sorcery. Though he'd been ready to step in and smooth the rough edges before the situation... deteriorated, flicked glances at both told him there was no need to.

"Could your teacher?" Saint casually asked.

What he beheld told him behind the nonchalance was a burn that'd dwelled in her belly for more than forty years, and having closed the wound over it with his own fingers and Light he could not find it in him to reprimand her for it. There were some things that couldn't be forgiven without losing part of who you were, and the open belly had been the least of the wounds the Ranger had inflicted on Laurence that day.

"I'm not sure," young Indrani admitted. "It's just wild magic, so there's no... principle to it."

The older woman's smiled was darkly pleased.

"It'll flow back," Saint said. "But I'll carve you a way through."

"Good," young Indrani nodded decisively. "Let's finish this, then."

"And you attempt does not succeed?" Tariq calmly asked.

"It will," Archer growled.

"Watch your mouth, girl," Laurence harshly said. "It's a sensible question. If it doesn't work, best way might be to kill him."

The Archer had blades in hand before the sentence was over.

"Peace," Tariq said. "Saint does not mean for him to remain so."

The ochre-skinned villain looked at him with narrowed eyed.

"Your resurrection trick, it works with villains too?"

The Grey Pilgrim was slightly pained to hear described the act through which he came closest to feeling the will of the Gods Above as 'your resurrection trick', yet he smoothed that away. No one would had not done the same could truly understand the nature of the act.

"It does," Tariq said. "As Laurence well knows. I am not, however, certain it would succeed with the Hierophant."

It was not only young Indrani that looked him askance at that. Laurence was not deeply schooled in the ways of his gift of forgiveness, for there had never been a need. Even now he would rather keep silence over it, for it touched upon the sacred, yet silence would now cost more than speech.

"His body might be too thoroughly ruined already," the Peregrine admitted. "I could breathe back life into him only for Hierophant to die again within moments. If the wound were of a different nature I would not hesitate, but if they were inflicted by his own magic. . . "

Wound inflicted by a foe would be one matter, easily dealt with. A wound inflicted by oneself, even under duress, was a thornier issue. There could be no guarantees, and he was inclined to believe it would fail. The Gods Above observed the order they had created, as did all the boons they bestowed. He could not Forgive a disease borne of one's own body, old age or the insidious manners of destruction that years of sickness or poison could inflict. Deaths unnatural, those could be forgiven for they went against the meanings of Above. The Hierophant's malady was not so clear-cut that Tariq could promise a return if the boy was slain. If he could be freed whilst still living, of course, that would be a different story. It was always much easier to stoke the last flame of life back to a blaze than to light it anew from spent ashes.

"It's his magic killing him, isn't it?" Roland hesitantly said.

"More or less," Archer said, brow furrowing as she studied the hero.

It must not be far from her mind, Tariq thought, that at the Battle of the Camps all three of them had stood on the opposite side of the field from her.

"I could take it," the Rogue Sorcerer admitted. "His sorcery. That would save his life at least."

In the breath that followed, both Archer and Saint refused and they each eyed the other with displeasure for it.

"I appreciate it, Rogue," Indrani said, and it was genuine. "But taking his magic might kill him in a whole other way, if you know what I mean."

"Are you an idiot, boy?" Laurence harshly said. "You want to take sorcery currently in the hands of the *Dead King*? Are you really that eager to be hollowed out and made into a Revenant?"

A valid concern, Tariq silently acknowledged.

"Roland," he said . "What you take, can you return?"

"I've never tried," the young man admitted. "I do not confiscate without reason. I suspect not, to be honest, but it is not impossible."

"Tariq," Laurence sharply said.

He met her eyes and inclined his head to the side. They had worked together a great many years, the two of them. She should know by now he would not dismiss the concern she'd expressed. After a moment, her face tightened and she looked at the Rogue Sorcerer with considering eyes.

"It's a risk," she spoke without looking at him.

"It is the Hidden Horror," Tariq said. "Can there be anything else?"

—

Laurence chewed on her lip. He wouldn't try go through with this, she knew, unless she assented. Could she do it, if the worse came to pass? Oh, if it worked the victory would be more than merely sweet. But if it didn't, she could be permanently crippling a promising young Chosen. If she'd been fresh, then... No, that was false thinking. It made no difference, whether she was tired or not. The issue was of *capacity*. And there was not, in the end, a single thing in Creation that Laurence de Montfort could not cut.

"A measured risk," she said, and it was concession.

Tariq nodded, lowering his wispy head of hear.

"Archer," he said. "Given choice between the confiscation of his sorcery and death, would you not agree that confiscation is preferable for Hierophant?"

The vicious girl glared, more at the situation than anyone in particular. Laurence could almost sympathize. It'd been a long night for all of them, wicked and righteous both.

"It's not impossible for him to get the magic back, right?" the Ranger's pupil said, looking at Roland.

"I don't know," the Rogue Sorcerer admitted. "But I would do my utmost to return it, that much I can swear."

"Fuck," the Archer said. "All right, worst case if Cat doesn't get here we can go down that road. Won't matter, anyway. Saint, carve me a path would you?"

Laurence looked at the child the Ranger had so fondly raised. She saw there the same indolent pride and skill, only without the weight of centuries behind it.

"Say please," the Saint of Swords said.

"Please," the villain replied without missing a beat.

Laurence's fingers clenched. Oddly enough, she felt more cheated by how easily the girl had said than she would have if the Archer had never said it at all. Sword in hand, the Saint tread across the carved floor and came to stand by the edge of the sorcerous whirls. She adjusted her stance, weighing her sword in her hand.

"Archer?" she said.

"Ready," the girl replied.

"*Now*," she hissed, and struck.

Her will cut where her sword could not, and it was enough to disperse sorcery. Long enough for the Archer to race across the opening. The girl grinned triumphantly as she slid before the Hierophant, laughing, and then-

"Pesh."

– the seemingly-entrance boy lazily raised a hand, sorcery flickered and Archer's brains splattered the floor.

"Now that I have your attention," the Dead King spoke through the Hierophant's mouth. "That was your single resurrection, I believe. Do not attempt to meddle again, lest your losses expand beyond the recoverable."

—

Masego was half-asleep, for not even the painful squeeze of the hand on his shoulder could keep him entirely awake anymore. Almost dreaming, he drifted in and out of consciousness. The sights still came, but he could feel they were nearing the end. They were slower now, like they had to reach deeper for less.

"How mundane," a voice spoke close to him. "How *petty*. I expected better of you, Intercessor. This is... beneath us."

"Oh, Nessie," a woman's voice fondly said. "You should know by now the house always wins."

It was a jolt to his consciousness. Masego's not-eyed fluttered open. Though this surroundings were still hazy, what had been lulling him into slumber had drawn back. There were two people here with him. One stood behind the sorcerer, and had a hand on his shoulder. He was the Dead King, an enemy. And in front of him a woman. Slender, dark-haired, much too pale to be Catherine. He could not make out everything about her, but there was a silver flask in her hand and she was drinking from it.

"You believe I cannot see your little scheme?" the Dead King said. "The thief and the cutter, to lessen me for every year to come. I need not witness your plans to see that. It is an acceptable trade, for I now know the lay of you."

"That's getting a bit ahead of yourself, innit?" the woman chuckled.

"I know," the Dead King said. "And now that I do, I need not lift a finger. I'll tell them, Intercessor, and *every last one will turn on you*."

"Yeah, see, that's the part where you're getting ahead," the woman drawled. "You knowing. The little shard of you in poor ol' Zeze knows, but *you*-you? That's a different story."

"You failed," the Dead King said. "The Tyrant spread into the souls, yes, but the Black Queen contains him. I will still have room enough to pass what I know."

"Do you?" the Wandering Bard grinned.

Masego saw her perfectly then. He saw, too, the blood and brains on the floor and the woman they belonged to.

"Dead King," Hierophant roared. "You did this."

The Wandering Bard raised her flask in a toast.

"Always," she smiled, "wins."

# Interlude: Reverberation

> "At which point Lord Bujune and Lady Rania both accused the other of being the Emperor in disguise, and the meeting devolved into protracted argument until the final quarter hour had passed."
>
> Extract from the minutes of the fourth meeting of the Red Fox Conspiracy, as taken by the stenographer Shamna Mehere (later revealed to have been Dread Emperor Traitorous all along

"She is not permanently dead."

Hierophant caught the withdrawing hand by the wrist. This was, he knew, mere symbolic slant: a way for his feeble mortal mind to interpret a complex interplay of forces it could not truly understand even as it used them. The Dead King was not truly standing behind him. The Wandering Bard had not stood in front, either, smiling like a well-fed cat. And so when he squeezed the wrist of Trismegistus until the bones *broke*, it was not the strength of his grip that mattered. Only that of his mind.

"Listen to me," the Dead King said. "The Pilgrim can still resurrect her. If I do not intervene. Do not make me intervene."

"Can you?" Masego asked, cocking his head to the side.

His sorcery, usurpation usurped, rose without his bidding. Like a spear being formed from a dozen threads of magic. It was not, Hierophant noted, the formula that would make a Revenant. But it might be that turning Indrani into such a manner of undead would interfere with Above's work, so it was not to be tolerated. *If you can't defend*, he remembered Catherine once telling him, *attack so your enemy has to.* And so Masego did not pit his will against the Hidden Horror's simply weaving spell with his own hands and striking at the Dead King's presence.

Power met power, a stalemate of an instant, and then the Hierophant truly went on the offensive.

—

Three heartbeats had passed.

On the first, young Indrani had died. With cold nonchalance the Dead King had raised his hand, spoken a word and sent out a flickering spike of void too swift for even the Pilgrim's eye to follow. It had ripped through the Archer's forehead, the flesh not wounded or even vaporized so much as... unmade.

Gone. The sorcery around the flesh was so strongly concentrated it obscured even his sight. The warning that began to be spoken after through the mouth of the imprisoned Hierophant, Tariq cared little for. He'd heard many of those before and might yet hear more – threats presented as a warning, fear spoken calmly as if that simple veneer changed the nature of what was being said.

On the second heartbeat Laurence, taken aback yet not beyond action, had darted forward to catch Indrani's corpse by the back of the cloak. To drag it out of the way of the returning sorcery the Saint had parted with a blow of her sword, lest the Archer's body be mangled by the wild and whirling magic. Roland finished the last syllable of the incantation he'd begun, protective panes of translucent sorcery forming around Indrani's body. Too late to be of use even presuming they would have held, which the Pilgrim doubted. Tariq did need to look at the young man's face to know it had gone ashen, burning guilt flaring at the thought of having been too slow. A loss tied to deeper fears, fears that Tariq could do nothing to soothe away. To meddle too much in the conflict that lay at the heart of Bestowal was a danger to all involved, he'd learned the hard way.

On the third heartbeat, young Indrani's corpse was unceremoniously tossed out of the way by Laurence, sliding across the rune-covered tiles and leaving behind a trail of wet blood. The shield around it winked out, Roland having dismissed the working with a clenched hand, and the other two heroes turned to the possessed warlock with hard eyes. Saint with the intent to cut, either the boy or the infestation. The Sorcerer with guilt-threaded determination, intent on confiscating the sorcery as he no doubt told himself he should have done from the start. It was these implacable twinges of conscience that always reassured Tariq the young man was in no danger of falling into Below's embrace. Willingly, anyway.

"- expand beyond the recoverable."

"Hold," the Peregrine said.

He had not raised his voice. It resonated anyway, and the other two stilled. The Hierophant's body half-rose, sorcery flaring, but then it fell back down and his power seething uneasily.

"The boy's fighting it," Laurence said, tone holding the barest hint of respect.

It was the closest to praise she'd ever come when mentioning any of the Woe. Tariq gazed down at the corpse of the vivacious young woman he'd spoken with, and for an instant wondered at coincidence. That she would take such a risk unflinching, knowing that the opponent was the Hidden Horror. That it would be young Indrani he was partnered with heading into the deeps, as if to make it certain he'd know what was lost should he stay his hand. *How far ahead did you see, Catherine Foundling?* How deep did the Black Queen's cunning truly run? It did not matter, the Pilgrim told himself. Not so long as it was turned against their enemy, against *the* Enemy.

"There will be an opening," Tariq said, tone calm and patient and unrelenting. "And when it appears, we will strike at the Dead King with our wroth entire."

The Hierophant, empowered by his affections and the death of one beloved, would throw off the Abomination's yoke for a moment. It would be enough for the rest of them to... A shiver went through the room, through this warped place, and as if tugged by strings the fabric of it began to pull inwards. Towards the Hierophant. Like silver mist, the souls of hundreds of thousands slithered through the open bronze gates and burrowed into the blind warlock's thin frame. Villain, the Pilgrim remembered then. The Woe were, for all the kind intentions of their leader, still *villains*.

And their kind did not get clean victories, even against each other.

—

"You are being made use of by the Intercessor," the Dead King said. "To your own detriment and that of your mistress."

"I do not have a mistress," Masego said. "In any sense of the term of which I am aware."

The bindings he'd wrought while half-mad were, it had to be said, a work of art. The elegance of their structure was matched only by its strength, far beyond any working made by his hand he could recall. He suspected that Trismegistus might have whispered insights, though considering he was going to end the creature it was unlikely he'd ever know for certain. The souls poured into him, power accumulated at a breakneck rate, though never more than he could handle. He'd made certain of that, taking only the slightest portion before releasing the dead to the Underworld awaiting them. It made the rate of accumulation easier to control, and to his understanding remained legal under Callowan law. It might be necessary, Masego mused, to secure some sort of permit for such future ventures. He would consult Adjutant on the subject.

"I know what she plans, Hierophant," the Dead King said. "And it would destroy all you hold dear."

Though the warning seemed well-intended, Trismegistus simultaneously attempted to seize enough sorcery to sever himself from Hierophant in what was likely an attempt to flee. Masego, without batting an eye, released all that Trismegistus would wield unshaped. Wild. Dimly, he noted that it appeared his shoulder now had a smoking hole in it. The physical one, anyway.

"You are dying," the Dead King said.

"That has been true since my birth," Masego reasonably pointed out.

"Your attempts to hinder my escape are killing you," Trismegistus said.

"That is true," Hierophant agreed. "Though I expect they'll annihilate you first, at which point I will cease and survive while you remain annihilated."

Ah, Masego thought, slightly worried. Was this a monologue? He'd been warned against those by several people.

"Given such a premise, what reason do I have not to kill us both?" the Dead King said.

"Nothing," Hierophant acknowledged. "You simply lack the ability-"

He paused, looking for something suitably pithy to add. Insults were pithy, he vaguely remembered quite a few of his friends using them.

"- you *Jaquinite*," he scathingly added.

—

"Tariq," Laurence hissed. "What the Hells is happening?"

The torrent of souls was streaming around the Grey Pilgrim without ever touching him, as if the dead were shying away from the Choir ever holding vigil over the soul of the Peregrine, but the rest of them didn't have a pack of winged guardians to rely on. She'd put her sword through the floor and anchored herself to that, but inch by inch she was being dragged towards the Hierophant by the sheer quantity of dead souls pushing against her. Through the mess she could see Roland huddling under roiling tongues of light, pressed against the ground. His protective spell was being battered down, moment by moment.

"The Hierophant is gathering and then releasing the dead," Tariq said, calm voice carrying perfectly through the whistling sound of flowing souls. "Massing strength for a crippling blow at the Hidden Horror."

"And what happens if we're drawn into that?" Laurence yelled.

She did not gesture at the maddened sorcerer, as she might very well fall into the current if she took a hand off her sword. Already her blade was being pushed back through the stone, her boots slowly sliding with it.

"Death, presumably," the Peregrine said, then paused as if speaking to the unseen. "Definitely death, Laurence, I retract the presumption."

You'd think the fucking Ophanim would bother to serve as more than some kind of almanac of dire ends, wouldn't you? But Mercy was all about the soft touch, way she understood it, so unlike one of Judgement's Chosen her old friend couldn't simply call down attention and have this entire black mess smote into smoking ruin.

"*Do* something then," she screamed.

"That won't be necessary," Tariq said. "It's been long enough. If the souls are in here, Saint, then out there what is left to fight over?"

Now wasn't the time for bloody riddles, she thought, but then there was thunderous sound above and the room's ceiling dented. Solid stone. A heartbeat later the dent became an explosion of shards and shape fell through. It was a throne, Saint saw, though acid seemed to have eaten away large chunks of it. The ceiling shook once more, though a stunted silhouette tumbled through the hole. The Tyrant of Helike, Laurence saw, was being carried by gargoyles holding his robe and had a visibly worsening black eye. He looked up, slightly worried, though he rallied quick.

"It's not what you think, Catherine," the Tyrant called out. "I swear. I didn't betray you to the Dead King again. Why, I'd *never*."

There was a beat.

"I betrayed you to someone else entirely," Kairos Theodosian proudly announced.

The gargoyles had to draw him back when a crumpled sword fell through where he'd come, and Laurence half-expected the Black Queen to follow through – only, instead, tendrils of darkness tore through half the ceiling and ripped it out like some gargantuan monster. Above them, the hood of her many-coloured cloak raised and two large crows perched on her shoulders, Catherine Foundling coldly glared downwards from the edge of the roof. Gargoyles began raining down, mangled and seemingly half-devoured.

It'd been a while, Laurence thought, since she'd seen the Black Queen really lose her temper.

—

"You are not in love with her," the Dead King said, sounding irritated. "With resurrection assured by the Pilgrim, unrequited affection should not have been sufficient. Not even with her meddling."

Hierophant spared an irritated thought for Trismegistus as well, irked by the presumption of that. As if a cursory reading of his memories would be enough to understand the sum of him – one did not master a grimoire by skimming it. While Papa had not been able to understand, not truly, for it was against the nature of an incubus to be as he was, his other father had seen in Masego similarities to what he'd once seen in his uncle. Enough to suggest a conversation. *Not every kind of love involves bedplay or poetry*, Uncle Amadeus had told him. *You can crave closeness with someone without craving them in other ways. Sometimes it just... fits. The intensity of it can be misleading, but you will learn.* Still, it would not do to monologue again by informing his enemy of such nuances. Where before the Dead King had fought him over the gathering power, now instead his opponent was allowing him to shape it while gathering his own will. They would clash, Masego thought, over control of that last working. Yet for all that the other mage was his superior in learning and skill, he had the advantage. It was to him the bindings had been attached, his hands that had released them and his will that was giving the power shape. It would be a struggle, but his victory was likely.

"It seems I will have to surrender to you," Trismegistus said.

"I refuse," Masego said.

"You refuse the millennia of knowledge I could offer, along with secrets that would allow the Black Queen to end the Bard's schemes?"

"Yes," he said.

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"Catherine is already going to be very angry," Masego pragmatically said. "And it'll be worse if I dissect your shard after finding a way to torture you, I think. So I'll wait to take your secrets until we attack Keter and destroy your heart."

Another heartbeat passed.

"I think I'll make this painful, though," Hierophant pensively frowned.

His hand still itched, when he thought of the red splattered on the floor and Indrani's body falling.

"You overestimate yourself," the Dead King warned.

"Your secondary runic escapement patterns were subpar," Masego scathingly said.

He was getting rather good at this pithy banter stuff, Hierophant mused.

—

"Now," the Tyrant of Helike said, "there are some among you who might be considering killing me."

The boy did not lack courage, Tariq mused, though in truth it might be more accurate to call it a disregard for consequences. The Black Queen's entrance had been appropriately eye-catching, a display of the power of this 'Night' she had acquired the right to wield. The two monstrous old things perched on her shoulders had no qualms in lending their power, now that the Hidden Horror was busied wrestling wills with the Hierophant, which meant that Kairos Theodosian had found his every advantage stripped away in a matter of moments. Artefacts shattered, gargoyles torn through, and the souls amongst which he might have sought to hide were either tithed and released by the Hierophant or cowed into retreat by the hungry gaze of these *Sve Noc*. Now the Tyrant of Helike was stumbling back as the Black Queen limped towards him, her staff hitting the carved floor like punctuation. The Grey Pilgrim felt no inclination to intervene in this, for Kairos Theodosian had been the architect of a great many unnecessary deaths.

"But before we get to that," the Tyrant chuckled. "I need to expound on why and to who I betrayed you."

The Black Queen did not bother to reply, simply raising her sinister black wooden staff and aiming it at him.

"It was to the Wandering Bard," the odd-eyed boy said. "And I did it for a pardon!"

"Should have held out for an escape route," Catherine Foundling drily replied, and Night gathered at the tip of her staff.

"Tariq," the Tyrant called out. "You still have the pillow you used that night. That's what she told me to say as proof."

The Grey Pilgrim flinched.

"Wait," he croaked out.

"Oh, Bard," Theodosian murmured with a vicious smile. "You never disappoint."

"Pilgrim?" the Black Queen said, turning impatient eye to him.

"I've only ever told one person that," Tariq admitted.

Not even Laurence knew that the pillow that'd been the death of Izil... He'd needed the reminder, he'd decided that night, so that never again would her ignore portents until it was too late.

"And why do I care in the slightest if the Bard has promised him anything?" Catherine Foundling bluntly asked. "To be honest I want to kill him twice as much now."

"Because she would not make that promise without reason," the Pilgrim said. "And I trust her discernment in such matters."

"I don't," the Black Queen said. "I've seen her get up to some pretty shady shit, Pilgrim. And not all of it serving Above, either."

"It might have seemed that way," Tariq delicately said. "But I assure you-"

"When this is over, we're going to talk about the Wandering Bard," the Queen of Callow grunted. "But fine, Kairos bargained for the lot of you to spare him. Hold to that. I'll tie up the loose ends for you – just close your eyes and count to five."

"We are not fae, to muddle through on exact wording," Tariq sharply said.

"Tariq, allow me to be perfectly clear," the Black Queen said. "There is no way in the fucking Hells that I'll consider the word of the *Wandering Bard* to be binding to me because you and I are on the same side."

"She makes a good point, Tariq," the Tyrant of Helike solemnly said. "I hate to say it, but it seems you might be losing this argument."

The Peregrine grit his teeth.

"I will count it favour," he said, "if you withhold your hand now."

The Queen of Callow eyed him silently, considering.

"Same terms as our last bargain," she said. "Should the other condition fail to happen."

The old man breathed out. She was doing him a kindness, here. The Black Queen could have demanded much steeper price, or even kept the favour hanging above his head.

"Then you have my thanks," Tariq said, dipping his head. "For both this and your restraint."

"I am deeply pleased to be returning to the fold," the Tyrant of Helike grinned. "Why, it's almost like I never-"

The sudden pulse of sorcery caught them all by surprise. The Hierophant rose from his throne, gasping a breath, and the Grey Pilgrim beheld the rotten orb that was the Dead King's hold being torn out of him. It still held by threads, and was slowly its way back into the villain's soul, but if they acted now. Laurence was already moving, the Black Queen dismissed the power at the end of her staff and began shaping Night anew. Roland was halfway through a spell, but quickest among them would be Tariq. Until his eye caught a slender, dark-haired woman leaning against the wall. In the blind angle of everyone save him. Though she held her usual silver flask in one hand, she was not drinking. It was the other hand that drew his attention, wagging a finger disapprovingly. *One, two, three*, she counted out and only then mouthed *now*. The Pilgrim struck out with Light, just as Saint began to carve away at the Dead King's rot, but the Hierophant only screamed.

—

Trismegistus leaned over Masego's shoulder looking into the distance.

"Did I not tell you?" the Dead King said. "You overestimate yourself. To be rid of me there will be a price."

And though the Hidden Horror's hold was ripped out of him, it did not go alone. For the all the power and sorcery the Hierophant had been holding vanished into smoke, and there was not a single piece of it left.

Masego reached for his magic, and found nothing at all.

—

There were exactly two things within It: instructions, and a secret witnessed through another's eyes. It waited inside the corpse, and only slithered away under cover of the souls when all Foes were distracted. It crawled and crawled and crawled, as instructed, until it reached the edge of a cliff and fell. Far, far below a large creature opened its mouth. The Skein swallowed whole the animated shard of sorcery, and in the moment that followed fell apart in a shower of dust.

—

Far away, as the slightest shaving of the shard no doubt destroyed by now returned to him, the King of Death laughed. Seven hundred and thirty-three years, crafting the spell he'd used in his mind without a single word or line of it to be found by the opposition. And the loss of the shard would lessen him forevermore, impossible to recover – though without it, how could his defeat possibly have been believed by the Intercessor? All of it a contingency, for it had been victory he sought, but for centuries he had watched his old friend make a friend of plans he'd thought flawless. Neshamah said nothing at all, for it would be a warning if he did, but alone in the dark he softly laughed.

This once, it seemed the house had lost.

# Chapter 46

# Abdication

> "One hundred and two: defeat is inevitable, yet it can be just as useful as a victory. Fate assures you at least one loss, so make sure it's the right kind."
>
> "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

We'd won, so naturally in the heartbeat that followed it all went to shit. Masego stumbled down his throne with gasping breaths, fingers blindly clawing at the rune-carve stone. He'd always been tall, but never before had I seen him so *thin* – it made him look spindly, like some long-legged insect in ragged black robes. The sorcery that'd been hanging heavy in the air was gone now, like some great gust of wind had blown it out, and I suspected that whatever it was that'd achieved that was the same thing that had Masego's limbs trembling. Heaving, he began to puke and I had to restrain myself from going to him after taking a unthinking step forward. It'd have to wait just a little longer, graceless as that truth was. Before the rest I needed to be sure that I wasn't going to be asked to make an ugly choice between two people I dearly loved.

"Pilgrim," I said. "What ails him, does it threaten his life?"

Even if the man did not know, the Ophanim would.

"Only if not attended to," the Peregrine said after a moment. "The fever will rise and his body will weaken: it will take weeks if not months of recovery."

"Then raise Archer, if you would," I said.

I'd phrased it politely but we both knew it for the order it was. Wordlessly, the Sisters left my shoulders

"We don't raise the dead, Foundling," the Saint sharply said.

"Resurrect, then," I replied, rolling my eyes.

I met Tariq's stare and slowly he inclined his head in agreement. I wondered if I was right in guessing he'd not immediately brought Indrani back because he'd thought Masego might yet die and that, in the war on the Dead King, the Hierophant would be more useful than the Archer. I set aside the thought, for there was nothing to gain from pursuing it. Even if he'd been

thinking that way the colder part of me had to acknowledge that it might not be a bad thing at least one of us had been. I was too close to this, to them, to be able to genuinely do the same. Leaving the Grey Pilgrim to the business of overturning death, I hurried to the still-crawling Hierophant. By the looks of it there hadn't been much in his stomach, which no doubt made the heaves worse as the body stubbornly tried to spew out something that wasn't there. His glass-crafted eyes moved wildly beneath the eyecloth, but he did not seem completely blind. I knelt in front of him, swallowing a pained wince, and made sure he saw me before further approaching.

"Masego," I softly said. "It's me? Do you recognize me?"

"Catherine," he croaked. "It's gone."

"I know," I softly agreed. "We all saw you push the Dead King out. We struck at it together."

I caught his shoulder and, shivering at the weight it put on my bad leg, tipped him back so he was leaning against me instead of half-sprawled over the floor.

"Here we go," I said. "I'm going to get the vomit off you, Masego, is that all right?"

"Not the Dead King," he rasped. "It's all gone, Catherine. My *magic*."

I stiffened at the announcement. I wished he'd spoken in a softer tone, so that the heroes – and Kairos, who'd remained dangerously silent through all of this – would not have heard him. As they most definitely just had. I immediately rebuked myself for the thought, for he was in no state to consider such matters. *Are you sure*, that pointed little question, held on the tip of my tongue for a heartbeat before I buried it. It'd only insult him: he wouldn't be this devastated if he wasn't sure.

"It'll be all right," I whispered. "We'll fix it. There's always a way, Masego. Always."

A lie, I thought, but one I would have wanted to be told in his place. He'd be able to speak to this more clearly when he'd rested and recovered, and when he did he'd have Akua to help and the knowledge of Sve Noc to look through. If there was a path to be had, we would find it.

"I feel warm," he said. "Fever. My teeth hurt. *I can't fix it*."

Sickly as he was, Masego was larger and heavier than me – I had to draw on Night to subdue him without hurting him, his sudden violent flailing taking me by surprise. Shit. I'd wanted him awake for the last stretch of this but he was going a bad way. Weaving a long thread of Night as gently as I could, I pressed my thumb against his forehead and let the working gently tug him into slumber. His thrashing subsided until it was little more than twitches and I let out a shaky breath of my own. All right. It looked bad, but once we got back to camp it could be fixed. We had mages and priests and I was owed by the foremost hero on Calernia, a man who had an in with a Choir. He'd come out of this all right, and then we could see about clawing back his magic from our enemy. Breathe in, breathe out. There was no place for weakness in me

when the Tyrant and the Saint were looking. I unclasped the Mantle of Woe and bunched it together, sliding it under Masego's head so he wouldn't scrape it against the runes. I rose back to my feet, leaning against my staff.

"Touching," the Tyrant of Helike drawled. "I do not jest, Catherine, it was truly-"

"There's a general that's been with you from the start," I said, meeting his gaze. "Basilia, is it?"

"Are you threatening me?" Kairos asked, sounding amused.

"Finish that sentence," I said, "and you'll find out."

Whatever might have followed that was to remain unspoken, for with a gasp Indrani returned to the land of the living. I limped past the Tyrant, making my way to her side. Tariq had put her on her back before digging into his aspect, and now miraculously enough there was no trace of the hole that'd been blow through her head save for dried blood over her face. The Saint was gazing down at her with a sneer when I arrived, while the Pilgrim gently asked her to cease moving so the Light could heal the last of her scrapes. Indrani's hazelnut eyes swam into focus when I arrived, first staying on me and then moving to the other two heroes by her 'bedside'. Leaning to the side, Archer spat out a little mucus and wiped her lips.

"Cat's always been fine and I can be sold on the Saint – gotta love a girl who knows her way around a sword," she drawled. "But a *priest* too? Gods, there can't have been that much liquor in the city."

In a moment of quicksilver surprise, I saw the Saint of Swords looking like someone had just personally pissed in her morning porridge and the Grey Pilgrim looked utterly, wickedly delighted before I had to cover my mouth with a hand lest I burst out laughing.

"I wasn't always a priest, I'll gave you know," the Peregrine sanguinely replied. "As a young man I once even attempted to become one of the Hidden Poets."

"They of the seventy-eight methods of carnal love?" Indrani asked, sounding somewhat intrigued.

"Indeed," he agreed. "Alas, my kamil declamations were judged unworthy and so I took an interest in healing instead."

"You look rather spry, for a dead woman," I said.

I looked at her searchingly even as I spoke, looking for a flinch or darkening of mien that would have given away a shadow cast on her soul. Resurrection was too great a boon to come without a cost, in my eyes, though that did not mean that price would be paid immediately. Yet I found nothing and so offered up my hand to cover my surprise. Indrani took it, and with a grunt I dragged her up.

"Well," Archer said, "I did get to take a nap. I'm all refreshed now."

*I* almost winced at that. I'd not seen her die, but the sight of her head missing a chunk was going to haunt my nights for a few months to come. Indrani's eyes moved to the sleeping form of Masego, lingering on the rise and fall of his

chest. The twitched were already rarer, but still I caught his leg in a spasm as he turned and a moan escaped his lips.

"What happened?" she quietly asked. "I know how I..."

She hesitated there, and I found an almost troubled look on her face when I looked. Not entirely without marks, then. I reached for her shoulder, but she shook it away.

"We knew it was a possibility," she said, tone grown firm. "But it should have shaken him out of the Dead King's hold. What went wrong?"

"Your little friend pushed out the Hidden Horror," the Saint of Swords said, approaching. "Long enough for us to help strike him down."

"When the shard of the Dead King ruling over the Hierophant was destroyed, it took his magic with it," the Rogue Sorcerer said.

Both the Pilgrim and the Saint shot a look at him, and he dipped his head as if to confirm something.

"Roland?" I asked.

"It is part of my Choosing to know when there is sorcery to confiscate," the hero told me, face grim. "There is none left in the Hierophant."

"Shit," Indrani murmured. "That's going to leave scars even if we fix it."

"Which we will," I meaningfully said.

Indrani questioningly glanced at my neck, more specifically the height where my cloak's collar would usually be.

"If anyone can," I agreed. "Otherwise, well, praise the Night and we'll figure something out."

"Crows might know something, yeah," Archer said. "They're basically magpies only with, you know..."

She gestured vaguely, trying to get across the concept of godhood. Something that had eluded the finest mages and theologians of the continent for millennia.

"That's heresy," I piously said.

Komena cawed in the distance, unamused by the way I hadn't entirely disagreed in my own thoughts.

"See, you've angered the gods," I said.

After the hellish, riotous night we'd gone through – and which had yet to end – trading barbs with Indrani like this was like a balm for the soul. The rest of the band had been looking on with various degrees of amusement and impatience, which was fair. Most of us were allies of convenience, if even that. I cleared my throat, Archer falling in at my left like it was the most natural thing in the world. I found strength in that where earlier I'd begun to find mostly exhaustion.

"The five of us have made it to the journey's end," I said. "And so now we bring about an ending."

"This where you reveal the last crown?" Laurence de Montfort bluntly asked. "Overdue."

"I'll confess to some curiosity as well," the Rogue Sorcerer said.

There was a moment of silence, a courtesy I was offering to the man in question – the opportunity to speak himself, if he preferred it that way.

"It will be mine," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Though the Dominion of Levant has no kings, I was born to the bloodline that has ruled it since its founding."

The Saint spat to the side.

"Funny how it's always us who ends up paying the butcher's bill tonight," she said. "Almost like it was planned that way."

I didn't answer that. It was true, at least in part, though I regretted nothing. For all that I'd scraped them raw, I'd made them fair offers and would deliver on all I had promised. As we'd begun the year deathly foes, I considered that far more generous treatment than was owed by the ways they'd dealt with me in the past.

"There can be no *us* and *them*, Laurence, if we are to survive the decade," the Pilgrim quietly said. "Not against the kind of foe we face. And it is no great loss, I assure you: I know better than most how ill-suited I would be to rule."

"Some would say merely knowing that would make you better ruler than most," the Saint replied.

I bit down on my tongue, because now was not the moment to express my strong opinion on the matter. Humility wasn't necessarily a bad thing in a king, but it was hardly a *qualification*. Ambition wasn't a flaw, it was the character trait behind most – no, now was not the time for that. Gods, was this my shatranj speech? Of all the damned habits I could have picked up.

"Oh, please *do* have him elected Holy Seljun," the Tyrant grinned. "That would be delightful. We'll have to have his... great-great-nephew? Close enough, I think. We'll need to have the current Seljun assassinated first, that is my implication, but worry not. Mercantis offers very fair prices on poison these days."

"Must you, Tyrant?" the Rogue Sorcerer asked.

"It's simply getting a little too chummy in here for my tastes, if you'll forgive my language," Kairos cheerily replied. "As if most people in this room had not tried to kill each other at some point."

"Well," Indrani mused. "He's not wrong. Why is he alive, anyway?"

"He made a deal with the Wandering Bard," I said.

"That is the *opposite* of a reason to keep him alive," Archer pointed out.

"A courtesy was extended," I said, tone informing her the line of questioning was at an end.

"Hear that, Saint?" Indrani grinned. "We're being courteous to you. So maybe you try not being such a-"

"*Archer*," I hissed.

"-card," Indrani adjusted at the last moment, "I was definitely going to say card."

Kairos gasped, as if deeply shocked by her foul language.

"It will not be long before dawn rises," the Grey Pilgrim said, "even given the nature of this place. We must attend to the tasks ahead."

"Namely, to slay a god," the Rogue Sorcerer said.

That bought an aftermath of silence for a few beats. If he'd not been Proceran I would have assumed a pun, but given his origins my assumptions erred on the side of clemency.

"Unless you're holding out on us, Foundling, the odds are not skewed in our favour," the Saint of Swords bluntly said. "It would have been one thing with the warlock, but he's done. The five of us and your cheap Ranger imitation won't cut it."

"There were more than simply the Huntsman outside," Roland said. "The entire Wild Hunt was standing vigil around the room. We will be outnumbered."

"We won't be, my dear friend," the Tyrant of Helike said, "for the same reason that the Hierophant is nowhere to be found."

Three pairs of eyes sought Masego, and when they found nothing at all turned to me instead. Alas, without my cloak I'd been robbed of my pipe and wakeleaf. Hadn't thought that through properly, I mused.

"Did you think she wanted this done before dawn for the ambience?" Kairos Theodosian grinned. "Oh no. She wants the war ended before daylight scatters her little army of darkness."

"I've dealt with fae royalty before," I mildly said. "A story is the one blade they can't parry and that we earned, as our band of five. But you still need to sink in the knife and that means power. I've provided it."

Of which there would be no lack, before the coming of dawn. The Sisters were circling in the sky above, patient and slow, but the Mighty I'd sent for would have long ago made their way through the broken grounds of Liesse and reached this deeper palace. If the coming Court and my own side came to blow, as I expected they would, I would have warriors awaiting more than the match of a Wild Hunt reforged.

"You think our Larat's going to be a rougher ride than High Noon?" Indrani asked.

"If we let him get a grip, that seems likely," I grimly replied.

None of the others here had been part of our fight against Princess Sulia, the general of Summer's hosts and herald of its sun, so while the idle reference by Archer was not gibberish to them neither was it really *understood*. The Saint and the Pilgrim had faced villains and monsters I'd never known the likes of, but the fae were... different. Less and more dangerous at the same time. And Larat, once the Prince of Nightfall, had been all sorts of dangerous even before his service under my oaths had taken him across the breadth of Calernia. Fae couldn't learn, not the way mortals did. Their natures were static in the way our weren't. Yet I knew from experience that they could learn to... interpret themselves through different eyes, shaping themselves through oaths and stories. The Wild Hunt, while bound to me, had seen more of Creation than the rest of their likely had in centuries. I fully expected any Court they had a hand in making to be dangerous in ways that the ancestral forces of nature

that were Summer and Winter could scarcely have imagined. I breathed out, rolled my shoulders to limber them.

"Ready yourselves," I warned. "We begin."

I seized my staff and struck down at the ground, a thin wave of Night rippling out, and from that darkness I leaned down to snatch out the bag that held seven crowns. Without even needing to look, I knew that the fae had come. As I strode towards the throne on which Masego had sat, when in the throes of the Dead King's enchantments, from the corner of my eye I saw silhouettes standing atop the walls. In ripping out the ceiling, I had made of this throne room an arena of sorts – and in a silent circle above the Wild Hunt stood, eyes watchful. I emptied the sack at the bottom of the throne. An old crowb of ivory and gold, set with a great carved topaz. A straight-edged cavalry sword, wrapped in a cloak. An ornate longsword, specked with its dead owner's blood. A silver tiara, bitter surrender. A bloody knife, regicide absolved. A bare blade within a banner, and last of all two silver wings ripped in spite. A harvest of royalty that cast a shadow over a third of the greatest realm under Calernian sun. No small harvest, this. The Grey Pilgrim padded forward as I threw aside the empty sack, and with measured ceremony came to stand before the pile. The old man brusquely snapped his own staff over his knee, the old thing breaking like it'd been fragile as driftwood, and tossed it onto the pile. He whispered two words under his breath, though I caught only one: *izil*.

With that last addition the seven crowns and one I'd promised were offered, and so the creature I'd promised them to arrived. Larat drifted in from right, steps silent and smooth, long black hair trailing behind him. He near brushed against me as he passed, though it was not jostling – it was an acknowledgement of his presence. We were, I thought, long past the petty games of posturing other times might have brought.

"I had thought, my queen, that you might destroy me before the debt was paid," the fae amusedly said. "Or make of me something... tamed and hollowed."

His sole eye flicked a glance upwards, where two crows still circled.

"I am a woman of my word," I replied. "However terrible that word might be."

"So you are," Larat said, dipping his head. "Let all witness it, and Creation remember it."

He ran an almost loving finger against the stone of the throne before him, having fluidly stepped around the crowns that were his due. As I watched every last thing tossed onto the pile turned to ash, until naught was left but that, and under Larat's watchful gaze those ashes rose up. They spun once, twice, thrice, and with every spin they gathered more tightly into something being forged. A crown, I thought. It was made of grey chalcedony and mother-of-pearl, one twisted like threads and the other hanging in star-like spots, but something more eldritch leant both darkness and radiant lights to the shaping artefact. It

thickened, until the last touch was added – a distant radiant star, shining on the brow, stolen and set for the pleasure of the newborn Court.

"And so is born the Court of Twilight," the fae said. "Under the pilgrim's star, willingly given, and winding through the many realms of mortals wicked and righteous both. We tread the span of dusk and dawn, unhindered and unseen, watchers of boundaries and makers of secret ways. Let none think themselves our masters, for we are the children of the debt repaid and the tricks woven in death."

Pale fingers caught the crown and Larat softly laughed.

"I thank you, Sovereign Under the Night," he said. "Not for the bargain fulfilled, for that was as ordained, but for what you gave us all freely."

He'd not put on the crown, I thought. It had not yet begun.

"And what would that be?" I asked.

"We cannot learn as your kind do, Foundling Queen," Larat smiled. "But we can... mimic. That is our gift. And you have shown us a great many things. You taught us, my queen, the greatest trick of them all."

Larat, smiling, put on the crown.

"Hear my first decree, one and all, as Twilight's King," he laughed.

Larat, smiling, tossed it back down onto the throne.

"My crown I abdicate, and let the worthiest of you bear it."

# Chapter 47

# Tenet

> "You who would be mighty, seek excellence in all things, for the conquest of eternity must be earned with every breath."
>
> Extract from the 'Tenets Under Night', Firstborn religious text

Well, shit. I guessed you could always count on good ol' Larat to make a bad situation incredibly worse. And I wasn't the only one to realized that with a pithy gesture and a few words he'd dropped us all in the deep end, because the moment the fae who'd abdicated the Twilight Crown took a step away from the throne I had to speak up.

"Hold," I got out, and there was an echo.

Archer's longknife slowed a hair's breadth away from the hollow of Larat's throat, as did the Saint's longsword – though it'd not been me that Laurence was listening but the Pilgrim. Who had, thanks the Gods, enough of a finger on the pulse of this to recognize that killing the fae now would be a Very Bad Idea. High above us, Sve Noc lazily circled the sky. Yet another fire I was going to have to put out the moment I'd assessed the nature of this turnabout. I inclined my head in thanks at Tariq and shot Indrani a steady glance. Shrugging, she withdrew her blade and with an unnecessarily eye-catching spin she put it away. The Saint I left to the Pilgrim, eyes on the fae who'd been the Twilight King for the span of two sentences. Was he still, though? I wondered with a frown. Not king – the abdication might have been a trick, but not of that particular kind – but *fae*. There was a flush to his skin now, and while his long hair remained unearthly in its perfection it was no longer... unnatural.

"Larat," I said. "Look me in the eye."

Baring a smile of pearly white teeth, the one-eye creature met my gaze and my lips thinned in dismay. When I'd first met the Prince of Nightfall, a simple look in his eyes had sent me tumbling down into fear and darkness. A glimpse into his nature, forced by the matching of gaze. I'd learned to resist that pull, in later years, or at times simply been the greater monster of the two of us. I was not currently using any of those tricks, for there was no *need* to. Larat held

not a speck of power within him. And fae, Masego had once told me, were little more than power made flesh and shaped by stories. The inevitable conclusion of that sent a shiver up my spine.

"Do you even know," I softly asked, "what you've become?"

"Something... unprecedented," he said, smile broadening.

"And the rest of the Hunt?" I said.

One after another they leapt down, graceful and lithe. None of them bore titles that I could catch the scent of, be it the newborn regalia of Twilight or older and more vicious accoutrements.

"We claim nothing," Larat languidly replied, "save that we *are*."

"Fascinating," the Saint of Swords said. "You gonna feed them to your drow, or should I just go ahead and finish this? I've yet to hear a reason that smirking head should stay atop his shoulders."

"Because someone's going to have to put on that damned crown, now," I said, never looking away from Larat. "And while I can't say for sure what murdering the creature that first forged it would do exactly, I doubt it'll be particularly pleasant."

The former fae's lips twitched. Seed of madness in the crown was my guess, putting an original sin at the heart of what this realm would become. The clever fox had picked a path that meant we couldn't kill him without dropping a vial of poison in our own cup.

"There no longer are any oaths between us," I acknowledged. "All debts have been paid."

"So they have," Larat admitted. "Would you believe me if I said, my queen, that my service under your banner was a pleasure?"

"Not even an hour free," I said, "and already lying? You always were a quick learner."

He laughed, deep-throated and wild. I swallowed a sigh.

"You fulfilled your oaths to the letter," I conceded, and raised my voice to the others. "All of you. If we are to part tonight, it is not in anger."

Larat, viper-swift, raised the sword hanging from his hip. I did not reach for the Night, though Archer was halfway through a killing stroke before she turned it aside – my former servant, after a salute, had dropped the blade at my feet.

"May we meet again, my queen, before the end," Larat said. "For every gift you gave you took fair measure, and I can pay no higher compliment."

Much as they had years ago when riding horses, the creatures that had once been the Wild Hunt paid me the mirrored farewell to the allegiance they'd sworn. Lance and blade and bow fell at my feet, and with every last a bow. Some paid respects to Archer as well, though to her they offered only words. They gathered around Larat: slender, beautiful and even without so much as a speck of power still terrible to behold.

"And what will you do?" I asked.

"Whatever we wish, my queen," the one-eyed fox said. "For be it wicked or righteous, it will be entirely ours."

I let them go without another word, ignoring the Pilgrim's weighty look and the Tyrant's fleeting yet fascinated glances at the former fae. There was another issue about to take hold, after all. For all that I'd chosen to part with the Wild Hunt on a cordial note, Larat had repaid my planned deicide in the same manner. The Twilight Crown was not up for grabs, and he'd known exactly what he was doing when he'd offered it to the *worthiest*. It was respect that'd stayed the hands of the drow so far, for through the Night I could feel hundreds of them hungrily gazing down. If I ordered them to refrain, I'd strain the limited of my authority as the First Under the Night. Oh, some would listen. At first anyway, until they saw foes and rivals close to getting their fingers on great power and the balance swung the other way. They only way they'd obey such an edict was if Sve Noc put their weight to my words. Yet I had the Sisters in the back of my mind, and so I knew they were eying that crown as hungrily as the rest of them.

"Black Queen," the Grey Pilgrim began, "given the-"

"Pilgrim," I calmly said. "I don't think you appreciate how delicate the situation is right now. I need to... confer with my patrons."

"Evil clawing at itself," the Saint bitingly said. "There's a surprise."

I ignored her.

"It'd be a mistake," I said in Crepuscular, addressing the sky.

The first crow that landed on the floor did so smoothly, and just as smoothly rose into the silhouette of a drow. Silver-blue eyes shone, and I saw she was wearing the ancient armour of soldiers of the Empire Ever Dark with at her hip a sheathed blade of obsidian. Komena. Her sister, fully formed a drow before her crow talons could touch the stone, made ground with serenity. It was the robes of the long-broken Twilight Sages she wore, in flowing shimmering silk, and her hands she hid within long sleeves. Andronike. My patrons, at least, had taken me seriously enough to make act of presence. And a little more than that, even. I caught flecks of dust gone still in the air around me, made visible by the glinting light, and all others in this seat of power stood as if frozen. Save for the Pilgrim, whose knowing eyes followed me still – whatever power was at work here, bending perception, the Choir of Mercy had not suffered that he would be touched by it.

"Would it be?" Komena said. "Twilight is not so far removed from our domain. And mastery over ways... oh, let the offering of travellers be not blood but instead *prayer*. There would be opportunity in that, and yet more. We have lost the Everdark and the kingdom you bargained for still has to be reclaimed from death. A home for our people would be fair in every way, Herald."

"You can't eat two courts of the fae, Komena," I said. "That would be grave overreach."

The two of them, long-legged and fluid, began circling around me on foot the same way they had as crows.

"You have warned us of such perils before, of the foes they would bring," she replied, and glanced at the Grey Pilgrim. "Having seen them, I am less than cowed."

"The way I see it, there's two ways that could go," I said. "Both end up with every single gain you've made so far pissed away."

That had them both looking at me with their full attention.

"You could become 'the monster that eats courts'," I said. "And just like that you're the greatest threat kicking around Calernia, both taking the weight off the Dead King and beginning a death match with every powerful entity in the service of Above up here and gathered to deal with him."

I paused, letting that sink in.

"Or, perhaps even worse, you've just begun a pattern," I said. "I made a Court of Winter and you ate it. I made a Court of Twilight and you'd eat it. There's only one court of the fae left, Sve Noc, and I also had a hand in its inception. Where do you think that story leads?"

"We would be mistresses of the greater part of the Garden," Komena said.

"Would you?" I said. "I wonder. When I stole Winter, it didn't *do* anything to the ruling court of Arcadia as far as I could tell. See, what I think is that it's the neverborn courts they get their blood from: Autumn and Spring, never to be again. Because Summer and Winter had to *die* so the unification of Arcadia could happen, so they couldn't be foundation of an entirely new realm could they? So my theft of Winter? Fine, I was robbing a corpse. The crown just to our side might just be what used to be Summer. So at best, o goddesses of mine, you'll be even. And you know that one viciously clever little bastard that just walked out of here?"

I jutted a thumb towards the open gates of bronze.

"The ruling King of Arcadia considers him to be a little dim," I said. "Think on that, before you start believing you'll be the winners in that scrap even if the weight is even. You're too young to the godhead, your power is too fragile and your foundations too unsteady. You're not *ready* for the kind of attention eating Twilight would bring."

Komena did not reply. She was not pleased, I could feel it, but she did not dismiss what I'd said.

"I do not disagree," Andronike said.

And now for the other one, I grimly thought.

"Let us allow the Mighty to find who is worthiest among them, and so establish influence without... overstepping," the oldest of the sisters said.

"Short-sighted," I assessed.

I saw Komena hide a smile.

"Pardon?" Andronike said, voice too calm to truly be.

"You're thinking in terms of gains without also weighing the drawbacks," I said. "Do you intend to make whoever takes the crown the leader of your people, fold them under their rule and effectively have them stuck in this ruin

of a realm forever? Because that's what you're headed towards if you make a play here."

"They have no choice but to make bargains with us if the ways are under our stewardship," Andronike said. "This war is lost otherwise."

"You're robbing them while the Dead King holds them at knifepoint," I said. "That's a mistake. What happens when the war is over, Sve Noc? Do you think they won't go back on treaties you crammed down their throat when they were in duress?"

"And will they come to love us, if we treat them lovingly?" Andronike mockingly replied. "That is surprisingly naïve of you, Herald. If they turn on us for this, they were always going to turn on us. All the more reason to claim what we can before the knives are bared."

"You're missing the point," I patiently said. "There's nuances to this, Andronike. Sure, the Procerans are never going to put a crown of flowers in your hair, but there's a difference between 'the enemy we leave alone because it contains a worse enemy' and 'those bastards that extorted us while we were facing annihilation'. You know what's going to be a lot more useful to your people than one of the Mighty on that fancy chair behind you? An undeniable and weighty precedent for the Firstborn being reasonable, restrained actors. You're going to have to *live* up here, after the war ends."

"You would have us pin our hopes on amity and mercy," Andronike said.

"I'd have you fight this war in a manner that doesn't guarantee having to fight another one in twenty years with your current allies," I frankly said. "You named me First Under the Night because you needed feet on the ground. Someone to steer you away from the mistakes you're blind to because of your position."

I paused.

"This is one," I said. "This might be *the* mistake. The choice that decides whether you're a decade-long catastrophe that ends up drowned in heroes or the latest nation to claim a seat at the table up here in the Burning Lands."

They circled around me still, silent. Thinking.

"This is not our way," Komena said.

"Your way is a snake eating its own tail," I said. "Be *better*."

"They might turn on us regardless," Andronike said.

"They might," I admitted. "Fear or faith, that's your choice. You can't cross a chasm without taking a leap."

The Sisters looked at each other, eyes sliding away from me, and whatever it was they spoke it was not meant for my ears. Pounding heartbeats drummed against my ears, they began circling anew. With every step they further faded into the shadow, until there was nothing left but crows once more circling above. As if they'd never left at all. I breathed out, slowly.

"You are First Under the Night," Andronike confirmed.

"The Firstborn listen," Komena said. "*Speak*."

My fingers clenched. Above us the Mighty stood, a ring of painted sigils and silver-blue yes. Watching, waiting. And my goddesses had asked me to teach restraint to a people they had taught to esteem gluttonous theft above all. I was not, I thought, clever enough a liar to trick them all into obedience. And that'd be rather defeating the purpose of this, wasn't it? I was the high priestess of Night: if I found offence with the faith I'd been named the steward of, who but me could be charged with the change of it?

"Are you worthy?" I asked, and my voice rang out.

Not a soul replied. I let out a harsh bark of laughter.

"Your silence says it all," I told them. "You believe you are, or that the shedding of blood will make you so."

And why wouldn't they? The worthy took, the worthy rose. Did the act of taking not make them worthy? That was the sickness inside them, Below's ever-red altar made into an entire people. It was the old enemy wearing another face: Callow and Praes, forever intertwined and bleeding. Procer as much burden as bearing, sowing its own demise with every conquest. It was bucket holding the crabs, and I was going to *break it*.

"I see you," I harshly said. "Scavengers, carrion things crawling in the dark. You make faith of what you've taken and call that *worth*. I see you, who call yourselves Mighty. I have been you, and heard the sweet anthems of might, so hear me when I tell you this truth: a hundred rats clawing at each other does not make a single king."

Oh, they did not love me for that. I saw it in their eyes, in the way fury and malice filled the Night. But it was a lesson long overdue and love was not what I wanted from them, much less what I needed.

"Did you believe a single moment of excellence would earn you an eternity of power?" I said. "The one-eye fox that left this place head held high forged this crown through ruses that fooled gods and ruined realms. What bring any of you that matches those deeds?"

I bared my teeth.

"The murder of your own kind? I ask you, what manner of creature under sun or moon is not capable of this? Where lies that which would make you worthy?"

I struck my staff against the ground, let the clap that sounded out jostle them.

"You have grovelled in the ruins of your own empire, bleeding behind the Gloom," I said. "And through that you survived. Yet is that all you seek, you who call yourselves Mighty? Survival? I thought you seekers of deeds. I thought you reclaimed of an empire ever dark. I thought you Firstborn, not grey ghosts haunting a ruin."

Fury still, but now their pride had been pricked. And there were some who were listening. Hearing what had been spoken but also what had not been.

"It is not enough to take," I said. "For you must be worthy to take. It is not enough to rise, for you must be worthy to rise."

Blasphemy, some would have called that, but how could it be when I spoke with the voice of their gods?

"Did you think eternity would so easily be conquered?" I laughed. "Seek excellence in all things, Firstborn. Seek to stand nighty not by lowering others but by rising above them, lest you make your own victory worthless. They who cannot master themselves will never be anything but servants."

I breathed out, let what I'd said sink in.

"And so I ask you again, you who call yourselves Mighty – *are you worthy*?"

*Sa Vrede*. The whisper spread, bloomed until it was on every pair of lips. *No*, the answer came, and with it the beat of spears against stone. Slow and oppressive, like a dirge.

"Then seek excellence, Firstborn," I said. "Ever seek it until the night comes where your answer has changed."

*Chno Sve Noc*, they went. All will be Night. And they bowed, for I has spoken with the authority of high priestess of Night and for all their fury they had found worth in the path I laid before them. As the deity-crows circled slowly above us all they withdrew into the darkness, dismissed without my needing to speak another word. I let out a shaky breath and turned to find the eyes of most everyone else resting on me. I doubted anyone other than Archer had understood any of that – Indrani had learned a bit of Crepuscular back in the day, though it was a fiendishly complex language so not all that much – but I supposed even without the learning it'd been something of a spectacle.

"Dawn will come before the hour's turn," the Grey Pilgrim quietly said. "And with it the end of this journey, for good or ill."

"Then there is only one agreeable solution," the Tyrant of Helike said.

He let a moment pass.

"We should crown Catherine," he said, and winked at me.

"I've ridden that horse before," I said. "Never again."

"A shame," he mused. "I'd volunteer, yet I suspect my dear friends might. . . "

"Murder you like we were planning to do to Larat?" I finished. "Of course not. Go ahead, Kairos. Put on the crown."

"Breaking the crown itself might suffice," the Rogue Sorcerer said.

"How sure are you of that, Roland?" the Saint asked.

He grimaced.

"Half and half," the Sorcerer said. "As you might guess, there's not exactly a *precedent* for this."

And considering that the hero wasn't able to understand High Arcana, there was only so much weight I was willing to put on his word. Gods, I wished Masego was in a fit state to speak right now. Hells, I'd even settle for Akua right about now.

"So either we roll the dice over the life of around two hundred thousand people," I grimly said. "Or someone puts on that crown and then we kill them."

# Chapter 48

# Swan Song (Redux)

> "Beware of deep passions, for great love may turn in hatred just as great."
>
> Hesperos the Tepid, Atalantian preacher

Less then an hour was left before the sky fell down on Iserre, and three great armies were broken and buried. How many people were down there, right now? I'd off-handedly said two hundred thousand, but with the League's armies it had to be more than that. Three hundred? It didn't matter, I thought. Their deaths were simply not the kind of blow Calernia could recover from in less than fifty years, if even that. To anchor this realm and wrest it out of the precipitous fall, Twilight could have three outcomes" a crown-bearer, one's corpse or a shattered crown. If there was to be a crowning it'd have to be one of us, I admitted to myself. None aside from the band of five I'd assembled and our guide in Archer, the fateful sixth, had the required weight to bring this to an end. We'd been the ones to storm the Dead King's holdfast, to destroy the shard of him and to face against the clever fox who'd turned it all around on us. It *had* to be us, didn't it? I could feel the current of the story and fighting against it too forcefully would only lead to failure. If I tried to bring out Akua, whose ties to this place and murderous legacy ran deeper than anyone else's, I suspected she would simply not arrive in time. In a place like this, where the rules of Creation ran so thin they could be twisted and snapped, having the story going the other way was a stone around your neck. The flipping of an hourglass would tell me near nothing about how far dawn was, while the rising tension of the choice having to be made would be almost exact a measure.

Crescendo awaited, climax, and cheating it would be tricky business.

"There is no choice to be made at all," the Rogue Sorcerer said with forced calm. "We must shatter the crown. Anything else would be odious."

There'd been a time I knew, where I would have agreed with him. But it'd been a few years since I'd last had the luxury to think that way – right and wrong, untouched by practicalities such as risk and consequence. Which was

the greater wickedness, I wondered: the killing of one at the altar, or to gamble hundreds of thousands of lives on odds unclear?

"I have heard it told in rumour," the Tyrant of Helike said, "that our friend the Peregrine can offer solace through resurrection. One after each dawn, the rumour goes, forgiving the mistakes that came before it."

And there went Kairos, pivoting from pest to useful because he was simply too clever to remain a distraction that all would agree on throwing out when it was all coming to a close. I suspected he would act the wise and sagacious ally, from now on, simply to ease everyone's well-earned urge to toss him out on his ass and close the doors behind him. Exhausted as the rest of us, Kairos Theodosian had a worsening purple bruise where I'd *very* satisfyingly decked him in the face, but otherwise no real injuries. Still, from the way his limbs had taken to twitching under the robes you'd think he was the worst off among us. Whatever sickness it was he'd been born to, it was debilitating whenever the protection of his Name waned. I followed the villain's gaze as it turned to Tariq, adding my weight to the unspoken question: if someone sat the throne and let themselves be slain, could the Pilgrim raise them anew after dawn? The white-haired man cocked his head to the side, as if listening to words only he could hear. He, too, had old monsters to ask answer of.

"It is uncertain," the Peregrine admitted. "There are some deaths not even my prayers can forgive, and to die on the altar for the sake of others might be one such."

The old man glanced meaningfully at Indrani, who in deference to the seriousness of the situation had been keeping her mouth shut.

"I cannot bring back those departed twice," he warned. "No matter the circumstances."

I'd had absolutely no intention of letting anyone so much as shake a knife in Archer's direction, but that was good to know. My friend had already died one tonight so, as far as I was concerned, she'd more than the paid the dues she hadn't even owed.

"Might be this is obvious to the rest of you," Indrani slowly said, "yet why aren't we simply having someone put on the fancy hat and stay alive? That ought to do the trick."

I grimaced. The Saint spat to the side.

"There'll be no founding of a court in service to Below on my watch, girl," Laurence de Montfort bluntly said. "The terms of this truce were that there would be a breaking, not a coronation."

"It would be preferable to the cold-blooded murder of an ally," the Rogue Sorcerer flatly said.

"Think beyond keeping your pretty hands clean, boy," the Saint harshly said. "Consider the centuries of blood and suffering that would come from the birth of this Court of Twilight."

"Ah, but the courts of Arcadia was so troublesome for they had many stories, many titled among their number," Kairos idly said. "It need not be so for

Twilight. A single brow bearing a crown, and nothing else. Power held yet going without exercise."

His tone had been idle, but there'd been something to it that had me clenching my fingers. He was half in love with the notion already, I could tell. And I could see how it'd appear to the Tyrant of Helike: then moment of temptation forever continued, principled restraint that might yet be broken by the right word or tragedy. And as for the rest of us, none would get what they truly wanted save a life spared. Or, as Kairos was likely to see it, yet another foe slighted and spared. To him, it'd be the loveliest of endings. And Gods forgive me, but I was more inclined to it than a killing. There was no one here that could have their throat carved open without a bloody mess following, greater good or not. If it was a hero and the Saint survived, she'd carry that grudge like a blade pointed at my back until one of us died. If it was the Saint herself, the lengths Tariq had gone to for the preservation of her life would find themselves tossed in the mud before so much as the first signature was put to the Liesse Accords. It was a thinning of foundation where I needed it to be firm. There'd be no talk of Indrani going through this, and while before the end I suspected I'd be put before a choice like this I would not walk the altar path when there was so much work left to be done. Martyrdom without groundwork was vanity, nothing less and nothing more.

It was a possibility, I thought, to force that crown onto Kairos' head and slit his throat. One I'd seriously consider, but the Tyrant had bargained back his life from the Bard and the Pilgrim seemed set on respecting this. Would it be worth it, I asked myself, to cross him on this? It might be too much of a risk. The Rogue Sorcerer might come out either way, given his scraps with the Tyrant, and Archer would be at my side through Crown and Tower but the other two? The Saint was most likely to see the practicality in bleeding Kairos, but she often deferred to the Pilgrim over calls like these and she'd be just as eager to take a swing at me. The Tyrant's reaction was arguably the most predictable and least worrisome, for though he'd attempt escape he wouldn't take it personally in the slightest. No, I finally decided. The odds were too stiff and the cause too red. Even if I got away with it I'd leave scars, the kind that'd come back to bite me down the line, and our alliance was too young not to be mangled by something like this. Gods, sometimes working with Above's people felt like shackles around my wrists. They just had so many *rules*. Even making a discreet inquiry as to the nature of the truce agreed on by Bard could feasibly do damage here, I reluctantly acknowledged, so it was best to set aside the notion entirely. Unless the Tyrant betrayed us once more, at which point the chops would be back on the damned plate.

He wouldn't though, I thought as I he offered me a bright and knowing smile. Kairos had a finger on the pulse here, on the underlying currents, and he had no intention of giving me an excuse. I smiled back, and it did not reach my eyes.

"That's a pot forever on the edge of tipping," the Saint growled. "I'll not

have it."

"If your issue is with a villain bearing the crown, then I will do so myself," Roland said.

"That sounds lovely," the Tyrant grinned. "Indeed, what is one more elaborate lie when one is at the very heart of who you are, Sorcerer? You've my seal of approval."

The hero paled, to my surprise. What was it that Kairos had found out about him? Pilgrim and Saint shared a weighty look and Tariq cleared his throat.

"You are too young for such a burden," the Peregrine delicately said.

Ouch, I thought. That had *had* to sting. Having the closest thing to your side of the Game's communal wise grandfather essentially telling you he didn't think you'd be able to take it if you stepped into the fire. The Rogue Sorcerer tried to hide his flinch, but he was among the least skilled of the liars here.

"If the Grey Pilgrim wants to take the crown, I'll make my peace with it," I conceded.

"You sound like you're making a concession, Foundling," the Saint harshly said. "When what you're doing is giving Below a path to one of the most powerful heroes alive. Shut your damned-"

"Tariq tossed his own crown into the bag, dearest friend," the Tyrant idly interrupted. "So if he takes one up now with the intent of ruling, who knows what manners of wickedness may come of it? We must think of the children, Catherine."

Indrani choked at the last sentence, sending Kairos an admiring glance that had the villain overtly preening. Aside from the theatrics, he'd actually made sense. It might be that Tariq would be reclaiming the right to rule he'd discarded, by putting on that crown. Or it might be something else entirely, and a disaster in the making. We couldn't take the risk.

"Even if I were willing to let that much power fall into the Saint's hands, I doubt she would be willing to take it," I said.

"You won't be getting your hooks in any of us," Laurence de Montfort bluntly said.

"It cannot be you, Queen Catherine," Tariq apologetically said. "I yet remember your... brittle temperament as Queen of the Hunt. I cannot in good conscience make bargains with such a creature."

I grimaced. Well, he wasn't entirely wrong. I suspected I'd handle apotheosis a lot better if the crystallization of it didn't come from one of the worst days of my life, but there was no real way to know. And it'd be a lie to pretend the notion of claiming that sort of mantle again was anything but repulsive to me. I'd put power over the rest before, and we'd none of us come out the better for it. Slow learner as I was, I would not claim to be *that* slow.

"I claim only one crown, and hardly forever," I said.

"While I would be delighted to lend a hand -" the Tyrant of Helike began.

"No," I said.

"No," Tariq said.

"Hah," Indrani snorted.

The Saint's hand simply went down to her sword.

"- yes, that," Kairos said, sounding a touch chagrined. "Which leaves only one among us."

"Kairos," I mildly said, "did we not once have a conversation on the subject of you taking a swing at my people and the consequences of such an act?"

"It is... possible," the Grey Pilgrim said.

I nearly twitched in surprise, fixing the old man with a look.

"There would have to be oaths," the Peregrine said, dipping his head in apology at Archer. "Safeguards."

"Well, would you look at that," Indrani mused. "You do listen, after all."

"Abdication after ten years," Tariq said, eyes moving to me. "Guaranteed of safe passage for those waging war on Keter. Abiding by earthly treaties."

I was genuinely taken aback by the turn, enough that it took me a moment to get ahold of my thoughts.

"I won't force her to do it," I flatly said.

"Cat," Archer said. "Look at me."

I turned, eyes lingering on the traces of blood still on her forehead. The reminder that she'd already died once tonight.

"It's just ten years," she said. "And you didn't age while Duchess or Queen, so I'm losing nothing there. I'm not enough of an asshole to insist we murder someone over a decade."

Except that she was, unkind as that thought was. Because Indrani was lovely and generous to those few that she loved, but the rest? She was not the kind to bleed for strangers, and I doubted the few months we'd spent apart had changed that about her. Or maybe I just didn't want to. What would it mean, if months away from the Woe was all it took to let her compassion bloom? *Or it might just be away from me*, I darkly thought. What had I ever really asked of her, save for slaughter? And though that thought remained, so did my gaze remain on the bloody marks streaking across her forehead. That, too, might be a reason for seeking crown. For all the other burdens of my time as Sovereign of Moonless Nights, I'd been absurdly difficult to kill.

"I won't pretend it doesn't make things easier," I said, meeting her eyes. "Having that much power at your fingertips. But it blinds you to other ways to die, Indrani. It takes from you as much as you'll gain – perhaps even more."

"I know," Archer said. "I was there, remember? But I want to know what the word looks like, from that vantage. That's reason enough."

"Is that really who you want to be?" I quietly asked.

"An entire world of secret paths, of unknown horizons," Indrani smiled. "Wouldn't be that something to tread?"

*It'll change you*, I wanted to say. *Even if you put down the crown after ten years, and that is never as simple as you'd think, it will still have changed you in ways you can scarce understand.* Gods, I wanted to forbid her to go through

with it. And the thing was, if I pushed hard enough she just might withdraw her agreement. I knew that sure as I knew my own breathing. Indrani trusted me enough for that. But it would never be the same, afterward: we would no longer be partners or friends – a line would be drawn, and she'd be on the side of it that meant servant. Merciless Gods. It was ugly and selfish of me, but I would rather let her try the crucible of Twilight than knowingly destroy what bound us to each other.

"We'll have to agree on the wording of the oaths," I finally croaked out.

I met her gaze, and an understanding passed between us. It was not love – neither of us had been afflicted with that particular delusion regarding the other, for all that we occasionally shared a bed – or at least not that kind of it. It was... a recognition, maybe. That I thought she was making a mistake, but that I respected her enough to stand in the way of decisions she freely made. Had this, too, been a pivot? A moment she'd look back to, in years to come, when wondering if the ties binding her to the Woe were a lifeline or a leash. Perhaps pivot was a conceited term to use, when matched to the unspoken understanding of two mortals of no real import in the greater scheme of things. Too grand for the two of us. But there was resonance to the meaning of it, I thought. Whether this had been a fault or something akin to wisdom I'd not know for years to come, but in time I would know. I was unnaturally certain of that, in the beat that followed her hazelnut eyes meeting my own. Indrani inclined her head towards me, not speaking a word.

"No," the Saint of Swords said.

The Tyrant let out a pleased, breathless sigh.

"You told me if I still believed you wrong come morning light, we'd put this to judgement," Laurence said, looking at Tariq. "Dawn's around the corner, old friend, and now I tell you this: I will not brook this deal you would strike. It is an abomination in every way."

Indrani casually took a half-step to the side, coming closer to me. In a better position to buy me time to weave miracles, if it came to blades bared. I wished I could say she was being unreasonably cynical by doing so. I almost spoke up, but there was a reason Kairos was keeping his mouth shut. He, too, suspected that anyone carrying Below's banner in the Saint's eyes intervening now would be met with immediate assault. Robber had told me a sapper's saying, once: no one has hands clever enough to juggle munitions. Simply by speaking up here, I'd be cracking a match in a warehouse full of goblinfire.

"Only ten years," Tariq told her. "It is breathing room so that we can arrange for a more agreeable ending, Laurence."

"It's condoning the birth of a court hatched by servants of the Hellgods," the Saint barked. "There's no going back from that once we unleash it, Tariq. And odds are we won't live to see that garden of ruin come to bear fruit – by what right do you pass on that woe to those that come after us?"

"You would rather embrace murder than compromise?" the Rogue Sorcerer said.

"Shut your mouth, boy," Laurence hissed. "You understand nothing. You shy away from taking a life now, from takin a risk, and you think that makes you virtuous? All it makes you is *complicit*. Your scruples will cost a hundred generations blood and fear simply because you flinched when time for the hard choices came."

"How hard a choice is it really for you?" the Sorcerer replied, tone ice cold. "When did you last make another, Saint of Swords?"

Laurence's face shuttered closed. Hells, I had to admit that Roland was starting to grow on me some.

"Peace, Roland," the Pilgrim said.

"Would that she'd hear of it, if only the once," the younger man scathingly replied.

"No, Tariq, let him speak," the Saint said. "Let him sing the praises of compromising with the Enemy. You" survive this, Sorcerer, for you may yet bring some light into this world. But burn this moment into your memory, child. Keep it close. There will come day when it burns like a lash on your back."

"What is made can be unmade, Laurence," the Pilgrim told her. "Even if this bargain were a mistake, and I do not believe it to be, it remains impermanent."

"Does it?" she asked. "You're letting them in, Tariq. You are setting a precedent for us sitting across the table from the monstrous and the mad, pretending they can be reasoned with. And Gods be good, perhaps this once it might even be true."

My brow rose.

"And yet it cannot be allowed to pass," Laurence said. "Because once the exception is made, the precedent is set, the ink touched the water – it's done. It's over. The poison is in and there's only sickness and death ahead. How many times will this bargain you'd strike lead those who come after us astray? How long will it take, before Twilight becomes a murderous madness that can reach everywhere across Calernia?"

"We must first ensure there is a Calernia left to safeguard, Laurence," Tariq quietly said.

"Compromising the soul to preserve the flesh," the Saint of Swords said, "is the first step into Below's service. There are things worth facing ruin for, Tariq."

"No compromise with the Enemy," the Grey Pilgrim echoed. "That is your principle. Yet you know mine, Laurence."

"So I do," Laurence de Montfort softly agreed.

Light bloomed, but already the Saint of Swords was moving and she struck.

# Chapter 49

# Cracked

> "They who first look at the sun will never see aught else."
>
> Helikean saying

It was just steel. There must have been thousands of longswords just like it in Iserre alone, decently crafted but nothing extraordinary. It was the work of some smith somewhere, not an enchanter or legendary artisan, so there was nothing to that sword that should allow it to cut into the likes of Twilight's Crown. Except, of course, that it was Saint of Swords of wielded it. Tabard trailing behind her, the old heroine crossed the room in three smooth strides and her sword arced down beautifully: the strike was like flowing water. And hit something that shouldn't have been there, a subtle glamour broken when Laurence de Montfort's blow scythed straight through the gargoyle that'd thrown itself in the way. The Tyrant of Helike cackled, high-pitched and delighted, but the Saint's blow carved through the stone construct and continued through and into the crown. I thought, as I watched the edge of the steel bite through chalcedony and mother-of-pearl, that if not for the for the gargoyle it would have gone straight through. Yet the Tyrant's stage trick had tainted what would have otherwise been a clear blow, and so instead the Saint's sword cut halfway through the Twilight Crown before it stopped.

Not even a heartbeat of stillness reigned over the room before a torrent of power tore out.

Everyone here had been in a scrap or two, so the raging tendrils of sorcery that went out did not score a kill the way they might have with less experienced Named. Reflex had me half-stepping to the side, still a swordswoman picking her distance for all my lack of sword, and dusk-like power howled through a bare few feet to my side. More importantly, having been close to the initial burst the Saint had been forced to retreat or see herself run through by a tendril. More than one, even, for a handful of howling streaks chased her even as she retreated, never slowing nor missing a step. Had her attack awoken something in the crown, some shard of sapience? A flicker of a look to the side

instead showed me a hard-faced Rogue Sorcerer with his hands outstretched and his long coat fluttering in unnatural breeze, guiding the sorcery with sharp gestures.

"Treachery," the Tyrant of Helike gleefully hooted. "Treachery most foul!"

With great flourish he presented his left palm, allowing one of the chittering gargoyles in attendance to place down a wand of what looked like pure gold on it.

"Cat?" Indrani calmly asked, eyes on the Saint of Swords.

She was ducking and weaving, for now, driven back by the Sorcerer's trick. But it'd be temporary. I wouldn't trust means that feeble to hold back Archer for long, and Laurence de Montfort was her superior in several ways.

"Don't kill her," I said. "Unless it puts you at risk not to."

"Gotcha," Indrani nonchalantly said.

In a whisper of boots on stone she slipped into the fray, the maelstrom of unleashed energies that had yet to ebb in the slightest. I'd expected the crown to either keep bleeding like a stuck pig or translate the wound into a single punishing torrent of power, but it wasn't indulging any of my expectations. It seemed almost like the lashing sorcery *was* the wound itself, thrashing about the room in some kind of eldritch pain. A nudge from Andronike had my gaze lingering on the side of the cut Laurence's sword had made, a sliver of Night sharpening my sight. Ah. So it *was* eating into the rest of the crow, shaving through a sliver at a time. It was simply slow and little at a time, though if we didn't settle this mess for too long we'd still be in trouble. The Tyrant's wand proved to be an artefact of some power, a heartbeat later, as he aimed it towards the Saint and spoke an idle word: streak of brilliant lightning went out, forking around an approaching Archer and striking at the Saint from both sides. Undaunted, Laurence de Montfort *parried* one streak and smoothly ducked beneath the other. Just in time for Indrani's boot to catch her in the chin, sending her sprawling back. Three streaks of twilight-stuff, guided by the Sorcerer, snapped out at the falling heroine. One would have punctured her throat, by my reckoning, but Roland redirected it towards her shoulder instead at the last moment and that was room enough for the Saint to manoeuvre: she twisted on herself, allowing one of the streaks to hit her flank and using the pressure to adjust her fall out of the way of the other two.

She landed in a crouch, slapped aside Indrani's follow-through strike with the flat of her blade and brutally backhanded Archer. I sucked in a breath, but Indrani had scrapped with Laurence before. She slid back, parried a probing blow by the Saint and adjusted her angle of attack to make the most of the support the Sorcerer was still providing. She'd make it through this, I told myself. I couldn't even hold it against Roland not to have put an end to this fight right out of the gate, not truly. The Saint had been a respected elder and ally until not so long ago, and even though she'd done so treacherously she was only going through with the fate he'd himself advocated for the Twilight Crown. A glance told me Kairos already had another artefact in hand, some sort of

jeweled silver arrow, and was preparing to throw it like he was playing darts in a tavern. Yet it was the last of us whose reaction I was most dreading to look upon, and my eyes finally turned to the Grey Pilgrim. I hid a grimaced. The Peregrine looked as if he'd aged twenty years in the last twenty heartbeats, and given his age that led him at least one foot into the grave. His face had gone ashen, his footing unsure, and if he'd still had his staff I was certain he'd be leaning on it for support. He had, I thought, genuinely not seen this coming. Neither had I, though that'd been more because I'd expected the Pilgrim to seem more worried if it was a possibility and he hadn't been. I could almost hear my father chiding me for relying on second-hand knowledge without having contingencies in place accounting for it being false.

"Pilgrim," I said.

He did not reply, eyes clouded as he watched the Saint of Swords cleverly snap out of Indrani's longknives out of her grasp, catch it with her free hand and smash the pommel into Archer's cheek. A moment later the Tyrant's strange arrow struck at her with a keening sound, and though she flicked her blade back in time to cut through it barely helped: at the moment of impact, the arrow broke and a dozen sharp darts of wind exploded out. Maybe half hit the Saint's flank, scoring blood if no deep wound, though that didn't hurt her half as much as Indrani's other blade cutting halfway through her thumb and snatching back the stolen longknife.

"*Pilgrim*," I said more loudly. "This is not the time to sink into yourself, Tariq. Whatever grief you might hold, how many lives is it worth?"

That shook him out, enough his blue eyes turned to me.

"The crown is wounded," he said.

"So I'd gathered," I flatly said.

"You do not understand," Tariq said. "The wound is permanent. It is part of the crown, now. And it will kill whoever bears it."

*Shit*, I thought.

"This from your Choir?" I pressed.

"Yes," he tightly said.

*Shit*, I thought once more, with feeling. I wasn't going to return for a sermon at the House of Light anytime soon, but in current situation I was willing to take the Ophanim to their word. We'd be killing whoever ended up putting it on, which disqualified Indrani from his discussion of succession as far as I was concerned. I'd already had enough close calls with death that I suspected I'd run out of ways to cheat it, and if I croaked it here too many things fell apart. That left who, the Sorcerer or the Pilgrim? It'd have to be Roland, I grimly thought. Much as he'd been growing on me, if the Grey Pilgrim died here the storm that'd follow would be massive. It was an ugly thought, turning on someone who'd been becoming a true ally, but what other choice was there? *Indrani*, the thought came. I felt a sharp well of disgust at myself, both for her name having come to me at all and then my refusal to entertain it. Was it not rank hypocrisy, to demand this sacrifice from strangers while denying

even thought of it when it came to my own? There'd been more than one reason villainy came easier to me than the other side's works.

"It will have to be me," the Grey Pilgrim said.

Night preserve me from godsdamned *heroes*. It wasn't a righteous sacrifice it you screwed the people you were allegedly doing it for, it was just vanity.

"No," I bluntly said. "Don't be a fucking fool. Now, would you help us contain the Saint before someone gets killed?"

The Tyrant had, while we spoke, thrown a javelin of red coral at Laurence. Poorly, for his arm was trembling and it was dubious he'd ever trained his body, so it flew errantly and skittered against the ground – where it blew up into a storm of fire, a solid ten feet to the side of anyone else in the room. The Saint leapt through the flames, apparently deciding to take advantage the opportunity to shake her pursuit, but Kairos already had tossed out a large opaque orb of glass and it caught her in the belly as she went through. It broke against her and smoke poured out as words boomed out in the tradertongue, the smoke solidifying and trying to bind her limbs.

"Laurence," the Grey Pilgrim called out, but his call was drowned out by the booming tradertongue harangue.

For a moment I wondered if Kairos had planned it that way, before dismissing the motion. Though it was possible, in truth it hardly mattered if it was. I reached for the Night, wove a globe of it and sent it spinning forward. Though it'd do no harm to anyone, it swallowed the words that'd come from the orb like a pit of darkness swallowing even the sound of falling. Unfortunately it also took the smoke bindings with the rest, which I'd not meant for it to do in the slightest. Kairos protested, though I ignored him.

"*Laurence*," the Grey Pilgrim repeated. "Desist now, while you still can."

"Better dead than kneeling to the dark," the Saint of Swords snarled. "Do your-"

The cold beam of Light struck her in the chest before she even finished speaking, and I almost let out a whistle. I'd felt that, the *rippling* of it in the air. The Peregrine was finally done fucking around, it seemed. The side of her chest a ruin of burned flesh, the old heroine swallowed a scream and slid across the stone floor. Already the Grey Pilgrim was crafting fresh strikes of Light, while Archer ran towards our opponent with five streaks of twilight-stuff guided by the Sorcerer following hidden behind her. The Tyrant had a handful of gargoyles before him presenting artefacts for him to wield like a pack of chittering wee sommeliers surrounding an Alamans prince with choice vintages. With the Pilgrim having been moved to act, the balance of this scrap was sharply on our side. But was it, I suddenly wondered, *too* sharply on our side? The crown was still falling apart, sliver by sliver, so we had to end this. Yet if this began a lone principled heroine standing against a band of five that was mostly villains...

"Give up, Saint," the Tyrant of Helike drawled. "Our victory is inevitable. You might even say that, in a manner of speaking, we are invin-"

"*Kairos*," I screamed. "Don't you fucking dare-"

"-vincible," the Tyrant finished in a cackle. "Submit to Below and you may yet be spared, do-gooder."

It wasn't anything as obvious as Laurence de Montfort suddenly finding all her wounds had been healed, or a lightshow of power being shoved into her tired frame. Yet, just like that, as she was dragged by Kairos' latest bout of treachery onto the path of a story the Saint of Swords stood a little straighter. Her eyes sharpened, her footing grew more assured.

"Archer, retreat-" I yelled.

But it was too late. Indrani's first blade extended as her whole arm outstretched and she place the point of her longknife at the Saint's back with blinding quickness. Just not quite quick enough. Laurence took a half-step to the side, letting her pass, and cut off her arm the wrist. She would have flicked the blade a second time and taken Archer's head, if not for the Sorcerer's quick divesting of twilight-streaks forcing her to withdraw a step back. The Pilgrim's gleaming Light caught her a moment later, but with hard eyes she carved right through and leapt up. The Tyrant and I struck at the same time, his green jade baton sending out a swarm of green insects at the Saint as I wove Night into dense flecks and sent them out at her. But it was like, I realized, tossing logs into a fire. The insects – each one made of jade, I only then caught – found a cut in the air that warded their approach save for those that impacted it and found themselves cut through. I'd formed four flecks of Night and the Saint almost contemptuously cut through only one, though at exactly the right time for the detonation that ensued to catch the other three. Her right boot landed on the Rogue Sorcerer's face a moment later and he went down like a sack of beets from the hit. Hells, that'd gone south in a hurry. Unlike the heroes and possibly even myself, Kairos had to know that the Saint would kill him in a heartbeat if she could. So why would he throw the fight this way?

I glanced at the Tyrant of Helike and found his gaze, half of it red as fresh blood, resting on my ebony staff. Kairos grinned when I caught him, utterly unrepentant. I found myself wishing I'd succeeded at cutting his throat instead of blackening his eye. The Pilgrim had chosen to prevent Indrani bleeding out instead of pursuing the offensive, to my relief, and as she held her severe hand to the stump with gritted teeth one of the greatest living healers of Calernia began to put it all back together. Good. Archer might make it back into the fight, I just needed to use Kairos and my own talents to hold until we could turn this around. The Saint should be coming for either of us by now. As it happened, Laurence de Montfort rose from the smooth crouch she'd landed in after tumbling past the unconscious Sorcerer. She glanced at me, calmly, and then her gaze swept the rest of the room. It came to rest on the crown, and without a word she ignored us and went straight for it. Oh Hells. It might be, I knew, that finishing the cut would only break this realm and spare us all either death or bargain.

Or it might mean the death of hundreds of thousands.

"Slow her," I ordered the Tyrant.

My tone was harsh enough he did not argue. The unpleasant truth was that I did not have the means to contain someone like Laurence de Montfort. Every trick left in my arsenal derived from the patronage of Sve Noc, whose blood-drenched path to apotheosis made the exact kind of power that someone like the Saint of Swords had been meant to put down. Maybe if I'd been quick enough to think of it earlier all of us save Archer could have let ourselves be 'beaten' and she could have duelled the Saint with something close to even footing. But at this point trying to use numbers to bring her down was effectively using the same tactics that'd led a horde of devils to swarm this very heroine barely an hour ago. The result back then had been providing the Saint of Swords with a lot of bodies to cut, and I had no reason to believe this would go any differently. I couldn't contain her or defeat her, and maybe if I had longer I might be able to figure out another way to get this done but I didn't have the time. So either I bent, and let her toss the dice with the lives of three great armies and most of Iserre besides.

That, or I killed her.

Breathing out, I began to limp forward even as Kairos tossed priceless old artefacts in the Saint's way like they were apple cores. My staff I raised, and abandoned the delusion that it had ever been one. Night roiled and the ebony fell to ash, leaving behind only a sword in a scabbard. The latter was an ornate thing, unlike most I'd borne in my time. Carved obsidian, depicting the tale of the fool girl who'd made accord with the Night. The blade had not once unsheathed waited within as my fingers tightened around the scabbard. Its long handle was onyx and amethyst, stones chosen for one's facility in holding power and the other's aptitude for bridging the mortal and the divine through communion. Kairos had, against all odds, succeeding at expending enough of his inherited trove of treasures to force the Saint to step back. She still stood by the throne's side, some sort of shining panels of sorcery standing between her and the crown, but my advance drew her eyes went to me. My hobbling had taken me ahead of all the others, and at my approach she smiled a hard smile.

"A duel, is it?" Laurence de Montfort said.

I lowered the scabbard to my side, right hand gripping the grip.

"Stand down," I said, offering once last chance. "Stand down, and we can still end this with words instead of blood."

"Some bargains compromise the very heart of what you are," the Saint replied. "You'll lose, Foundling. Call your minions back and let me end it the way it should have been done since the start."

I breathed out, steadied my stance.

"You're mortal," Laurence de Montfort sharply said.

"So are you," I replied, and for the first time since I'd left the Everdark I drew a sword.

I'd gathered Night for months in preparation of this moment, not a single mote of it anybody's but my own. This was a prayer, after all, not a ritual. I was

making an appeal to Sve Noc, and sacrificing power so that a miracle might be granted. And so, when my sword cleared the scabbard, it was revealed to have no blade. Night pulsed all around us, a living and breathing thing.

*One.*

"What have you done?" the Saint asked.

*Two.*

"Nothing," I honestly replied.

*Three.*

"Do you think I'll not strike you for being unarmed?" the Saint snarled.

*Four, five, six,* I counted as she spoke, and she stiffened with the last. It was close, then. I'd wondered how long she would last. I touched me too, but Gods forgive me the touch was lighter than I'd believed it would be. The Dead King, it seemed, might have been terrifyingly correct. The Saint took a step forward, and I almost spoke but instead I close my mouth. It would not do to monologue, would it? Not when the end was close. I watched her skin tighten, grow sallow, I watched her limbs weaken and finally she fell down. A moment later and she was dead. Struck down without a trace. It had, from the beginning to the end, taken eleven heartbeats.

And so in the heart of the prayer I had made, eleven years had passed.

I'd always known that I couldn't beat the Saint of Swords in a fight. What kind of a fool would fight a heroine forged of war through that which had forged her? No, I'd heeded the lessons of my years under the Black Knight and slain her through one of the few things the Heavens did not protect their chosen from: the passage of time. I let another heartbeat pass, simply to be sure, and only then did the Night's touch upon this broken realm withdraw.

# Chapter 50

# Sunset

> "Blood freely spilled always offers greater power, for it carries the worth of both the blood and the choice."
>
> Extract from "The Most Noble Art of Magic", by Dread Emperor Sorcerous

"Huh," the Tyrant said. "That is *not* what I believed that would do."

I wheeled on him with cold eyes. For all that he'd helped me land the killing stroke on the Saint, he was also the reason there'd been a need for one at all. We'd been close to subduing her, before he'd decided to taunt Fate and loudly dare it to meddle. There would still have been the issue of the wounded crown, but Gods I would have preferred ending this without Laurence de Montfort's corpse on the ground. Not because of any deep affection for the heroine, though I'd had a few perturbing glimpses on this journey at the woman that lay under the zealotry, but because the Saint of Sword's death would both have a messy aftermath and rob us of someone who might have been able to truly hurt the Dead King. I'd begun this winter itching to put her down, but now... A virtue was no less of one because it belonged to an enemy, and for all her horrid flaws Laurence de Montfort had hardly been without the opposite. My hand had been forced, in the end, when the choice had been between a woeful roll of the dice and slaying her where she stood. But for all that the choice I'd made would stay with me, I would not for a moment forget who'd forced me to make it.

"This was," I said, "one betrayal too many, Kairos."

"There's no such thing, Catherine," he confidently told me. "And if there was, yet one more betrayal would see to it."

Shouldn't be too difficult to kill him, I thought. I had no intention of allowing anywhere near the decision yet to be made over the crown, or of sparing him after that last knife in the back, so ending this here and now before the Twilight Crown finished crumbling seemed the way to go about it. Kairos Theodosian still had a handful of attending gargoyles and more artefacts than anyone should have at their fingertips, but aside from that he was spent. He'd

burned his strength against the Skein and then against me, shaken his sleeves enough that all his worst tricks had already been revealed. And while I was hardly fresh, above us two crows still slowly circled. Omens of death, and death was what I intended on delivering: if I need seek the helping hand of my patronesses for that, so be it. On the other hand, I grimly thought, there was still one last use left for the Tyrant of Helike tonight.

"There's one path that doesn't lead to me snatching the life out of you tonight," I coldly said. "And that's you putting on that crown."

"So it seems I am to die," the Tyrant pensively said, "unless, instead, I am to die. Truly, my friend, you present me with a dilemma."

"Burn enough bridges and you'll find there's no pretty path left," I bluntly said. "You just tried to get half of us killed by flapping your mouth, Kairos. Fuck the amnesty you bargained for: the last courtesy I offer you is deciding the shape of your grave."

The slightest flicker of power, but there were only so many times someone could use a trick around me before I caught on.

"Riddle me this, Catherine," the Tyrant cheerfully said. "What makes you think that-"

Night flooded me, bringing strength to my hands, and I crushed the obsidian scabbard still in my grasp. The powder that fell I blew through and, shaping the Night I threaded within it, cast it outwards. The obsidian dust revealed Kairos' glamoured silhouette as he tried to make for the door and the Night I'd sent out wove itself into a noose that delicately went around his neck. The end of that rope fell into my palm, and as the noose tightened my fingers closed around it.

"Well," Kairos Theodosian slowly said, glamour dispelling. "This is embarrassing."

"Don't pay attention to him," the glamour I'd been conversing with insisted. "He's an impostor."

I wound the Night rope around my fist and spread my stance to steady my footing.

"How's your dilemma coming along?" I asked.

"Bracingly," the Tyrant replied without missing a beat.

"Enough," the Grey Pilgrim tiredly said.

The streak of Light cut halfway through the rope of my own making, severing it clean. I was, bluntly put, too surprised by the old man's sudden turn to properly react.

"How many of us do you intend to slay tonight, Queen Catherine?" the Peregrine said. "Enough."

"If it's not him it'll have to be one of us," I pointed out. "There is no reason to spare him, Pilgrim. One might well argue he earned that end."

"Shall we speak of endings earned then, Black Queen?" the Grey Pilgrim replied, tone remote and eyes considering. "It would be an exchange of some consequence, I think."

"You can't be serious," I said. "You struck out too, Pilgrim. To contain her, as I wanted to. And the damned reason it had to go further than that was the Bard's fucking amnesty, which *you* insisted on-"

"I am well aware of what took place here tonight," the Peregrine harshly interrupted. "Are *you*? I'd just lent my hand to the killing of a woman I loved like kin and trusted just as deep. Those ties were already tried and tested when you were yet to be born, Catherine Foundling. I did this because the bargain you offer may yet save lives by the millions and lay the foundation of a long-lasting peace. But do not mistake that, not for a moment, as my having been suborned to your every whim."

"None of that means he should be sent home with a slap on the wrist," I hissed.

"A trusted and farsighted comrade has asked me to spare the Tyrant's life," he flatly said. "And so it will be spared, no matter the nasty tricks he may play."

"You are the hero of my heart, Grey Pilgrim," Kairos Theodosian said, picking out the Night noose still around his neck and dropping it to the floor. "In the spirit of my deep gratitude, I would offer-"

The weight that fell over the room was almost a familiar thing. Above us Sve Noc spared a glance, and so my knees were not made to buckle, but the Tyrant of Helike was offered no such protection. The odd-eyed villain collapsed, first on one knee and then outright to the ground for that leg's shaking. Twitching on the stone floor, Kairos rasped out a pained breath as the Grey Pilgrim stared down at him. Sharing that gaze, the Choir of Mercy looked upon the Tyrant without the slightest speck of compassion.

"You are not forgiven, Kairos Theodosian," the Peregrine said, voice ringing with power. "You will yet serve a greater purpose, and for that you will be allowed to crawl out of this place through filth and dust. But you are not *forgiven*, you creature of ruin and perfidy."

The Tyrant twitched on the floor still and I realized with a start it was as much from his convulsing body as a shivering laughter ripping out of his throat.

"Coward," he gasped. "Even now Mercy holds your hand. *Coward*."

The old man strode forward, dusty grey robes trailing behind him, and he knelt before the cripple before laying a hand over his lips.

"Through lies and deception you have brought great suffering," the Grey Pilgrim said. "And so from you I take that poisonous gift: never again will you speak untruth, lest it be the last words you speak at all."

Radiant light blinded my eyes, for a heartbeat, and through the Pilgrim's touch I felt the Ophanim reach out into Creation. This would be a curse, if a villain had been the one to place it. I wondered what it was to be called, when a heroic hand had done the placing. My brow furrowed. Would lying make Kairos make a mute or kill him? It'd not been clear, by the phrasing. Looking at the Peregrine's shoulders, I wondered if that'd been on purpose. The Tyrant's body shuddered one last time, like someone whose fever was going the way of the grave, and only then did his twitching end. He exhaled a ragged breath.

"This is not," Kairos Theodosian guffawed, "the last you've seen of me."

Mismatched eyes going wide, he looked up and waited. A moment passed and he did not die.

"Best get crawling then, I suppose," the Tyrant of Helike mused. "Until next time, friends."

Without a hint of shame he flipped onto his belly and began dragging his expensive robes through the filth, fleeing the throne room like a snake slithering on the ground. Three heartbeats later the last remaining gargoyles ran out after him, as quick as their little legs allowed. I debated, seriously, reaching for the Night and just vaporizing the back of his head. The temptation was there, made even heavier by the way the odds were good I'd manage it. But if I did, it wasn't the story that'd punish me. I'd be, in essence, breaking off ties with the Grey Pilgrim. Which I couldn't afford to, if the Accords were to be more than a waste of ink and parchment.

"That was a mistake," I finally said.

"If it was," the Grey Pilgrim said, "then it was mine to make. Not yours."

I kept my face calm but winced beneath it. Already the cracks were beginning to run through what I'd wanted to be the foundations of the Liesse Accords. And it wasn't fair, I thought, for there was plenty of fault to spare and divide. But in the end, the Peregrine had stuck to our arrangement and helped slay the same woman whose life he'd bargained for. I could not truly ask more of him or begrudge his bitterness over having been led to this pass.

"If you're quite finished," Archer spoke up, "then I could use a hand, Pilgrim. I'm usually concerned only with hitting heads, not what comes after. Does he need healing?"

She'd propped up the Rogue Sorcerer over her knee, supporting the back of his neck. The Saint had knocked Roland unconscious, but aside from a red boot mark on his forehead the spellcaster should have no lasting marks. A concussion seemed likely, though, Named or not. The Pilgrim hurried to the younger hero's side, wielding Light with a delicate touch for but a few moments before the Sorcerer woke. The mark, I noted, had gone from bright red from light pink but it still remained highly visible.

"She's dead then," Roland croaked out, eyes going to the heroine's corpse. "Gods, what a waste."

"So it was," I quietly agreed.

His eyes, for once without trace of a coloured ring around the pupil, met mine.

"Your work?" he asked.

I nodded. Behind us, as is mocking the quiet of the conversation now taking place, the crown continued lashing out around itself with tendrils of sorcery.

"Whoever bears that will die," the Rogue Sorcerer frankly said. "I'd be like trying to grip a naked blade as tight as you can, only with your soul instead of your fingers."

The Saint of Swords' last kill, unerringly made from beyond the grave. Her aged figure still lay sprawled at the foot of the throne, still and silent. No one had dared to touch it.

"Look like the choice was made for us," Archer said, seemingly amused. "We're back at making a god and killing it, whether we like it or not."

"There is no choice to make," Tariq evenly said.

And already I could see the lay of that, how it'd unfold. A band of five assembled before the eyes of princes and princesses of Procer had gone into broken Arcadia at the urging of the Black Queen, among them perhaps the two most famous heroes alive. Neither the Regicide nor the Peregrine would return from that journey. The treacherous Tyrant of Helike would escape with but a curse, and from the heroes the only survivor would be the Rogue Sorcerer – a hero little known, and a mage to boot. Sorcery was not well-trusted, in Procer, and seemingly rare in Levant.

We'd be at war again before Morning Bell, bargain or not.

"Agreed," I said. "It'll have to be me."

Three gazes turned to me, Archer's the least surprised.

"You said it was possible resurrection would work," I reminded the Pilgrim. "And dawn comes. If it doesn't, well... Vivienne's been designated as heiress to the throne. I wish she'd had longer to prepare, but we don't always get to choose."

"No," Indrani said.

I blinked at her.

"You've cheated death too many times, Cat," she bluntly said. "You've always squeaked out of it so far because you had a story at your back, but this time the wind's going the other way. You've spent your luck thrice over, this is just going to get you killed."

"It'll get someone killed regardless," I said. "I don't relish the thought I might not come back from this, Indrani, but I knew the risk when I began going down this path."

"That's nice," Archer casually said. "Very stirring. But if you take so much as a step in that crown's direction, I'll knock you the fuck out."

She was, I realized as I looked at her stony expression, absolutely serious. It was a strange thing, to both love and be furious with someone in the same moment for the same reason.

"It cannot be you, Queen Catherine," the Grey Pilgrim agreed. "You underestimate the depth of the loyalties you have earned, and not only here. The Army of Callow would carry your corpse to the gates of Salia to make a funeral pyre of it. And I shudder to think of what the drow would be, without their designated conscience."

"It can't be you either," I hissed. "You think it'll go bad if I die? Hells, Pilgrim, your death alone would have Levant on the warpath but the Saint *and* you? Even if the First Prince turned up just to order the Alliance armies down there not to fight we'd still have a battle on our hands."

"Then it has to be me," the Rogue Sorcerer tightly said. "Archer has already been resurrected once, there is not even a chance of her being spared lasting death."

He shuddered out a breath.

"It will have to be me," Roland repeated. "It makes sense. I am the only practitioner among you, who best to shape this realm in what is needed of it?"

"At a guess? The only person in this room to have ruled over a court of the fae before," I said.

"Cat, you can't be trusted to make a choice like that right now," Indrani frankly said. "Whenever there's a blunder – and I'm guessing you count the Saint's death as one – you always get all… self-flagellating. Like you're just looking for a sword to fall on. Pilgrim says it's good politics to keep you alive? Even better. I don't really give a shit, though. I'd rather cut the damn thing than let you put it on."

"You can't think like that, Archer," I sharply said. "I'm one life. That's the weight on the scale. You'd be putting at risk hundreds of thousands-"

"Then it's a good thing I'm not one of Above's footsoldiers, isn't it?" Archer said. "I get to be selfish if I want to."

I wasn't going to make headway there, was I? Touched as I was, I was just as infuriated. Because I couldn't be grateful for this, not when it might cost the world so much for her to follow through. Who was it, I'd wondered, who'd taught her to love people on her own terms – much as I wanted to blame the Lady of the Lake for it, the dark suspicion lingered it might just have been me.

"It will not be you," the Pilgrim said. "Nor will it be Roland."

Though he'd gone pale at the notion of perhaps embracing his own death, I felt a sliver of admiration for the way the Sorcerer didn't simply take the first way out he was offered.

"The Black Queen was correct," Roland said. "There may be war, if you are the one crowned and killed."

"My death will echo," the Grey Pilgrim said, cocking his head to the side. "I have been promised this. There will not be war."

The Ophanim *agreed* with this? Godsdamned angels.

"You're needed to keep the heroes together," I said. "There's no one else with the pull."

Maybe, and I would not have put a lot of faith in that prospect, maybe the Saint could have succeeded at that. She'd had the strength, if not the charisma.

"The White Knight will return," the Pilgrim serenely said. "He was already on his way.

"The Tyrant had plans about him," I said.

"I expect he does," the Peregrine said, undertone amused. "It will come to nothing, under the stern glare of the Seraphim."

"It might be that you could forgive my death," the Rogue Sorcerer hesitantly said. "None could do the same, for you."

"Forgiveness was never meant to be a salve for every wound made on Creation," the Pilgrim gently said. "It was a gift to be handed out in the face of grave injustice. And there is no injustice, Roland, in an old man being allowed to rest at last."

"So you're just going to lie down and die?" I said.

The was a heartbeat of silence.

"The Saint of Swords is dead," I said. "We all had a hand in that, mine looming largest by far. But that's it, Pilgrim? Your friend is dead and you feel tired, so you're choosing death when Calernia is facing its harshest test since the reign of Triumphant?"

"Queen Catherine," the Sorcerer hissed. "There is no need for-"

"You've done some real nasty things over the years, haven't you Tariq?" I said. "We both know you have."

The old man's blue eyes, limpid as a cloudless summer sky, met mine.

"You don't get to roll over for death, after crossing those lines," I said. "After taking on that responsibility."

"Which of us are you truly haranguing, Black Queen?" the Grey Pilgrim chided me, not unkindly.

"I think I'll get away with it," I pensively replied. "I really do."

Because I'd been here before. Twice. At this crossroads, making this call. I'd chosen death to rid myself of a pattern of three with the Lone Swordsman and taken my due resurrection from the Hashmallim after refusing the crown they offered me. I'd chosen death once more to slip the bindings the Diabolist had entwined me in, making myself the beastly keystone to her demise, and refused the crown she offered me. Liesse had been the crucible of my existence in a way nowhere else in this world could claim to be. Which of my triumphs and ruins had not been born of this place, or taken place among it? Here in this city I'd forged my claim of power over Callow not once but twice – first through bargain, and then through simple might. I'd struck a pact here that allowed Akua Sahelian to govern this place, and when that governance led to folly it was on these grounds I'd torn through her heart. Indrani said I'd cheated my demise too often, and perhaps she was right. Twice, here, I had tricked life out of death. But there'd never been a third, for before I'd woken in the depths of the Everdark mortal once more I'd dreamt and within that dream asked Sve Noc a question: *am I dead?* And the reply had been: *at the threshold*. Not through. Not quite dead. And so, I thought, Archer might be wrong in this.

Maybe I did still have a story at my back: twice living through death after twice being offered a crown. There was power in reiteration, in repetition, and few numbers had heavier hand on a story than three. Or, I knew, this might be where the pattern came to a close. This once I'd be reaching for the crown, and so my death would remain. It could go either way, I felt. Yet even then, I had a better chance of living through this than any of the other three. Rolling the dice on poor odds had always been one of my worst habits, I thought, but why stop now? You only lived once – give or take a few times.

"Three times I've been offered a crown here, by someone neither fully friend nor foe," I began. "Three times-"

Archer, sighing, slid behind me and to my indignation she covered my mouth with her palm and put me in a chokehold. I began struggling, but she was Named and I was not: the disparity in strength could not be breached my mundane means.

"Is that... necessary?" the Rogue Sorcerer delicately asked.

"If you feel like you're winning," Indrani said, "the single stupidest thing you can do is let Catherine Foundling *talk*. Go on, Tariq. Before she turns it around on us."

I reached for the Night, preparing to force her back as gently as I could, but it slipped through my fingers. Fear rose up in me, and I looked up. The Sisters were perched on the edges of the gutted throne room, one to the east and one to the west. They watched, silent.

*Are you worthy?* Komena asked, a whisper in my ear.

Patrons, I thought. Not tools or companions but goddesses of which I was the high priestess. If I set a measure in their name, I would be measured by it. It was, I admitted, brutally fair of them.

*I have brought us here, through scheme and steel*, I told them. *I've tricked mortals and Named, set the Dead King aflight and freed from his grasp the last of the Fairfaxes. I have slain and won victories, all to bring this journey to an end of my making. Who can be worthy, if not me?*

Sve Noc watched me, judged me, and in inscrutable silence passed their judgement.

*All will be Night,* Andronike whispered in my ear, and it tasted like assent.

Indrani knew me best, and so when the goddess-crows above let out a cacophonous caw she immediately tried to knock me unconscious. Unfortunately I knew her as well, and so restored not to struggle but to the first trick I'd even seen one of the Firstborn use: sinking into a pool of Night at my feet, I dissolved into a tendril of shadow and followed forward. Even in that strange, unpleasant state I could feel the clash of Sve Noc and the Choir of Mercy – both attempting to hinder the others' champion and prevent their foe from hindering their own. They were, at least in that moment, each other's match. I could hardly see, when shadowed, for unlike drow this state of being did not come naturally to me. I had to leap back into mortal form to get my bearings, though fortunately I found myself not far from the throne. From the corner of my eye I found Indrani, having strung her bow, nocking an arrow and likely intending to wing me before I could claim the crown. The Sorcerer's jaw was tightly clenched as he worked some manner of sorcery, but it'd be too late. Sidestepping the Saint's corpse, I reached for the crown.

My fingers went through it

The illusion broke, now that I knew it was there, and so did the one the Rogue Sorcerer had woven around the Peregrine. The Grey Pilgrim took the wounded crown, set with his own star, and placed it upon his brow.

"No," I shouted.

Like it was the most natural thing in the world, the Grey Pilgrim leaned down and gently pried the Saint of Swords' blade from her cold hands.

And, just as gently, rammed it through his own heart.

# Chapter 51

# Twilight

"Of all Praesi I trust least those who come bearing gifts."

Queen Yolanda of Callow, the Wicked (known as 'the Stern' in contemporary histories)

There was a part of me still, after all these years, that expected the momentous to be flagrant. That the closing of an era or the birth of a realm should be an affair of thunder and lightning, a crashing and crackling storm of power. But that was so rarely the way, wasn't it? The pivots of history that we all got to see, the speeches and battles and coronations, they so often flowed from unseen turns taken months before. Quiet bargains and private councils, decisions made in the dark. Yet I had learned that the truth of Creation was that while at times power in exercise was deafening, more often it was hushed. Subtle. And as the ending that was breathed into the Twilight Court came from the Grey Pilgrim – Mercy's patient, farsighted and indirect hand – why would its coming be a raucous thing?

Tariq Fleet-foot, the sword of his oldest friend through the heart, let out a soft gasp and slumped onto the throne. Blue eyes fluttered to a close as trails of scarlet tainted the dusty grey of his robes: death blooming in three hues, painted by the Peregrine's own hand. The Pilgrim's face loosened slowly from a clench decades in the making, and as he sagged down against the throne he let out one last shuddering breath. That shudder rippled out, the last will of a man whose life had been a thankless struggle to lessen suffering in a world so very intent on wounding itself time and time again. It was a death that would ring out across Calernia, I thought. One not easily forgotten. Yet, looking at the white-haired healer who'd stumbled back with a sword through his chest, I could not help but believe it had been a lesser ending than he'd deserved. I'd had my quarrels with the Grey Pilgrim, but never once had I thought him malevolent or deliberately vicious. The shudder I'd felt slowly faded, and in deference to the death of a man who had tried so very hard to be a good I closed my eyes. I had no prayers to offer, for the goddesses I kept to were not the kind

whose attentions would have been welcomed by the Pilgrim, and so I remained silent instead.

The roof that would have been above our heads had been ripped away by my own wroth, when I'd hunted down Kairos Theodosian meaning to kill him, and so the lazy summer breeze reached us unhindered. It shook me out of my daze, enough that I opened my eyes and looked up. What had been darkness above us, Masego's grief and madness given shape, had became something softer. Almost wistful. It was closer to night than day, to my eye, but the shade of the twilight writ across the firmament of this realm was a pale and starry blue. Speaking not a word, I limped out of this cursed room. The summit of the tall stone stairs beyond the bronze gates allowed me to stand and take in the breathtaking sight splayed below: what had once been a ruin of dust and flame was now a realm in truth. The Hierophant's devastating use of this broken realm had been turned into something beautiful: a sprawling kingdom of tall grasses and rolling hills, of shadowy rivers and secret paths. It was a warm evening, like a southern summer's, yet the breeze was soft and its caress almost playful. It was the kind of night, I thought, that would be a pleasure to journey through.

I wondered if a young man called Tariq had once roamed a twilight much like this one, a very long time ago in a land far from here. If the echo of that memory had been enough to leave its mark on this place. For that this was the inheritance of the Peregrine there could be no denial: just as it had been set on the Twilight Crown, the pilgrim's star shone above in the starry sky.

"It's beautiful," the Rogue Sorcerer quietly said.

I'd not even heard him approach, too deeply lost in my thoughts. Long leather coat trailing at his back, the last of the three heroes to have heeded my call came to stand at my right. He was looking not only at this starlit realm below but also had what had been made of thrice-broken Liesse. The City of Swans had partaken of life breathed into this place, and though it was not the same city that'd once been the jewel of southern Callow I could still see the traces of that place in its fresh face. The ruins had not been raised anew but the sight of them had been... eased by the growth of greenery. Tall shaded trees had become the pillars of slender basilicas, gutted churches turned into ethereal gardens of flowers in shades of dusk. Vines with umbral flowers bound together streets like strange arches and soft grass had grown through both pavestones and graveyards. Liesse, I thought, had become the City of Twilight. A resting place for pilgrims and the lost, bell towers and softs beds of moss awaiting all who'd wander to this cradle of tragedy. I found my throat choking at the sight. How could it not, when Tariq's last gesture had been to make beauty out of the broken shards of my bitterest failure?

"The star's always watching," Archer softly said, having come to stand at my left. "You old rascal. Keeping an eye on it all, are you?"

How strange, that I found the thought comforting when the man had tried to kill me more than once.

"He always did," Roland said, tone quietly fierce. "Gods, he was not a perfect man. And there are things he did, that he asked us to do... But he looked out for us. Even when it cost him. *Especially* when it cost him."

It was not a grand eulogy, for a man who for good and ill had done so much for so many years, but I couldn't truly mind. What kind of words could any of us say that would be more than a pittance to the living, breathing tribute to the Grey Pilgrim that was around us?

"I wished I'd never had to fight him," I simply said, the honesty of it feeling a little too raw. "I wish it'd never come to this. But we so rarely get to choose, don't we?"

"Then win, Black Queen," the Rogue Sorcerer said, eyes burning as they met mine. "Because this was not *nothing*. Two great stars fell to forge this realm you promised, two servants of Above like few before and few will ever come again. It has to matter. Or else..."

He trailed off, though it was not a threat. It was almost a petition and more than a little desperate. *Or else what did their lives mean? Their tears and blood and decades of bitter struggle to bring just a little light to Calernia?* If the fall of such old and honoured stars meant not a thing, what could any of us ever hope to amount to?

"This war has only just begun," I softly said. "It will take us to Salia, to forge a peace. It will take us to Keter, to visit upon the Dead King what he has so often visited upon us. But there's another enemy, Sorcerer. She breaks kings with sentences and topples kingdoms with but the lightest of touches. None of this can end before she'd been killed. For good."

Roland dipped his head, not in acceptance but at least in acknowledgement.

"It seems," he said, "that we have much to speak about."

That we did, I silently agreed, dipping my own head in a return of courtesy. But not here, not now. Not looking at what could either be taken as a last breath of life freely gifted or an entire realm made into the mausoleum of good intentions.

"Not dawn yet, I think," Archer said. "But close. It might be time to go back, Catherine."

She was right, I knew. The Pilgrim had promised that the manner of his death would assure there was no war between the Grand Alliance and my own armies, but his death would still be catastrophic to relations between my people and the opposition. The Tyrant of Helike, by now, would not doubt have crawled back to his armies and begun his hasty retreat. There would be fears to quell, explanations to give, and more duties to see to than there were hours to either night or day. I *should* go back, for though the triumvirate of Vivienne, Juniper and Hakram could see to much of the situation there were parts that could only be settled by my own intervention. Fearsome as those three could be, my reputation loomed taller still.

"Go," I said. "I'll follow."

Indrani cast a look at me, half worried and half hesitant.

"Are you sure that-"

"Go," I repeated, a tad more sharply.

Her jaw tightened with displeasure, but she did not test me further. I did not have it in me to be furious at Indrani for getting in my way tonight, not right now – it was like the Pilgrim's death had replaced sentiment in me with some manner of exhaustion – but her actions there would not go unanswered. It would be a thorny knot to untangle, this mess we'd made together, for she had died and we'd both need knives sheathed if we were to help Masego out of the worst of his grief. But she'd not trusted me, in the end, even if her intentions had been guided by love of me. That would need to be addressed, lest the wound fester between us.

"Archer can guide you out," I told Roland. "She has a knack for paths like these."

He nodded, though his face was unsure.

"Come along, Rogue," Archer said, tone thick with forced cheer. "We're all in a need of a stiff drink after a night like this, and there's none to be had here."

No elaborate farewells followed, as they simply disappeared into the city below. Indrani would find a way out, as she had first found a way in when seeking Masego. The Lady of the Lake had shared knowledge with her I'd not asked the lay of, long aware that the keeping of her teacher's secrets was one of the few things Indrani considered sacred. I sat, after they'd gone, resting my bad leg against the rough granite steps. But for all that I was tired, it was a restless of weariness that'd settled over me. Before long I was hobbling down into Liesse, through the broken palace of the proud and ancient House of Caen – gone from Callow, like the city they'd once ruled. Above me, shadows among the shade, crows flew beneath the starry sky. I had no destination in mind to guide my steps, little more than a wandered in a realm of wanderers. Feeling the breeze stirring my hair, cooling my sweat in the crook of my neck, I passed through the garden that'd been made of Liesse. I trailed my fingers through luminous bushes bearing wine red flowers, limped through fields of soft grass made silver by starlight. It was a surreal city, and one where it would be easy to become lost. Yet I came upon a place, in time, where the scent of old deaths lingered. It'd been a basilica, once, before the walls were shattered.

Now all that remained of whatever beauty there'd been were tall panes of stained glass whose colour had faded, whatever scene they'd once depicted now instead a mere game of blue shades. There had been pillars, within, and though half-crumbled they'd become intertwined with thick and twisty trees bearing small red fruits. Yews, I thought, and what had once been a temple of worship to the Gods Above had instead become a manner of shaded grove, leading to a yew elder and larger than any of the others. It towered tall and broad, its branches spreading out far in a great crown of leaves. The wind set something akin to chimes tinkling when it passed through the branches, and it was when I saw the face of those chimes I understood the source of the taste of death. The ragged remains of a tabard that'd once depicted the golden bells of

House Fairfax trailed like streamers, tangled among them the broken shards of the armour last borne by the Good King Edward. Halfway sunken into the earth at the foot of the great tree the last Fairfax's sword shone from an errant ray of light, the blade still pristine and sharp. I slowly approached, in almost reverent silence: the King of Callow had cowed the Hells themselves, for a time, and done it with little more than will and spite.

The crows threaded through the branches and took perch with only the slightest murmur of a sound heralding them, their shadowy feathers melding into the penumbra of the great yew. They looked, I thought, as if they belonged here. My fingers softly lid across the grip of the sword once wielded by Edward Fairfax, and I smiled mirthlessly.

"In northern Callow," I said, "the yew is known as the tree of death. In the south and the heartlands it's the elder trees they claim to be that omen, but even in Laure the story was told different."

I flicked a glance upwards and found my patron goddesses silent yet watchful.

"It's because of the Deoraithe," I told them. "Their longbows, they're made from yew. And for a very long time, there was no sight half as dreaded in Callow or Praes as a company of Daoine longbowmen. There were older superstitions, too, but in my eyes it was the centuries of reaping lives that hung death on the branches of yews."

And still my only answer was silence.

"So this is how it goes," I softly said. "I take up again the sword I lost in the Everdark, and bring war to the Crown of the Dead. It's an old story. Well-worn, and strong for it."

King Edward had been taller than me, I thought, with broader shoulders as well. And yet, I suspected that if ripped that sword free from the earth it would fit my hand perfectly. Better than any other blade ever hand.

"The world spins on," I said. "No matter who lies buried. And so that is the sum of us: we fight and we die and if we're lucky we're remembered for a while still."

All we'd schemed and struggled and bled, and still this night hadn't belonged to any of us. How could it? When the crabs dragged each other down the only victor to be had was the bucket.

"No," I murmured. "I think not."

My fingers left the sword I would not claim.

"Am I not your high priestess, Sve Noc?" I said. "First Under the Night?"

"So you are," Andronike said.

"In this, we are satisfied," Komena said.

"Then as your priestess I make this claim – we can do *better* than this," I called out to the twin shadows among the branches. "Than a ruin of a victory, handed to us by kindly hand. I don't care if we've been tricked and tripped by the Intercessor or the Dead King or even fate itself. We can do better than this, and so this story has not come to an end."

I laid my palm against the rough bark of the yew, looking up through the branches.

"I heard you, Good King," I whispered. "Your warning. I hear and heed, so lend me your aid when I yet stumble."

Under the twilight sky the great yew groaned and twisted, the scent of death in the air thickening until I could taste it on the tip of my tongue. From the crown of the tree a branch dropped, slender desiccated deadwood still echoing of defiance in the face of the end. I knelt to take it, and found it was of excellent height and yield for me to lean on as I walked.

"We will not go gently," I promised to the tree-grave of the last Fairfax. "And we are not yet done."

Turning my back to the grove abruptly, I limped away leaning on the yew branch-staff. The grounds I had tread I tread once more, returning to the summit of the City of Twilight. Through grass and grove, through thorns and flowers and streets of worn stone. Behind me, as if trailing, Sve Noc followed on inky wings. I climbed the great steps of granite, and as I forced open the great gates of bronze I had never closed two great crows claimed my shoulders as their perch. Within awaited silence and something else, for though the Grey Pilgrim still sat dead on his throne with the Saint sprawled at his feet they were not alone.

Like a solemn tribunal, or some aerie of angels, the Choir of Mercy stood vigil over its fallen champion.

Under the stars a multitude of tall and thin silhouettes stood, the only marks of their presence silhouettes like a heat shimmer and ever-spinning eyes like wheels of flame. There were dozens and dozens of them, all bent as if in grief. None turned as I entered the throne room and my own back was coated in starlight, but the weight of their attention was felt nonetheless. I could almost hear a song being sung, as if the wind was carrying to my ear parts of a faraway refrain, and what little I could make out was... heartbroken. Melancholy in a way I was not sure I – or any mortal – could truly understand. The barest fraction of that feeling was enough to put a stutter to my step.

"You actually loved him, didn't you?" I said, voice wondering. "Or as close to that as you can."

They answered not. Whatever manner of mourning the angels bore, they would not share it with me. It took a single step forward, and as if a sword had been unsheathed a myriad of burning, spinning eyes turned to me. I swallowed dryly, for though Sve Noc were at my side and I knew well their power the Choir of Mercy was older and colder both, when it deemed it necessary.

"You can't bring him back," I said. "I understand. There's *rules*, and it's not in your nature to make exceptions."

The attention never wavered nor lessened in intensity.

"But I'm not you," I said. "Your rules don't bind me. And if you let me, I will."

I suspected, that if not for the Sisters sinking their talons deep enough into my flesh I bled I would have passed out. The blinding light and heat I felt, for just a moment, would have seen me fall to my knees if not for the staff in my hand. And yet it'd not been strike, for within that heat and light I'd heard whispers and while the words I'd not understood their meaning I'd somehow grasped anyway.

"Why?" I repeated.

It was a fair question, I supposed.

"Because I can, so I should," I said. "Because even when he was my enemy I did not believe him to be a bad man. Because. . . "

I struggled to find the words to express it, but perhaps the simplest truth was best.

"Because I don't want to be at war with you or him," I quietly said. "And the moment you choose to believe that, the war's over."

And I supposed I was a fool, thinking I could make peace with a Choir even if its virtue was that of mercy, but I owed it to all of us at leas to try.

"We kill you," I said, "you kill us. The wheel keeps spinning, the world keeps bleeding. And maybe that can't be mended, maybe there's just something about mortals that's all teeth and hunger and it'll never go away no matter what we make of ourselves – but we can do *better* than this!"

I gestured at the room around us, the realm around us, but I meant more. I meant the armies below, at each other's throats even in the face of annihilation. I meant the Named scraping each other raw until even the noblest beginnings and the finest intentions became knives to hack at each other with. I meant Praes, hungry and wealthy, and Callow, sated and poor, each capable of helping the other but forever clawing at themselves instead.

"Please," I said. "I know you don't make exceptions, and I won't ask you to. All you need to do is to stand aside."

We stood there, the Choir of Mercy and the Arch-heretic of the East, and a long moment passed.

They stood aside.

Heart beating wildly I limped forward, until I stood by Tariq's corpse. He would have looked to be sleeping, if not for the sword through his heart. Night flickered through my veins, strengthening my limbs, and the Sisters flew up cawing like grim omens. I eased out the Saint's blade, spilling blood all over myself, and dropped it to the side. And then, without warning, I stuck my arm into the Grey Pilgrim as the thief of Bestowal that I was. Three aspects awaited: a star, an eye and a prayer. It was the last I ripped out, a whisper of **Forgive** touching my mind. My fingers withdrew a small receptacle of wood, which I slid open with shaking fingers. There was a fine red powder within, and a power that would have blinded me if I'd tried to gaze upon it.

"Time to rise, pilgrim of grey," I murmured. "There's still work to be done."

I blew out a breath, and the powder scattered across the dead man's face. A long moment massed, once more, and my stomach tightened.

Then, above us in the sky, the pilgrim's star winked out.

Tariq's mouth opened to a ragged gasp, and within the depths of Liesse death was cheated for the third time at my hand.

# Interlude: Concourse I

> "When a highborn is slain, look to who benefits and you will have learned what families the third party wants to incite strife between."
>
> Extract from 'The Behaviours of Civil Conduct', by High Lady Mchumba Sahelian

There was only one crowned head left south of Salia, and it was Princess Rozala Malanza of Aequitan.

As a girl or, honesty compelled her to admit, as recently as a few years ago Rozala might have found such a prospect exciting. To wield such influence, to claim such authority, and with so few to check her! After her mother's disastrous bid for First Princess during the Great War and the ruin that had befallen the Malanzas for it, Rozala had been forced to look in the eye the fact that if she did not take cover under another's wings her family mighty yet be toppled entirely and that odds were Aequitan would not know prominence against in her lifetime. And now, not even a decade later, Princess Rozala could be argued to be the second most powerful individual in Procer: she commanded a great host, had inherited the reins of a powerful bloc within the Highest Assembly and her reputation as both general and noblewoman had reached heights she'd never before thought possible. And yet, as dawn inched ever closer the Princess of Aequitan found it all felt hollow. For all the power and influence that had been gathered to her name, Rozala Malanza found that the sum of what she could do in the face of death was look up at the sky and pray.

Pray that the Peregrine and the Regicide lived up to their legends, that the Rogue Sorcerer proved worthy of one day having such tales matched to his name. That the Tyrant's schemes would be turned against the Crown of the Dead and, most of all, that the Black Queen would make as terrifyingly potent an ally as she had been an enemy. They'd all danced to the sounds of Catherine Foundling's tune, this winter, found the calm-faced villain always one step ahead. *Let the Hidden Horror taste of that, for once*, Princess Rozala thought. *Let every promise that has been made under cover of night come true, and great vengeance be visited upon the King of Death.* Rozala Malanza ruled lands large and wealthy, commanded soldiers in the dozens of thousands and held power of life and death over a dozen times that – and so, left to stand stewing in her own inability to do more than hope, she pondered her growing mislike of the Cho-

sen and the Damned. Those colourful few, cloaked in power and mystery, who would bargain with the fate of nations and the pivots of history. Who left all others in the dust of their grandiose *adventures*, be they great or small. What a hateful thing it was, to have your own life and death decided by the hands of others.

She was not unaware of the irony inherent to a princess of the blood pondering such things. The touch of rue jostled her out of her thoughts enough that she heard the person approaching behind her, though she did not turn. Hair loose and going down her back, Rozala tightened the warm fur cloak around her body and kept looking at the night sky brought about by the blasphemous sorceries of the drow.

"There have been another dozen," Louis Rohanon, once Prince of Creusens, told her.

The Princess of Aequitan did not need to look to know he was exhausted beyond all words. Neither of them had slept in much, much too long – and there was only so far brandy and alchemical tonics could carry one past what one's body could tolerate.

"Were they more coherent than the last?" she asked.

"In a manner of speaking," Louis sighed. "It has become apparent that the... visions all concern the same journey, but the Heavens were seemingly unconcerned with the order of the revelations. It is all rather haphazard."

Louis Rohanon had never been a particularly pious man, which was Rozala was less than surprised by his implicit criticism of the manner the Gods Above had granted their insights. No doubt if the Prince – former now, she reminded herself – of Creusens was a one of the Gods the visions would have been regularly arranged, in good order and with the proper seals affixed to bills of delivery. Less than surprised, yes, but perhaps a little amused. Not that she would show it. The mirth was short-lived, though.

"And the initial vision," Rozala said. "Has anything happened to cast it in doubt?"

She looked at him from the corner of her eye and caught his face tightening.

"No," Louis quietly admitted. "It still returns at least once per lot of dreamers waking, and never once have we been told of anything taking place past it. It seems to have been the end of their journey."

The Princess of Aequitan closed her eyes. She'd not slept, so there'd been no opportunity to experience the dreams, but in the urgency after the first dreamers woke she'd had several of those blessed with the visions describe it to her in detail. It always seemed to centre around the same vivid parts: the Black Queen's scream of denial after she realized being tricked, the Grey Pilgrim taking up the blade of the fallen Saint of Swords and then the wizened hero's taking of his own life. All who'd dreamt the dream agreed that the Black Queen had tried to prevent the Peregrine's death, though words failed them when they tried to explain why. Yet it seemed undeniable, by now, that both the Regicide

and the Grey Pilgrim were dead. The former, if one of the growingly reoccurring visions was to be believed, having been slain by Catherine Foundling herself.

"Any word of the Dominion armies?" she asked.

"None of the Blood have returned from their seclusion," Louis said. "The senior captains still hold command, and our people in their camps confirm their rank and file are having similar dreams."

"It's the Blood that'll make decisions, not the captains or the soldiers," Princess Rozala said. "Keep sending envoys, Louis. We can't afford for the battle to resume."

"Dawn will bludgeon the drow hard," the former Prince of Creusens carefully said. "And will arrive soon. If a victory is to be seized by surprise, it would be in the coming hour."

"Tell me, Louis," the dark-haired princess flatly said, "even if we slew every last soldier of the Army of Callow without losing a man, what do you believe will happen when the Black Queen returns?"

"She's already raised one army of the dead," Louis said, though he shivered. "How many times could she truly do such a thing?"

And shiver he should, for Malanza had been told the same tale as he and it had clenched her guts to hear it. An ancient king of Callow stolen from the Dead King's grasp and hundreds of thousands of furious wraiths summoned to deliver his wrath? Such a thing could break an army fresh and dug-in, if well-used, and Rozala Malanza's host was tired and spread out. For all that the Black Queen had come to favour subtler tricks than those she'd plied at the Battle of the Camps, it would not to do forget for a moment that they were facing a woman capable of slaying thousands with snap of her fingers.

"Regardless, this is not a gamble we can even begin to consider with the League still on the field," Rozala reminded him. "They may have withdrawn but they are not so far as that."

The disparate armies of the League of Free Cities had, as of an hour past, begun to retreat. They'd put perhaps a mile between themselves and the other two great hosts on the plains, their great combined camp turning into a labyrinth of mayhem before it'd even been fully raised. Rozala had ordered envoys sent there, to probe for intentions and information, but so far all had been turned away outside the camp and the few spies she'd tried to slip in had been shot and hung from poles as a warning. She'd not even tried to get anyone inside the Army of Callow's camp, well aware that Wasteland sorceries would make infiltration more than merely difficult, but at least there her envoys had been received by Lady Vivienne Dartwick. Who was now, it seemed, heiress to the throne of Callow. Lady Dartwick had been courteous but dclined Princess Rozala's offer of sending a contingent of priests from the House of Light to see to her wounded, likely suspecting the additional intent of gleaning the state of her camp through it. At least the venture had confirmed that some of her soldiers were touched by the dreams too, as well as confirming that the 'priests' of the heretical House Insurgent were truly capable of healing. Which would

not be a pleasant to hear for some of the priesthood in Salia, Rozala suspected. Last she'd heard from the capital, lines against Callow had been hardening amongst the House of Light.

"As you say, Princess Rozala," Louis relied, inclining his head.

She grimaced, for until a few hours ago though she had been his leader they had also been peers: and while the former still held true, the latter did not. They would have to become used to that. Rozala tried to conceive of a sentence that could mend the gap she could feel growing between them, but sentiment had never been her knack and she struggled over the words until the entire debate was made moot. A messenger approached, though Rozala did not recognize her face and she was being escorted by a pair of Aequitan soldiers. The messenger bowed low, and only began to speak when Rozala gave her leave.

"Your Grace," the woman said, her faint Alamans accent still discernible. "You have been summoned to stand before the First Prince. The Order of the Red Lion has found the restrictions on scrying lifted at last."

Louis' face darkened with both anger and embarrassment.

"It was ordered that any successful contact with Salia be reported immediately," he sharply said. "How is it that I am only now hearing of this?"

"You ordered everyone under your command to do so," the messenger politely agreed. "Yet I am here on behalf of Her Most Serene Highness' plenipotentiary envoy Arnaud Brogloise, who answers only to the First Prince and the Highest Assembly."

So Cordelia Hasenbach had hidden an entire set of messengers and scryers right under her nose, Rozala darkly thought. Likely among the army of the former Prince of Cantal, who until so recently she'd believed one of her most eager supporters. The Princess of Aequitan grit her teeth at the memory of Arnaud's treachery revealed in the bloodiest of ways, though now was not the time to settle that account.

"As always, I am at the disposal of the First Prince," Rozala replied flatly. "Guide the way, messenger."

Louis was left with instructions to have someone inform her the moment there was movement from the Levantines, no matter who it was she was speaking with at the time. The dark-haired princess followed the messenger into the camp of the Cantal army, though she was not so foolish as to do so without a company of trustworthy Aequitan soldiers escorting her. She was well aware that the First Prince would find it much more difficult to take her head after the dust had settled and her star rose in the eyes of commons and royalty alike, and while Rozala was not certain it was in Hasenbach's nature to so bluntly snuff out a rival these were dark days for all. Fear could do strange things to a woman: sometimes it could urge her to greatness, but it could just as easily spur her to the basest of instincts. Yet Rozala and her escort were not surrounded and slaughtered but instead guided to the former Prince of Cantal's private pavilion where the man himself awaited. Along with a handful

of wizards who took their leave when dismissed, and a basin of water large enough it could have been used as a bath. Arnaud Brogloise rose from his seat when she entered, as the fresh disparity in their ranks required, and personally introduced her.

"Her Grace Rozala Malanza, Princess of Aequitan and supreme commander of the southern armies," he briskly said.

Cordelia Hasenbach's cool blue eyes, framed by those perfect golden tresses, were already studying her through the waters and so Rozala offered the proper bow.

"Your Highness," she said. "As I was summoned, I came."

"For that promptness I thank you, and again for the services you rendered the Principate on this campaign," the First Prince said. "You may consider me informed or recent developments in Iserre, for the purpose of this conversation."

"So I shall," Rozala replied, resisting the urge to glance at Brogloise. "May I then inquire, Your Highness, as to what the purpose of this conversation is? While I have matters to bring up before you, your messenger implied... pressing need."

It was as close as she could come to chiding the First Prince for summoning her so abruptly, and the message should be twice as loudly heard for the way Rozala had kept to the courtesies while Hasenbach very clearly had not.

"As of a quarter hour ago, we have confirmed that the Dead King has withdrawn on all fronts," the First Prince said.

Rozala's eyes widened in surprise.

"Furthermore, while my cousin finds it difficult to see through either the Hidden Horror or the Black Queen, she has confirmed that a truce of more than one month and less than six was bought, though not at what price."

I did not escape the dark-haired princess' attention that Catherine Foundling had been mentioned in this, though for now she could only speculate as to why.

"You believe this is the doing of the Queen in Callow?" Princess Rozala asked.

Hasenbach sighed.

"Queen *of* Callow," she finally said. "Best we grow used to that, Your Grace, for it seems bargains will have to be struck. The Augur had gleaned that the truce is related to the Black Queen, though little more than that. Given the consequences of hostilities resuming, we cannot afford to take risks with Queen Catherine's life – or, indeed, to risk provoking her at all for at least a month."

A pause saw the First Prince's tone grow heavy and solemn.

"In that spirit, Princess Rozala Malanza, as commander of the Principate's southern armies I charge you with the preservation of Queen Catherine Foundling's life and the safeguard of her armies and associates. Should the Dominion strike at her, you are to take any measures short of open war with Levant to prevent conflict reigniting between Callow and the Grand Alliance."

Rozala sharply breathed in. Open war, the First Prince had said. Which was implicit endorsement of assassinating Dominion commanders over allowing the

Black Queen to be put at risk. If it ever came out that Cordelia Hasenbach had given such an order, the Grand Alliance might very well splinter. The First Prince, Rozala thought, had just handed her a knife to put to her throat in years to come. The Princess of Aequitan would never like the cold-eyed woman ruling over Procer, she knew that. There was too much bad blood.

Yet there were times where she could not help but admire the other woman, in spite of all the rest.

"I understand, Your Highness," the dark-haired princess said.

"I believe you do, Princess Rozala," the First Prince of Procer evenly replied. "Whatever comes, the Principate must survive. Do as you must, and know you have the full weight of my authority behind you."

The water in the basin rippled and in the heartbeat that followed Cordelia Hasenbach's silhouette disappeared, leaving behind only tepid liquid. While the First Prince had been within her rights to take her leave so abruptly, it surprised Rozala that a woman known so far and wide for her diplomatic talents would so carelessly offer discourtesy twice on the same night. Then it occurred to her that with the audience having come to an end so swiftly she'd never had opportunity to bring up the petitions passed on to her. The dark-haired Arlesite turned to Arnaud Brogloise, who still stood in silence. His dark eyes had not ceased studying either of the princesses as they spoke, though at least he'd not bothered to put on the pretence of being a blustering fool again. In Cleves the middle-aged former prince had put on some muscle, adding it to his pudgy frame, but Rozala had never found him to have much of a presence – on occasion a sort of buffoonish swagger, but nothing to give her pause. Yet now his girth seemed less laughable, his ruddy face no longer a fool's visage, and the Princess of Aequitan realized odds were he was physically stronger than he. It was somewhat unsettling to know that, now that she'd seen Arnaud Brogloise open the throat of royalty without batting an eye.

"You are still her envoy, I take it," Princess Rozala said.

She was princess and he not: no longer was courtesy owed.

"I am to begin negotiations with the Queen of Callow when she returns," the older man acknowledged. "I've already spoken with her right hand, to interesting result."

"Lady Dartwick?" Rozala asked, surprised.

"Hakram Deadhand, the Adjutant," the Alamans corrected. "He lacks formal title save for his Damnation, but wields the influence nonetheless."

An orc, holding power in Callow? It had been one thing when the Wasteland still held sway over these lands, but it seemed rather odd that one of that land's ancient enemies would have such authority within its borders now.

"And what did the Deadhand have to say?" the Princess of Aequitan asked.

"A great deal, on the subject of accords," Arnaud replied, lips strangely quirking. "I have a great deal of reading ahead of me."

"More than you believe," Rozala said. "I have petitions to pass on to the First Prince. As you've demonstrated a knack for reaching her, they will be

placed in your hands. Delaying would be ill-advised, Arnaud."

The man let out a breath that straddled the line between a sigh and a chuckle.

"You have something to say?" the princess flatly said.

"I would not speak out of turn, Your Grace," he said. "Yet I wonder – these petitions, would they be the designated succession for the abdications of the night?"

They were, though Rozala did not immediately say so. Thought it was little more than a formality, save if accusations of treason and other great crimes were to be made, the designated succession for a principality of Procer was to be submitted to the Highest Assembly. There'd only been a handful of refusals throughout the entire history of Procer, usually when villainy or civil war had split the realm asunder. Why would such a matter amuse Arnaud? Certainly the amount of crowns to be approved was unusually high, perhaps even without precedent, but... The Princess of Aequitan's blood ran cold.

"Send for the wizards, Brogloise," she said. "I will put the matter to the First Prince myself."

"I will change nothing," he replied. "An extraordinary session of the Highest Assembly was called. In times of troubles the wisdom of our predecessors is once again needed, and so the Guillermont Decree has been restored."

It took a moment for Rozala to place it. Not the name of Guillermont, for that she could hardly ignore: it was the name of royal house that had ruled Aequitan before the Malanzas rose to prominence and set them aside. The decree in particular, though, came from the First Princess Éloïse Guillermont – best known for ending the Principate's occupation of Callow. Before she'd been First Prince she'd been a sitter of the Highest Assembly, and her election to the office of First Princess had been... contentious. The politics of the time had been complicated, as they often were in Procer – Guillermont had been the leader of a bloc among the Assembly that held no lands in Callow and so considered the taxes levied to keep armies standing there an utter waste – but the broad lines had been that Procer in those days had been split between the royalty that wished withdrawal and those that wished to tighten Procer's grip. Princess Éloïse had risen to power by seizing an opportunity after Callowan rebels had slain five princes in their beds in Laure, gathering her allies in the Assembly and passing her eponymous decree before succession could be arranged. It was an obscure procedural measure that specified no *assermenté* – that pretentious Alamans term for proxy – could be used to present one's name for confirmation of succession. The would-be ruler had to attend in person. In practice, that'd meant that the designated heirs and heiresses of the slain royals had been forced to leave their seats in the Assembly empty for more than a year as they remained in Callow trying to keep their holdings from collapsing. Those empty seats had allowed the Princess of Aequitan to swing the balance of votes in her favour by enough of a margin she was elected First Princess and ordered the withdrawal from Callow, changing the path of history.

Yet that had been a mere procedural trick, one that First Princess Éloïse herself had been easily persuaded into rescinding when she'd ascended to the office. What Rozala was beginning to piece together was a different beast entirely. Seven crowns had been abdicated, this night. That meant that almost a third of the Highest Assembly, which held twenty-four seats, had been silenced: proxies could not vote when there was no ruling prince or princess stood behind them, for they were the voice of that ruler and had no formal decisional power of their own. That left seventeen votes, then, for the foreseeable futures. The Lycaonese principalities made four. Salia itself, the demesne of the First Prince, held a vote as well. Prince Frederic of Brus and Hasenbach's other two foremost loyalists in Salamans and Tenerife were well known to have instructed their *assermentés* to follow Hasenbach in all things, which meant eight votes. Prince Beatrice of Hainaut's lands were being defended by Lycaonese armies, which likely made for nine and with Prince Gaspard in Cleves being heavily dependent on southern supplies for his defending armies that made ten out of seventeen. A clear majority that would vote however Cordelia Hasenbach wanted it to. And it would not be broken in the coming months, for the First Prince would be able to put her chosen candidates on the abdicated thrones long before any possible designated heir presented themselves in Salia. After all, the only mages who knew the secrets of scrying in Iserre were in Hasenbach's service, and no rider could ride quicker than sorcery.

"She has made herself the queen of Procer," Rozala croaked, "in everything but name."

"On doom's approach," Arnaud Brogloise said, "law must fall silent."

"And you would enable this?" Princess Rozala hissed. "You were a prince, Arnaud. You understand what is at stake: the Assembly can be led, but it must never be *commanded*. That way lies tyranny."

"Oh, we'll survive a spot of tyranny," he replied. "Yet we might not survive Keter without it."

"What did she give, to make of you such a loyal hound?" the Princess of Aequitan hissed. "What manner of ugly bargain was made?"

"She let her kin die and her home burn, to better our chances of victory," Arnaud said. "Loyalty is a child's sentiment, Your Grace. I heed Her Highness's decrees because she had proved willing to sacrifice whatever is necessary for Procer to survive."

The scathing reply on the tip of Rozala's tongue had to be swallowed, for another entered the pavilion. It was, the princess saw, one of her own officers.

"Captain Matias?" she asked, tone harsh.

"Your Grace," the soldier said, bowing. "Louis Rohanon has sent word: the armies of the Dominion are gathering."

Cursing, Princess Rozala Malanza thought, would not help in the slightest. Yet she still blasphemed several times, before sending for enough soldiers to give those damned Levantine madmen pause before they got everyone killed.

# Interlude: Concourse II

> "Thus the Gods granted us the third boon: no longer would scales close our eyes, obscuring knowledge of Good and Evil and preventing us from earning just deserts."
>
> The Book of All Things, sixth verse of the second hymn

Juniper had done what she could to keep the army on battle footing, but not even the Hellhound's sternest warnings could keep an air of festivity from hanging over the camp of the Army of Callow. Hakram noted with some amusement that while the ale rations that Legion tradition dictated should be opened after a great victory remained sealed and put away there seemed to be no lack of drink flowing through the cups of the legionaries – be they exiles or the Black Queen's own. While the Army of Callow had been under strict instructions to refrain from sacking towns and cities even when its columns were detached and the supply situation became arduous, there'd been no order sent down to avoid trading with Procerans. Callowan soldiers were on campaign pay, which meant only half the coin was handed and the rest set aside for return home, but they were hardly penniless and in a war-torn region like Iserre they were the closest thing to patrons the locals would see for the winter. That'd overridden reluctance to trade with wicked heretics some, though no doubt there'd been price gouging. At the very least, most the bottles and flasks merrily being traded around fires were filled with the rich red wines the Principate's heartlands were known for. The ambitious had sprung for bottles of *pleurs de fée*, the heady Alamans herbal liquor whose name could more or less be translated into Lower Miezan of 'fairy tears'. Hakram had tried it a few months back and found the drink foul, though humans seemed to like the taste well enough.

"You'd think we fought a battle, by the revelry," Vivienne said, tone dry.

Neither of them were fools, and the former Thief was an old hand at this sort of game, and so instead of wandering around the camp in heavy dark cloaks that hid their faces they'd put on officer's armour and kept their faces half-hidden by helms. Two well-fitted armoured gauntlets, one empty and the other hiding bone, had seen to it that Hakram's most easily discernible marks would be kept out of sight. The orc followed the human's gaze, finding a pair of grizzled or goblins cheerfully bullying some Callowan girl-soldier into drinking

enough *aragh* it was a near-certainty she'd puke. The sappers noticed the attention but were unbothered bit it. Not unreasonably so: Adjutant was passing for a captain of heavies, and Vivienne for a mage lieutenant. Neither of them would be in an easy position to punish the drinking of soldiers so far removed from their own theoretical commands.

"Perhaps we didn't," Hakram quietly replied, "but it feels like victory nonetheless, doesn't it?"

"We threw some spells and shot some engines and General Abigail ordered a single cavalry charge on enemy mages," the blue-eyed noblewoman said. "The drow fought, admittedly, but us? This entire 'battle' had seen fewer than two hundred soldiers die, Hakram."

"Aye," Adjutant agreed, once more amused. "Fewer than two hundred of ours dead, and we've both forced the Grand Alliance into truce and put the League of Free Cities to retreat. They'd make songs of today, Vivienne, even without Choir dreams gilding the legend."

"Legionaries would make songs of rivers being wet, after drinking," the heiress-designate to the throne drily replied. "They've taken to the sport of it the way Callowans once loved jousting."

Hakram had never actually seen one of the famous Callowan tourneys, much less a joust, tough he'd read of them in books. Under the Carrion Lord's rule knightly orders had been banned, which effectively killed the practice, and though under Catherine the Order of the Broken Bell had risen anew it was also part of the kingdom's army in a time of war – and so not free to pursue such leisurely pastimes. Under the old kingdom the Fairfaxes had often held tourneys to recruit promising knights into the Royal Guard, which had leant the practice a certain legitimizing weight, but Cat had balked at resurrecting it. When Grandmaster Brandon Talbot had pressed the matter she'd told him she'd rather arm another company of regulars or feed a village through winter than 'piss away gold celebrating the virtue of knocking down people with sticks'. He'd caught Juniper, whose distaste for the chivalric trappings of Callowan knighthood was deeply ingrained, grinning to herself for a solid month after that session of the Queen's Council.

"Mock if you will," Hakram gently said, "but you know I speak the truth. Tonight will be remembered for many years to come. It will have consequences, Vivienne. Ripples."

They'd resumed walking, and though the gloom of Akua Sahelian's curtain of night had cast darkness over all it was not enough that Adjutant did not see the unease his words had brought to Vivienne's face. Like him, she had difficult grasping what might yet come of what had taken place tonight. Unlike him, however, that blindness worried her. Their steps slowed as they left the outskirts of the Second Army's camp in favour of Fourth's. He'd have to speak less here, as he'd spent months as an observer with the Fourth Army and he might be recognized by some through his voice even in the dark. Vivienne's gaze was on a young Soninke legionary, standing on the shoulders of a pair of

orcs with a clay pot of black paint in hand as he added to one of the army's banners.

"Wings," she softy said. "I will not be surprised if the Third is doing the same. Sve Noc were not meek of hand in Sarcella."

The legionary had some talent, Hakram, though, for though instead of a brush it was the work of fingers dipped in paint the fresh symbols added to the banner could not be mistaken for anything but what they were: crow's wings. Two pairs, sharply shaped and feathered, and the Soninke finished the last touches on the last wing only to reveal the Fourth Army's changed banner: the four in Miezan numerals, gold on Fairfax blue, but now framed with crow wings at the upper corners.

"It'll spread from there," Adjutant acknowledged.

The soldier-artist was helped down by the pair of well-built orc women who'd been holding him up – one of them, Hakram could not help but notice, had an enticingly muscled frame and fangs that looked like they'd go *right* through bone – and the three of them were greeted by cheers from the throng of soldiers that'd been watching.

"I'd say something scathing about soldiers and superstitions," Vivienne mused, "but for all I know that might be enough to attract the gaze of the Crows."

"Best to keep on good terms with gods, when death and dying's your trade," Hakram said.

"Even those?" the noblewoman said. "I wonder. That Catherine has charmed ancient horrors into some manner of patronage I've no trouble believing – Merciful Heavens, it wouldn't even be the first time – but that does not mean the spread of their influence is a boon. She will not always be there to keep them honest, and when our soldiers return home there might be... complications."

"The House Insurgent has been rather amiable to the drow," he pointed out.

There'd been incidents, of course, but the Firstborn were being kept in hand by their chieftains and to be frank the Insurgents were trouble all around. Hakram had been told of quarrelsome priests, before, but it'd been with the understanding that those quarrels were largely theological. The House Insurgent was rather prone to fistfights, for priests, and it likely did not help that most of them were young and fresh to their rebellion.

"The Insurgents are the hotheads and Catherine's most radical partisans in the House," Vivienne said. "It's the priests in Callow that might have words when the banners come back bearing Night's wings. Heresy, in particular, comes to mind."

Hakram had followed the debates within the Callowan House of Light with great interest, to the extent that he'd sought a sister for theological lessons. More than once Sister Mariet had hinted that he should consider conversion for the sake of his soul, but given how clear-spoken and learned the old woman had proved to be he'd hardly minded. The conclave in Laure that'd followed the Jacks seeding the rumours he and Vivienne had agreed on of the Woe's time in Keter had taken them both by surprise, and they'd both found that as they had

no real influence within the House they could only be spectators to what then unfolded. Perhaps a third of the priesthood of Callow, numbering high with the young and those hailing from the heartlands of the kingdom – which had always been the region most eager to embrace the Black Queen's reign – but also a surprising among of oldest priests from the north who'd been infuriated by the Proceran House being involved at the Battle of the Camps had taken a hard line and pressed for the entire Tenth Crusade to be declared graceless. That'd been judged too extreme an approach by many, even though the Grand Alliance had come to be held in great disdain. It would be, in essence, declaring the entire priesthood of the Dominion, Procer and Ashur to be grasping heretics and any soldier participating in the crusade to have forfeited the grace of the Heavens.

Cooler heads, mostly priesthood from the ravaged south and the wary east, had tried to broker a compromise by instead declaring the decrees of the same Salian conclave that'd declared Catherine to be Arch-heretic of the East to be themselves heresy. That vote had passed unanimously, but the radicals had pushed for denunciation of the House of Light in Procer as a whole and found little appetite for the measure among their fellows. The talks turned harsh when the compromise motion of the House providing a tithe from its coffers to the Kingdom of Callow to support the defence of the realm was flatly refused by the southern priesthood, who was already beggaring itself providing charity to the families displaced by the Arcadian War. With that second compromise collapsing, the radicals scorned their fellows and mocked them for *children of Dana* – which, Hakram learned from the ever-helpful Sister Mariet, was a reference to the infamous Sister Dana of Laure who'd colluded with the Procerans during their occupation Callow – before walking out of the conclave. They'd come to call themselves the House Insurgent, in the months that followed, and many had flocked to the Army of Callow. Yet it could not be denied that most the Callowan priesthood, more than two thirds of it in truth, had preferred a tamer stance.

In the kingdom the priests who'd remained in the fold had come to be called the House Constant, though that was more story than truth: they were united mostly in their eschewal of harder measures, and in other things remained as prone to squabbling among themselves as the Callowan priesthood was reputed for. They could be counted on to back Catherine against all comers, so long as those comers were foreign, but Vivienne was right in worrying of dark wings painted on banners. The settling of a goblin tribe on Callowan soil had been a hard mouthful to swallow for many of them, as was the entrusting of so many high offices to Wastelanders and greenskins, yet those had only been earthly matters. The Crows earning some devotion of their own, however, would be seen as Below sinking its claws in the hearts of the Callowan flock. There would be trouble.

"Most the soldiers we took in from the old legions keep to Below, if they keep to anything at all," Hakram said. "And many of what used to be the

Fifteenth do the same. It may not be too contentious a matter so long as it is kept ceremonial. Soldiers' superstition, as you said."

"I hope you're right," Vivienne said.

Yet her eyes were on the cheering soldiers, surrounding a crow-marked banner.

"But if you are not," she said, "then it might be necessary to back our favoured horse within the House of Light."

Adjutant's brow rose.

"Insurgent over Constant, you mean," he said, tone pensive as he measured the rusks. "It might be it can be done. If we return victors one and all, their reputation will have risen. Yet there are risks to meddling there, especially for us."

House Fairfax had been embroiled in disputed with the House of Light more than once, over the span of its line, most often over the great cathedral of Laure and what was spoken in the sermons given there. Yet the old kings and queens of Callow had been Named as often as not, exalted in Above's service. It was one thing for one of that ilk to intervene in the House's affairs but entirely another for the *Black Queen* to do so. If a villain was seen as trying to subvert the House of Light, rebellion was certain. Even the Carrion Lord had chosen the soft death when dealing with the priests, preferring instead the stratagem of starving them of coin.

"Too early to tell if it'll come to that," Vivienne Dartwick finally said, eyes hooded. "We'll have to keep an eye on things as they unfold."

Adjutant rumbled in agreement and they resumed their walk. The First Army's camp, where they'd begun their wandering, had been quiet and orderly compared to the rest – as was only to be expected, as it was Juniper's own command and closest to her displeasure should festivities become too obvious. The Second's, under General Hune, had been tense for other reasons entirely. As Hune's army had seen fighting during the day and the night, it'd been allowed to rotate most their companies to sleep. Which had turned out less than restful, when vivid dreams began waking the legionaries. The First Army's entire mage contingent had been awoken to put together answers, as well as the Senior Mages from other armies. So far there'd been little more put together than the string of visions depicting parts of the struggle that'd taken place over Liesse, though the shape of the whole adventure had been taking appearance when they'd left the mages to it. Adjutant would have liked to assign Akua Sahelian to the matter, but she'd had more pressing duties: the soul of the Carrion Lord had been stolen back from the heroes, as had been his body weeks ago, and now the shade who'd once been the Diabolist had been tasked to bind soul and flesh anew after their brutal severing. Still, useful as her expertise might have been the army's mages and scribes were capable of seeing to the matter. It was less than urgent, anyhow, as Catherine would tell the tale herself when she returned. Most important, as far as Hakram was concerned, was that the most recurrent and vivid of the visions showed that Grey Pilgrim and

the Saint of Swords were seemingly dead. The latter would do no favours to Catherine's reputation, but the former was a deeper concern.

The Dominion was prickly, when it came to the Peregrine, and though the visions legionaries had received made it clear Cat had tried to prevent his death that might not mean too much to grief-stricken killer with more pride than sense. Someone would have to be blamed, and even if it did not outright come to war they might try to kill Catherine upon her return to 'avenge' the Grey Pilgrim. Which would lead to war regardless, no two ways about it. His warlord was popular even with the Legions-in-Exile, who of the coalition holding this camp were the host with the least fondness for the Black Queen. The Army of Callow and the Firstborn had deeper loyalties, and very few qualms over killing either Procerans or Levantines if provoked. The truce over the field had been achieved by scheme and force of personality more than great desire for peace by the soldiers, Hakram knew, and that made it fragile. Even more so now that the League's hosts had retreated some and no longer stood as a close and obvious threat to the other two great assembled armies on the field. Juniper was well-aware, which was why there were scouts out there keeping an eye on the Grand Alliance's positions and the Army of Callow had yet to entirely leave battle footing.

If the betrayal came, they knew, it would come after dawn rose when the drow would be struck by the sun-sickness and forced into slumber after being stripped of their power. Some would remain able to fight, but few and as little more than tribes of warriors.

The orc was forced out of the thought from the first stirrings of a song in the distance, one he did not recognize. The mismatched pair wandered closer to the source by unspoken accord, until they found a broad bonfire and a crowd half-drunk soldiers around it. Orcs and goblins, Taghreb and Soninke and Callowans. They were, to hear of it, crafting a song in the old legion manner – everyone trying a verse, a chorus of loud voices singing the attempts until something passable had come of the crucible. Hakram missed Nauk like a limb, in that moment. The other orc's rough humour and gift for song and poetry, his strange yet unrepentant sentimentality. It was not enough to distract him from the sight of one of Vivienne's agents approaching her discretely, whispering news in her ear when she gestured permission. The orc's attention turned instead to the song, heart clenching at the remembrance of a friend he'd now twice grieved.

"Came they proud princes, one and all
Great lords from olden, golden halls
And as one they fell, under the moon
When the Black Queen sang her tune
For in lovely Iserre did come undone
Dominion of seven crowns and one
'lo blood of slayer, brigand, binder
And champion too, binding tighter

Yet what star could shine so brightly
It would not fear our queen's fury?
For in lovely Iserre did come undone,
Dominion of seven crowns and one."

The song, he thought, was fiercely proud. Raw and half-done, yet already he could see the grimly boastful shape of it ripping free of a hundred voices. The Jack slipped away and without pause Vivienne leaned close, lowering her voice.

"Juniper sends that the Dominion has begun to gather troops," she whispered. "So has Princess Rozala."

The one-handed orc looked up the night sky, so very close to fading. He could feel it in his bones, how close to that veil falling they had come, how near to the end of the journey they'd arrived. It would all end soon, one way or another. And beyond that, Hakram felt another pull. An older claim to him, one he'd embraced body and soul.

"We gather our own, then," he growled. "And quickly."

The woman who'd once been the Thief glanced at him knowingly.

"You know where Catherine will return," she said.

"I do," Hakram Deadhand said. "So let us gather steel, and march towards it."

Vivienne did not question him, for she knew the truth of it. In end, Hakram of the Howling Wolves Clan was many things. A soldier, a killer, a steward and on occasion a scribe. He'd served as an advisor and a herald, as an ender of loose ends and watchman of missteps. For the hand taken from him by the Penitent's Blade and returned by the sorceries of the Sovereign of Red Skies, he had earned the sobriquet of *Deadhand*. To ensure the succession of everything that had been built in the beating heart of Callow he'd carved through the other wrist, and not once regretted it. That lesson, like many others, he had learned from someone he loved the way a knife loved a steady hand or sparrow loved flight. For, most of all, he was a bored sergeant on a warm Wasteland night, catching his first glimpse in the eyes of a stranger of the girl who'd topple empires and feeling his blood *burn*.

He was the Adjutant, and Catherine Foundling was returning.

If any stood between them they would be broken, sure as dawn and dusk and the death of men.

# Interlude: Concourse III

> "All law is upheld through violence, but when violence itself becomes the law then only disorder can come of it. As prosperity requires order, to ensure prosperity a ruler must therefore suborn violence to law."
>
> Extract from the memoirs of Dread Emperor Terribilis II

Razin Tanja was not yet lord of Malaga, and in truth might never be. Father had named him heir, before they left Levant, and so of all that could lay claim his right would be the foremost and hardest to dispute. Yet he remained only heir, until he'd stood the ancestral grounds of the Tanja and been acclaimed to lordship by his closest kin. Razin had no right to call on the oaths once sworn to his father and so the captains of Malaga could defy him his orders if they so wished, though on war-grounds with the death of Akil Tanja still fresh they'd chosen to follow his commands nonetheless. It was because of that frail arrangement and the rights of his Blood he was considered to have voice equal to the other three standing at this council, though it would be foolish to assume the others did not regard his standing to be the lowest among them. Yet here they were nonetheless, the four of highest authority among the Dominion's armies, having woken from the waking-dreams the Peregrine had sent them to hold these talks.

There were only seats and a deep-dug firepit within the tent, for though it belonged to Lord Yannu Marave it was not the same they'd before used for war councils. This one was rather smaller and behind ancient ward-stones brought from Levant, gifts from the Gigantes that had been rarely made and were even more rarely taken away from ancestral grounds There they kept veiled from sorcery and spying the affairs of the families owning them, as it should be. Though the stones could have been set around a larger tent, Razin knew enough of sorcery to know that certain patterns must be kept arithmetically exact to exert their full strength. The wonder-makers of the Titanomachy were free in speaking the secrets of use when they granted gits, though never the secrets of making, and no two such gifts were ever truly the same. If the Lord of Alava had chosen this lesser tent, it would be for good reason. Razin would acknowledge, in the quiet of his own thoughts, that the closer seats and crackling flames set to the talks a different tone than that of the battle-councils.

It was easier to see the truth of the others this way. Lord Yannu Marave – *Careful Yannu*, as the man was known in Levant – had not personally taken the field, yet the general of the Champion's Blood looked drained under his sweat-flecked facepaint. For him Razin found little compassion, for the man had slain his father even if the matter had been settled in fair and honourable duel. He found near as little for Lady Itima Ifriqui of the Brigand's Blood, who had held command of the Vaccei warriors but left her eldest son to lead the vanguard that'd tried the fortifications of the Callowans. Moro of the Brigand's Blood had been made to sleep again, fed herbal potions concocted by binders so that if there was more to be seen in dreams one of the Blood would see it. He might yet be allowed entrance to this tent, should he come with pressing knowledge. Though Lord Yannu sat on the other side of the flames and Lady Itima to Razin's right, to his left was the only person in this tent he counted as more companion than foe. Lady Aquiline Osena, who twice had tried to see him slain before they had shared strife against the drow. He found his gaze drawn to her bronze-green paint, the sinuous lay of it covering every inch of skin not covered by her tanned leather vest.

He'd not forgot the sight of her running over moonlit snow like a whisper of smoke over water, beautiful and terrible like some ancient goddess of the hunt from olden days. Ashen Gods, how could he? He might as well been branded with a hot iron. Aquiline found his gaze, for he'd allowed himself to linger too long, and though the cast of her face was difficult to read under the colours she did not seem displeased in the slightest. Though Razin had known women before, something of the wicked glint in her eye had him feeling like he should blush. He looked away, careful not do display undue haste in doing so that would draw attention from the others but found he had to force down something like a smile.

"The Peregrine is dead," Yannu Marave said, voice shattering the silence. "We have all seen it."

And more besides, Razin thought. The journey the five Bestowed who'd gone to fight the Dead King had not been shared in full, he thought, but enough had been offered to know what need be known. The Grey Pilgrim had gone to death for the sake of all the world, and though the Black Queen was wicked and scheming she had not schemed his death nor broken the bargains she had made. The same could not be said of the Regicide, which had troubled all. Laurence de Montfort, though unfortunately Proceran, had been held in high esteem by most of them. Rarely had the Heavens known so righteous or unyielding a servant.

"The Tyrant of Helike must die," Lady Itima of the Brigand's Blood harshly said. "The Theodosian line should be ended for good, lest the viper keep biting again and again."

"Are we to wage war on the League, then?" Aquiline replied, unconvinced. "The One-Eyed King is poison to all he touches, but still surrounded by a great host."

"We can petition the Grand Alliance for soldiers," Lady Itima insisted.

"Which ally would you petition, Ifriqui?" Razin calmly said. "Ashur, broken at Thalassina and besieged on its own island by the fleets of Nicae? Or perhaps Procer, who even now makes desperate war on the Hidden Horror?"

"You would let this go unavenged, Tanza?" the Lady of Vaccei sneered. "All knew you without magic, but are you without *honour* as well? You talk like a coward."

His teeth clenched, his anger rose.

"Razin Tanja rode with a slayer band and fought death steel in hand," Aquiline sharply said. "Can you claim the same tonight, Itima Ifriqui? Did you even come close enough to drow or legionaries to loose a single arrow?"

"I have nothing to prove to you, girl," Lady Itima replied, tone just as sharp. "When you've fought in half as many battles as I have, then you-"

"The Peregrine is dead," Yannu Marave repeated, calmvoice cutting through the rising voice. "And so, without his wise hand to guide us, we must decide where the honour of Levant lies."

Though neither of the two ladies were pleased with the interruption, they allowed it nonetheless. There would be other nights to pursue their feuds.

"Dangerous words, Marave," Aquiline warned. "It is the Holy Seljun who keeps the Dominion's honour, on behalf of the Majilis."

"Must we keep to that pretence even now that he is dead?" Lord Yannu asked, tone exhausted. "Custom is custom, yet we all knew who was the Isbili we followed – stripped of that name or not. In this tent are four of the five that would be seated if the Majilis was called to session. The fifth has not been more than a decoration in my lifetime."

"Hasn't been a ruler of the Pilgrim's line worth the name since Yasa Isbili," Lady Itima conceded.

"What it is you suggested, Lord Marave?" Razin stiffly asked.

"That decision must be made as to the fate of this Grand Alliance," the Lord of Alava said. "What has it brought us, to warrant what we've lost in its name?"

"You'd abandon the Tenth Crusade?" Aquiline asked, genuinely surprised.

"What Tenth Crusade is that?" Yannu Marave asked. "We've marched for more than a year now, and I've yet to see it. We have fought soldiers of Callow, soldiers of the League and now the drow servants of the Black Queen. Was it not the Tower we swore to war upon? Pretty words were spoken yet the truth is plain: only Ashur tread Wasteland soil, and it has been defeated. The Tenth Crusade is done, and if there can be said to have been so much as a thimble's worth victory to it then it belongs to the Queen of Callow."

He exhaled.

"Let us go home," he said. "Let us bury our dead and see to our lands, instead of chasing shadows for Cordelia Hasenbach's sake."

"Oaths were made," Lady Itima said.

"To march," Lord Yannu said. "March we have, and fought too. How much more can be owed? Aid was given, oaths kept."

"And what will happen, when the Dead King devours the entire Principate and raises it as an army that'll outnumber grains of sand?" Razin said. "Do you suppose he'll simply stop at our borders and turn around?"

"The Red Snake Wall has never been breached," the Lady of Vaccei said.

Her Blood knew the great work better than any other, having often snuck past it to raid Arlesite lands, but this was foolishness. Aquiline agreed, it seemed.

"Never has the Hidden Horror tried it," the Lady of Tartessos said. "Mighty as the enchantments of the spellsingers are, the Crown of the Dead is a spawning pool of endless fresh horrors. What manner of abomination might be made from the corpse of an empire? Best not find out, for all our sakes."

"It is not written in stone that Procer will fall," Lord Yannu said. "Bestowed have flocked to the north, and now both the Black Queen and the League offer truce to the First Prince. Let Procerans see to the defence of their own lands, and if friendship so compels your souls we may offer other bounty than the blood of our people. Foodstuffs and arms, loans of gold to fund their war."

"And so when the war for Calernia's survival is ended, we shall be remembered as those that crawled back to our own lands after the first taste of bloodshed," Aquiline scathingly said. "Or, even as the continent dies around us, we'll be cursed as the cowards who might have preserved it – if not for the *wisdom* of Yannu Marave."

"Thousands have been lost already," the Lord of Alava said. "Our old ally the Thalassocracy is ruined for at least a generation even if it shakes the Nicaean boot off its throat, which is hardly certain. Would you exhaust our every army as well so that Salia can reclaim Levant after the war end? We all know how much *alliance* meant to princes, after Callow lost its armies in the last eastern crusade."

"The First Prince is an honourable woman," Lady Itima said with a grimace, looking like it cost her to admit it.

Though the Brigand's Blood was fervent in its hatred of enemies abroad and Procerans in particular, the Lady of Vaccei had spoken of Cordelia Hasenbach with respect more than once. The peace forged between Vaccei and Procer by its First Prince could have been so costly as to ruin the Ifriqui, for none had stood behind Lady Itima in her warmongering and would have protested heavy reparations overmuch, but Hasenbach had been restrained and allowed for honour in peace. That'd been remembered just as much as the many treacheries of the Principate.

"Will her successor be as well?" Lord Yannu retorted. "Or will our spent lands be hungrily eyed by Arlesite crowns and a would-be conqueror be elected after her?"

"To ward off a betrayal that might be," Razin mildly said, "you instead offer a betrayal that is. I see no honour in this, Marave. Only fear."

"Hear hear," Aquiline said. "It might be the Tower we declared war on, but it is the Dead King that now seeks our end. Until the Last Dusk that old

thing will be our enemy, and I will not retreat without even catching sight of his armies *once*."

The Lord of Alava turned to fix Itima of the Brigand's Blood with a steady look.

"Your judgement, Lady Itima?" Lord Yannu asked.

The older woman hesitated.

"It is not the war we agreed to fight, no denying that," she said. "And you speak sense in being wary of Arlesite friendship. Yet honour must be observed. Some may remain, but others should return."

Lord Yannu said nothing, gazing at them over the fire.

"Then let it be remembered that when the Enemy marched, Vaccei flinched and Alava turned tail," Lady Aquiline Osena said, tone cold and contemptuous. "Tartessos will not shame itself in such a manner. My captains will remain, and I with them. Run back behind tall walls, if that is the sum of you."

The gaze moved to him.

"Malaga stays," Razin simply said.

"You're not lord, boy," Lady Itima replied. "You've no call to make that decision. It will be put to the captains."

"I imagine it will," Razin Tanja of the Grim Binder's line replied. "I will be certain to tell them the Lady of Vaccei believes them so cowardly as to flee. No doubt they'll be eager to prove you right."

It might have been enough, Razin suspected, just for the captains to be told that retreat was Lord Yannu Marave's own notion. His slaying of Father had seen him politely despised among the men and women who'd spent decades in the service of Akil Tanja. Now that one of the Brigand's Blood had called their bravery into doubt this way? Gods, there might be honour-duels over insinuations they'd even considered returning south. Lord Yannu gazed at him for a long and silent moment, until he tiredly sighed.

"Has your shoulder been fully healed, Razin Tanja of Binder's Blood?" the Lord of Alava asked.

It had been. Though the drow's blow had been hard enough it was still tender, the healing of his binders had ensured that within perhaps a day he would perfectly hale. As it was, save for a mild ache when he moved there was naught left to fix. Still, a strange amusement took him when he realized they were not even speaking of the same shoulder wound as the previous time – it was not a goblin blade that'd hurt him last but a monstrous drow appendage.

"It has," Razin acknowledged.

He would not lower himself to lying over the matter, even if Yannu Marave meant now to kill him just as he'd killed Father.

"By smoke add dust you vowed enmity between us," Lord Yannu said. "To be set aside until healing was seen to."

The Lord of Alava rose from his seat, graceful for all his exhaustion.

"Let us settle matters of honour, then," Yannu of the Champion's Blood said.

"As was sworn," Razin calmly agreed, rising to match him.

The tent was not large, he thought, yet neither was it so small it could not be put to use as duelling-grounds. It would best to keep this away from the eyes of their captains, regardless.

"Will either of you require an officiant?" Lady Itima drawled. "I've no horse in this race, and so put forward my name."

Razin declined, as did Lord Yannu. Theirs would be a duel to the death, not first blood or first wound, and so there was no need of another pair of eyes to adjudicate when to call a halt. Aquiline had risen as well, and leaned closer so her whisper would not be overheard.

"I've seen the two of you fight, Razin," she said. "You're one of the finest blades I know, but he is finer still and experienced in such duels besides. You will not be the victor in this."

"He is tired," Razin replied.

"So are you," she said.

"I vowed enmity nonetheless," he told her.

She studied him in silence.

"So you did," Aquiline conceded.

She leaned closer still, and for a heartbeat he believed she might kiss him. Instead he swallowed a gasp when he felt a knife slide into his lower belly. He'd not even seen her draw. Still studying him, the Lady of Tartessos nodded approvingly.

"You didn't scream," she said, sounding proud. "Good. You may consider this the formal beginning of our courtship."

"Well," Razin croaked, "you've certainly made an impression."

"Lady Aquiline, what is your meaning by intervening here?" Lord Yannu coldly asked.

Aquiline graced his reply with a twitch of the lips before turning to the Lord of Alava.

"As Razin Tanja is injured, he may not fight you," the Lady of Tartessos said.

That was one way to delay the matter, he conceded. She'd even been kind enough to slide the blade somewhere that had little risk of killing him. Yet it would amount to little, for Yannu Marave's intent remained: the man would slay either himself or Aquiline, and so ensure that few enough captains remained that those of Malaga or Tartessos would follow the rest home simply not to be stranded without allies in the midst of the Principate. Before long, there would be one more-

"And so I claim his right as his champion," Aquiline Osena casually continued. "Any may contest this claim if they so wish, but it will have to be blade in hand."

"Aquiline," he began, "don't-"

"Alas, he has become delirious from the pain," she said. "And so his word can no longer be taken over the matter."

Lord Yannu's cool eyes moved from him to the Lady of Tartessos, assessing.

"So it seems," the Lord of Alava agreed.

The choice was clear, Razin supposed, between a mere unacclaimed heir like himself and a true ruling lady like Aquiline. If one of them had to die, in Yannu's eye she would be the better choice for unlike him, she could call on oaths to force her decisions onto captains. Knowing there was no point, he set aside the urge to continue protesting. Both duellists moved to the side of the tent, where they would have more room to move, and the other two of the Blood were invited to withdraw to the opposite end of the tent. Knife still in his belly, Razin obeyed.

"Even if she is the victor," Lady Itima casually told him. "I've not agreed to your own decision."

"What do you want, Ifriqui?" he grunted.

"The Tyrant of Helike," she murmured. "If not the annihilation of his line, then at least his head."

Aquiline and Yannu unsheathed their long, hooked swords and bowed. The Lord of Alava was taller than her, he could not help but notice. Larger and heavier with a great deal more blood on his hands. The Slayer's Blood were unnaturally skilled duellists, it was true, and Aquiline skilled even compared to her kin. Yet the Champion's Blood were known to reap lives like wheat and laugh through wounds great and small. There was no telling who would be the winner.

"We've no soldiers for that reckoning," Razin said. "And no ally to borrow them from."

"You know my terms, boy," the Lady of Vaccei simply replied. "They will not change. If you and the girl want my warriors, earn them."

The unspoken threat being that otherwise she would leave with her host, and perhaps the Alava men as well. If Yannu was slain and no other captains left, the Alavans might be shamed into remaining with the greater army – lest they be known as the sole warriors of the Dominion to have fled. It the Vaccei swords left with them, however, there could not be talk of dishonour. Or at least not quite as pointed, which for men who wanted to leave would suffice. Of course, this meant nothing unless Aquiline won. The two duellists had begun to move, he saw, yet blades had yet to clash. They were fighting over position, for now, looking for an opening to end it quick and clean. They were both tired and well-aware of it. The Alavan captains would be hard to keep, he thought, if Lord Yannu was killed. The hill-folk of Alava disliked taking orders from any save the Champion's Blood, and were prouder than most. Aquiline suddenly lunged forward, blade flickering forward, but Lord Yannu calmly parried and withdrew, with the hook of his blade scoring a long cut on the Lady of Tartessos' cheek. Red blood trailed down onto paint of green and bronze.

This would only end when one of them died, Razin thought, and in that moment the though disgusted him. The Peregrine's corpse was hardly cold that already the children of others lines were killing each other over disputes of honour. Was there really any honour to be found in this? Razin wondered,

watching Aquiline deftly manoeuvre around the fire pit to avoid a blow that would have taken her hand and scoring a cut of her own on Lord Yannu's face – above his brow, where the blood might trickle down onto his eye if he was not careful. There was skill, that much was certain. Admirable skill. But honour? It was his own father being avenged, Razin reminded himself. His father who had been slain in a honour-duel much like this one, disagreeing over a decision of great import. Theirs were hard ways, Razin Tanja knew, but he'd been taught that they were also *honest* ways. Unlike Procerans who poisoned and schemed, unlike the Free Cities and their empty trials, those of Levant did not leave the rot to fester. The brought it out, cut it out, settled the matters so they would not grow and settled them in honour. Honour-duels, he thought. Honour-wars. So much honour was there to be found in the Dominion, and all of it derived from blood.

"If he kills her, the Osena will feud with the Marave," he quietly said.

And, though it would be early and almost presumptuous of him to say, the Tanja as well.

"So they will," Lady Itima shrugged.

She was unmoved, for this was simply the way of the world. Steel touched steel, as they watched, as a quick exchange that had Razin's heard racing saw Aquiline avoiding a cut throat but taking a blow to the side of the head from Lord Yannu's heavy pommel. She seemed dizzied, and so his stomach clenched in fear. Razin Tanja had stood just like he was standing now and watched his own father be slain, because this was an honourable way to settle things and it would be dishonourable of him to do otherwise. *This settles nothing*, he thought. *It is rule by the blade, and it brings ever more the same.* If Aquiline slew Yannu, avenging Razin's own father, then some other Marave would one day come for her to avenge Yannu. And then in years after someone would come for her killer, and on and on and *on* it would go until either Levant died or the Last Dusk came to pass. Razin felt as if he were standing on the edge of a tall precipice, as if he were about to fall, and every inch of him wanted to retreat. To take a step back. But he thought, in that moment, not of anything his father or teachers had ever said but of a pair of cool brown eyes and a cutting grin wreathed in smoke. *You mock yourself*, the great monster of their age had told him almost gently, *by pretending today did not happen. It did. Learn from it, or die in a ditch somewhere blaming everything but yourself.*

"Enough," Razin Tanja of the Binder's Blood said.

Lady Itima eyed him curiously, but nothing else came of it.

"*Enough*," Razin hissed, and he ripped the knife out of his own guts.

Even when the blade clattered on the ground they did not cease their fighting, though when bleeding and wincing he stepped in between them the blades were held back.

"Razin," Aquiline harshly said, "do not-"

"How many years has it been, since the Dominion was founded?" he interrupted. "Three hundred and change, I'd say. That is how long it has been since

Procerans ceased killing us and we've started doing it to ourselves. Enough, damn you."

"You dishonour yourself," Yannu Marave scorned him. "Fearing defeat-"

"The Valiant Champion took up arms to end tyrants, didn't she?" Razin said. "Rulers who forced their will through force of arms. I wonder how much difference she'd really see, between you and a prince."

The Lord of Alava paled, either in dismay or white-hot fury.

"If there is *honour* to be lost," Razin said, scorning the very word as he had himself been scorned, "then let it be mine."

"You would let your father's death go unavenged?" Aquiline asked, and there was something like contempt in her voice.

That wounded, it did, but still he must press on. *Learn from it, or die*, he told himself.

"Someone has to," he snarled back. "What does this change? What does any of this change?"

Something in him snapped, for if he'd been able to see this why hadn't they? Why did it have to be him, bearing those disdainful looks like he'd somehow spewed in their cup by arguing that more killing wasn't going to get them out of the put killing had first dug.

"It settles our disagreement," Lord Yannu said. "Move aside, Tanja, or be struck down."

Razin laughed.

"Do it," he said, extending his arms and wincing from the wound in his gut being stretched. "Is this what we are now? Even when the world is half-ended we kill each other over battle plans and decisions and how we've killed each other over the last two. Are we truly that... *little*?"

"I will not warn you again," Yannu Marave calmly told him.

"Move, Razin," Aquiline said, and though there was still disdain in the voice there was more worry.

It was not much of a balm, but it was not nothing.

"No," Razin said. "If you want to force this through look it in the eye, Yannu Marave – admit that you are willing to cut down an unarmed man to get your way."

"Damn you, boy," Lord Yannu hoarsely said, but raised his sword anyway.

The knife came to rest against his throat without anyone having it heard unsheathed. The Lord of Alava stilled.

"Keep talking, Tanja," Lady Itima said.

A convulsive chuckle ripped its way free of his throat.

"Do I truly need to make some great argument," he said, absurdly amused, "of why we should cease slaughtering each other at least on the same night when *the sky almost fell on our heads*?"

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"Gods Above," Razin said. "Look at us. We might as well be an Alamans farce: the four fools who duelled on the night the world almost ended. We've

fought half a score in battles and skirmishes against the Army of Callow and the League and the drow, yet the closest the Dominion's armies have come to breaking this winter is this very hour. Think on that, for a moment. We've wounded ourselves more viciously than the Black Queen and all her heretic cohorts put together."

"Much have you chided us," Aquiline said, "yet you've said nothing of how to mend the wound."

"We bring back the Peregrine's corpse," Razin Tanja said. "And we put it to a proper pyre. And when that's done? We don't butcher ourselves like *fucking animals*. If we are to decide the fate of Levant, then let Levant have a say."

"The Holy Seljun?" Lady Itima said, sounding surprised.

"No," Lord Yannu softly said. "He means the captains. He means that we speak our case to an assembly of our soldiers, and choose our way by acclamation."

Razin nodded.

"And if the soldiers choose to go home?" Aquiline pointedly asked.

"Then we go home," Razin said. "We have to be willing to lose, Aquiline, to bend. Otherwise this only ever ends with swords bared."

"That has been our way," she replied, "and it has served us well."

"Has it?" he softly asked. "The Grey Pilgrim has been dead for nary an hour, and already in this tent the seeds of a decade of war have been sown. Can you truly say our way has served us *well*?"

"I will agree," Yannu Marave said, "to sending warriors to bring back the Peregrine in honour."

Razin admired, against his will, how calm the man's tone was when Itima's knife had yet to leave his throat.

"The escort and the assembly both have my agreement," Lady Itima of the Brigand's Blood said. "Be it battle or retreat, let it be chosen before Gods and men."

"The escort and the assembly," Aquiline agreed after a moment, tone brisk. "The right decision will be clear to all that are not craven fools."

Razin Tanja idly wondered if it would be ill-taken to send for a priest or a binder for his stomach wound before an honour guard of warriors was assembled to take the Peregrine back to his kin.

"The escort and the assembly," he said, as if there'd been any doubt.

He was still bleeding from the belly when they left the tent, but at least no one had died. That was, he decided, better than he'd had any right to hope for.

# Interlude: Concourse IV

> "A victor has a hundred friends, every last born yesterday."
>
> Helikean saying

Abigail of Summerholm – still a general, despite her best efforts – had finally figured it out. As the Gods despised her for reasons known only to them, her attempts at mild incompetence had instead been reward with successes that'd earned her a reputation as a 'tactical prodigy'. Her continued protests that she was not such thing were being taken as humility instead of desperation, to the extend that Marshal Juniper had commended her for being 'grounded' and 'not letting acclaim go to her head'. Abigail had never seen anything half so horrifying in her life as the Hellhound attempting an approving look, and she'd had goblin stew. Which was made by goblins and not *of* goblins, as she really wished someone had told her before she'd eaten a bowl out of fear of offending a whole swarm of sappers. Ah, but it'd been naïve of her to assume that simply trying to pass on her responsibilities to literally anyone else would be enough to see her demoted back to a set of responsibilities less gallows-adjacent. Indeed, from the towering heights of her fresh understanding she now grasped how guileless and green that manner of thinking had been. But she'd learned, oh yes she had. They were going to sweep her under the rug quietly, maybe even enlarge her retirement pension so she kept her mouth shut for the rest of her life, which as far as she was concerned was the ideal state of affairs. Of course, her most cunning plans still hinged on the Deadhand not getting them all killed before Morning Bell.

Which was, unfortunately, looking less likely by the moment.

"Six hundred, at least," the Adjutant calmly said. "Personal armsmen of the Blood, by the looks of their equipment."

The tall, broad-shouldered villain spoke in that way orcs often learned to after they'd been out of the Steppes for a few years: slower than they would in Kharsum, and careful to avoid being too loud. You could tell how long they'd been out of the homeland by the way they talked, since those fresh out of the Clans hadn't usually yet figured out that a big orc speaking loud and harshly in a hard-to-understand accent tended to make humans a *mite* twitchy. Hakram Deadhand struck Abigail as the kind of person who went around spending a

lot of time thinking about what other people thought before acting all cold and measured. She'd known folks like that more than once, they were the traders who'd done the best under the Praesi at Summerholm. Those who'd not choked on pride when it came to getting trade permits from the easterners, who'd not balked at serving legionaries and greasing the palms of Wasteland scribes. They usually weren't nice people but they did tend to be able to afford nice meals, which in Abigail's humble opinion was a lot more useful a trait.

"The Tartessos and Malaga captains were hard in a scrap," General Abigail replied. "And they're not even the people known for having heavy foot."

*Please, Lord Deadhand*, she silently prayed, *do not ask my two cohorts to take that damned hill.* Four hundred legionaries, even veterans, trying to dislodge those armsmen would be like swinging a trout at a wall: amusing, except for the trout. She'd seen those bastards in Sarcella taking a run at sapper-dug positions and still make a dent, since they refused to die even when shot repeatedly and didn't seem to have a single self-preserving bone in their bodies. It was always worse when one of their nobles was around, too, it put an unnecessary amount of additional steel to their already-steely countenance in the face of danger.

"That would be the Alava warriors, whose colours are also flying," the Adjutant said. "I receive your point, general. An assault before reinforcements are had would be difficult."

Huh. She'd not expected that to work. Did praying to people actually change things? She'd heard that there was talk about making the odd offering to the Crows these days, which she didn't entirely disapprove of. The Gods Above asked for a lot, birds were probably *much* easier to bribe as far as deities went. Alms took hard coin, but you could get dead rats from any poorly-kept cellar.

"Haven't been told why we set out either, sir," Abigail said. "Er, lord? My lord?"

"Adjutant will do," the ivory-fanged villain told her.

Ugh, he'd even done the fucking grin just like Krolem did. Someone really needed to have a sit down with all these orcs and explain to them that some big muscled bastard displaying enough sharp teeth to fill the mouths of at least three jackals wasn't ever going to be taken as *reassuring* by anyone with any sense. At least the goblins were aware they were horrifying as all Hells when they did it.

"We are to serve as the escort for Her Majesty's return to Creation," the Adjutant said.

Abigail was well-learned in the ways of the Army of Callow, by now, so she didn't need to have it spelled out for her. Of course it'd gotten worse, it always did it this bloody outfit.

"It's on that hill isn't," she whined. "With all the warriors on it."

And any moment now the Dominion was going to be reinforced by a battalion of demons, or a legion of angels, and still the Deadhand would say: *take*

*me that hill, General Abigail, or no general's pension for you.* And that was the thing, wasn't it? Abigail had come too far to retire without the pension now, she refused to attend that many bloody strategic briefings and not make it out of this damned war set for life.

"Your intuition is as acute as rumoured," Deadhand said.

The Summerholm girl didn't squint at the villain, because that was a good way to get your eyes eaten, but she did wonder how long it'd taken the orc to perfect a tone of voice that so perfectly straddled the line between serene and sardonic.

"Thank you," she said, cleared her throat. "Sir lord Adjutant."

"As for why you in particular are serving as commanding officer for the cohorts instead of a commander or even a legate, it's simple enough," the one-handed orc gravelled. "You're one of the few people Catherine has ever personally promoted. I was curious."

Abigail looked up at the sky, casting out her despair for any god willing to hear her. How much would it cost, for people to stop getting 'curious' about her? She was willing to resume attending sermons, if that was what it took. Or offer, like, three dead rabbits to the Crows. She could probably get a few of those from goblins if she found a gaggle around a campfire and put up bottles to trade.

"I'm flattered," she lied.

She was going to have to implement that plan faster than she'd earlier intended, the general thought. Gods forgive her, she might even have to accept that dinner invitation Grandmaster Brandon Talbot had sent her. Rumour was he extended that to every rising Callowan officer, but she'd thought to avoid the whole thing like the plague by claiming that a goblin had eaten the invitation. It would have held up, they ate basically anything if they got hungry enough or were dared to. Now, though, she'd have to use a nice public dinner with important people to say something horribly, *absurdly* racist somewhere too many high officers were seated for it to be ignored. She was still debating on what to say, that was the issue. She wasn't going to start mouthing off about greenskins – not when she had so many of them close to her and bearing sharp things – and going after Wastelanders tended to earn retribution. Taghreb officers watched each other's backs, and if there was a single Soninke in this damned army that couldn't do magic or didn't have a friend who could she'd yet to run into them.

No, it'd have to be about real foreigners. She'd been mulling over arguing that 'all Procerans should be eaten, especially the children'. If she said that in front of enough people it'd have to be bad enough she was encouraged to retire, right?

"And now Rozala Malanza graces us with her presence," Hakram Deadhand said. "This is going to get *interesting*."

It was hard to make out much in the darkness, especially at a distance, but the Procerans were hard to miss: they'd brought their own torches, and not few. Even after the Tyrant of Helike had tumbled them down form Arcadia it looked

like the princes had been able to put together a contingent of horse. Abigail had a hard time guessing numbers, given the swiftness they rode with and the movement of the torches, but there had to be at least two hundred riders there. Trailing behind at a slower pace, men-at-arms whose strength was easier to gauge were approaching in a column. Easily five hundred there, Abigail saw with dismay. This was about to turn into a bloody godsdamned mess, wasn't it? The Dominion had six hundred foot, but it also had the hill and some of those hard warrior-priests who'd melted the Princekiller's own plate over him. Princess Malanza of Wherever and Whatnot had that light Proceran horse and some decent fighting men for a sum of seven hundred but Abigail suspected charging up a hill at Levantine armsmen wasn't likely to end well for Malanza, horse or not.

And then there was them, approaching with two cohorts of two hundred. One of regulars, veterans from Arcadia and the Doom, and the other a lighter force: sappers, mages, crossbowmen. The weakest force of the three, if you didn't count that Hakram fucking Deadhand was part of it. She'd seen the orc Named thrown like a trebuchet stone at Akua's Folly and walk it off before assaulting a rebel bastion near single-handed. The Adjutant could turn it into a fight, if not a very pleasant one.

"Our reinforcements might get there in time," General Abigail tried.

And they might, pretty please, bring with them someone high up enough in rank this would no longer be her problem. The low hill the Dominion had taken and would allegedly be the Black Queen's stepping stone back into Creation was roughly between the camps of Levant, Procer and Callow but the dark-haired woman would bet on the Army of Callow's muster over anyone else's without batting an eye. No one else drilled battle-muster save for the Legions, so if this got out of hand their own legionaries should get here quicker than either the Levantines or the Procerans. Of course, there were a *lot* more of those around so that'd only go so far.

"Unlikely," the Adjutant said, eyes moving across the darkness.

He could see where she could not, Abigail knew.

"We're mobilizing faster," he acknowledged, "but they began earlier. This is the vanguard for all of us, and it'll have to be by our hands it's settled: by the time reinforcements are on the field Catherine will have returned and it will be over."

*Please don't order me to take that hill, Lord Deadhand sir*, Abigail desperately thought.

"I suppose we'll have to take that hill," the orc mused, and she whimpered a little inside.

He cast at her an almost knowing look before offering the barest flash of fang.

"Not alone, though," the Adjutant said. "See the banner riding towards us? Rozala Malanza seeks audience."

—

Princess Rozala rode her destrier hard, intent on snatching this disaster out of Below's ruinous grasp before they all ended up paying for it.

Whatever it was the Blood had been up to in their closed council, in the wake of its end they'd not bothered to even acknowledge the presence of the messengers she kept sending to their camp. They'd gathered entire war parties of their finest warriors, sent for the Lanterns and marched out for the hill where Rozala's mages said enough power was currently coalescing to burn a town to the ground. The Black Queen's return must be imminent, her people had concluded, and its location was beyond dispute. Which meant the way the Levantines had made for it without missing a beat unlikely to be a coincidence. The riders she'd sent after the Dominion forces with orders to try anything short of baring blades to get an audience with the lords and ladies had been turned away roughly, though at least not in utter silence: they'd been informed that this was a sacred matter, and concerning only the Blood. No interference would be brooked. Heart clenching, Princess Rozala had sent forward the soldiers she'd been able to muster up until then and left Louis to assemble the second wave.

The Callowans weren't blind, of course, so they'd sent out a force as well. Just two cohorts from the Third Army, but that force's general had something of a reputation: the Levantines spoke of her with a measure of respect for the way she'd held on to the city of Sarcella even when taken by surprise and outnumbered. This General Abigail was also said to have slaughtered like lambs almost a quarter of the Levantine mages during the first assault on the southern palisade, which was no small thing. Rozala Malanza's ancestors had fought binders often and known them to be dangerous foes when moved to war. Still, even led by a superb field tactician four hundred legionaries were not a major force. Not so great as the one fielded by Levant, at least, or even the hasty party the Princess of Aequitan had put together and led forth. Or so she had fought, until she'd seen the Black Queen's own banner flying above the cohorts: silver on black, a balance bearing a sword and a crown. That the sword weighed heavier said much of the woman who'd taken that heraldry as her own, and how it was she'd come to be Queen in Callow – *of* Callow, Rozala corrected herself. Best not make that mistake around Foundling herself, her temper was well-known.

That the *Sword and Crown* flew could simply be sign that it was expected the Black Queen would return under it. Or it could mean that the Adjutant was with the cohorts, and that'd *complicate* things. In truth, it could be said that Hakram Deadhand was the least dangerous of Catherine Foundling's woeful company. He lacked the terrifying great sorceries of the Hierophant, the Archer's talent for sudden and surprising killing strokes and even the Thief's rumoured endowment to steal anything from a fleet or river barges to some fae princess' sorcery. The Adjutant was a lesser figure in the stories that'd made it across the mountains, as the nature of his Damnation would imply. Yet there was one thing all tales agreed on – of all the Woe, none were so implacably

loyal to the Black Queen as her Adjutant. The others, Rozala felt confident she might have swayed into holding their hand. The Archer was drunken sot, for all her lethality, the Hierophant had read through then entire peace talks after the Battle of the Camps and the Thief had been cautious even before she'd been rumoured to have lost her power. The Adjutant, though? Be reputation, he was temperate and even-handed sort. Those, in Rozala's experience, always tended to make the worst fanatics.

Few things were as troublesome as an otherwise reasonable man believing an unreasonable thing.

Escort riding close around her even as the rest of her vanguard advanced on the hill where the Levantines had taken position, the dark-haired princess veered hard to the side when she saw the Black Queen's banner split from the rest of the legionaries. An escort of ten, the very same number she rode with, made for her direction at a sedate pace while the rest of the cohorts continued marching on the hill. Wary of too sudden an approach being taken as a charge, Rozala reduced the pace of her mount and shouted for her soldiers to do the same. Within moments they were in sight of the enemy envoys, and even before she drew her up reins and halted the Princess of Aequitan was silently cursing. There was no mistaken the burnt and darkened plate on the tall orc for anything else: the Adjutant was there, along with a young woman bearing the marks of a general and a retinue of Callowan regulars. The dark-eyed Arlesite would have called it a risk taken, bringing but a matching number of legionaries when she rode to them with horse, but knew better. The orc was Damned, and not fresh to his legend: he could likely kill them all without coming to breathe heavier for it.

"Hail, Lord Adjutant," Princess Rozala called out in Lower Miezan.

"Your Grace," the Adjutant replied in the same.

She flicked her eyes to the side, taking in the sight of the woman who was most likely this General Abigail of the Third Army. Black hair, tanned cheeks, watery blue eyes. More tavern girl than warrior-queen, and what was it with Callow and spawning all those wee dangerous women?

"I present you General Abigail of Summerholm, in command of the Third Army," the Deadhand said. "You may have heard of her."

"So I have," Rozala replied. "Well met, general. Your deeds in Sarcella drew attention."

"That was all Her Majesty," the black-haired woman replied almost hurriedly. "Truly, I have done nothing worth remembering."

Humble, the Arlesite princess wondered, or trying to remain obscure so that she would take her enemies by surprise in wars to come? Either way, she was one to watch out for.

"It appears, Princess Rozala, that the Dominion has seen fit to obstruct the return of my queen," the Adjutant gravelled in that unsettlingly deep voice. "This seems to me a violation of the truce that was struck."

"I am sure they merely mean to serve as an honour guard," Rozala lied. "Though, of course, that honour should be shared between all of us. Indeed, I brought soldiers with me for this very purpose."

The orc's hairless brow narrowed.

"A threefold honour guard is your intention?" he asked.

"Of course," the Princess of Aequitan said. "Is it not yours? Surely the Army of Callow would not seek to break the truce your very queen arranged."

The Damned let out a noise that was either amused or contemptuous, Rozala knew too little of his kind to tell.

"I've no intention of sharing the honour," Hakram Deadhand calmly said. "We'll be clearing out the Dominion by force of arms."

General Abigail let out a mocking bark of laughter, though her voice made it sound like strangely terrified trill.

"There is no need for such a thing," Princess Rozala insisted. "I can accompany you to treat with the Blood and this can all be achieved without breaking truce."

The orc studied her for a long moment, and then slowly bared his fearsome great fangs.

"The First Prince ordered you to keep Catherine alive and amenable," the Adjutant serenely said. "You'd have tried threats otherwise. Well now, that's a fascinating turn. How far are you allowed to go to assure that?"

"You assume much," Rozala flatly replied.

"I suppose it doesn't matter," the orc said, snorting. "Send your people in a flanking position for the hill, on the eastern side. We'll take the other flank. You and I can speak with those Levant lordlings from a position of strength."

"You overestimate your position," the Princess of Aequitan said, tone glacial.

Hakram Deadhand studied her, then laughed.

"No," he said. "I don't. Glad to have you on our side, Princess Rozala. I've great esteem for your campaigning in Cleves."

And just like that, he turned and began to walk again. Though anger boiled in her stomach, the Princess of Aequitan found she had no means to deal it out. What could she do, strike out at the Black Queen's own aide or let him lead his cohorts into a fight that could not be won? She'd been ordered to avoid provoking Catherine Foundling, and letting the Adjutant die would be very much the opposite of that. The Princess of Aequitan found that General Abigail was looking at her still, a strange expression on the Callowan's face. She reached for something within her armour and Rozala tensed, half-expecting a knife, but instead it was a dull bronze flask. The general tossed it to her and patted her horse's neck with what seemed to be genuine sympathy.

"I'd tell you it gets better," General Abigail said, "but it would be a lie."

# Bonus Chapter: Seed I

> "In declaring all that is not Good to be Evil, one surrenders the better part of the world to the Enemy."
>
> Theodore Langman, Wizard of the West

The librarians were skulking about again.

Amadeus was going to have to kill a few before this was done and over with, he suspected, which would have been trouble if Dread Emperor Nefarious still took interest in anything but his seraglio and his grimoires. The Deep Library, as the misshapen people of this place called the true Imperial archives – those hidden deep beneath the Tower, where none without permission could enter – was purely the Emperor's to oversee. It'd been that wat since it had grown from a tomb full of secrets to one of the greatest repositories of knowledge on Calernia, in the days where Dread Emperor Sorcerous had reigned and learning had flourished in Praes like never before. The Deep Library was as a small city, now, those that saw to its obscure labyrinthine stacks and records born and raised within the depths. Few had ever seen the light of day, and centuries of inbreeding and exposure to old sorceries had warped them in... unseemly ways. They wore the hoods by imperial decree, as some ancient Tyrant having been disgusted by their appearance. For all that they'd made clear their disapproval of a mere *Duni* like Amadeus being granted access to the stacks even if he'd come with a writ bearing Nefarious' own seal. It'd been the Chancellor's hand that'd pressed it down, truth be told, but the rats scuttling in these deeps had no way of knowing that.

"I can hear you," the Black Knight calmly said. "Come into the light or be treated as a spy."

The Chancellor no doubt had suborned a few eyes among this lot and tasked them with study of what it was *he* was studying, but he'd hardly be the only one. The old families of the Wasteland would have agents of their own, entire bloodlines of traitors cultivated over centuries whose practical worth was greater than that of a vault full of rubies. The ring of flickering lights cast by oil lanterns – mage lights would have been more efficient but they tended to go wild in these parts, affected by the ancient wards and magics – revealed the yellow-robed silhouette of a lesser librarian. To a guest bearing a seal, like

Amadeus, they were to be ordered about as wished though it was customary to allow one of the greater librarians to see to it instead, expressing wishes to the greater so that they could send the lesser to carry them out. Of course, that would require one of the greater librarians to have remained in attendance of the Black Knight as was also customary instead of vanishing back into the dark maze. A distasteful parting shot had been made about getting mud on the scrolls, for which Amadeus had considered taking the woman's tongue as a warning to the others. He'd decided against it, for now anyway. There were yet more ways in which the keepers of this place could hinder his research, which was too important to risk on what was hardly likely to be the last reference to his breeding he'd hear.

"This one has what was sought, Lord Black," a mellifluous voice spoke from under the hood.

The Mtethwa spoken had an archaic bent to it, for those speaking it had been separated from other speakers for so long they'd not changed their manners along the same lines. The court address was properly done, though still unfamiliar to his ear: highborn had only begun using such courtesies with him since he'd slain the Heir and put a permanent end to their struggles.

"The Thalassinan records, yes?" he questioned.

"It is so, Lord," the librarian agreed.

He gestured for the yellow-robed stranger to approach. Stuttering steps brought the tablets he'd sent for, and Amadeus allowed the librarian to set them on one of the rare corners of the reading hall he'd claimed that wasn't covered. It looked like utter chaos, at first glance, piles of scrolls and manuscripts and stone inscriptions sprawling under ancient maps of Praes and eastern Callow. The divisions were not geographic, in truth, but chronological. Inconveniently enough, he'd had to spend longer finding the right time and place in histories to look for answers than actually finding the answers he sought. The seal that'd allowed him access to the Deep Library had been a reward claimed from the Chancellor, but it was not without bounds: he had only seven days and nights to seek his answers. He'd not slept more than two hours apiece in the last five days, and if Amadeus could have avoided that without measurably impairing his mind's ability to retain details he would have done so. There was no telling when he would next have such an opportunity.

"If this one may speak, Lord," the librarian said.

Black's eyes flicked up in surprise. He'd expected them to leave as soon as the precise duties were discharged.

"It may me presumptuous of this one to grasp at the intent of one of hallowed rank, yet it seems that it might be grain quantities in particular being sought," the librarian delictely said.

"That is correct," Amadeus said. "Under the tenure of Rector Cornelia Orbivia, to be specific."

Which had been irritatingly difficult to find out with any degree of accuracy. The Miezans had famously put everything to writing and what remained

of the records of their occupation was surprisingly extensive, but Praes had been one of the most distant overseas provinces of their empire. Which meant that, far from the stern gaze of their imperial rulers, the rectors overseeing Praes had been habitually corrupt and falsified the reports they sent to Mieza in order to better enrich themselves off imperial revenue. Cornelia Orbivia had been unusually corrupt even among rectors, to the extent that Amadeus had found himself reluctantly impressed by her gall. On the same year where Taghreb tribal record of the Banu Hiraq spoke of several large gold shafts being mined in the Grey Eyries, she'd had the gall to send envoys to Mieza requesting funding for the rebuilding of the Wasaliti levees that she otherwise 'could not afford'. As a nice touch, she'd even mentioned that failing to repair those works would agitate the local savages. Amusing as that had been to find out, Rector Cornelia's falsifications made it difficult to assess what the yield of fields under her rule had actually been. Which was unfortunate, for under her successor the Miezans had begun trading regularly with the Callowan chieftains of Summerholm and that influx of grain would throw off the numbers in a way Amadeus couldn't really account for.

"The harbour records of Thalassina would only provide incomplete understanding, Lord," the librarian said, "as they do not account for ships that were exempt from duties and inspections by Rector's decree. This one presumed to send for the records of such exempted ships, if it pleases the hallowed one."

"It does," Black replied, eyes narrowing by the barest of fractions. "Yet are you implying that Rector Orbivia kept *record*s of her own corruption?"

"Hallowed one, they are in fact from the array of charges brought against her by Imperatrix Iusta," the librarian said. "Who later recalled Rector Orbivia and had her drawn and quartered after public trial."

More than once, perusing Miezan histories, it had occurred to Amadeus that the Praesi apple had not fallen far from the tree.

"Those charges would be accurate, in your opinion?" he asked, cocking his head to the side.

"This one recalls the Imperatrix was reputed for her preoccupation for justice," the librarian said. "Yet the hallowed one need not take this one's recollections as facts, for such is mentioned in the *Annales Zosimia* and the *Sicorat Aheli*."

Amadeus' brow rose. The famous historian Zosimia had been prone to embellishing when the truth of things proved insufficiently exciting for the audience, but as a rule they'd been faithful in relating what more reliable and unfortunately lost histories had believed to be the truth. The Sicorat, on the other hand, was not a Miezan history but a Baalite one. Amadeus' passing knowledge of tradertalk had him suspecting the meaning of the title was something along the lines of 'Foe-Tale', which was an apt summation of the relations between the Hegemony and the Empire during their shared span of history. That rather added integrity to the source, in his eyes. Invectives from an enemy ever flowed freely, but praise? That was a rarer thing, and grudgingly given.

"Have the Annales Zosimia sent to me," he ordered. "Do you have a translation of the Sicorat from I assume to be the original High Tyrian?"

"This one knows only of a highly revisionist reinterpretation of the work penned by High Lord Saman Muraqib during the reign of the Dread Empress Maleficent the Second," the librarian replied. "It does contain several accurate translations of the Sicorat Aheli's text, spread among High Lord Saman's own writing."

The Black Knight almost snorted. Considering the second Maleficent had clashed more than once with the Thalassocracy of Ashur in her day and that the islanders were the last remnants of Baalite rule on Calernia it was no great stretch to infer the nature of the Taghreb aristocrat's commentary. The man would hardly be the first of the Wasteland's highborn to rail at the Ashuran 'perfidy' in not allowing Praes to raise a fleet worth the name. He would not even be the first to frame Praes as the inheritor of Mieza and Ashur that of the Hegemony, poetically fated to war as their progenitors had been.

"My palate might not be discerning enough to truly understand the depths of High Lord Saman's wisdom," Amadeus drily said. "His work shall rest, I think."

"By your will, hallowed one," the librarian said, bowing.

The Black Knight hummed and considered matters for long moment. Weighing risk, weighing dues.

"Your name?" he asked.

"This one is called Nafari, hallowed one," the librarian replied.

"After arranging for the Annales," Amadeus said, "I believe you will find your duties take you far from this part of the stacks. For some time, too."

The hooded librarian stiffened.

"It will be so, hallowed one," Nafari croaked out. "Manifold thanks from this unworthy one."

Amadeus did not further acknowledge the exchange, unwilling to tip his hand too deeply. This one had been helpful, and polite. The slight risk could be taken as gratitude. It was forgot before long, for the promised records had arrived and so he returned to his calculations. To his surprise, though Rector Orbivia had smuggled out the wealth she'd stolen from imperial revenues at a rate of between five to eight ships a year, a significant part of that theft was grain. The quantities allowed him to add the last finishing touch to his estimates of grain yields, yet the detail remained in the back of his mind like a wiggling tick. Rector Orbivia had been nothing if not apt in extracting wealth from her office, Amadeus thought. Why, then would on a year where she had sent six ships sailing to Liceria would a full three of them have been filled with grain? The same hull filled with slaves, for example – orcs had been rare on the other side of the Tyrian Sea and wildly popular, fetching high prices on Miezan slave auctions – should have secured much greater profit. Had grain been easier to obtain, in those days? It was possible, for the Wasteland had not yet earned its name through Sinistra's cataclysmic blunder. Yet agriculture

had grown more sophisticated since those days, and the crops reaped relative to the amount of cultivated land had been numerically higher in those days.

Something was beginning to dawn on him, slowly, as he kept open his leather journal with his lower palm and marked in ink the numbers for Rector Orbivia's tenure.

Yet it would have been absurd, when Praes held so many other ways for a Miezan rector to enrich themselves, unless he was missing a detail. The Annales Zosimia were brought to him, all seven volumes, by another yellow-robed librarian. This one did not speak nor linger, and Black dug throughout the fourth tome until he acceded to the parts concerning Imperatrix Iusta. It was easy enough to confirm Librarian Nafari's words, namely that the Imperatrix seemed to have displayed a very real concern for justice even when it was politically inconvenient for her. Yet it was not those sentences in Old Miezan that caught his attention but instead slight details of military history. An attempt from the king of the Luxor, a Baalite ally, to seize the lesser city of Antisma on the coast of Caracisson. The last name was familiar, and referral to the Miezan history of the *Bellum Stobogii* shed some light over it: Caracisson was a rich stretch of coast in the Miezan province of Stobogia Minor. Which, along with its northern sister-province of Stobogia Major, were the Miezan empire's traditional breadbasket due to their great fields and golden summers. Over the reign of Imperatrix Iusta, according to the Annales, no less than eight battles had been fought over the provinces against a variety of northern nomadic tribes and southern Baalite-backed petty kingdoms. Looking further back through previous reigns, the trend had begun at least four decades earlier.

And like that it fell into place, bitter as the epiphany was.

When Alaya arrived, she found him with a cup of wine in hand and a dark look on his face. His mood had turned sullen, now that he'd put the pieces together. Even wearing a cloak and drab vestments she was a vision, as if the lackluster clothes had been picked to make her beauty evident by contrast. There'd been a time where Amadeus had felt the first stirrings of interest in his friend, though the notion had been buried early and he missed it not. The thought that he might force a manner of affection onto Alaya that she could not reciprocate was viscerally repulsive to him, moreso for the nature of how she'd been brought to the Tower. That she'd been graceful in enduring her situation did not detract in the slightest from the atrocious nature of it. Alaya dropped onto the seat at his side without any of the put-on grace that might be expected of her higher in the Tower, wordlessly accepting the cup of wine he'd poured her and offered. She drew back her hood and Amadeus found his eyes lingering on her cheekbone. He'd learned to recognize the sight of mage-healing, and even the most exquisite of sorceries could not avoid flesh being made tender when it was knit anew. He said nothing, for he knew pity would burn her like acid. His friend drank a sip of the cup and made a spluttering grin against the rim.

"Gods, that tastes truly awful," Alaya said. "From the Green Stretch?"

"Where else could they make such a horror?" he grinned back.

It'd been worth suffering the rest of that bottle just for the smile, he thought. She drank again, deeper this time.

"It might as well be vinegar with a handful of grapes left to stew inside," Alaya said, sounding fascinated. "This might be the single worst wine I've drunk, Maddie."

"Only the finest of the worst for you, Allie," he toasted.

She quietly laughed, the way she had back home when she was truly amused and not simply putting on merriment for the patrons at her father's inn. They both drank, and he let her take the reins of the conversation without qualms.

"Dare I ask what had you glaring balefully at parchment when I arrived?" she asked.

His jaw tightened, until he mastered himself.

"I believe," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said, "I've grasped how the Wasteland was made."

She straightened in her seat, fingers tightening against the cup.

"I expect," she said, "your answer runs deeper than Sinistra's famously ruinous attempt to steal the weather of Callow."

He dipped his head in agreement and she breathed out.

"Tell me," Alaya ordered. "All of it."

She held no office, wielded little influence and bore no Name while, Duni or not, he was still the Black Knight of Praes. Yet it did not occur to him that this could be anything but an order, or that it could be disobeyed.

"I began studying it because Sinistra's ritual was, in essence, our first great national act of lunacy," Amadeus said. "Before her, we had a hundred and twenty years of relative success: the Grey Eyries annexed, and though Summerholm did not fall its Counts were near enough to vassals of the Tower. We backed them against Alban attempts to bring them into their realm them twice, Alaya! Why would Sinistra, then, risk such a ritual? Was she simply mad, consumed by the urge to wield her sorcery?"

"Was she?" Alaya asked.

"Last year," Amadeus said, "Wekesa, Sabah and I broke into one of the lesser spell repositories of the Warlock. While Apprentice had his design on volumes writing of wards, my own interest was in a rumour: namely that old failed rituals were kept there and used as tools of teaching for the Warlock's pupils."

"And you found the ritual Sinistra tried to use there," she murmured.

"I did," he agreed. "And Wekesa believes it sound in principle, though wildly ambitious and with laughably little margin for error. If heroes had not interrupted it, the sorcery could have functioned as intended."

"She could be a talented mage and mad nonetheless," Alaya said. "We've certainly precedent enough for that."

Not, he knew, because she was arguing against him. It was the way they spoke, the two of them, presenting the opposing view so that weakness in ar-

gument and knowledge could be made evident. *Iron sharpens iron*, highborn might have said, though she was anything but a foe.

"Agreed," he said. "On the other hand, if the ritual was well-formed then it had to be tailored to the realities of where it was meant to affect. That implies..."

"There was an observable phenomenon on Creation she was reacting to," Alaya said. "Was the land souring?"

"I wondered the same," he smiled. "And early Imperial records to make increasingly frequent mentions of famines and food shortages from the moment of the Declaration onwards. Yet considering that there were little changes to agricultural practices after the end of the Miezan occupation, the source of that issue had to be older."

"Explaining why you've a pond of books in Old Miezan spread over this hall," she drily said.

His lips quirked, but the mirth left him soon enough.

"It was Rector Cornelia Orbivia who led me to the answers," Amadeus said. "The last of the Miezan rectors before trade with Callow was established. She was spectacularly corrupt, you see, yet somehow found it profitable to sail ships full of grain back Liceria."

"Meaning," Alaya said, "that even compared to the wealth of the more traditional resources offered by Praes grain still remained a worthy investment."

He felt a rush of affection, heady and sudden, for this woman to whom he'd never really had to explain his thoughts. Who he could speak a word to and have a page understood. If it was not love, then what was this to be called?

"Stobogia Minor and Major, the breadbaskets of Mieza, were under pressure from Baalite allies and displaced tribes to the north," Amadeus said. "The worth of grain would have risen accordingly."

"More than that," Alaya murmured. "It became a strategic resource. The city of Mieza was famously populous and the heart of their empire in every way. Grain could buy the love of the hungry, bind them to causes. And even for the less ambitious, it would have been prized. A ship filled with rubies and gold ingots would attract attention: an army could be raised with such a prize, or offices and officers bought. To an Imperator, it would have smacked of rebellion in the making. Grain would not attract near as much attention, if sold discretely, yet still turn great profit."

She paused, turning dark eyes to him.

"And this was when, in the Miezan span?" she asked.

"Between the First and Second Licerian War," Amadeus said.

"The practice won't have ended at all, after," Alaya said. "After the Second much of their empire fractured and governors raised their own private armies to try to claim the throne and fight the encroaching Hegemony. I expect that with the collapse of the usual grain markets, Praesi harvests kept ambitious armies fed on campaign more than once."

He'd not considered that, truth be told, for his interest had been in the consequences here and not across the Tyrian Sea. Yet every sentence she'd spoken only confirmed what he'd suspected.

"So now you understand what drove the madness," he said.

"Madness?" she asked.

He set aside his cup and leaned forward, snatching the leather-bound journal where the ink he'd put down had long gone dry. He opened it at the correct page and passed it to her.

"Grain exports from the province of Praes," she acknowledged. "I take it the sharp rise is when trade with Callow begins?"

"It is," Amadeus agreed. "No move to the fourth page of the journal."

She moved.

"Comparative yields for fields now and under the Miezans," she noted. "Higher in those days, yet the land might have been more fertile then. Less ravaged."

"Ninth page," he said.

There she would find the compared yields of eastern Callowan fields compared to those of northern Praes under the Miezans. Alaya's eyes narrowed.

"This implies," she slowly said, "that the lands now called the Wasteland were significantly more fertile than Callow's own fields as of. . . "

She trailed off, glancing at him.

"Seventy years ago," Amadeus said. "The most recent instance an Imperial agent had a look at the ledgers of the Count of Summerholm. The numbers to the side are for, respectively, one hundred and three years ago and two hundred and fourteen years ago."

"Largely the same," Alaya said. "Which means it is not a lone oddity. Yet it should not be possible – no, it *isn't* possible. Not naturally."

"Field rituals," Amadeus softly agreed. "They used sorcery to increase the crop yields beyond what nature allowed, year after year, because grain was more useful to them than gold and we were too far for their enemies to strike at us. And so, like a body healed again and again by sorcery without care to its natural functions. . . "

"The land began to rot from the inside," she completed.

"Dread Empress Sinistra might have been mad," Amadeus acknowledged, "and have significantly worsened the situation, but she was not the cause of it. Her ritual was a desperate attempt to turn back the death throes of what became the Wasteland."

Her jaw tightened.

"We still practice field rituals, Amadeus," she said.

"Trismegistan magic, not Petronian," the Black Knight replied. "And they are meant to ensure the land can be cultivated at all, not to offer unnaturally great bounty. Wekesa assures me the grounds are exhausted but not damaged by the rituals. For all his other flaws, Dread Emperor Sorcerous was a brilliant mage."

Eyes bright, almost excited though nothing had been revealed since doom and the source of it, Alaya drank of her cup again.

"So you've found answers," she said. "What do you mean to use them for?"

"To make this empire," the Black Knight said, "into more than a covenant of the hungry."

"An ambitious enterprise," Alaya commented, eyes veiled.

"It is," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said, holding her gaze. "It'd take at least two to see it through, at a guess."

Something flickered across her face, then, that he could not put a word to. It stayed there, for a time, until her chin rose and her eyes blazed with something utterly implacable.

"So it will," Alaya said, and it rang like an oath.

# Interlude: Concourse V

"Diplomacy is war without all the clumsiness."

First Princess Eugénie of Lange

If it came to a fight, Lord Yannu Marave decided, they would likely lose. He did not fear the Proceran horse, for its charge would break against a shield wall strong and unflinching. Neither did he balk at the numbers, for though legionaries were skilled soldiers and men-at-arms brave neither were match for armsmen of the Blood holding high ground. It was the Callowan sappers that tipped the balance to the opposition's side, for he had seen with his own eyes what their munitions could do when lobbed at a tight formation. The word shredding came to mind. Torture of Callowan prisoners had yielded knowledge that these 'sharpers' were both commonly used and in large supply, which made it likely the packs of sappers he'd seen shoot out of the torch light and into the darkness would be carrying them. No, if the Procerans and the easterners had ridden forth to betray them then every son and daughter of Levant on this hill would be dead before reinforcements could arrive from the camps. *Had* they?

"That is Rozala Malanza's personal banner," Lady Aquiline said. "Arlesite she might be, but she's no foe of ours – she has behaved honourably since taking command in Iserre."

"I see cavalry and foot coming for us, not bread and honey," Lady Itima replied. "This has an ill cast to it, girl."

Spoken, Yannu thought, as a woman whose lands shared border with Arlesites. Unlike Aquiline Osena, whose main preoccupations as Lady of Tartessos had always been rivals of other Blood and the prowling creatures of the Brocelian.

"The Black Queen's banner flies as well," Razin Tanja mentioned, eyes narrowed. "One of the Woe might be with the legionaries."

The Lord of Alava considered that. Though the visions the Peregrine's last will had carried to them had told much of what happened within the nightmare of dead Liesse, it had not revealed where the Archer and the Hierophant had gone. They should both be alive, though the great Soninke warlock had been stripped of his power, so it would be possible for them to be riding with the cohorts. Yet it seemed unlikely, after the night's troubles, for the Archer's death

was still seared in Yannu's own memory and the Hierophant had been put to slumber as an act of mercy. No, if any of the Woe rode under that banner it would the Adjutant or the Thief – and there had long been rumours that the latter had lost her Bestowal by stepping into the responsibilities of rule.

"If it is the Archer and they mean to slay us, then we are all dead," Yannu Marave noted. "She will kill ourselves and our officers as the opening stroke, and our only answer would be to charge down onto sapper-prepared grounds."

Everybody held in a wince at that, for all here had suffered of the vicious devilries goblins could prepare when given opportunity. Razin Tanja most of all, from what he'd heard, for the Third Army under General Abigail was said to have turned the streets of Sarcella into a slaughter yard even before the Black Queen arrived.

"No one's sprouted an arrow in the forehead," Lady Itima of the Brigand's Blood said. "I'll take that as a hint that either the Archer's not there or they're not baying for blood."

If it were only the Callowans coming none of them would have batted an eye, for when the Peregrine's body was returned it would be by Catherine Foundling's hands if by any. Yet the Procerans coming out had muddied the waters, for they had no business with what would come by morning's light. They had even been told as much, for their messengers had insisted on audience beyond politeness, yet here they were. More suspicious yet, their advance had come to be matched to that of the Army of Callow's legionaries: together they were heading towards flanking positions that would be difficult to push back if assault was given.

"The Praesi crossbowmen could be firing by now," Lady Aquiline pointed out. "Not to great effect, but at least to soften our defence before assault."

Lord Yannu was inclined to agree this was sign of peaceful intent, yet this was a delicate situation. It was likely that canny old Itima Ifriqui had noticed already, even if she'd held her tongue, yet the younger two among them might not have: save for Itima's own two sons, every individual of any Blood in Procer was standing atop this hill. And given both the Brigand's line poor reputation and recently-mauled forces – their assault on the Callowan camp had been costly – it was unlikely that they would be able to sway even most captains into following them through diplomacy or threats. A strike here and now would be decapitating the armies of the Dominion abroad, and even when word trickled back home months from now any retribution for the treachery would have to wait until matters off succession were settled and a session of the Majilis convened. The Lord of Alava was not certain why betrayal would be had here and now, but there was no denying the opportunity was there. Had the Procerans or the Callowans peered into their private councils and then decided removing the Blood to be in either their interests? It seemed a senseless thing, truth be told, but easterners were willing in a villain's service and Procerans lied as easily as they breathed.

"Silence serves us not," Razin Tanja said. "It is unseemly to treat with

foreigners before the Grey Pilgrim's body has been given to the flame, yet strife would be even more so."

"Shall we give them voice in our councils as well, Tanja?" Yannu said, voice hard cast. "We have our wats for reasons, though it seems you have forgotten both. Blood can wash out, unlike honour tarnished."

It was more than simply unseemly to play politics with foreigners now, it was dishonoring a great man's death. That Proceran *royalty* would not be willing to discard their precious Ebb and Flow even long enough for the Peregrine to be put to pyre was...

"If the Black Queen's the one bringing back the Peregrine, the Callowans at least are already part of this," Tanja replied.

"Speaking to them and not the Procerans might split them," Lady Itima noted, sounding approving. "There can't be a lot of trust between them."

Akil Tanja's son seemed as if he wanted to argue that'd not been his intent at all but restrained himself in the end. Young Razin was not so stubborn as to toss away victory he'd already earned, then. For victory he had indeed earned, Yannu had silently acknowledged the moment Lady Itima spoke in favour of *audience*. For Lady Aquiline had made her preference for talks clear already, and if only the Lord of Alava stood alone of the four against words being bandied then his growing isolation among the Blood in Iserre would only be set in stone. Neither Razin Tanja's words nor a knife at his own throat would have stayed Yannu's hands after he'd set out to guide the Dominion away from disaster through duel, as he had. He'd taken a step back simply because Lady Itima Ifriqui, who had every reason to stay out of the affair for dislike of the Osena, had chosen to put that knife to his throat anyway. Though it was a proud old boast in the lands of his birth that Alava had stood alone even when the rest of the Dominion fell to the Principate, and that the hill-folk needed no ally save the bravery of their own kin, the reality was that the city and lands he ruled could be starved of coin and goods and even many foodstuffs if it broke with every other great line. At the very least, alignment between the other three would see him removed from the highest command of Levant's armies even if killed one.

He could kill them all, perhaps, but that would be just as dangerous a roll of the dice and he was a careful man by nature. No, best to take step back then and now so that he might arrange victory on his own terms when the opportunity was ripe.

"It seems there will not be a choice," Lady Aquiline suddenly said. "Look."

Under three banners – Aequitan, Foundling and truce white – a party had approached the foot of the hill as they spoke. Two riders were behind Princess Rozala's familiar silhouette, one carrying her heraldry and the other a torch. Behind a tall orc in darkened plate two smaller humans were carrying the other two trailing cloths, a mere six souls in whole. Unlikely to be an ambush, then, even though the burnt plate was as good as announcement that the orc among them was the Adjutant.

"We can send an invitation to the Deadhand alone to stand before us," Itima said, smile gone hard.

It could be a fine line between envoy and hostage. Razin Tanja cast her a considering look, and for a moment Yannu was reminded of the boy's father. Lord Akil had been known for his keen wits, and though he'd been no great general under his reign the Binder's Blood has seen their influence rise through careful bargains and treaties. It was an old jape back home that the true talent of the Tanjas was not the magic of their famous ancestress but in truth the wealth that flowed through the canals of Malaga, yet few before Akil Tanja had been so skilled at making use of that wealth. More than once Yannu had seen the same look he now saw in young Razin's eyes in his father's own, just before someone was goaded into making a costly mistake on the floor of the Majilis.

"Alone would be insultingly obvious," Razin said. "Let him bring an attendant, at least."

Itima's agreement was the sound of the decision being made, and Yannu Marave began to wonder if it might not be better for the realm to kill the boy than Lady Aquiline after all.

—

Princess Rozala was more than passingly familiar with bravery. She would not consider herself a great paragon of that virtue, though neither was she a coward. Rozala, for all that she did not shy from battle, was still a princess of the blood: she went to war surrounded by loyal bodyguard and with priests ready to bring her back from death's door should wound be taken. It was natural this be the case, though perhaps not fair in a godly sense, for her death would herald a great deal more trouble than a fantassin's. Yet it was easier to brave, the Princess of Aequitan privately thought, when so many were sworn to keep her alive. Yet she'd seen purer strains of bravery in other men and women. Soldiers who volunteered to hold border positions in the face of the Enemy, knowing no reinforcements could be spared. Conscripts running back under arrows and spellfire to drag fallen friends back to safety behind the lines, boys and girls not even eighteen summers old stilling their shaking hands and raising their shields steady as the dead charged howling at them. The Arlesite princess had even seen many whose fearlessness had been hollow, a spectacle put on for myriad reasons ranging from stiffening moral to preserving reputation. And yet Rozala Malanza could not for the life of her tell if Hakram Deadhand's serene disregard for the danger surrounding them was genuine or not.

The orc's helmet was held in the crook of his handless arm, revealing the thick leathery skin and the troublingly large teeth of his kind. Greenskins were not well-known to Rozala, and so discerning one's sentiments did not come naturally to her, yet he'd not hesitated a moment when invited to walk into the wolf's den atop the hill nor expressed particular concern since. It was as if he could not see the hundreds of flaring heavily armed soldiers around them, whose gaze lingered on the truce banner Rozala was carrying with open antipa-

thy. She would have preferred to come in riding, truth be told, but Deadhand had spooked her destrier something fierce when he'd come close. That instinctive dislike by animals was said to be natural to greenskins, though until recently Rozala had believed it to be one of those commonly accepted falsehoods like Praesi being liars from the cradle or Callowans being physically incapable of halfway edible cooking. It seemed there was truth to it, however, for all horses had grown unruly when the Adjutant had been upwind of them.

"The banner's dipping, Your Grace," Hakram Deadhand said.

His coarse voice betrayed the slightest hint of what she took to be amusement. Gritting her teeth, the Princess of Aequitan raised back to full height the banner she'd been made to carry like some sort of, well, attendant. Which the Adjutant had not hesitated to designate her as when the summons had come from the Levantines. To her dismay, she'd even had to play along for the sake of being there when the talks were held. As if leaving alone an orc and a foursome of quarrelsome Dominion lordlings could end in anything but bodies on the floor.

"Is your line known among your people to be of particular dignity?" Princess Rozala tried.

This would be slightly less wounding of her dignity if at least he was the orc surrogate for highborn. Otherwise, she was carrying a banner for one of the Damned plucked out from some northern waste to serve the Black Queen. A heartbeat passed.

"My mother famously made the finest Callowan meat stew in the clan," the Adjutant replied.

She was being mocked, Rozala realized. Wait, *Callowan* meat stew? Surely he could not mean...

"I'd never heard of this delicacy," the Princess of Aequitan said. "May I ask what it contains?"

Surely not Callowans, she thought, for the Black Queen would not have made so important a dignitary of him were it the case.

"Not humans, of course," Hakram Deadhand nonchalantly replied.

She mastered herself so that she would not breathe out in relief. At the very least she was not being made to consort with a bloody-fanged cannibal.

"Much too expensive, that far out in the Steppes," the Adjutant continued just as nonchalantly. "Never ate it done the traditional way until I came to Ater."

Before Rozala could conceive of a gracious way to ask the Damned at her side whether or not the 'traditional way' involved human flesh, they were ushered past one last ring of armsmen and came to stand before the four heads of the Dominion's armies abroad. The older two she was most familiar with: Lord Yannu Marave of Alava and Lady Itima Ifriqui of Vaccei. The latter had particularly poor reputation among Arlesites for her vicious and unprovoked raids into Orense in the years before the Tenth Crusade. The First Prince might have made peace there, but the looting and burning of southern Orense had not been

forgot. Lord Yannu she did not much like, but at least respected. The Lord of Alava, who claimed descent from the Valiant Champion, was a cautious and ferocious man who displayed little of the famed recklessness of his line. The Princess of Aequitan had misliked that by virtue of being the foremost Levantine commander he'd effectively seized command of the Iserran campaign, especially considering unlike her and several of her generals he'd never fought either Queen Catherine or Marshal Juniper. Yet the Dominion had provided the greater part of the host, and so claimed greater influence. If the Battle of the Camps had been a victory perhaps Rozala could have argued otherwise, but while those brutal three days had been many things they had not been that.

The younger pair she only through reports, though the Levantine fascination with war paint and bloodline colours made their identities easy enough to deduce. The young man in iron grey and crimson would be Razin Tanja, son and heir to the fresh-slain Lord Akil Tanja of Malaga. The peculiarities of Dominion inheritance laws meant he would not be Lord of Malaga until his kin had acclaimed him on the grounds of that very city, assuming his right was not challenged, so among the four highborn here his authority was the weakest. His own captains could defy him without breaking oath, at the moment, though if he ever ascended to lordship that'd be a poor decision indeed. The impressively-shaped young woman to his side would be Lady Aquiline Osena of Tartessos, by repute rival to the Tanjas and deathly foe to the Ifriquis for reason of kinslaying twice over. Dominion political affairs were fluid even by Proceran standards, for they shifted with the feuds of every generation of the Blood, but it was usually to be expected that their highborn would be feuding with whoever's lands bordered their own and seeking cordial ties with whoever's did not. The Maraves of Alava did have a reputation as proud lunatics staying out of politics save when offended, which had made it both surprising and not when Lord Yannu became informal head of the Dominion's armies abroad. Rozala was not unfamiliar with the trick of putting those that could not be called to heel in charge.

The four lordlings were standing and fully armed. And, by the visible wounds on the Osena and the Marave, had recently fought some manner of duel among themselves.

"You stand before four lines of the Blood," Lady Itima said in heavily-accented Lower Miezan. "You may kneel."

"You stand before the Queen of Callow's right hand," the Adjutant calmly replied in Chantant. "You may bow."

Princess Rozala would have appreciated the insolent confidence a great deal more if it hadn't run the risk of getting them both killed. Lady Aquiline's lips twitched in amusement, as did Lady Itima's, but Tanja's lips thinned and Lord Yannu's face remained inscrutable.

"Princess Malanza," the Lord of Alava said. "Are you now *attendant* to one of Below's servants?"

"I am sworn envoy speaking for the First Prince of Procer," the Princess of

Aequitan replied. "Who also happens to temporarily attend to the Lord Adjutant."

If he expected to shame her into retiring, he would have to do better than that. Rozala had been the ruling princess of principality that'd half-beggared itself fighting to the death with the current ruling First Prince, the daughter of a woman who'd once laughingly boasted she would send Cordelia Hasenbach running back north with her tail between her legs to 'suckle on icicles and brood'. She'd had to wade through seas of scorn and mockery to rise to the height's she now stood at, all of it dealt by peers – which not a single individual here could claim to be.

"What an unlikely coincidence," Lady Itima sardonically said.

For some reason, she shot Razin Tanja a half-approving look afterwards.

"You interrupt sacred ceremony, Bestowed," Lady Aquiline said, eyeing the orc curiously. "Withdraw your warriors and let nothing more be spoken of this."

Rozala found herself almost shamefully glad that there'd been no talk about claiming the Black Queen's head in some sort of doomed attempt at vengeance. Near enough to every highborn of the Dominion was here, if some dimwit among them took a swing at Catherine Foundling the entire Levantine host could be decapitated. It wasn't as if the Princess of Aequitan had sallied forth to protect the Black Queen, for what would that monster fear from not even a thousand soldiers? The Queen of Callow had looked more than eight thousand horse in the eye, drawn a line in the snow and dared them to cross it. And when Rozala had offered her challenge, after, it'd not been met with fear or defiance. It'd been met, chillingly enough, with a sort of vague irritation. Like Foundling had already done them all a favour by refraining from slaughtering them like animals and anything aside from withdrawal from that point on had been trying an already thinning patience. That, more than threats or promises, had seen Rozala Malanza order a retreat. And rumour had since trickled in that the Black Queen had, for having struck at her legionaries, broken two fingers from every cataphract of Helike and sent them marching back to the Tyrant stripped of arms and armour. It might be that the Lanterns and the armsmen might kill the villainous queen, if they struck at her. It'd been a long and arduous night.

More likely, though, Catherine Foundling would lose patience at the attempt and kill them all without batting an eye.

"You have claimed the grounds where my warlord will return," Hakram Deadhand said. "That will not be brooked."

"We've no interest in your queen," Lord Yannu bluntly said. "We await the arrival of the Peregrine's remains."

"I've no interest in the remains of the Grey Pilgrim," the orc replied. "I await the arrival of my queen."

"Perhaps a simple honour guard can be arranged," Rozala suggested.

The Lord of Alava fixed her with a steady look.

"Sons and daughters will bring the Peregrine to the flame," he flatly said. "None other."

"The Queen of Callow will not return from saving all your lives to a ring of foreign soldiers," the Adjutant replied just as flatly.

Rozala would have hissed at him in an other language, if she shared any with him that the Levantines would not.

"It was the Grey Pilgrim who sacrificed himself for all who stand here," Lady Aquiline sharply said.

"It was the Black Queen who made truce where you sought war, and led the band of five to victory," the Adjutant said. "Do you deny this?"

"That the Queen of Callow acted honourably this night is not in doubt," Lady Itima said. "Bargains made were kept."

There was agreement from the others, some of it more reluctant than others.

"Yet you diminish the sacrifice made by the Peregrine through your words," the Lady of Vaccei continued. "Curb your tongue, Damned."

"Damned you call me, but my honour lies in the service of my queen," the orc unflinchingly replied. "I will not suffer her return being a circle of swords bared."

In that moment, Rozala Malanza grasped that the Adjutant had been playing them all. Gods, he'd been trying to extract something from them from the start.

"No offence is meant," Razin Tanja said.

"Then why do you insist on giving it?" Hakram Deadhand said.

There was a rumble of discontent from the Levantines.

"What offence is this, orc?" Lord Yannu bluntly asked.

"Though under truce, you are enemies still," the Adjutant said. "How can your surrounding my queen be taken as anything but slight?"

"The Peregrine's last escort will not be opened to Callowans or Wastelanders," Lady Aquiline firmly said. "This will not be argued."

"Then to avoid slighting Callow's honour, you must no longer be enemies to its queen but instead allies," the Adjutant said.

"Are we to swear oaths to the void?" Lady Itima mocked. "Even were we willing, there is nothing to be done."

"There is," the Adjutant replied, offering a fanged grin. "Years ago, Queen Catherine requested to become a member of the Grand Alliance. All that would be required for friendship to be established is your agreement to this suit."

"It would mean nothing, without the First Prince's approval and the Majilis' agreement," Razin Tanja said.

"It would satisfy honour nonetheless," the orc said.

Rozala's pulse quickened. Should she intervene, she wondered? For all that the Foundling Queen had declared her intention to join the war against the Dead King, that was not the same as her becoming signatory of the Grand Alliance. If four of the five greatest aristocrats in Levant agreed to back Callow's

bid to become part of the Alliance, its chances would become more than merely good. The consequences of that were… hard to foresee. Gods, this was too great a decision too swiftly made. Rozala Malanza bit her lip.

A heartbeat later, dawn began and a gate tore open before all of them.

Two people hobbled through it, and just like that the Princess of Aequitan felt the world change.

# Chapter 52

# Recovery

> "Negotiation with your ruler, my lord, is like treading the edge of a hidden pit filled with man-eating tapirs. Unrelated, but before we further discuss taxation would you take a single step to the left?"
>
> Dread Empress Atrocious

Dawn broke through the night sky, revealing bared steel.

That, I considered, was a lot of swords. Shame about the way the people wielding those seemed inclined to point them in my direction. Princess Rozala, who was here for some reason, immediately began shouting for the pack of Levantine warriors surrounding us to sheathe their blades, which went largely ignored. Almost like some Proceran princess screaming out orders at people her ancestors had invaded hadn't gone over well with this particular crowd. Who'd have thought? Hakram, who was there because he was a prince among men, strode forward ignoring all the shouting and the foreign priests looking like someone had kicked over their anthill. After going through his cloak pockets he produced a nice little wooden pipe and stuffed it with wakeleaf, at my unspoken invitation putting it up against my lip and scratching out a match to light it. A few puffing breaths later I breathed in the smoke, breathed it out and let out a pleased moan before facing the angry shouting crowd.

"Right," I got out around the pipe's lip, "you all seem to be very concerned about something and I don't want to, uh, diminish that. But I also don't speak Lunara, so we're at a bit of an impasse."

"That was mostly Ceseo, in truth," the Grey Pilgrim rasped out.

His speaking triggered another round of shouting while I pondered the complexities of smoking a pipe without having a free hand for it. I had one holding up Tariq's doddering frame, slipped under his shoulder to let him stand, while the other was busy keeping *me* up by leaning on my staff. Our journey here through Twilight Throneless had been somewhat less than graceful, though I'd been rather amused by the fact that the first set of stairs we'd encountered on

our way out of Liesse had probably come closer to killing either of us that night than Kairos.

"Figured they'd be a little happier to see you, Tariq, I'm not gonna lie," I mused. "Would you care to translate?"

The old man cocked his head to the side.

"To put it delicately," the Peregrine said, "questions are being raised as to the authenticity of my person."

"Oh?" I mouthed back, grinning nastily around my pipe. "Did someone call you an undead abomination yet? That's always been one my favourites."

"You're enjoying this a great deal more than you should," the Grey Pilgrim muttered.

"Someone else being called that?" I murmured. "Never. That would be *highl*y petty of me, after all."

A heartbeat passed.

"Maybe they'll name you Arch-heretic of the West," I suggested. "Wouldn't that be something?"

I wasn't sure whether what shook him was a cough of a snort, but it ripped through his frame suddenly enough it very much did become a cough. My use of his resurrection trick was apparently a little rough around the edges compared to his personal touch, and he'd not been a young man to begin with. And if that hadn't been enough, I still remembered what it'd felt like having an aspect cut out of me. Tariq had been dead when I'd ripped Forgive out of his corpse, so he'd been spared the inhuman pain I'd felt when Masego carved Seek out of my soul, but losing a third of your Name was nothing something to be *shrugged off*. Especially when you'd had your aspects as long as the Grey Pilgrim had. A quartet of Levantines seemed to be getting deferred to by even the Lanterns, who were visibly itching to have a go at Tariq and I, and one's familiar face told me why: Razin Tanja was among them, which meant they were Blood. I waved at him from the Pilgrim's side, wiggling my hand against the old man's flank, but my treasured acquaintance seemed rather offended by the act. Fancy that, I drily thought. I'd always got on so well with Levantines.

"Queen Catherine, please," Princess Rozala shouted in Lower Miezan. "At least answer the accusations-"

"My return was wrought," the Grey Pilgrim said, weak voice firming, "under the auspices of the Ophanim."

"Forgiveness, Peregrine," a towering muscle slab of a man said, "yet if the corpse of the Grey Pilgrim were to be so defiled, it would speak as you do. Truth must be ascertained."

I glanced at Hakram, who'd fallen it at my side and was nonchalantly ignoring the way the few hundred warriors surrounding us had yet to put down their swords or even lapse in their general glowering. I drew on the pipe, letting the wakeleaf sink down my throat and into by lungs before breathing it out through my nose. It burned a tad – I usually blew it out – but not unpleasantly.

"So," I drawled. "I don't suppose you've got a flask of Vale summer wine stashed away in that cloak?"

"I could only get my hands on Dormer pale," Adjutant apologetically said.

My lips twitched.

"See, now I *know* that's a lie," I replied.

"This is going to be a hand joke, isn't it," he sighed, sounding resigned.

"If I say yes," I murmured, "are you going to lose it?"

I shamelessly chortled at my own joke and regretted it not a bit. His jaw muscles twitched in what was either suppressed amusement or the sudden urge to bite off my face, and not metaphorically speaking.

"Your Majesty, would you start taking this seriously?" Princess Rozala hissed. "This could easily devolve into a battle. Already forces are gathering, all bloody chaos requires is a spark."

I glanced at her, brow rising, then looked at Hakam.

"It's looking like Hasenbach's riding her hard to keep you alive and happy," he told me in Kharsum.

"She must just *love* that," I replied in the same.

Not even the harsh syllables of the main orc dialect entirely managed to hide my petty glee at the revelation, from the looks I got. I sighed and began helping Tariq off of me.

"Need my stick, old bones?" I asked. "I'll let you borrow it if you promise to give it back."

"I'll stand, thank you," the Grey Pilgrim sighed. "I will have to grow used to having broken mine."

I cast a look at the middle-aged warrior who'd very politely just told Tariq they were going to have to check if he was my dead corpse-puppet, mentally going through what I knew of Levantine commanders in Iserre. That was Yannu Marave, probably, though I couldn't be sure from his face-paint as I could not remember the colours of the Champion's Blood at the moment.

"Lord Marave, is it?" I probed.

"It is so, Black Queen," he calmly replied.

"Word of advice," I said. "When you have your priestlings poke at the Peregrine, tell them to be gentle."

"Truth must be ascertained," he replied, eyes tightening.

"Sure," I said. "But if they get too rough, after tonight I'm guessing the Ophanim might end up *ascertaining* them all over the ground. I mean, it's not my hill so I've no horse in this race, but think of the poor Proceran peasant who'll end up stuck cleaning that up."

I bet Alamans princes didn't even tip, too, they seemed like the type.

"We will see," Lord Marave said.

I had a free hand, now that Tariq was standing on his own, so I used it for the very important task of having another pull of my pipe and spewing out the smoke into the crisp winter morning air. Then, resting my staff against my chest, I extended an open palm towards Hakram and saw it filled with a

nice little silver flask. Had to unscrew the cap, but a sniff told me it really *was* Dormer pale inside. I'd be damned, hadn't thought any Callowan drink would make it this far out. The surprise brought back sharp remembrance of Ratface, whose days as a quartermaster had seen him taken as some sort of contraband magician, and the ache of my dead friend's absence was a lingering pang. I smoothed it away from my face, pulling at the wine. A pair of Lanterns were not helping the Pilgrim stand, gently but firmly inspecting him.

"I'm guessing, Lord Yannu," I said, "that you want me to stick around until that little charade there is over with."

"I accept your kind offer, Black Queen," the Lord of Alava said.

Someone was letting the inch I'd given them go to their head, looked like.

"Put words in my mouth again, Marave, and that'll be the last time you have a tongue," I casually replied, with a nice friendly smile.

The warriors around us didn't like that, or at least not my tone. I wasn't clear on how many of them spoke Lower Miezan. The other three of the Blood – the older woman had to be the Lady of Vaccei, who I remembered had grown children, while by elimination the last was the Lady of Tartessos – didn't either, though none spoke out to take me to task over the threat. Almost like they were realizing they were trying to keep the Queen of Callow prisoner, breaking truce in the process. I allowed myself a single appreciative glance at the Lady of Tartessos, whose bronze and green paint paired with a rather tight leather vest made for an attractively unusual look. Truthfully if Lord Yannu had been twenty years longer he might have been the one to draw a second look but as it was he was both at least twice my age and getting on my nerves.

"No offence was meant," the Levantine lord said.

He didn't sound all that apologetic, which made sense as I'd yet to hear an apology.

"Now, for the sake of diplomacy I'll tolerate this," I said. "But I'd like the lot of you to consider the amount of insults you've been laying at my feet this morn, after the trouble I went through to save your ungrateful hides."

"You claim debt, Black Queen?" the Lady of Vaccei asked.

"I claim slights," I idly replied. "Three now and your tab's still open. Best start thinking now of how restitution will be offered for them."

I was willing to make peace with these people, to make alliances and sign treaties and fight by their side. But I would not allow that willingness to be confused even a moment for *fragility*. If they offered insults, they'd pay up for them – or else. I had no intention to allow either myself or Callow to be made the rented mule of the Grand Alliance in the war to come. Grace would be answered with grace, but disrespect with the same thing as well. The talk of restitution went over about as well one would expect when spoken by a villain, but in those haughty faces I saw something like abashment as well. No one who spent as much time going around talking about honour as the Dominion's highborn did could be unaware that they were pushing me far enough a less temperate woman might have chosen violence as answer. Oh Gods, I thought,

pulling at my pipe. You knew a manner of thinking was awful skewed when *I* could be counted as temperate by it. One of the Lanterns, speaking rhythmic prayers in what might still have been Ceseo for all I knew, brought forth a long spike of Light. She touched it to the Pilgrim's skin, near the wrist, and that was then the Choir of Mercy took offence.

Well, I'd warned them. The rest was on their heads.

There was a ripple of power by now familiar to me, a taste of flame and smoke and the beat of wings, and before it could draw blood the Light winked out. The Lantern fell to her knees, stunned, and began babbling in one of the Levantine tongues. I glanced at Hakram, pulling at my pipe, but the orc shrugged. He had no idea either then. I turned to Princess Rozala, realizing only then she'd been bearing a truce banner this entire time. Gods, I was more out of it than I'd thought. I almost asked why she'd been made flag-bearer, but to be honest the true reason might not be as amusing as what my imagination was providing so it'd be a shame to break the illusion so soon.

"I don't suppose, Your Grace, that you speak… that," I said, somewhat vaguely.

"Still Ceseo," Princess Rozala said. "They use it for formal conversations even in northern Levant. I'm not fluent, but she seems to be saying she has lost the 'grace'."

I cocked my head to the side.

"Well, I'll be damned," I said.

"Again," Hakram helpfully contributed.

I would have gestured obscenely at him, were my hands not full. Truly, my Adjutant's wiles were without match.

"They stripped her of the right to use the Light, then," I whistled. "That's as clear a verdict as you'll get."

I was not, apparently, the only one to think so. It was only Yannu Marave, at first, but within moments a handful of warriors followed suit and from there on it was like levees breaking: before the bone-tired Grey Pilgrim the men and women of Levant knelt. I could feel the tiredness withdrawing from my wary bones, though it must be illusion. I'd been at the end of my rope hours ago, by now I was dangling in the void. I sniffed at the flask in my hand once more.

"Hakram, is there anything aside from wine in there?" I asked.

"A Praesi alchemical tonic," he admitted.

My brow rose.

"Didn't think to mention that before I drank it?" I said.

"You have been awake for nearly twenty hours, Catherine," he said. "And few of them restful."

"Potions are always hollow strength," I grunted.

I didn't further mention it, though, for cheat or not the tonic's effect was pushing back the moment where I'd collapse in my bed for three days by a few hours yet. Might be I wouldn't need that long before I crawled under a set of warm covers but I might as well be fully awake for the time it did end up taking.

I took another sip from the flask. It might just be the lack of sleep talking, but the wine might actually taste better with the tonic in it. It took the edge of the sweetness of – oh Gods, I'd been spending too much time with Akua lately if I'd seriously been thinking about that. Next thing you knew I'd be talking about what poisons paired well with an Aksum sour, and what kind of a dress you should wear when crushing your enemies underfoot. Probably something red, I mused, depending on how literal the crushing was. The winding turns of my life had made me rather depressingly familiar with how difficult blood could be to get out of clothes. I forced myself to pay attention to what the Pilgrim and the Levantines were doing, which from the look on Malanza's face must be rather impressive.

Well, they did make a pretty painting. I'd at least concede that much. Tariq, weary and bloodstained and victorious, surrounding by a ring of kneeling warriors in steel and paint as the sun rose above them all. Unfortunately, pretty as this all was I was beginning to lose patience with it. If the Dominion wanted to get all ceremonial about the Peregrine returning to them all the better, but they could go about it without my attendance. It was also rather ungainly that myself, Hakram and a Proceran princess were the only people on this hill not kneeling to the Pilgrim. Didn't particularly make me want to take a knee to good ol' Tariq, mind you, but we stood out a mite. Adjutant looked askance at me, but I shook my head. Hakram Deadhand had no need to kneel to me, so why should he kneel to anyone at all? The Grey Pilgrim addressed his countrymen in one of their languages, sounding as if he was admonishing them, but even then they all stubbornly remained kneeling save for the four of the Blood. I was occupied wondering whether it would be rude to, well, *leave* after I'd finished smoking my pipe when the four aristocrats were calmly addressed by the Pilgrim and turned to us.

"We are told this was wrought by your hand, Black Queen," Lord Yannu Marave gravely said.

"Mercy allowed it, as the Peregrine said," I honestly replied. "And it was not without price for all involved."

Least costly to me, who'd merely tossed away the chance in the future that one dear to me could be stolen back from death, but it'd been a price still. Chances like that one came only once, when Creation's writ conspired to deliver them into your hand, and spurning what had been offered would ensure there was no repetition.

"Honour was given," the Lady of Tartessos said.

"Honour was given to all Levant," the Lady of Vaccei said. "This we agree."

"And so honour must be returned in kind," Razin Tanja gravely said.

So, I idly wondered, what kind of a largely ceremonial gesture would be made. Would concession be made, a declaration that I was not truly Archheretic of the East? No, I decided, not that. It'd been a conclave of several priesthoods that named me that, even if they were influential enough to force the Lanterns to agree it wouldn't be enough. Amusedly, I wondered if I was

about to be made some manner of Blood. Not one of their own, of course, but recognized as some Callowan equivalent. I did remember that for all that their five great lines held the power and influence, other Named were granted some privileges as well. As far as Levant was concerned, being Named was being nobility. *Catherine Foundling of the Squire's Blood*, I thought. Well, it'd been a long year. I could use the laugh, even if diplomacy dictated it must be had behind closed doors where these touchy nobles could not hear it.

"The Champion's Blood endorses Callow's petition to join the Grand Alliance," Lord Yannu Marave said. "In my name, I speak this, as the Lord of Alava."

"The Brigand's Blood endorses Callow's petition to join the Grand Alliance," Lady Itima Ifriqui said. "In my name, I speak this, as the Lady of Vaccei."

"The Slayer's Blood endorses Callow's petition to join the Grand Alliance," Lady Aquiline Osena said. "In my name, I speak this, as the Lady of Tartessos."

"The Binder's Blood endorses Callow's petition to join the Grand Alliance," Razin Tanja said. "In the name of myself and my kin, I speak this, as the heir to Malaga."

They were, I understood after a moment of silent disbelief, deadly serious. Because for them this wasn't about treaties and interest and Calernia's balance of power – it was, old-fashioned as the thought was, about *honour*. What had moved their tongues was the same thing that'd been the source of indignation that'd seen Captain Elvera chastise me even as my prisoner for daring to suggest she might go back on her word when released. What lay at the heart of Praesi and Procerans I could understand, for it was not so different for all the posturing and castigations that both so freely threw. This, though? I would call it some sentimental ardour coming through in a moment of weight, but I was coming to grasp that was a mistaken understanding. This was good as law to them, wasn't it? Returning boon to even those they believed to be in Below's grasp, when boon was given. Honour, the way they spoke of it, was not something I could understand. It might be one needed to be born in their lands, to grasp it as they did. But my own people knew of debts, of scores settled, and perhaps those were not tenets so estranged as I might once have believed.

"I will not speak for the Pilgrim's Blood," Tariq said. "Now or ever. Yet I will speak of this *to* the Holy Seljun, Queen Catherine. And I swear now that the Majilis will speak as one, endorsing the petition of the Kingdom of Callow."

# Chapter 53

# Avowed

> "Count them all, in the snow
> Red and gold and black as night
> Count them all, high and low
> Seven crowns broken by rite
> Brought they forth, in accord
> Peace, oaths and a sword."
>
> Iserran children's rhyme

If felt like the fact that my hands were currently filled with a pipe and liquor might be detracting some from the solemnity of this occasion, but maybe it was just me. Gods, I wished I'd gotten ten hours of sleep in me before having to parse this. On the surface this seemed like a coup, but not looking further than the surface was how you lost feathers at this game. Levant was backing my bid for being a member of the Grand Alliance, and Ashur had been struck down into irrelevance by the Battle of Thalassina and then being knifed in the back by the League. I forced my tired mind to keep slogging on, but as far as I could see the heart of what this meant was that if I made a bargain with Cordelia Hasenbach – which, given the amount of things I had to trade, I should be able to – then Callow would be brought into the fold. Was this a case of putting a leash on the beast you couldn't defeat, an attempt by the Pilgrim to bind me to his causes? It hardly mattered, though, in the end. I'd been trying to get a foothold in those treaties for years now, and if they were seeking a peace because they thought they could win that where war had failed them then I could live with that. Because I, too, sought more than my signature on declarations of alliance from this. I would get the Liesse Accords signed, and whatever else could be said of tonight it was also was a step towards that end.

Discretely as I could in this situation, which wasn't all that much, I pressed back the flask into Hakram's hand and hide the pipe behind my arm to empty it into the snow. Already I was half-wishing I'd drunk the whole thing, as much for the wine's touch of warmth in the face of the cold morning air as the tonic that'd shaken off some the lethargy clawing at my thoughts. Leaning against

the dead yew offering I'd found in the depths of Twilight, where lied the grave of king the world had decreed to be good, I shivered but matched their expectant gazes.

"I have one foe," I said, "and he dwells north, behind the walls of Keter, where his tyranny lies serene. Everything else is chaff."

Would that I had my cloak, as much for warmth as for the presence it lent.

"You have bled my people," I said. "And we have done the same to you, every one of us dancing on damned strings. Let that end with this dawn, for we share one war still and it will not be found on this field."

"War on Keter," Aquiline Osena called out, voice loud and clear. "Honour in victory, and should doom find us then honour in defiance *unbent*."

The last word clapped out like a challenge, proud and finding reflection in those that heard it.

"War to the north," Razin Tanja agreed, his words ringing out. "As oath was sworn in Blood and smoke. The shames we will redeem, the graces we will earn."

"To the Crown of the Dead we bring steel," Itima Ifriqui smiled, hard-toothed and starved. "Through wasteland and snow, until tall walls come to echo our scorn."

"Oath was given. War to the knife," Yannu Marava said, eyes cold and limpid, "to ruin and carrion things and silent dusk. Let Creation know that the Dominion of Levant marches to war, and the sword will not return to the sheath until the Enemy has broken or we are dust."

Would my countrymen have shivered this way, I wondered as I watched the fire light in the eyes of the warriors around us, if a king of the Old Kingdom had called on their oaths? I remembered still the sight of Edward Fairfax standing bedecked in bells and spite, the words that heady call that'd sounded beyond the veil of death – *rise, Callowans, rise once more for we have debts yet unsettled* – and called the sum of my failures to war. It was a bastard throne I had made, and bastard was the claim I had on those who had chosen to follow me into strife. This, though? It was older, purer. The stuff fables were made of. I watched it ripple through the hundreds of armsmen around us, that intangible weight that betrayed history's gears turning. Sometimes, I thought, it didn't have to be a scheme. Sometimes the stars were aligned and Creation let fate flow like water down the river. A hundred thousand touches too light and too small to have been seen, conspiring to shape something grim or beautiful or both. The Levantines sounded swords and axes on shield, though this was no acclamation: the rhythm sounded like a strange dirge, like grief and doom and wonder.

"The Anthem of Smoke," Princess Rozala Malanza murmured under her breath.

It was, I remembered, one of the great story-songs of their people. Not unlike *Here They Come Again* for mine, or perhaps *Red The Flowers*. There was an anger to the tune, I thought, and why would there not be? Levant had

been born of bloody, merciless rebellion. Their Named were not the white-clad knights of the Old Kingdom, the tricksters and preachers of the League or even the blinkered, colourful exemplars of Procer. No, that lot had tasted the blood in the mouth from the start, hadn't they? Slayer, red-handed killers one and all. Binder, shackling doom to ride it to war. Brigand – that incongruous Chantant word in Levantine hands, the scornful dismissal of *bandit* instead turned into declaration of war. Even the Champion had stood for a people who'd preferred burning their own homes to surrendering it. And at the heart of them all a Pilgrim in grey, and how did the famous line go again? *His stride rebellion and stirring ember.* Oh, theirs were not the finest armies I had seen. They lacked discipline, lacked training, lacked equipment. But they were brave, I thought, and the manner of savagery I saw in their bearing I thought might be kin to the sort I'd glimpsed in another hard people. One I'd come to trust, and in many ways they was still the backbone of my armies.

One served as my right hand, too, and another as the marshal of my hosts.

Savages as they might be, I thought, striking each other at every turn and writing honour's couplets in blood, but when the dark pivots came they wouldn't break easy. It was slight, and fading, but there remained something in them of the people who'd humbled the Principate when it stood at the height of its power. *May the Hidden Horror yet choke on it*. I stood in silence until the hammering of steel on steel ended, trailing off into the clearing sky.

"So be it," the Grey Pilgrim said.

And oh, he sounded exhausted but there was a brightness to his voice as well I'd rarely heard there before. Pride, I thought, if not without sadness. I could not blame him, for Levant had sworn anew to do the right thing and that never, ever came without a price.

"I stand witness to oaths sworn again, and let none break them while claiming honour," he said. "Let it be remembered that when the Enemy came for the world, Levant did not shirk its duty."

The sound of steel sliding out of its sheath drew all gazes to my side, where Rozala Malanza had drawn the slender blade at her side. In the morning's cast the princess was a sight, long dark curls loose behind her and matched in shine only by the gleam in those equally dark eyes. Tall and curved but hard-handed, as much general as she was princess, the Princess of Aequitan breathed out mist. In war too, had that one been forged. Her mother's war, the one whose defeat had haunted her life, but other since. The Battle of the Camps, where ambitions were ruined and I first tasted the fear that would lead me down the road to Keter. This one as well, though, had left a mark. *A princes' graveyard*, Leonor of Valencis had called it, one from which only one crown emerged untouched. Her own, for having judged it less than the lives of the people it ruled over. I'd admired the gesture then, and still did now. Of all the princes and princesses of Procer I had beheld, none save the First Prince herself could be said to have character worthier of respect.

"I am not the First Prince," she said. "Yet I stand the sole of my title in

Iserre, and the south entire. I speak only to that, which is right enough to my eye."

I studied her in silence, not alone in this: so did the four of the Blood, and the Pilgrim as well. The Peregrine had been at her side before, I remembered, when he'd led the heroes of the northern crusade.

"We have been foe before," Rozala said, princess still but in that moment Arlesite even more, "on Levant we warred, unjustly, for many years. And to the east, across the mountains..."

She looked at me then, and I did not soften gaze or offer sympathy. I still remembered the bloody gaps left in the ranks of my army after I'd awoke from Winter's grasp, on the last day of the Camps, and though war was war even if I did not count it grudge neither would I simply *forge*t it.

"We spoke righteous words, and schemed that which was not," the Princess of Aequitan said. "A fresh entry to a tally long kept of contempts offered unprovoked. I say this not to apologize, for I bear not so great a crown it can change the lay of the past, but to..."

She hesitated, struggling for the word.

"Acknowledge," Rozala Malanza said. "That even though treaties were signed, that alliances were made and bargains stuck, we did not *earn* this. That in the face of the darkness what we have sown might have seen us stand alone, if you all had not chosen to heed beliefs of a higher order."

She let out what might have been a laugh had it not been utterly without mirth.

"To acknowledge that there were choices to be made and you chose to act in honour," she said. "Knowing that like the viper of old lore we have sunk our fangs in the flesh of our benefactors before, still you chose. And I cannot – I cannot offer anything for it that would not be insult."

She'd stumbled, in the last sentence, like it'd been disgraceful to speak it.

"There are no honours I could grant that would be higher than those you claimed simply by making this decision," Princess Rozala said, raising her chin. "I will not pretend that wealth or promises would be worth the blood you have and will shed, though should you wish them of me you have all I own. Yet I can, Merciful Gods, at least I can say that this was *heard*. That it will be remembered, that it will not slip quiet into obscurity once the menace has passed."

She breathed out shallowly.

"Shame on us," Rozala Malanza softly said, "if we ever forget it."

Her sword she thrust into the ground, through snow and ice and earth, and it bit deep.

"And if ever comes to that," she said. "On that day I, or one of my line, will come for that sword again. To take it up and wield it until the shame has been cleansed."

My fingers clenched. That had not been small oath, I thought, or a feeble one. The Princess of Aequitan had sworn, in her own way, that should Procer turn against those who were coming to its help in its hour of need she would

rise in rebellion. No, more than just her. She had sworn as a Malanza and bound her entire line to the oath.

"Rozala Malanza," the Grey Pilgrim called out, voice clear and bright, "hail."

Like a snake uncoiling the call spread through the Levantines, Blood and not, until the *hail* rang out like thunder. Softly I struck the butt of my staff against the ground, looking at the sword and wondering what manner of curse would take anyone trying to take it up save in fulfillment of the oath. There'd been a weight to the princess' words, Named or not, and such a thing was rarely without consequence. No, they'd remember Rozala's Oath for many years to come. After the last hail died, like the wind had gone out of all of us we began to disperse. The force that had held us all spellbound had ebbed, used to nothingness or passed afar.

And so the great battle on the plains of Iserre ended with three things: peace, oaths, and a sword in the ground.

—

I could feel the vigor leeching out of me as we began walking downhill, the half-scattered Levantines parting respectfully for us. Princess Rozala had made her own way down, apart from Hakram and I and directly headed towards the horse and foot she'd brought. I'd traded a meaningful look with Tariq before we parted ways, both of us aware that there would be need for talks of all sorts in the days to come. Gripping as the exchanges on the hill had been in their own way, they would amount to little and less if the diplomatic legwork did not follow behind the grand gestures. Verbal agreements at sunrise made between recent enemies were not actual treaties, though my life would be a great deal simpler of they were. Still, I'd be useless before I got some sleep in me and Tariq was in even worse state: freshly-resurrected, robbed of an aspect and with no finger on the pulse of where his people had been headed before we returned. I, at least, could rest certain that Vivienne and Juniper would keep things running as they should in my absence. With Hakram to watch over them, these days I did not need to keep nearly as close an eye on the Army of Callow's workings as I had in the early days.

It was for the best, in my opinion. I still believed myself a fair hand as a general and an occasionally inspired tactician, but the army could not come to rely on me. Black, when he'd first forged the modern Legions of Terror, had been very careful to ensure that his presence and Name would be supplement but never *required*. The Legions, and now the Army, must be perfectly capable of functioning without my being involved. It freed my hand to address other perils, true, but there was also an issue of legacy – I would build no host that would be crippled by my death or abdication, whichever came first. I'd been taught better than that. Two cohorts and a pale-faced General Abigail were awaiting us when we reached the bottom of the hill, which had me casting a mildly reproachful look at Adjutant. She was far too high-placed an officer to be in command here if someone higher up the ladder had not requested it. The culprit seemed obvious, and after the general hurriedly distanced herself from

us under pretence of leading the cohorts back to camp from the front, turned out to be unabashed.

"Wanted to see how she holds up under pressure," he quietly told me in Kharsum.

"She's held command in battles without folding in the slightest," I pointed out in the same. "She's a twitchy thing, mind you, I won't deny that. But she thinks fast on her feet and she's got the right instincts."

"Reminds you of anyone?" Adjutant mildly said.

I rolled my eyes.

"I was never all that shy when it came to getting into scraps," I replied. "Not every canny Callowan girl is my kin in spirit."

"If you say so," he teased.

"I do," I said. "And you're being cagey. Haven't told you anything you didn't already know, so what's your actual reason for bringing her along?"

"There's more than one kind of pressure," Hakram said. "Many moving parts, tonight, and many ways it could have spun out of control."

I grunted, conceding the point. Keeping the lid on the pot was different than keeping your head screwed on straight when the blades were already out.

"So?" I asked.

"She kept her head," he said, almost approvingly. "General staff material, that one. She'd also thank you for sending her far from the frontlines."

"She needs accolades first," I murmured. "A few feats under her belt. Otherwise the nobles will squeeze her too easily."

The bastard system of fresh Callowan rule I would be passing on to my successor had governors holding many of the great territories that'd once belonged to the aristocracy, but the nobles hadn't been stamped out. Yet there were still baronies up north, Duchess Kegan in Daoine and even highborn stripped of their lands still held a lot of influence. Though the unspoken threat of my disapproval – paired with the open secret I was less than fond of aristocrats – had kept a true noble faction from forming since the effective dissolution of the Regals, there was no guarantee such a state of affairs would be maintained under whoever followed after me. Rebellions or even just unrest, would be a nasty turn after the way Callow had exhausted and would further exhaust itself prosecuting war against the Dead King. Best to nip that in the bud with a large standing army whose head would be both popular with the people and not bound to any of the great nobles and dignitaries of Callow. Whether Abigail of Summerholm could be that woman still remained to be seen, but for now she was at least the foremost candidate. I was shaken out of the reverie I'd slipped into when thinking when I caught sight of a familiar silhouette approaching. Ivah, by now well-known in the Army of Callow's circles, found the shield wall opening for it without a comment.

General Abigail glanced askance at me, silently asking whether her presence would be required for the conversation that'd follow, but I shook my head. And tried not to be too visibly amused at her poorly-hidden relief.

"Ivah," I greeted the drow. "Still up, I see."

"My tasks have yet to end, Losara Queen," it replied. "I bring forth message from your shade, as well as your mantle."

It did, in fact, have my cloak with it. It spread it out, though not before handing me a small stripe of parchment, and I turned to the side to cast better light on it. *He is one again*, Akua had written me. *Losses were slight. Exhaustion will keep him slumbering for a time.* A tired smile stretched out my lips. It'd been a damned ride of a night, but there'd been more victories than defeats. Foremost among them was that my father's soul had been reattached to his body and he'd wake before too long, whole and not greatly lessened by the experience. Akua had come through for me once more, as she was in the habit of doing these days. Good news. I thought I'd heard a scuffle behind, but when I glanced there was nothing out of the ordinary. Hakram laid the Mantle of Woe on my shoulders and I breathed out in comfort. It was not so warm as that, but I'd grown used to it more than I'd ever believed I would.

"Masego is stable?" I asked.

"He is," Hakram gravelled. "And still asleep. We have him watched."

I snorted.

"Archer let you post guards?" I asked. "Which brings to mind, did Roland return to the Proceran camp in the end?"

"The Rogue Sorcerer," Adjutant frowned. "Archer was not sent out on a task?"

My stomach dropped.

"No, she wasn't," I said. "You haven't seen her or the Sorcerer, I take it."

"They did not come to our camp," he said. "And neither were mentioned to me otherwise."

"Shit," I muttered. "Did anyone recently move their – no, you don't even need to answer that."

I sighed.

"Still got that flask, Hakram?" I asked.

He nodded, though his eyes were curious.

"Hand it to me," I grunted. "I'll need the tonic if I'm to have talks with Kairos."

# Chapter 54

# Lustrate

> "A house can be destroyed by a fortune spent and twenty years of exquisite scheming; or in less than an hour with a single well-thrown torch."
>
> Dread Empress Massacre

I didn't even step foot into my army's camp, knowing that if I rested for even a moment I'd drop like a sack of flour. Truth be told, I was I no state to deal with the Tyrant of Helike if he decided to get clever with me. I was very nearly out of tricks, dawn had come and exhausted was the demure word for how bone-tired weary I was. But Archer and the Rogue were likely prisoners, and that meant sleep would have to wait a little longer. I had, though, absolutely no intention of getting clever back at Kairos. If he wanted to have a neat little rapier duel, all wits and triple meanings, then I was going to stroll into his fucking camp with a flying fortress full of sappers. I would have specified the sappers to be bloodthirsty but Hells, when had I ever met any that *weren't*? Even Pickler got that unholy spring to her step when told her latest devices would be unleashed on enemy soldiers. So no, I'd not gone to camp to pick up an escort or a detachment of soldiers that'd look as impressive as they were useless under the dawning sun. Instead I'd gone to pick up my personal diabolical possibly-undead tame thing, and also Zombie.

"You are smirking most fetchingly, dearest," Akua Sahelian noted. "As you only ever do when pondering unkindness at my expense."

"Not a single part of it was untrue, though," I mused.

"Then all hail Catherine Foundling, fae queen of our souls still," the shade prettily smiled.

I could only resent the way the way sarcasm was actually an attractive look for her, instead of aggressively spiteful as it tended to for on myself. There was probably some dark magic at work, I told myself. Zombie's saddlebags had been filled with the bare necessities, such as wine and munitions and a set of knives. And a pouch of wakeleaf, though it was the redleaf variant I felt tasted

a little too strongly against the roof of the mouth. Still, considering Iserre was half a ruin and the closest town was several days of travel to the north it was a miracle my people had even managed to get their hands on that much.

"Which reminds me, actually," I said. "Either of you catch sight of Larat and his posse after they made their exit?"

"No," Hakram said. "And we did look, now that scrying has been restored. No one has a clue of where they've disappeared to."

I let out a reluctantly impressed whistle.

"Larat, you magnificent bastard," I murmured. "Good on you."

I raised the flask of tonic-flavoured Dormer pale towards the sky in a toast.

"May you forever be someone else's problem," I said.

The last of the wine slunk down my throat, gone cold. The toast and respect that went with it I'd offered without rancour, even though his slipping the noose had meant trouble for my plans. As those plans had involved carving him open inside like a fish at market, though, I found that to be fairly done. That one-eyed fox had wanted to stroll into a strange new daw unfettered and unbound, no matter the costs, and had gotten exactly that. For all that the once-Prince of Nightfall was a monstrous old bastard, in the end he'd beaten both Fate and his own nature to claim his prize.

So very few of us could say the same.

"I think he might have been my favourite treacherous lieutenant," I mused.

Akua, without ever moving from her textbook perfect horse-riding stance on one of the confiscated Helikean horses, conveyed her deep and genuine offence at my words.

"You can't be my treacherous anything, *dearest*," I drily said. "Aren't you on the side of angels these days?"

"I'm sure some sort of arrangement can be reached with them," she serenely replied, after gracing me with a pleased smile. "Perhaps a pact of some sort."

Hakram choked.

"Are you suggesting diabolism be used on Choirs?" the orc got out.

"Finding the 'morally righteous' equivalent of blood sacrifice has been something of a riddle," Akua candidly admitted. "Priests have been… less than supportive of my inquiries, when pressed."

"Try helping people," I suggested.

"That sounds positively horrid," she said, wrinkling her nose.

I was at least two thirds certain she was joking, though. I took another look at her face, then amended to half. It was a work in progress, though maybe one of these days I'd have to sit her down along with Archer for a friendly talk about *Why Other People, Who Are Not Us, Matter*. Gods, I wondered if Black had ever been forced to have that with the Calamities. Not Sabah, I thought, as for all that she'd carried a ravenous man-eating monster within her she'd always been a decent woman. But Warlock or Ranger? Sisters, I'd pay good coin to have transcripts of that conversation. If Robber's band of marauders were still putting on plays, we could even make an evening out of a theatrical reading.

*Mean thou, Black Knight, that Creation be more than the navel at which I gaze so pridefully? Prithee, these be lies.* Godsdamned Ranger. The rising sun had begun to cast down unpleasant glare before we reached the edge of the League's maze of camps, no doubt making for a strange sight. There were only three of us, after all, and Hakram was on foot. His longs limbs and the tirelessness of his Name allowed him to keep pace, so long as riders shied from anything faster than a trot. We'd certainly not gone unnoticed, at least, for now seven detachment of troops were hurrying out of the sea of League tents to greet us.

"Is that a bedsheet?" Hakram asked, cocking his head to the side.

The Helikean foot carrying what was quite likely a bedsheet stolen from some Proceran clotheslines, and therefore also the Hierarch's personal banner, moved faster than the rest. It seemed like every city in the League had sent some people to meet us, including a thick pack of what I assumed to be Bellerophan infantry significantly outnumbering everyone else put together. Gods, but the armour they wore looked like it belonged in some war two centuries ago. So did the thickly-packed formations they advanced in, formations that would be reaped by wheat if they encountered a few lines of Praesi mages or even some swift-footed sappers.

"We are received in honour," Akua said. "Queen of my heart, shall we proceed?"

I breathed out. Could be a trap. Wasn't likely, considering Kairos had to know that breaking truce in any way at this point would see everyone else turning on him like rabid wolverines, but you never knew with the Tyrant. Just because he'd antagonized nearly everyone he could didn't mean he wasn't going to keep pushing his luck. If he were a reasonable sort of madman, he'd be a great deal less dangerous.

"Let's," I said. "As for courtesies to offer, I have only one thing to say."

Hakram's eyes found me, and Akua's brow arched in invitation.

"Remember the first time I attended court in the Tower?" I said.

"Vividly," the shade replied, lips quirking.

"Feel free to make that look polite," I coldly instructed.

We resumed our advance towards the Leaguers, bearing no banner and offering no announcements. They clustered uneasily around each other, a band of mercenaries and militias and career soldiers whose allegiances were only loosely bound together by Named madness and happenstance, and awaited our arrival. It would have been customary to rein in the horses before them and speak, I knew. Diplomatic. I kept riding.

"Black Queen, we greet you," one of the Helikean officers called out.

Hurriedly, I noted, as we'd not slowed in our advanced.

"You're one of Kairos'," I noted. "Run back to your master, soldier. Tell him if Archer and the Rogue Sorcerer are not freed and in full health by the time I reach him, I'll rip out his fucking heart and feed it to Adjutant right here."

I jutted a thumb at Hakram, who gallantly displayed every inch of fang there was to display. I'd been told he had impressive pearly whites, by orc standards. It was a lot of teeth, and none of it friendly.

"You cannot threaten-" the officer indignantly began.

"She just did," Akua daintily sighed, as if put-upon by the man's poor breeding. "Best start running now, for we'll not slow in deference to the likes of you."

"Treachery," the call came from further down the field.

The Atalante contingent, by the looks of the banner.

"You knifed the rest of Calernia in the back at the Dead King's behest," I coldly replied. "And are now breaking the same truce you begged for last night. You have exactly once chance to make reparations before every army on this field marches against you."

"Seeking extermination, this time, not surrender," Akua casually added. "One does not *twice* allow a rabid dog to run free."

Ah, and there was that Wasteland highborn breed of nastiness. I'd not missed in the slightest, though having it turned on my opposition was a refreshing novelty. We could have lingered further, reasoned with them, but that would imply that we were in less than complete control of this situation. That we needed to speak with them, rather than having granted them the privilege of being spoken to. So we resumed our advance as if we were untouchable, and so went untouched. No one, I realized with amusement, wanted to be the first to step forward. As much for fear of death as for the calamitous consequences that laying a hand on any of us would bring, I thought. However rude we were, they must be painfully aware they were a long way from home facing better and hostile armies more than twice their number – and that there would be no swift retreat from Arcadia, now that the shard had been settled into a newborn and broken realm.

So they moved aside, and two Helikean riders peeled off in haste to bring warning.

I was too tired to properly assess the enemy's camp and so left that to Adjutant's watchful gaze, contenting myself with noting that just like the getting parties their tents remained highly divided. This was not a great army, it was a coalition of smaller ones. On the field, even if they had significantly greater numbers than either my eastern coalition or the Grand Alliance individually I would bet on those over *this* mess. Helike and Stygia fielded fine hosts, but none of the others were of that quality. Arguably, now that Ashur had been broken the League of Free Cities was now the preeminent sea power of Calernia – but down here, on the ground and in Iserre? Juniper would eat these poor bastards for breakfast, and she'd actually lost battles to the Grand Alliance in this campaign. It was only the prospect of casualties that kept everyone's sword in the sheath, and these days Kairos Theodosian was proving too much of a nuisance for that to keep being enough. Under our unfriendly gazes some attendants in servant robes came for us when we entered the edge of the camp, guides meant to bring us to the Tyrant of Helike and his 'guests'. We followed,

and so tasted the Tyrant's warning pulsing blindly and dimly in the distance. The same invisible current I'd felt in Rochelant, and again made as a sword in Kairos' hand. The Hierarch had returned, and though his ruinous leviathan of an aspect was still slumbering its presence could still be tasted in the air.

Waiting until it could wake again, and feed.

Neither of my companions had been exposed to it before, and I glanced at them in worry. Distant as the pounding was, faint like a sleeping dragon's breath, it still trembled in the air. Adjutant, though remained as calm as ever in the face of it. And as for Akua, she simply cocked an eyebrow.

"Quaint," she murmured.

"Quaint," I repeated, disbelieving.

She smiled at me, golden eyes almost visible through the veil.

"Whatever else I am," Akua said, "I am a Sahelian still. What a shallow chalice this would be to drink from, compared to the many heady madnesses of my forbears. My blood has known great sweeps of lunacy, heart of my heart, and this kind is not so great I would fear it."

Well, who was I to deny that hard-headed arrogance couldn't let you fight the run of the world? I'd never truly understand – could never – that hard Wasteland pride rooted in old blood and deeds always terrible and sometimes great, for it was a highborn pride. I was the daughter of orphanages, raised to Wasteland lessons on Callowan lips, and the only blood I trusted was that which my hand had spilled. But I would not fully deny the bones of Akua Sahelian's vanity, for it was not fully unearned. We rode on, until a great pavilion awaited us and the guide-servants bowed, and only then did I dismount. The shade followed suit, and without waiting to be announced we strode within. To my utter lack of surprise Kairos Theodosian awaited within, not the Hierarch whose slumbering aspect I could still feel further in or even any of the greats from the other cities of the League. It was grimly satisfying to see that even a jackal's grin could not hide the black eye I'd given him or his exhaustion. There were but a few gargoyles left to attend him, for near all those he'd brought with him in the seeking of Twilight had been broken by my own miracles. He was, I thought, slowly but surely running out of artefacts to spend.

"Catherine," he affably greeted me. "In a fine temper, I see."

We were deep in the Helikean camp now, surrounded by thousands soldiers whose loyalty to the Tyrant would be absolute. Unless we slew him with the first strike – unlikely, given the faint whisper of sorcery lingering within the tent – attacking him would start a fight I could not win. Yet my hand still itched with the desire to make a matching set of blackened eyes.

"Archer," I said. "The Rogue Sorcerer. They're in your hands."

"Honoured guests," he assured me. "Kept safe until you came to fetch them."

"I have," I bluntly told him. "Where are they?"

"They've been sent for," Kairos said, "though there has been something of a complication."

He could not lie, I knew. The Grey Pilgrim had seen to that. Yet he was not cripple in wits as he was in flesh and could easily deceive without outright speaking an untruth. Tariq, I thought, might have actually made him more dangerous. Knowing he couldn't lie I'd been inclined to believe him, until I'd realized he'd never specified exactly *who* it was he'd sent for.

"Complication?" Adjutant asked in my stead.

"Archer, while having peacefully enjoyed her pick of our bottles earlier, now appears to have killed her way through the company of soldiers sent to fetch her," the Tyrant sighed. "She's now retrieved her armaments and is suspected to be coming to kill me."

"And you would know this how?" Hakram asked.

"There was talk of beating me to death with one of my own gargoyles," Kairos informed us. "Well, shouts to be more accurate."

That did *sound* like Indrani, I'd admit to that.

"Your presence has since been known to her," the odd-eyed king said. "One hopes it will be enough to stay her hand."

I inclined my head.

"The Rogue Sorcerer?" I asked.

"Last I heard he was hesitating over which of the ancient tomes I've provided for his perusal he will keep. I've offered such a boon as a parting gift," the Tyrant said.

Tiredness had slowed my wits, but not slowed them so much that I would not understand the implication here. The two Named that'd stumbled into his grasp had been treated very well, and there would be no trouble in retrieving them. They'd not been hostages, then, but instead a pointed invitation.

"You wanted me here, obviously," I said. "Here I am."

"Would you like a drink?" he offered.

"I'd like two days of sleep and to see you eat your own hand before a jeering crowd," I casually replied. "Get on with it, Kairos. My patience wears thin."

"There is no need for us to be uncivil," the Tyrant of Helike chided me.

Akua's head inclined towards me the slightest bit, a question asked. I replied with the ghost of a nod. If she wanted to speak, then by all means.

"A surfeit of treachery is the mark of an insecure hand," the shade casually said.

"Did one of your most infamous emperors not style himself Traitorous?" Kairos said.

She laughed, rather cuttingly.

"Traitorous?" she smiled. "Oh, youth. You are barely even a *Malignant*."

Hadn't one of those started the War of Thirteen Tyrants and One? No, I decided, it'd been the First War of the Dead. Gods, the Praesi had had so many damned civil wars. Procer could try as it might – and most definitely had – it had a few centuries of catching up to do before it could even begin to rival the Wasteland in this regard.

"Third?" Hakram asked.

"Second, of course," Akua daintily replied.

"Harsh," he commented, undertone appreciative.

"You are tamer a beast than I believed you would be, Akua Sahelian," the Tyrant of Helike said, tone friendly. "Learned to love the hand that cowed us, have we?"

So he'd been able to see through that, had he? I was too tired to be afraid, and not certain I would have been even if I'd been well-rested and sober. Kairos could shout this on every rooftop across Calernia, if he wanted to: he'd burned too many bridges to still be believed.

"I see now, why you so easily strike a chord with so many of them," the woman who'd been Diabolist said, offering almost fond amusement. "You are, in essence, a poor man's Carrion Lord."

Gods, but I'd forgotten how genuinely vicious she could be with a turn of phrase. How easy it was, now that the sharpness had been dulled and turned to teasing and bantering insult, to forget that while I was playing in the streets of Laure and skipping my lessons Akua had spent her days learning to flay the pride of others with mere sentences. To play all the deadly games of the Wasteland highborn, those beautiful and elegant monsters with eyes of gold and poisonous tongues. Kairos' face tightened, imperceptibly. Were less tired, less raw, I suspected it would not have. But it did, and the woman who'd once been the Heiress saw the weakness bared.

"So eager to offer insult," Kairos said, tone friendly. "Shall we play that game, then? I know of the rules."

"Then you have played *poorly*," Akua said, scathing. "Look at you now, Tyrant of Very Far Away. You pretend it power that you can greet us without the greats of your League but we both know different, don't we? It is an admission that if they see you bleed, they will turn on you like hungry wolves."

"Am I to take lesson from you?" Kairos grinned, red-eyed and mutedly furious. "Oh, that strikes me as *folly*."

"I have seen boys like you played to death by the dozen," Akua said, almost gently. "Minds like pretty baubles of glass, thinking themselves untouchable for their sharp edges. It does not take brilliance or treachery to end the likes of you, did you know? All it takes is a thick enough boot."

A flicker of power, but not in here. Outside, and familiar. Discretely I gestured at Hakram. If it was Roland, I would prefer for them to await without entering. For looking at Akua now I saw cruelty like frost, yes, but not only that: I also saw a woman lancing an old and festering wound, and of that I would not brook interruption. Adjutant quietly left the pavilion, the gargoyles following him with their eyes but neither the Tyrant not the once-Diabolist even noticing.

"And yet you pair me to the man who called your kind to heel," Kairos idly said. "Who took the proud High Lords of the Wasteland for mere horses to be broken in, and then proved the truth of that contempt."

"A pale imitation, in truth," Akua mused. "Armies and cleverness and parlour tricks, only without everything laudable in our man. Even made a shivering ghost, still he commanded enough loyalty for armies and pupils and companions to seek him. You? Victor and surrounded by armies, you've ruined yourself and call it brilliance. You are *alone*."

"So are we all," Kairos Theodosian said, and it was too harshly said for it to be pretence. "They beat you and fed you, Akua Sahelian, with pain and scraps of affections – until like a loyal hound you licked the cruel hand. The apprentice did to you as the teacher did to your entire people. And now you put on their masks and speak their empty creed, but that is a hollow thing isn't it? Compared to the truths you can still feel slithering through your blood, those that whisper of greatness instead of *submission*."

"I am more than blood," Akua Sahelian hissed. "I am more than what I was made from. But *you*, Kairos Theodosian? You are the apostle of the cage, the congregant of scrapped iron. And what has that made of you, Tyrant of Least and Less? You bargain with every change of the wind, and every time find return diminished. You have run out of coin to sell yourself with. You have made an enemy of all the world, and so you *no longer have place in it*."

"I am a droplet in the tide that will drown Creation," the Tyrant of Helike smiled, eye red like fresh blood.

"You are yesterday," Akua said. "That is the sum whole of you. And scream and wail as you will, that is all you'll ever be."

And, chin high and back straight, she turned. She walked out without another word and left behind her oppressive silence. I watched Kairos, and in turn he watched me. Like a furnace lit and closed, the rage could be seen glowing at the edges of him. The tent was opened a fraction, even as he continued trying to master himself.

"Archer found the Rogue and followed him here," Hakram told me in Kharsum. "Both are fine."

I inclined my head in acknowledgement without turning and the tent closed.

"You made a deal with the Bard, while we were out there," I said, tone even.

"A greater game is in the works than you suspect," the Tyrant of Helike said. "She is no ally of mine."

"The rest I could stomach," I mildly said. "But the Bard? You burned a bridge with that. Still. There'll be a conference of the great powers and you'll have your seat."

"As was promised," he said.

"As was promised," I agreed.

I turned and began to limp out.

"We have more to discuss, Black Queen," Kairos called out.

I glanced at him.

"No," I said. "We don't. You want an audience? Crawl to my camp. You ought to know how, after last night."

To the sounds of his anger and the chittering of gargoyles I walked out of the tent and did not look back until I'd brought my people safe to camp.

# Chapter 55

# Renewal

> "It is said that when his Chancellor told him the scheme to release a culling plague would cause rebellion, Dread Emperor Vile thoughtfully replied that should this be the case he could always release a second one."
>
> Introduction to 'Thirteen and One' by Hakim of Kahtan, the Haunted Scholar

I woke up knowing two things: were more than halfway to dusk and that my leg *hurt*.

Gods, the throbbing was atrocious. Like someone was taking a hammer to my knee with every breath. I was tempted to reach for the Night before I'd even opened my eyes, to weave it so that coolness would sink into fevered flesh and the pain would recede to a dull and distant beat. Instead I forced myself to unclench my teeth and breathed in and out slowly, soothingly. I'd already pushed my limits last night more than was wise, cheating my body's due once more would only worsen the eventual settling of the debts. No, best to feel the harrowing pulse now when I had yet to see demands made of my time rather than putting it off until the cup tipped regardless of what I wanted. I let out a shuddering breath and opened my eyes, taking in the dim lighting within the tent. I'd settled onto a padded armchair to sleep instead of a bed, which no doubt would have made things even worse with my leg if someone hadn't propped both of them up on footrest while I slept. As usual, I was left to wonder about who it was that'd struck a devil's bargain in my name to arrange my meeting Hakram. In truth it was coincidence, I thought, though perhaps of that pointed kind that some might call fate. And it wasn't like that relationship had been made of thin air, willed into existence – it had taken time and trust and understanding. But how many people in Creation went through their lives without ever encountering someone who understood them even half as well as he and I did? It might not be providence, but it would be a lie to say that villains did not get golden luck of their own sometimes.

I let a few breaths pass, two sensations warring over mastery of my body. The loud and strident call of pain in my leg and the sort of earthly satisfaction one got from much needed sleep. The pleasant lethargy that lingered until you stretched, telling you a need had been seen to. I embraced the former to drown out the latter and sought further distraction by taking in the tent. The reason I'd ended sprawled in an armchair instead of a bed was but a few feet away: Masego still lay still on his cot, hands folded over his chest as it slowly rose and lowered. Indrani had fallen asleep on him when seated on his bedside, forehead on his side as she lightly snored. And, by the looks of the sheet beneath her mouth, drooled. Well, we'd all had a long night. The folding chair she was still seated on was precariously balanced on its two front feet, anchored only by her weight and leaning against the cot. I resisted the urge to suddenly shout just to see her stumble on the ground, though it was a close-run thing. To my surprise, there was another within the admittedly cramped tent. In another armchair, curled up like sleeping cat, Vivienne was clutching at a blanket and sleeping so heavily she might as well be dead. I wasn't the only one who was a fragile little mortal these days, it was true, and her hours of waking had been almost as troublesome as mine. While I would not hesitate a moment to ruin Archer's sleep, Vivienne at least should get to keep her slumber for a while yet.

There were two layers over me, my cloak and a thicker blanket above it, so I softly dropped the latter on the ground and with a muted grunt pulled the former around me. Gods, even with the brazier in the corner the air was cool and I'd shrugged off quite a few of my clothes for comfort. Barefoot, I slid onto the footrest and back into my discarded boots, tightening the straps. Pain in leg spiked, which did not bode well for walking out of here. I reached out blindly and without fought, but my fingers closed around my staff. I almost started, eyes narrowing as I turned to look at the dead wood. Had I remembered where I'd propped it up last night, somewhere in the back of my mind? Or had it just been where it needed to be? Didn't matter, I ultimately decided. It was meant only to help me walk, not to serve as a weapon or a tool of power. It could not fail me in an hour of need if I never relied on it for more than what any stick could provide. I pushed myself up, swallowing a moan of pain, and took a few hobbling steps. It got better after a bit, though never less than unpleasant. Finding myself close to Indrani and Masego's sleeping forms I allowed myself to take them in for a moment, Masego most of the two. It'd been near a year now, hadn't it? How strange, that someone who'd been nothing to be for most my life could come to be missed to sorely when we were now parted. It wasn't even that Zeze was the one among my friends I saw the most. That'd always been Hakram. But there'd always been a manner of comfort in knowing that Masego was close by, even if he'd disappeared into a tome or an experiment for a few days. From the moment we'd met he'd so rarely been afar, even if not together. Until he'd left for Thalassina. I could sense a discreet working of Night on him, woven to keep another appraised of his health, and that served as fresh reminder of what our third time in Liesse had personally cost him.

When he woke, it would not be pretty. There'd be many among my fresh allies howling for punishment, and the loss of his sorcery would not necessarily be enough to appease. They weren't even wrong, I thought, for though he'd done it in grief and while manipulated by the Dead King he *had* come within an hour of killing hundreds of thousands. More, even. If the realm that'd become the Twilight Ways had crashed into Iserre, it would have taken more than this battlefield with it. How many more thousands lived in the principality's cities, its towns and countryside? No small number, and most of that civilians. Penance would have to be found, I thought, though delicately doled out. Already returning to lucidity would make him behold in full the truth that his fathers were gone, but that anguish would be paired with his sorcery being taken. That would... take time to accept, I suspected. I would not pretend to truly understand every part of the complex relationship Masego had with magic, but I suspected it would not be too different from losing a dear friend or a spouse for him. *But we're back*, I thought, looking at the sleeping pair. Vivienne was not far, and though Hakram would already be busying himself with one of the thousand little hidden things that kept my world spinning he was close as well. After months in the dark and split across the face of Calernia to seek our own truths, we were finally together again. Grim as the days to come were, the Woe had found each other once more.

Whatever doom lay approaching behind the horizon, it would find us waiting and bearing sharp knives.

Swallowing a wince as I leaned down, I picked up my blanket and softly laid it on Archer's shoulders. I brushed back a lock of hair that'd tumbled over her ear, fingers lingering as I acknowledged that there would be need to settle matters personal as well eventually. Though Indrani has spoken it nonchalantly enough as we chased victory in Liesse, the admission that she loved the sleeping man she was drooling on was no small thing. Out in the open it was no longer as a butterfly's wingbeat, easily ignored or taken for illusion. Most of what would have to be settled in there would have to be seen to by the pair of them, and I had no place in it, but only most. I'd been sharing a bed with Indrani regularly since that first time in the Everdark, but it might be for the best for that to cease until boundaries had been clearly drawn for them both. Or disappointments had, if it was to be that. Masego was in no way mandated with returning that affection, after all. And someday I wondered if he even could. That he had no interest in bedplay was well-worn knowledge, but he'd displayed disinterest in more than that. There were many ways to love someone, and not all involved skin or pining sighs. They'd find their balance, I knew. Or make peace with the way they could not. We were all too tightly bound for such a small thing to wound.

Being a good friend when the mood struck me, I slid a few small firewood logs under the lifted feet of Archer's chair so she'd not topple when she inevitably woke. I limped out quietly, feeling filthy with sweat and soot and blood. The thought of a warm bath or even a basin of hot water ferociously

attractive, but I'd not eaten in too long and drunk quite a bit over the last day and night. Best get breakfast before that came back to haunt me. The thought was enough to work an appetite, and as it happened there was an open campfire not far. The two silhouettes by it I knew well, and was greeted by amused smiles when I leaned over the fire to smell at the iron pot being heated.

"Tea?" I said, surprised.

"One of Aisha's blends," Hakram replied. "It ought to help with the leg, if only a little."

Adjutant knew well my reluctance to cheat the discomfort for too long, so it wouldn't be an herb meant to kill the pain. Maybe one of those Wasteland herbs that helped with the flow of blood? Eh, I'd ask later. Instead I made Akua move further down the old stone and sat myself with a grunt, hands rising to accept the mug of tea the orc had just poured. I sniffed once more, but though the smell was vaguely familiar I couldn't quite put the finger on what had gone in it. I blew out the mist that wafted up, ignoring the increasing number of eyes I could feel on me. This part of the camp would be restricted, I thought, but there'd still be soldiers. It wouldn't be long before word spread I'd woken. The prominence of Lower Miezan in both Callow and Praes meant that gossip still flew with swift wings no matter who ended up joining the ranks of my armies.

"I'm guessing that clever little Night-weave on Masego is your work," I said to Akua.

She inclined her head.

"His health remains within my expectations," she said. "Though it may be some time still until he fully recovers."

My brow rose.

"Losing the magic didn't knock him out," I pointed out. "I did."

"You only pre-empted the natural course," she told me. "You may think of it as Lord Hierophant having recently gone under a chirurgeon's knife."

"Like when I lost an aspect," I murmured.

"That was a metaphysical wound," Akua disagreed. "This is physical. The body must acclimate itself to the absence of magic."

"And typically how does that go?" I frowned.

"It is not a phenomenon I am much familiar with, for in the Wasteland is it exceedingly rare for one to lose sorcery without death ensuing," she admitted. "And I no longer have a storied library to expand my learning, much as I would like to."

The Sisters might know, I thought. Or Roland, considering part of his Name apparently involved the 'confiscation' of magic.

"I see no reason to worry," Akua assured me. "Though he should remain weakened for a span, he should wake much sooner. It is exhaustion, not forced torpor."

I slowly nodded. Still, I'd not gamble with Masego's health if I could help it. Behind me the sound of eggs on a pan caught my attention: Hakram had cracked three, as I usually took, and was frying them on the open fire.

"I'll get you a conversation with the Rogue Sorcerer," I told Akua. "You should be able to get use out of that."

She inclined her head in agreement. I claimed a bowl myself, as Hakram's sole hand was already occupied, and watched with mild bemusement as Akua Sahelian heeded his instructions and got out a small pot of salt before sprinkling a few touched of it on my eggs. He deftly turned them afterward, using only his wrist. There was still half a cookpot's worth left of stew – horse, since we were starting to run low on other fresh meats, and I ended up digging hungrily into a bowl filled with both. The tea took me longer to get through, for it tasted bitterer than I preferred, but I was not drinking it purely for pleasure. It was a pleasant meal, my two companions keeping the conversation going on matters of no great import while I only occasionally interjected a grunt of agreement or the opposite. Apparently the heartlands of Procer used a great deal more salt in their meals than I was used to back home, since it could be brought in cheap from the great salt pans on the western coast of Neustria and Brus. I stretched a bit afterwards, pleasantly full in a way that I'd never truly known how badly I missed until I could be again.

"Right," I finally sighed. "Lay it on me, then. What did I miss while I slept?"

"In truth, nothing particularly pressing," Hakram said, to my surprise. "Arnaud Brogloise has sent messenger to request an audience when it is convenient for you. He'll be approaching you in the name of the First Prince, since the powers she granted him have yet to expire. I'd consider what he has to say more representative of the situation in Salia than what Princess Rozala will speak to."

I hummed.

"But it's not pressing," I said. "Why?"

"I expect he's still going through the partial text of the Accords I passed to him," Hakram said.

I didn't reply immediately, though I almost chastised him. We'd discussed passing that along to the Procerans in advance of the conference that would most likely be held in Salia – I couldn't see Hasenbach leaving the city at the moment, she'd be leaving the Highest Assembly to its own devices – but I'd been more inclined to Princess Rozala, or even the now-former Princess Sophie Louvroy. The latter was one of Hasenbach's loyalists, the one sent to keep an eye on the army, which implied a degree of trust. On the other hand, Arnaud Brogloise had turned out to be her spy and empowered envoy. He was, objectively, the better pick: not only was it assured that whatever he saw would end up in Cordelia's ear, he had the authority to speak on her behalf before we got to Salia. And though dear old Arnaud obviously had very few compunctions with killing, he'd been able to play some highly perceptive Proceran royals for fools. For *years*. Malanza was more general than steward, by my reckoning, and to my knowledge not a particularly skilled intriguer. No, Brogloise was the right choice. In some aspects, anyway. I'd rather have the Princess of Aequitan

at my side than on the other one, when the time came to push for the Accords, and that couldn't be done if she was kept in the dark about them.

"Have another one prepared," I said, then thought more of it. "No, two."

"Pilgrim," he said. "And Princess Rozala, I'd assume. Is that wise?"

I cocked my head to the side. There couldn't be many reasons he'd expected me to keep one of the two most powerful women in Procer in the dark until the last moment.

"You're afraid they might use the Accords to draw lines in the Assembly," I said. "For and against, every sitter to gather behind one or the other."

"The First Prince remains unpopular," Hakram pointed out. "These are times of war and she is not a general while her seat of power – the Lycaonese north and its support – has been uprooted. Of course, with the fighting up north toppling Procer's ruler would attract a great deal of scorn. Unless it was reluctantly done to avoid some great mistake."

"She's fought the dead, Hakram," I said. "And you saw her on the hill. She's not going to make a grab for the throne halfway through the end of the world."

"She might," Akua disagreed. "If she believed Cordelia Hasenbach to be unable to fight this war the way it needs to be fought."

"If we don't tell her now," I said, "she'll take that as the insult it is."

"Agreed," Akua easily said. "Arlesites are notoriously prickly over such matters. I also rather disagree with Lord Adjutant's notion that discussion of the Accords will be used in the Highest Assembly. Your support is much too precious a commodity at the moment for one of them to discard it offhand."

"My support," I skeptically said. "Wouldn't my backing in any of their private squabbles be a kiss of death? It's both a villain and foreigner intervening in Proceran affairs."

"Ah," Hakram suddenly breathed out.

An elaboration would have been more helpful, as far as I was concerned.

"You have a series of victories to hand out, my heart," Akua smiled under the veil. "End of the dwarven ban on armament sales. Assurances of truce with the Firstborn and the support of their armies against Keter. Access to Callowan grain markets come next harvest. The secrets of the Twilight Ways for Proceran armies to use. And, of course, the great achievement of having turned the dreaded Black Queen into a tame tiger unleashed on the dead."

My fingers clenched and unclenched as I considered that. I'd considered most of those a given the moment bargains were struck, but I could see their point. If all those things were presented as the victories of either Hasenbach or Malanza, they'd come out looking like the person getting things done. The kind you wanted in charge, when someone like the Dead King was at the gate. The First Prince already had the throne, true, but the Princess of Aequitan was fresh off what could be considered a success here in Iserre. And I knew better than most than when the days got dark people liked to have a soldier wearing the crown.

"If Malanza tries to seize the reins, then they'll both try to use the Accords as meat to barter for anything I could provide them," I said. "So if we don't send her the text we're essentially tipping the scales in Hasenbach's favour. She'll have had time to prepare, and she's too skilled a hand not to turn that into a significantly better position."

"The decision must be carefully considered, in my eyes," Akua said. "For the twin truth of what you said is that, in apprising Princess Rozala of your intent, we tacitly allow her to present a challenge to the First Prince in Salia."

Which I doubted Cordelia would take all that kindly to, all things considered.

"I would be surprised, in truth, if Cordelia Hasenbach's unseating was the intent," Akua continued. "By the procedures of the Assembly such a thing would be difficult to accomplish – and embitter the Lycaonese for *generations* if carried out. Assuming they did not outright rebel. More sensibly, with the right maneuvering it would not be impossible for Rozala Malanza to become the true power in Procer no matter who rules in name."

If this was just about curtailing how much hostility I'd be earning by my decision, I suspected sending the simplified Accords to the Princess of Aequitan would make for much less personal a grudge than keeping the same woman in the dark until we reached Salia. On the other hand, approaching the matter that way was a fine way to make a mistake: wading into a melee before knowing who you wanted to thump was a good way to end up eating dirt.

"There's no guarantee they'll turn on each other," I finally said.

"The Principate is on the precipice of change," Akua disagreed. "And only one may hold the reins if their nation is survive the war, they both know this: divided, squabbling, Procer can only break. The lesser crowns cannot look to two mistresses for orders, and so one of them must submit to the other before the Highest Assembly for uncertainty to end. She who remains standing will rule the Procer that is to come, should she survive the war."

"We lose little from allowing Princess Rozala a challenge," Hakram noted. "If anything with two bidders concessions ought to be easier to secure. If the First Prince had been more willing to negotiate with us in the past I'd advise against it, but there's hardly any good will there to spoil."

"I believe that Cordelia Hasenbach remains the superior candidate to ensure lasting peace," Akua told him. "And if decision is made to back her from the start, being owed a favour can be worth more than auctioned support – and would *create* good will. A knife hand stayed is worth more than promises."

I shook my head.

"You're selling both of them short," I said. "And I don't mean there won't be tensions, because that ship rather left the dock when Hasenbach made Malanza's mother drink poison after their civil war. But they'll remain cordial while the Dead King is at the gate, because neither will be willing to roll the dice when snake eyes might mean the end of the Principate."

I thought back to a conversation that felt so long ago, Hasenbach and I alone in the depths of my since-devoured domain. *You miss the central tenet of the Principate*, she'd chided me as we spoke of tyranny. *It is, unlike Praes, a nation built on consensus.* She'd sent Prince Amadis and his cabal into my hands to be savaged, I'd retorted back then, her opposition in that Assembly she so touted. Yet she's believed in her words, back then, even as she struggled with realities that were flawed. Did she still, I wondered?

"No, if Procer is to decide its own fate then let it be in the open," I said. "Cordelia Hasenbach cannot grudge me her own principles observed. Malanza gets the Accords, same as the Pilgrim."

Although, in truth, this entire matter should have been debated with Vivienne awake. Which they would know, I thought. Yet they'd spoken of it anyway. I would not count that a coincidence.

"You're not telling me something," I said.

"I thought you'd come to the conclusion yourself without prompting," Akua said, sounding fascinated. "It truly is a glaring blind spot."

"We've named boons you can offer that would win princes to either cause," Hakram gravelled. "Yet there's prize that would win the people as well. In these parts for certain and others as well. It is a matter of pride, in the end."

My heart clenched.

"Black," I said. "They'll want Black's head on pike."

The shade dipped her head in agreement.

"And you pushed this not because you want me to make a decision," I said, "but because he's awake."

"Before seeing him you should know what may still lie ahead," Hakram said. "Make no mistake, Catherine, they will hound you for him. Their people will riot otherwise, after what he's done. The Legions themselves may be spared, but the Carrion Lord? They cannot afford to simply let him go."

"They can't afford to fuck with me either," I sharply replied.

Akua looked at me, and for a moment under the veil I believed she might have looked sad.

"There will be a choice," she said, "between what the woman wants and what the queen requires."

I grit my teeth, rising to my feet.

"Catherine," Hakram called out.

I turned a glare on him.

"I handed him the full Accords," he said.

*Why*, I almost asked, but already knew the answer. Either my father would sign the damned thing, or he'd be sold so that everyone else did.

I stalked off, furious at no one in particular, to find Amadeus of the Green Stretch.

# Chapter 56

# Reflections

> "In winning a game one may only grasp lesser victory; only in setting the rules may greater victory be found, for one then transcends the possibility of loss."
>
> Extract from "Bought and Sold", a collection of the teachings of the Merchant Prince Irenos, founder of Mercantis

It wasn't all that hard to find him, even though my temper refused to allow me to double back and obtain Black's location from those two. The combined camp of the Army of Callow and the Legions-in-Exile was centred around the barrow where I'd schemed the coming of this day, and the elaborate Mavian prayer atop it. It was half a fortress raised from the plains around the tumulus and half a well-organized city of tents, the latter being what told me where to look. Most of the layouts for camps that my army used were slightly adjusted from Legion standard, which I was long familiar with. By virtue of remembering a bird's eye view I knew which parts of the camp would have access restricted to them by order of one of my triumvirate of deputies – Juniper, Vivienne, Hakram – and where the restrictions ran high and the wards with them my father would be kept. Not as a prisoner, no. That'd be a blunder, given that within our own camp were the same legions who'd followed Black on his ill-fated campaign into the Proceran heartlands. I had no doubt, not for a moment, that Grem One-Eye would force a battle if we tried to imprison the Black Knight or execute him. None of my little triumvirate would have dared to take so bold a step without my approval, anyhow, not after the way I'd chewed them out harshly for overstepping not so long ago. Especially not when it came to a matter as delicate as Amadeus of the Green Stretch.

It wasn't long before I found the tent where he'd been recuperating, though somewhat unsurprisingly he'd already left it. Along with, from the lack of papers strewn all over the inside, one of the few fully scribed texts of the Liesse Accords. He was in fit state to move, then, which was good news. From there I did not even bother to ask questions of the legionaries still standing guard

around the tent. I knew the man, better than most, and after so long cleaved from his own flesh he'd not be able to tolerate remaining stuck in bed helpless while the world moved around him. Especially not after having been handed an intriguing read by my Adjutant's hand. No, there was no doubt as to where he'd be holed up if the matter was seriously considered. I began my slow trek up the barrow's slope, slipping through the three concentric rings of raised stones that from below looked like some eldritch temple's wall. At the heart of it, seated among the dead riverbed of what had once been an altar to the fae, my father sat in the very seat I'd stolen from Arcadia. The parchments I'd once had Robber hang up on stones, when trying to divine a path through the Iserran chaos that would not break half the world, had long been burned – I would brook no evidence of my schemes to survive them – but I'd come by that method of thought honestly. Put up on worn and ancient stone in little clusters entire sections of the Accords had been put together.

Black did not look up from the parchments he was frowning down at even as I approached, though even Nameless he must have heard my limping gait. I could only make out the side of him, from where I was approaching, for he'd pivoted the seat to ensure that the afternoon sun would shine against his back and onto the sheets. He'd shaved, I saw, stripped away the growing and greying beard his soulless body had kept growing without him. It did not make him look younger – the thickening strands of grey in his hair saw to that, black touched by iron – but he felt more like the man I knew than the sleeping body had been. The cleanliness of him, not some highborn peacock's perfumed pretence but instead the austere thoroughness of someone who could not tolerate the slovenly, had been restored. Pale green eyes narrowed in thought before he rose to his feet and set down a thick sheath of parchments on the table I'd had put up here days ago.

"How much of it did you read?" I asked.

I limped up to his side slowly as he remained still, gaze still on the parchments ahead of us that traced the bare bones of the manner of world I wanted to make. I stood at his side, noting with old surprise that I was taller than he these days by more than an inch.

"The substance of it," my father replied. "The legal minutiae are not so interesting as what you seek to achieve through them. Which is…"

His head moved to the side, as if amused. My heart skipped a beat, for though I was no longer his student and his ways were not always mine, the thought that he might be my foe in this was almost too much to bear.

"Ambitious," Black said, lips quirking. "With iron and ink and oaths, you would bind that which is worst in us and through it call forth a strange new dawn."

"It's how we get out of it," I said, dry-mouthed. "The wheel of misery that rolls over us all, the wound some misbegotten part of us just keeps *picking* at. I see no other way."

"It is that," the green-eyed man quietly said. "And it's beautiful, Catherine. It truly is."

My throat choked up. Fingers clenched around the yew haft and my other hand rose, hesitantly. It was one thing to acknowledge the thinning, even crossing, of a boundary to myself but another to presume acting upon it. At our last parting, I'd slid a knife between his ribs and chased him out of my kingdom. Things, thoughts that had seemed certain in the privacy of my own thoughts or even those few I trusted now seemed – arms pulled me close, and I breathed out lingeringly as my nose came to rest on my father's shoulder. I could be furious with him later, I thought. It was not weakness to choose when an accounting was asked. His fingers held tight to the cloak he'd gifted me long ago, before I'd taken to adorning it with own victories and covered the blackness of its beginnings, and for a while we stood that way. The embrace broke without the embarrassment I'd expected from at least one of us, much left unspoken yet somehow still acknowledged.

"It appears I owe you the salvation of my soul," Black said, tone the faintest hint of dry.

"If there's pieces missing, well, it was like that when I found it," I replied.

His lips twitched, which coming from him was good as a smile.

"Gratitude, nonetheless," he said. "For the difficulties my defeat brought to you."

"The parts where you were arguably winning have been much, much worse," I frankly said.

"Then for that as well," he said, inclining his head to the side.

It was, I saw, an apology for the inconveniences he'd caused me. Not, even the slightest bit, regret for the dozens if not hundreds of thousands he might have killed through empty stomachs. I'd not truly expected otherwise, truth be told. He'd never been one to flinch in the face of monstrous acts, if he deemed them necessary to victory – or to repent for blood spilled a necessity's altar.

"You've gotten old," I casually said, statement and question both.

"They found me on Lake Artoise," Amadeus said. "Their band of heroes, so nobly clad. And before the fist blow was struck, already I was no longer the Black Knight."

"Below sold you out?" I frowned. "I'm no great admirer, mind you, but that doesn't sound like them. They prefer their favourites to go out in a blaze."

"Already I had sensed the thinning of my mantle," he admitted. "The well was always shallow, and I leaned on it as rarely before, but the signs were there."

My eyes narrowed. That did to sound like the loss of Name, or more accurately not only that.

"You're a claimant," I said. "Shit. To what?"

He hummed a tune, and my blood ran cold for I had heard it before.

"There was once a girl without a name,

There was a tower no one could claim

No one remembers why she has climbed,

Or all those she must have left behind," he softly sang.

*The Girl Who Climbed the Tower*, that tune was called. Only those who might one day claim the tower at the heart of Ater had ever been known to hear it.

"You said you'd heard it before," I said.

"The fullness of it, only once," he murmured. "When I was yet young and believed there was nothing sufficient steel and cleverness could not cure."

It was what I wanted from him, wasn't it? Should he overthrow Malicia and become Dread Emperor, he could make of the Wasteland more than a wild and cornered beast. Carve out the worst of it, by fire and sword, and leave room for something better to grow of the ashes. And yet, hearing the pale-skinned man humming that eerie tune, a shiver had gone up my smile. Dread, perhaps, to match the title that may yet be claimed. *Claimed*, I mocked myself. *What a nice, genteel word that is to describe the murder of one the few people he loves still drawing breath.*

"And now?" I softly asked.

"Now I heard the refrain and wonder," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said, "at the attributes that make an act a mistake."

I paused, sensing this was somewhere to tread lightly. I was not the only one in his life to have ever commanded affection, and his partnership with Malicia at its height had seen the Empire reach its greatest height since Maleficent the Second. Their ties were decades in the making and keeping, and though cracks had been wrought the temple they'd raised to each other was still tall and many-pillared.

"She's been making increasingly hardline decisions since you left," I said.

"She has made increasingly hardline decisions because I left," Black countered calmly.

Which might be true. I did not think the Empress so sentimental a creature that she'd lash out over the loss of a companion, no matter how dear, but Black was a little more than that. When he'd taken so many of the Legions to the Red Flower Vales and ignored every missive coming from Ater, he'd stripped her of her most feared enforcer as well as put it out in the open that at least half the Legions of Terror would heed orders from him over her. Her position had been crippled, even before the Ashurans started torching the coasts and cities with them. Even before Thalassina went up in smoke, taking the Thalassocracy's finest fleets but also Warlock with them. Now her power was shrinking, the vultures circling, and she could not afford even the pretence of weakness less she be torn apart. Of course, she'd ordered the Night of Knives before it ever came to that. There were some who might say that by making peace talks with the Grand Alliance and distancing myself from the Empire I'd courted such retaliation. They might not even be wrong.

That did not mean I would either forget or forgive it.

"You've read the Accords," I said. "I can't see her signing them, for many reasons but most of all that she'd need to abdicate."

"You underestimate her," my father noted. "If it became clear that her diplomatic position was untenable, she'd concede rather than fight a war she could not feasibly win."

"She won't sign it," I said, "because the moment she does the High Lords will slit her throat and one of them will claim the Tower over her corpse."

"Not," he said, "if I have returned."

My fingers clenched.

"I'll be blunt," I said. "No one would trust her to actually enforce the terms, least of all me. Sure, the throne in the Tower would go empty. A Nameless ruler would be rustled up. And before night's end the struggle to decide who would be the Secret Emperor or Empress ruling through them would be concluded. Maybe, and I do mean *maybe*, if you were keeping an eye on the situation those promises could be trusted. But then it would still be you that's the keystone, not her. She is not an asset to the arrangement."

I'd had frank, almost brusque talks with my father before. We had disagreed over matters great and small, most notably when we'd last spoken face to face. But never before had we really had such a discussion when I stood in the position of greater power and authority. Oh, even out here in the heartlands of Procer surrounded by enemies Amadeus of the Green Stretch remained one of the most powerful men on Calernia. He commanded the loyalty of a large and capable army, stood at the head of a great net of informants and had ties to powerful Named. There were those who called themselves rulers out there that paled in comparison. Yet now I stood Queen of Callow, First Under the Night and with great names and Named in my debt. I could, in all honesty, say that perhaps the only entity on the continent that could feasibly dictate terms to me was the Dead King – and even then, there would be difficulties. I supposed a lesser man might have felt cheated by that, the way the balance had swung to my side with the passing of the years. I'd seen it in Callowan nobles, the indignation at needing to heed the orders of some young warlord of no great line. At being made to kneel before someone the truths of their world stated should be kneeling to them instead. It ate the insides like poison, and always left a mark. And yet I found no trace of that in the man who'd once been the Black Knight. It should not have surprised me, even if it did.

When had ever begrudged me so much as a step forward, even when it came at his expense?

"Only so much can be spoken of this while neither of us has knowledge of the situation in Praes," he finally said. "I will have to speak to Scribe. We should still have scrying relays on this side of the Whitecaps."

"Scrying works now," I confirmed.

Green eyes narrowed.

"I will have to speak to Scribe," he said, tone strange.

"Your people are more likely to have fresh word of the Wasteland than mine," I freely conceded.

His lips thinned.

"Eudokia, this is hardly the time," he murmured. "Catherine, sharpen your mind against influence."

My brow rose.

"You think someone's meddling with my mind?" I said. "I'm not dismissing that out of hand, but there's other things in there nowadays that'd not take kindly to that."

"It is not active interference," he explained. "Consider it more akin to one being so utterly unremarkable that the mind dismisses them."

That... rang true, somehow. I drew on the Night, feeling the interest if the Sisters directed at me.

"One of my companions is the Scribe."

Oh. *Oh*. All this time? I'd just... not thought about her, even when by all rights I should have. Like my mind's eye had skipped over any hole left by her absence.

"Godsdamnit," I said through gritted teeth. "All right. I know she was with Marshal Grem for some time after your capture, but I can't speak to her movements after that. Hells, she could still be hiding in some tent here for all I know."

"She won't be," Black said.

To my irritation, there was an undertone of open fondness.

"If she has left the armies, then it was to prepare for what she saw coming," he continued. "Considering both defeat and victory would have brought you – and likely myself – to Salia then that is where she will be."

"You're telling me your spymistress has been in Procer's capital for what could be months," I slowly said. "What *for*, Black?"

"We'll have to find another form of address, if Amadeus makes you so uncomfortable," the green-eyed man said, sounding amused. "That one will never be accurate again, I don't think."

I rolled my eyes, though it was true enough. It felt... disrespectful to call him by his given name.

"Pray tell, Lord Amadeus, what has the Webweaver gotten the fuck up to in Salia?" I politely asked.

"I'd expect she has been taking root in the city, Your Majesty," he replied without missing a beat, lips twitching at my wince. "She often prefers to spread influence for some time before taking action, as a better read on the currents of the local allows for intervention so indirect as to be near traceless."

"And what is it she's been trying to set up?" I grimly asked.

"It could be near anything, truth be told," Amadeus said. "Though in all humility, I expect she will have given priority to reclaiming me. After ensuring she was in a position to do such a thing should opportunity arise, I would

venture she began making arrangements for the political collapse of the Great Alliance."

If someone else had told me that, I might have been skeptical. Cordelia Hasenbach was probably, all things considered, the most skilled diplomat of our age. She'd also run circles around the Highest Assembly for years while simultaneously fending off the Tower's sabotage of reign. The Thalassocracy of Ashur had never been a great worry for me – they were a naval power first and foremost, what trouble was that to Callow? – but I'd read of them since the Tenth Crusade began. They were a realm arguably older than Praes and who'd largely remained stable for that entire span. As for the Levantines, though their squabbles of honour made them the obvious weak link they also had the Peregrine looking over the shoulder. The Grand Alliance was hardly the most stable of edifices, it was true, but neither was it captained by fools and with the Dead King at the gates there was mortar to keep them together. And still, if Black now told me that Scribe could threaten it, I could only believe him. For if I'd sent Thief or Adjutant or – Gods forbid – Akua in Salia and let them prepare for a few months? Oh, they would wound it badly. And Scribe had been the spymistress to the Calamities for longer than I'd lived.

"But you can tell her to call it off, whatever she has prepared," I said.

"It is not," my father said, "quite as simple as that."

Not the answer I'd been looking for, that.

"Eudokia takes orders from me so long as those orders are sound," he said. "In the sense that my judgement is unimpaired."

"Which it is," I pointed.

"Only if you do not consider sentiment to be an impairment, which she does," he said.

"I need the Grand Alliance to hold, Black," I flatly said. "For one, I'm going to be part of it."

"Indeed," he said, cocking his head to the side. "You need it. Callow benefits. On the other hand, the Alliance's continued existence means that the Dread Empire is effectively cut off and at the mercy of its signatories."

"Which won't matter if the Empire signs the Accords," I pointed out. "I'm not trying to end wars – I can't change human nature with bits of ink. But the moment Praes is no longer the nation of flying fortresses and undead plagues-"

"- which assumes that the Dread Empire of Praes, regardless of who rules it when the matter is broached, will be signing the Liesse Accords," Black said.

My heart caught in my throat.

"Are you saying you won't?" I asked, calm forced.

"Asking," he said, "is not enough. That you are my daughter in all but blood is not enough. We barter now the stuff of empires and the fates of nations. You would set the foundation of the Age that will follow you, and I fear that in some aspects of that seeking you are ill-prepared. I offer you, then, opportunity. If you want any ruler of Praes at all to sign your Accords?"

He met my gaze.

"Convince me," he demanded.

# Chapter 57

# Hearing

> "It was written in faraway Mieza that law is what separates men and beasts. We know better, in Praes: law is what separates the beasts wild and tame."
>
> Dread Emperor Terribilis I, the Lawgiver

It was tempting to send for Hakram and Vivienne, who in some ways were just as much the architects of the Liesse Accords as I might claim to be. The shape of them had come from me, but it was Adjutant who'd discretely gathered jurists from Callow and Praes and pressed them for understanding until a cohesive body of law could be put together. Vivienne herself had been at our side the entire way, spreading out her Jacks far and wide to obtain the practical knowledge that was needed to make any of our fancies a functioning reality – yet burning, ardently, to see it done. Some days I suspected she'd spent more hours working out how the Accords could be made to hold up than either of us, moved by sheer want of seeing them take hold. It wasn't like they wouldn't be of use when arguing, either. Hakram had a ludic way with cold logic, and a mastery of details I'd never be able to match. And Vivienne's brand of argument, half ruthlessly pragmatic and half genuinely passionate, did tend to reach people neither Adjutant nor myself would get to. I didn't, though, because it would be missing the point of this exercise. Black wasn't simply demanding that I convince him, he was giving me the opportunity to cut my teeth on selling the Accords to a foreign ruler in a relatively safe manner. Here, if I stumbled, it would not be a disaster that struck at all I'd fought for.

Even now, I thought, he was a sort of teacher still. Some things you never entirely outgrew.

Still, in the end it would be me that carried the Accords to the shore if they were to ever reach it. Vivienne, while heiress-designate to Callow, was still deep in my shadow from an outsider's eyes. And Hakram, and Gods it was unfair, but Hakram wouldn't be taken seriously by any of them save if he had a knife at their throat. Because he was villain, because he was an orc, because

he had chosen to stand at my side instead of raising his own banner. It angered me, the suspicion that in centuries to come the Liesse Accords would likely be written of as my work alone and other names with claims just as deep would be allowed to fall to the wayside. History, I thought, would shortchange Hakram of the Howling Wolves Clan. I'd fight it every way I could, even when he might wish I did not, but I did not believe it would be enough. For too many out there the story would feel neater without him – less challenging of what they thought they knew – and I well knew the knots people were willing to tie themselves into to allow their view of the world to go unchanged. Yet it was undeniable truth that when the deal was brought to the table where Hasenbach and the Blood and Ashur's committees sat, it would live or die by the wagging of my tongue. And so I dare not call on the others now, less that same tongue fail me on a day mistake would mean lasting calamity.

Still, it was past noon and we both kept to some of the Wasteland's ways: though I did not send for the others, I did send for wine. And so Black and I claimed that old Mavian prayer for ourselves, breaking out bottles of some sharp Iserran wine – *Prière de Fou*, it was called – that lingered on the tongue like sin or vengeance. In the afternoon's light he seemed strangely vital, for all the greying marks of age in his once-dark locks. With a loose white shirt on his frame and woolen dark trousers going into Legion-issue boots, he honestly seemed more... carefree than I could remember ever seeing him. There'd been a heavy jacket of linen on his frame when I first came, but by the second cup of wine it was on the back of my seat to my own cloak's side.

"The throne of Callow recognizes Lord Amadeus of the Green Stretch, Praesi dignitary," I began.

I was toasted with a rough clay cup holding wine of which a singe bottle could likely but a whole bag of. He was seated at the edge of our heavy wooden table, ignoring the perfectly good seat I'd left

"The Dread Empire of Praes deigns to recognize the Queen of Callow, Catherine Foundling," he allowed, lips twitching. "In the depths of our mercy, keeping with our well-known concern for the fellowship of nations."

"Kind of you, eastern devil," I drily replied, leaning on my staff as I took a sip of my own shoddy cup. "Now, I assume you've read the proposed treaties that were sent to you."

"These so-called Accords, yes," Black easily replied. "A blatant attempt to weaken, isolate and starve the Dread Empire. And you expect us to sign these? You should be grateful our answer wasn't releasing a plague in Laure and setting your granaries aflame."

Threats, huh. It was true that while I arguably stood the greater victor on the fields of Iserre, Callow was not untouchable and despite the best efforts of my companions in fact remained rather fragile. Praes had other fires to put out, at the moment – a goblin rebellion that'd taken Foramen, the sack of Nok by Ashuran fleets and the annihilation of its largest port Thalassina along with every living soul in that great city save one – but Malicia might be able to get

a handle on the mess, or whoever murdered her and claimed the Tower might. That meant Praes, though wounded, could turn its attentions on the fledgling goblin nation to its south and a very vulnerable Callow whose armies were largely abroad and had been for months. There shouldn't be food shortages though the winter, though there'd certainly be a rationing of the handouts by the royal granaries Hakram had created. If those went up in flames, though? It'd be more than a lean winter we were dealing with. No, the Dread Empire was not entirely without answers if cornered. On the other hand, there was a reason that even though Black was speaking like some arrogant Wasteland highborn even in that pretence he'd not 'actually' struck at my kingdom. The current lack of open hostilities was something very much in the Tower's interest to maintain, lest I turn my attention to it instead of the Dead King.

"If you strike across the border, I'll dismantle Praes after we're done up north," I said. "The Grand Alliance already wants to, we both know that. The only thing that's truly been standing in their way is trust and distance, both of which will be sufficiently seen to if Callow becomes a signatory."

"When you are done up north," Black repeated. "And there is the arrogance. Even should you beat Trismegistus on the field, will the Alliance not be ruined in achieving this? You threaten me with soldiers already sworn to die very far away. Your own armies are abroad, and their loyalties complex besides. If you do no want my concern to be how to break Callow before you return, or how to break it when you *are* returned, then offer terms other than submission or the sword."

I drained the rest of my cup and tossed it at his head. He caught it, though a lot more narrowly than he would have a few years back, and filled it with the Iserran red even as I considered my answer. So he was making it clear my position in the Tower's eyes was not so strong as one might think at first glance. I could concede to part of that, at least. After a costly campaign against Keter, I couldn't see the current signatories of the Alliance eagerly embarking on a second military enterprise immediately after. In Praes, the prevailing belief among the High Lords might very well end up being that Callow was the only threat to worry of if it came to war. They might not even be wrong, I thought. I was not so sure the Sisters would send a great army of Firstborn to aid me again, if blades came out in the east.

"Then let's see to your worries," I said. "You said that the Accords would weaken, isolate and starve the Dread Empire."

"When paired with your declared intent and seemingly imminent achievement of becoming a signatory of the Grand Alliance," Black specified.

I inclined my head in agreement. Wasn't going to be a secret for long, assuming it even was at the moment, so I did not mind the boundaries of our debate including it.

"I'm listening," I said.

He rose to his feet and strode across the thinning snow, pressing the filled cup into my hand as he passed, and came to stand by one of the raised stones.

He tapped the parchments hung there with a finger.

"Weakening," he told me. "Your proposed laws would forbid the summoning for extra-Creational entities, save for peaceful purposes, and even then under restriction. These are specifically stated to include angels, devils and demons."

"They are," I said. "Cutting through the legalese, civilian labour and advice-giving is fine for angels and devils. Demons are forbidden under all circumstances save if all signatories of the Accords agree such an act is necessary."

"And so you roughly enforce parity of means between Named," Black said. "Which will be pleasing to some Named, mostly those incapable of actually doing any of this, but you seek to remove those same Named from positions of rule. As for lordly concerns, since those matter foremost under your laws, you would highly disadvantage Praes as a military power. Centuries of accumulated grimoires and contracts, which are potent soldiery when called on, are suddenly made invalid. Demons have been an integral part of the defences of our cities for ages, as deterrent and blade both. Some lasting presences of their kind would be difficult to dispose of even were we so inclined."

"I've made provisions for that last part," I said.

"Yes, heroic Named under villainous supervision would remove lingering mistakes such as Hell Eggs," he mildly said. "If that supervision were Praesi in nature, such an act might even be only *mildly* offensive foreign intervention in our affairs. Yet you do not address the most essential of imbalances: the Dread Empire would be surrendering a great deal of strength while other signatories would not. What does the limiting of angels mean to Procer or Ashur? To Levant? By weakening the Empire, you strengthen all its rivals at its expense. There is no nation in existence that would agree to such a thing unless forced – and treaties thrust upon a realm by force of arms rarely last."

"Demons," I flatly said, "damage the fabric of Creation. Every time one is used, it is an act of war waged on every other sentient being. That the Empire has been practicing that sort of diabolism for centuries is not an excuse to continue, it is something to *expiate*."

"Regardless of such concerns, it remains an advantage surrendered for no given rationale," he pointed out.

"You do get something from this," I said. "You get to no longer be the Dread Empire."

His brow rose.

"Look," I said. "I've read Malicia's treatise. The famous one, I man, 'The Death of the Age of Wonders'. The touchstone of what she makes her foreign policy is making alliances abroad beyond the traditional Good and Evil lines, with the Thalassocracy of Ashur being the keystone. It's skillful politics, using it as counterbalance for Procer since raditionally it keeps the Principate in check by strengthening Levant and ensuring the League of Free Cities is pointed west."

"That," Black said, "and alliance with Ashur means that sea trade lanes and the grain they represent would be effectively untouchable."

"It's a nice thought, but Ashur jumped into bed with Cordelia and just spent the better part of a year putting everything in Praes within walking distance of the sea to the torch," I said. "Hasenbach is good, Black, but she's not *that* good and Malicia had decades at the game before she was even born. Why did the Thalassocracy pick her over a risen but since restrained Praes as their ally?"

"Because the Tower can't be trusted," he replied. "Mind you, we had the effective heir to the Thalassocracy and some of their foremost admirals willing to back alliance after the death of Magon Hadast. But a powerful Praes – and we were, in those days, perceived to have largely assimilated Callow – will always be seen as a continental threat."

"And if you sign the Accords," I said, "you get to shed that like old skin. Oh, I don't mean that suddenly the Wasteland will be trusted and the Tower will be the sudden beloved of people it spent centuries sending flying fortresses at. But when decisions are made, high up? They'll know that the Empire is sitting at the same table as everyone else, following the same rules. The moment other crowns no longer have to worry about whether the latest Emperor is going to feed a few thousand babies to a snake to summon an army of devils, then they become a much more palatable ally. Then *interests* begin to matter again, and if that's the game then Praes brings quite a bit to the table. You ask what signing the Accords give you? Proof that you're a reasonable actor. And Black, how *else* are you ever going to get that?"

He studied me for a time, then gave half a nod.

"Some of the Empire's highborn might be swayed by such an argument," he noted. "Not the better part, but enough to make civil war feasible to win. Which brings us to an issue born of your Accords, yet not part of them."

"Callow," I said.

"Starvation," my father agreed. "Having largely forsworn diabolism, the Wasteland might not longer be able to conquer the Kingdom of Callow to secure grain supply. Even less so should Callow be a member of the Grand Alliance, which involves clauses of mutual protection against non-signatory aggression. Praes would surrender the means through which to forcefully acquire grain without having first secured other means for that acquisition."

"Praes can't sign the Grand Alliance," I admitted. "I can't see that ever going through."

"Neither can I," Black replied, amused.

"So we cut out the middle man," I said. "Praes and Callow, bound in a treaty of trade and peace. It's not like we don't take losses selling the crops south and west, anyway. The Principate has fertile plains and Mercantis gouges us habitually. Besides, in everything magical we're at least half a century behind the Empire, if not more, so it's not like you have nothing to trade aside from precious metals."

"You would be tying our nations at their very heart," he warned me.

"Good," I snarled. "I want it to be that the Tower can never war on Laure again without starving itself. I want the fucking stained glass in the windows

of our palaces not to be *imported from Procer*. All these centuries of taxes and steel and young soldiers we've spent moving the same border back and forth can be put to better use. Gods, Black, just imagine what Praes could do if it didn't waste its talents on magical plagues and flying fortresses and bleeding its own people for fields! Imagine what Callow might become, if half the yearly taxes didn't go to raising knights and raising walls to the east – we could be so much *more*."

I laughed, harshly.

"Did you know that the cathedral in Laure, the one Elizabeth Alban had built spending Alamans treasures, is the reason why the House of Light is allowed to ask coin of the faithful?" I said. "Because there were points in Callowan history where the crown was too *poor* to pay for its damned upkeep while also raising armies and fighting wars in the east. Gods, Black, as nations we've spent more of – name it! – on killing each other than any single other thing in the span of our history. And while we were busy biting each other's tails, the world moved on."

"There will be those," he said, "for whom those truths will not be enough."

"Aye," I said. "I had a few of those too, back home. I hung the sloppy ones and murdered the rest."

He laughed.

"Those poor Regals," he said, lips twitching. "The fought as barons challenging a queen and found themselves instead having slighted the Dread Empress of Callow."

That there was a fond pride to his tone was not enough to prevent my wince. There was some truth to that and I knew it, for I had not learned the lessons of rule from my distant predecessors the Fairfaxes and the Albans. I'd wielded knife and scheme like one reigning from the Tower, tyrant no matter my good intentions. So be it. The Fairfaxes had failed, in the end, and I would not suffer that of myself after the myriad lines I had crossed.

"Your meaning is taken," the green-eyed man said. "Thought here are objections still."

"You trade the weakening for strength elsewhere," I said. "Your feared starvation will be sworn away. That leaves what, isolation? Praes is already isolated, by virtue of having pissed away every possible alliance it could have struck. What fault of that is mine, or the Accords?"

"Don't be childish," Black chided. "You would require of the Empire that it willingly embraced your new age – you must then make a place for it amongst that age."

"When did the High Lords and Ladies of Praes become lost children I must lead out of the woods?" I mockingly said.

A true speaker for those highborn might have taken offence to that, but while my father was hardly the source of my disdain for nobility he'd certainly reinforced the leaning.

"When you sought to place your will above even the Tower's," he easily replied. "In this world you would make, Praes must have a role to play. Else its energies will be spent unmaking what you have made."

"To be honest, I expect that within thirty years it'll be at war with the Free Cities," I admitted. "They'll not be Grand Alliance, and maybe not even Accord signatories."

"War is one thing," he said. "Inevitable, no matter what treaties are written. Yet more is required. Which brings me to this."

Striding forward, wine cup in hand, he gestured at another raised stone. One holding parchments regarding the to-be city of Cardinal, and the academy it was to hold within its bounds. An academy unlike any other Calernia had ever seen.

"The school," I said.

"It was," Black said, "a stroke of brilliance. Forcing Named to attend there, teaching them the articles of the Accords as well as manners of villainy and heroism? The academy is the means through which your dream lasts longer than your life's span. But it does not go far enough."

In truth the academy was more Vivienne's notion than mine – I'd been more concerned with enforcement, which had led me to the founding of Cardinal itself – but it truly *was* a stroke of brilliance. Oh, all those young Named would get practical lessons in how to accomplish what they wanted but they'd also get an education in the Articles of Strife: the manners of violence that were allowed of Named, depending on situation. How to keep mortals away from the damage, when it was allowable to kill another Named over a disagreement and what methods were legal to employ in that killing. And what methods would instead bring down on your head the wrath of the signatories, including the Named sworn to lethal enforcement of the Accords for a period of ten years at a time. I would leave behind a world where someone using a magic plague to wipe out a city would be met with heroes and villains from all over Calernia coming down on your head like the wrath of the Gods, where someone breaking the acceptable rules of warfare would be barred from Cardinal, from the Twilight Ways, from receiving support by any signatory government. Shatranj was a horrid metaphor for war, as war wasn't a game. But the strife between Named I fully intended on making a continent-wide tourney, a pit fight that'd allow the Gods to claim their due and the rest of us to keep on moving.

"You named these very accords after a tragedy wrought by sorcery – it was a Named practitioner, to be certain, but it was still magic that brought the madness," Black said. "Shaping Named is not enough."

"You want me to regulate sorcery," I frowned.

"I want you to make this Cardinal of yours the greatest centre of magical learning on Calernia," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said. "And to crown it the thief of our worst follies, made to serve higher purpose."

# Chapter 58

# Prolong

> "All are free, or none. Ye of this land, suffer no compromise in this."
>
> Inscription on the founding stele of Bellerophon

My heart skipped a beat. Certainly, it was no deep secret that I had bound Akua Sahelian to the collar of the Mantle of Woe and there would be some who suspected the true nature of the 'Advisor Kivule'. Still, none I'd not brought into the secret had ever spoken of it until now save for Kairos Theodosian. And the Tyrant could have bargained for that knowledge with the Dead King, who knew all of my deeds that Masego had known of, or even through the use of whatever aspect allowed him to be so sharply perceptive of the wants of others. Black, though? If he knew now it was either because officers of the Legions-in-Exile both knew and had passed it along since he woke, or because it'd been known to him before he was captured. Or maybe, I reluctantly thought, he'd just known me well enough from the start to tell where that story was headed.

"Flowery language, that was," I carefully said. "Perhaps a little lacking in precision."

His face had grown no easier to read, for all the purported insouciance he'd been carrying himself with since he woke.

"Use them," Black said. "Our madmen, our warlocks and sorcerers. Give them laws, give them coin and great undertakings to embrace. Else they find all these on their own."

I calmed, the slightest bit. It was still no small thing, he was speaking of – Cardinal as neutral grounds for the Accords as well as the seat of the legion that'd enforce them by steel if need be would already be costly, but to make it a centre of sorcery as well? I was no great scholar of sorcery, but I'd had a close looks at the deep pockets required for the sort of research that Masego and his father had considered to be leading-edge. The costs to both found and fund a mage's school would be daunting, to say the last. He wasn't wrong about the virtues of keeping Praesi mages occupied, though, especially those who would have before then spent much of their years learning the intricacies of diabolism.

The notion of even a hundred furious highborn Wasteland warlocks out in the world with little left to lose was the sort of thing disasters were made of. And quite possible Named, though I'd always known that dropping this large a stone in the pond would cause ripples. I'd counted on it, in truth. If instead of ruinous wars between Good and Evil I could instead make the crux of the conflict strife between Named that heeded their laws and did not? Then it became a war of Names, not nations, and Calernia avoided another coming of Akua's Folly.

"Did you perhaps believe I meant the shade of Akua Sahelian?" the green-eyed man casually asked, smile sudden and sharp.

His sense of humour, it seemed, had not been gentled by the loss of his Name. I supposed that'd been a little too much to hope for.

"Oh, it would please some of High Lords to have her placed in position of importance," he conceded. "Yet when it comes to the Doom of Liesse, my advice will always remain the same: no matter how clever you believe your scheme to be, it isn't. Kill her now, in full and beyond anyone's mending."

"I have a purpose for her," I said.

"And she for you, Catherine," he chided. "It would hardly do to forget that. If a single victory was all it took to bind the highborn to one's cause, the Tower would not change rulers the way other lands change seasons."

"I know that," I said, a tad sharply. "There's a lot you don't know, Black. *Couldn't* know, because after I told you to get your shit together you instead decided to take a walk through the heartlands of Procer with a torch in hand."

"A calculated measure meant to ensure the Principate could not continue waging war as it had," he said. "The morality of it I've no intention of debating, though I'll say that if the First Prince of Procer intends to use massed levies to fight wars then she marked her peasantry as a war asset by her own hand."

"You condemned hundreds of thousands to a slow death by starvation," I flatly said. "Not innocents, perhaps, not all of them. But certainly non-combatants. There are manners in which waging war is acceptable, Black, and you used to know them. You didn't allow sacks during the Conquest, or any of the other myriad atrocities that followed the old Legions like a loyal dog."

"I set boundaries appropriate to the manner of outcome I desired," Black calmly replied. "As I did in the Principate. There can be no peace settlement with a crusade, Catherine. They end when one side is no longer capable of prosecuting the war. I took the most swift and plausible path to that ending."

"You also failed," I told him. "Failed hard enough my Marshal had to commit Callow's armies to bailing out your own and I had to tangle with two of the most potent heroes alive to take back your soul after *they'd fucking cut it out*."

I would have thought less of him, after, if he'd made the argument that the legions under Grem had bled not long before to defend the Red Flower Vales and so relief had been owed. It was true, and the debt that lay there was one of the reasons I'd not entire lost my temper at Juniper's adventurous western campaign. But it would have been, implicitly, an admission he'd expected someone to step in and save him. Coming from the man who'd taught me to pray at

the altar of taking responsibility for one's actions, be they righteous or wicked, that would have been... disappointing.

"Indeed," he frankly admitted. "I significantly miscalculated in both assessing the danger posed by the Grey Pilgrim and the lay of the strategies decided by Calernia's great powers. Marching the legions north towards the Stairway would have been the correct decision, in retrospective. Klaus Papenheim would have followed us and so arrived to bolster the defence of Hainaut in time to avoid losing the shores. The losses would still have been bloody for both him and Malanza's hosts, still leaving the First Prince in a vulnerable position but without having committed either my legions or your Army of Callow to the field."

The assessment was spoken clearly and concisely, like some chirurgeon slicing open the cadaver of a mistake one word at a time. At least he wasn't shying away from admitting he could blunder. And my own hands were not clean as driven snow here. Malicia might not have told him of her attempted dealings with Keter, but neither had I, so he'd made his decisions blind. And though the famine he'd wrought on the Principate was both a lasting shame and a lasting complication, it would have been dishonest to pretend I'd not also benefited from it. And from someone else doing it, too, so that my hands would not be stained by the deed.

"Procer wouldn't be so willing to bargain with me now if you hadn't first broken their wealthiest and most fertile territories," I admitted. "And I've reason to believe that the Grey Pilgrim went after you in particular to secure a hold on me."

He cocked his head to the side, sharp-boned face gone pensive.

"Not a hostage," he decided. "That would have carried... considerable risks. Forcing a confrontation on his own terms, then."

I looked at him then, the mind at work behind the pale green eyes, and still saw the bones of the man who'd become the Carrion Lord. He'd lost a mould of power, when he'd lost his Name, but the substance of what made Amadeus of the Green Stretch dangerous remained. A fresh mould might yet be found, I thought, and if it was what came of it would not be gentle. His eyes finally flicked to staff in my hand.

"Pattern of three," he deduced.

I dipped my head, an acknowledgement that at least I suspected as much.

"Congratulations are in order, then," Black said, to my surprise. "You have been marked the equal of one whose influence spans more than half of Calernia."

His lips twitched, but I'd learned to tell the difference between mockery and amusement with those and this was of the latter.

"I have higher ambitions still," I admitted.

"Indeed," he said. "You are aware that there are some who will say the council you propose will be the true ruler of Calernia from the shadows. Espe-

cially if your proposed enforced succeed at attracting Named as well as funding a standing army."

"It's not going to be a campaign army like Juniper and Grem command," I felt compelled to say. "It'll be meant for battles and hitting cornered Names who gathered people to their banner. For large-scale warfare we'd call on the signatories."

"That will always be one of the weaknesses of your Accords," Black warned. "You saw firsthand the shortcomings of a ruling council in Laure: voting blocks forming and personal interests coming to command the debates is inevitable. Forming a diplomatic council including an elected hero and villain to settle disputes will only aid so much, if every signatory's designated representative fights for their country's interests alone. Outside enmities and alliances will interfere with the diplomatic mechanisms functioning as intended."

"That's one of the reasons in need Praes to sign on and claim a seat," I admitted. "I'm not sure the League will sign on – certainly not as long as the Hierarch lives, however long that'll last – so without the Empire the signatories are essentially the Grand Alliance, Callow and the drow. It'll be too imbalanced."

"It is unlikely the Golden Bloom will deign to participate in such a treaty," he agreed. "Or the Titanomachy, for that matter."

Which meant Levant and Ashur, historically close allies since the Dominion's founding, and Procer with all its wealth and influence radiating outwards. Callow and the Empire Ever Dark, as nations on the outskirts who must deal with Procer to have any significant trade presence, would inevitably end up on the outskirts of the Accords' council as well. If the Empire was a signatory, the game changed. Ashur would have commercial interests on the Praesi coast, and the Wasteland would be closely aligned with Callow's own interests as it would be its effective granary and strongest trade partner. If the west pulled together so would the east, and that'd prevent any bloc from commanding a strong majority in council. Which, considering that I'd set in law that such a council could call on signatories for war against a nation in breach of the Accords, was essential if I wanted them to actually function as intended. If the council in Cardinal became a way for an alliance of nations to force its influence at the expense of others, the Liesse Accords would inevitably collapse.

"A roving band of Named enforcing your laws backed by an army will earn resistance in and of itself," Back said. "Yet combined with your insistence that Named cannot rule or own property of more than a specific total worth – which should be higher in general, by my reckoning, but significantly stricter on landholding in particular – it may very well be taken as the villain Catherine Foundling attempting to claim rulership of Calernia from behind a veil of shared laws."

"I won't have any particular authority under the Accords," I pointed out. "In Cardinal itself yes, but-"

"But the Woe makes up a significant portion of living villains, you are a ruling queen with great resources at your disposal and undeniably the most fa-

mous Named of your generation," he calmly interrupted. "It is near a certainty you will have a seat on that council as the representative for Below. That will be enough for rumours."

"Fine," I said. "But on the other side of the table, odds are it'll be the Peregrine speaking for Above. The man commands a *lot* of trust in the west, Black."

A moment passed.

"It has a story's shape," he conceded, which was praise and condemnation both. "That does not, however, change the truth that you would be risking war every time you tried to depose a popular ruler having come into a Name."

"It's necessary to avoid the worst Named can deal out," I insisted. "Sure, a Good King will usually improve things more than not. And a powerful Dread Empress binds Praes together for at least part of her reign, allowing for growth. But if they share a border, what would be skirmishing between mundane rulers becomes *much* more prone to escalation – and capable of escalating to vicious heights no one else could reach."

"A Good King being told to abdicate by a council mostly made up of foreigners will withdraw from the Accords and bitterly fight against any attempt to have its terms enforced upon him," Black said. "The Dominion sees its Named as figures of religious reverence, at least those from the great lines. Even if the Pilgrim backs you, you'd be using to obtain compliance the very trait you seek to eradicate. A tower of shallow foundations, that. In Procer you might find agreement, for Named do not rule there, but where else?"

"Named are under influence," I said. "Below or Above's, it doesn't matter, the judgement will always be impaired. Sometimes that impairment leads to upright deeds but even then it still remains a thinning of their ability to make clear-headed choices."

"Will you also place law in the Accords forbidding the crowning of a drunk or an idiot?" Amadeus asked. "These, too, are impairments."

"You know that's not the same thing," I said.

"I know you are attempting to dictate who can and cannot rule nations that are barely your allies if at all, nations you have not conquered or truly defeated, nation on which you are attempting to impose your personal belief in the face of centuries of culture speaking to other directions. And, most of all, this is directed at nations whose goodwill you need very badly for the Liesse Accord to exist as more than ink and fantasy," he said, tone never rising nor ebbing low. "You are overstepping."

My fingers clenched.

"You know we'd all be better off if we agreed on excluding Named from rule," I said. "Gods, even just Praes getting rid of some of its-"

"Until the Dread Empire itself desires the mending of that wound, no amount of treaties will change a thing," Black said, tone bland. "That was made plain to me, in knowing and truth. It is not enough to be correct in *principle*, Catherine. If you cannot offer a practical way to deliver on your beliefs, then they are wind. No one will agree on the Cardinal council having right to call signatories to war

to depose a Named ruler, not even your own people once you've passed on the crown. It is best you make your peace with that early and prepare yourself to fight more salient battles."

He didn't suggest taking the articles out though, I noted. Ah, of course he wouldn't. Since in his eyes it'd never been something worth seriously attempting, scrapping it became an easy concession in a true negotiation. I wasn't convinced, honestly, that he was right. But I could at least consider him as a herald of the opposition I would face in days to come, and that meant at the very least some parts of this would have to be reconsidered. There was no point in making a toothless law, but one with too much bite might be even worse considering most of the signatories would have been recently at war with each other to one extent or another.

"Such as?" I asked.

"Your academy," he said. "True, without it the Accords die with you. If your rules of engagement are not carved into a pattern all must heed, they will fade the moment the strength behind them does. Yet you must address the inherent difficulties in gathering *Named* and forcing lessons and laws upon them."

"I'm not making a War College, Black," I said. "It won't be classes and lectures for both a fourteen-year-old Squire and a grizzled Unconquered Champion in their late thirties, that's doomed to failure. The main purpose of the that academy is to teach the Articles of Strife – acceptable levels of violence against other Named and Nameless – and set out rules of behaviour. I expect most will attend for a few months only and wander back out into the world. But they'll be wandering with the knowledge that seeding an undead plague in some village's well brings Named killers down on their head, that calling an angel down on a city will get your throat slit and that city quarantined. I can't control a continent's worth of Named, it'd be absurd to even try. But if I can teach them rules of engagement and get them to agree that those rules should be enforced? Then the Accords have already done half of what they were meant to."

"Short-sighted," Black said. "Do you not realize the amount of influence Cardinal – and by extension your academy – will inevitably accrue? The Good King. The Dread Empress. The Tyrant of Helike. The Grey Pilgrim. What do all these have in commons?"

"They are or can all be the head of their nation," I frowned.

*Oh*, I thought.

"The crowns of most of Calernia will spend at least half a year studying abroad in Cardinal," I said. "Shit."

He'd didn't need to expand on the point any further, my mind was already spinning. If I wanted the spending of months in a foreign city to be seen as more than an imposition on a sovereign or sovereign-to-be, Cardinal needed to provide more than just an education in the intricacies of the Accords. That much could be provided by tutors when it came down to it, and that meant no

one had motivation to fund Cardinal's existence – which meant the weakening of a heart to them, and that was a death knoll in the making.

"Sorcerers," I said. "We'll need every damned one we can get, and any grimoire we can get our hands on. Teachers and books as well, of every subject and stripe. League histories, Ashuran atlases, Proceran poems. It can't just be for Named, can it? It has to be *the* school, so that when some angry kid with a sword and growing powers is offered a chance to study there it's an opportunity and not a chore. They have to *want* to come."

"Oh, you'll get more than Named and Named-incipient if you succeed at that," Amadeus of the Green Stretch smiled, thin and bladelike. "Gather such fine teachers, such deep knowledge, and you'll find even nobles sending their children there. Do you think any tutor in the Dominion could match the education you have spoken of? In Callow, in any city of the League? Highborn and diplomats and the ambitious seeking to become intimates of Named still in their rise: all these will knock at your door, demanding a place."

"That's. . . " I hesitated. "It'll cost a fortune. And you don't even know where the city is to be raised."

"I am not a fool," my father said, sounding amused, "so I do. You are still, deep in your bones, Callowan. You'll have it carved out of the Red Flower Vales, putting neutral grounds between yourself and Procer while also opening the gate to enriching trade."

I wondered how many more people had seen through that. It wasn't like it'd be a mistake to do that – as Queen of Callow I could cede enough fields to support the city from my side, and given the way Procer would be gaining much from the Accord while losing less than anyone else getting an equivalent land grant on the other side of the Whitecaps shouldn't be impossible. It was at the centre of Calernia, too the crossroads of the west and the east. Still, it would have been a lie to say I'd not intended the location of it to be boon for Callow.

"You'll be making the capital of a new age," Black said. "And so you must reassess your negotiating stance accordingly, or see yourself outplayed. It will not be your backyard alone, Catherine. You are founding the royal court of Calernia itself."

And his lips were quirking as he spoke, like the world demanded that they turn into a smile regardless of his wants.

"I need you to see it through," I admitted. "I need you at that table, speaking for Praes and signing the Accords. Gods, I need you just to have someone I can speak to about these things."

Someone who, unlike Hakram and Vivienne, had desires sometimes estranged from my own. Who'd look at my schemes and see weaknesses I had not.

"Help me," I asked. "Help me to *break* the Game of the Gods."

He looked away, at the hung parchments that laid out my fool's dream in ink and law.

"A better world, is it?" he pensively said.

Pale green eyes narrowed, something cold at the heart of them. Like great cogs of steel, made to half yet stuttering back into movement.

"It can be done," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said. "And if nothing else, it ought to be an interesting way to spend my twilight years."

# Chapter 59

# Review

> "To repudiate what lies at the heart of Praes – ambition, skill, learning – would be a mistake, yet to allow those traits to be principle rather than tool has been the mother of a great many dooms. The greatness of olden days must be put to modern purpose or see itself turn irrelevant to the lay of Creation."
>
> Extract from 'The Death of the Age of Wonders', a treatise by Dread Empress Malicia

Afternoon soon drifted into evening, and it seemed for a moment as if I'd found the Laure beat of affairs once more: too many things to do and so little time to do them. The herbal brew Hakram had made me took the edge off the pain just enough that if I remained still while seated it didn't throb too badly, so I took full advantage of the relief when seeing to the many duties that'd piled up while I slumbered. Still, I did not regret having a physical need to sleep once more even if it ate away at the hours I could work. It was a pleasurable sensation, sleeping, but also one I'd found grounding in some ways. It was easier to make mistakes when your thoughts ran uninterrupted for days and nights, like a hound chasing its own tail. Sleep was a wedge in between it, a way for thoughts to cool and distance to come down. I'd need another night's sleep, I decided, before speaking of the Accords with my father again. I'd not made nearly as good an argument for the banning of ruling Named as I could have now that I'd had time to better gather my thoughts – no one touched by a Choir, for example, should be allowed anywhere near a throne – but I would not resume the back and forth without rest and preparation. Besides, we'd both have demands on out time for days to come.

Marshal Grem and the Legions-in-Exile had been parted from him for months, simply getting the bare bones reports about months of campaign in order would take at least a day. And he'd have more waiting, especially now that scrying worked properly again. No, Black would have busy days ahead and myself even more so. By the time I'd come down from the barrow-top there was a mixed honour guard of legionaries and Firstborn, dzulu from the Brezlej and Soln sig-

ils, waiting for me along with Adjutant. A full line of veterans from the First Legion, Marshal Grem's personal command, was waiting for Black slightly to their side. I offered them a respectful nod and got the same in return. Legio I *Invicta* had fought like lions in the Red Flower Vales, I'd been told, facing down a charge of Lycaone heavy horse the White Knight himself had led. I would not forget anytime soon that the Legions-in-Exile were the same who'd fought in the defence of Callow. For those that'd remained holed up in Praes while the wolves howled at my gates I had no great fondness, but these? They'd bled for my home, even though once upon a time they had also conquered it.

I claimed a comfortable seat in the First Army's war council tent, hiding under the broad table how carefully I had to manage my leg, and as Hakram stood by my side I sunk my teeth in the day's first work. Casualty reports began it all on a high note. The Army of Callow and its sister-legions from Praes had taken negligible losses in last night's battle, and though Ivah came bearing the drow losses in Rumena's name it revealed the losses there had been relatively light as well. Less than two thousand dead, and though the Levantines had found a surprising amount of success while killing Mighty – my Lord of Silent Steps mentioned that the warriors of Tartessos in particular had made an impression – most those killed had not been sigil-holders or even rylleh but lesser Mighty. The Dominion has pulled out some sort of enchanted or blessed lantern that'd interfered with the Night, and the least of the Mighty had been struck hardest by it. Both the League and the Alliance would have gotten significantly worse off from last night, which was a damned wasted of soldiery on the eve of war to the north but also a boon to my own diplomatic position. The situation of our supplies was a great deal less promising, unfortunately.

The Hellhound had arranged baggage and foodstuffs for a long campaign, as she'd originally believed it might be necessary for the army to seize the principality of Arans to hold it against the Dead King's advance, and the Southern Expedition of the Empire Ever Dark had been dragging around the supplies I'd bargained for with the dwarves throughout its Iserran fighting. We were not, by any measure, in danger of running out of food or necessities soon. But the Army of Callow had been campaigning for months now, and probably would have suffered from a steady trickle of desertions were it not the middle of winter in hostile foreign lands. Professional soldiers or not, my legionaries needed rest and recovery before going into another fight. That would be difficult to arrange in Procer, I suspected, and while the details of the use of the Twilight Ways remained unknown to me I doubted they'd be much more efficient at moving troops than the Arcadian paths. That meant bringing my soldiers back to Callow would take them out of the war for at least the better part of a year. I couldn't do that. Victory or defeat against Keter might very well be decided by then.

The issues with the Firstborn were more complicated in nature, and I ignored the irritated look on Juniper's face – and the fascinated one on Hakram's – while Ivah expanded on them in Crepuscular. One sigil-holder, the Mighty

Zoitsa, and two rylleh from other sigils had been slain in the fighting. The former Zoitsa Sigil would have begun tearing itself apart over succession had General Rumena not personally intervened and broken all the limbs of the two most prominent rylleh aiming to claim the sigil. The other two casualties had prompted power struggles as well, as the complicated weave of alignments and enmities that made up the upper levels of a stable sigil was upset by the removal of two high-placed killers. Those had, for now, been kept under control by the own sigil-holders. But my decree that drow could not have killing duels while we were on campaign was being tested sorely by the situation, and the strain was showing. Rumena had politely suggested that I come adjudicate the matters myself, which was enough to tell me it was serious. It was almost never polite to me if it could help it, and its command of the southern expedition gave it the right to settle such disputes without my involvement in principle. If my presence was being sought, then it meant neither the respect nor the fear General Rumena commanded had been enough to settle the situation.

"I'll come after dusk," I said. "Unless the general believes the situation is so dire as to require my immediate intervention?"

Ivah bowed low.

"It is not so, Losara Queen," it said. "The general has remarked that containment will be more… arduous after the coming of Night, but under pale light all will be brought to order."

In other words, Rumena was willing to run roughshod over the squabblers while the sun was out but would have to get pretty hard-handed to keep it all under control after Mighty started slinging Night around. Fair enough. For all that it had been appointed general and commander of the southern expedition by divine mandate, Rumena remained very much a first among equal: there were limits to the orders it could give without having to spill blood to see them enforced. Ivah left, and I marked the whole situation as a cauldron I'd need to see settled before it tipped over and burned everybody else. And Hells, this was just a single sigil-holder and a pair of rylleh. How bad would it get when we started taking real losses? Another method needed to be put into place, one that didn't end up with Mighty turning on each other violently whenever one of them died.

"What did the drow want?" Juniper asked.

"They're having some internal disputes," I grunted. "It'll be taken care of."

The orc eyed me carefully, then accurately guessed that if I believed she needed to know more about that then she would. The conversation moved on to the debate on whether or not the old Legion tradition of ale rations being broken out after a victory should be indulged with so many other armies camped around us. I argued in favour, for not even the League would be foolish enough to think an evening of drinking would be enough to save it if it resumed hostilities now, but Juniper dug in her heels at it being an unnecessary risk regardless of the improvement to morale. A compromise over shifts that'd allow at least half the army to be on war footing at any time was being put together when

Vivienne joined us, a little over an hour before sundown. Wearing a practical cloak and dress over boots and trousers, the heiress-designate to the throne of Callow strode in looking pink-cheeked and well-rested. We dismissed the general staff, after that, and she settled at the high table by Hakram's side when he finally took a seat instead of standing by my side like some grim green gargoyle.

"Indrani?" I asked.

"Wandered off after we ate," Vivienne replied. "You know how restless she gets after a long sleep."

From closer up than the former thief suspected, yes, though usually having slept together beforehand made her slightly more mellow about it. Knowing Indrani she'd be having a look at the League positions or feeling out the half-there paths into the Twilight Ways. In the overwhelming majority of situations she was more likely to be the danger encountered than the one encountering danger, so I wasn't all that worried about her safety. She'd drift back in to check on Masego before too long anyway.

"She'll turn up," Juniper gravelled, unmoved. "Damn hard woman, the Archer."

Coming from the Hellhound, that was high praise. I fished out my dragonbone pipe and stuffed it, calling on the slightest touch of Night as I passed my palm above the bowl. I breathed in lightly before looking up, finding the other three gazing at me expectantly. A heartbeat passed.

"I've only got the one pipe on me," I said. "And I'm not sharing, folks."

Irritation for Juniper, resignation for Vivienne and some sort of rueful amusement for Hakram.

"Yours talks with Lord Black," Marshal Juniper said. "How did they go?"

My brow rose and I glanced at Hakram.

"Everyone knows," Adjutant admitted. "Even putting the matter under seal would have changed nothing. Word began to spread before you were even all the way up the barrow."

Merciless Gods. No one who made jests about gossiping fishwives had ever served a term in an army.

"The Exile Legions haven't withdrawn or begun to muster, so it can't have gone too badly," Vivienne noted.

The Jacks were still hard at work, it was heartening to see.

"I have his backing for the Liesse Accords," I said. "He's not committing to a stance on the Tower until he knows more of what's happening in the Wasteland."

I caught a look between Juniper and Vivienne, which had me suppressing a spike of irritation. From these two in particular, the impression that things were being hidden from me would remain ill-received for some time.

"The Observatory works again, though essentially crippled in capacity," Vivienne volunteered. "Fadila Mbafeno repaired what she could, though she

maintains that without Hierophant's personally attention it is a fantasy to attain full functions."

"But our scrying web is back," I flatly said. "What have you learned?"

"General Sacker moved east on the Blessed Isle," Juniper said. "Our man in Summerholm – Legate Asadel – requested that she evict the Praesi refugees before taking up positions on the shore."

Which, considering that we were feeding General Sacker's legion out of Callowan granaries, was a request that'd carry a great deal of weight.

"Legate Asadel," I slowly repeated.

"Fifteenth," Juniper said. "Taghreb, originally one of General Hune's at the War College. He's loyal, Catherine. No reason to doubt that."

There was always a reason to doubt that, I thought, though if you did not learn where to draw the line such worries could only drive you mad.

"I take it the refugees declined to follow the orders," I said.

"They also called on Governess Abreha's protection, which was granted," the orc continued. "Household troops were sent to discourage Sacker, but she picked out their positions and broken them in night raids. Then she set the refugee camps on fire and ordered shot any who fled west instead of east."

I let out a hissing breath.

"Shit," I said. "Tell me the announcement was enough, Juniper. Tell me one of our own fucking legates didn't have a role in the *slaughter* of terrified civilians."

"One caravan was butchered," the Marshal of Callow said. "Two hundred dead, we think. Children were spared. It was enough to get everyone else running."

I closed my eyes. Breathed in, breathed out. Why was it that the moment I took my eyes off anywhere it all went to shit? No, I thought, that wasn't fair. If Legate Asadel was a contemporary of Hune's and so the rest of is back at the College, then he was no older than twenty-five. His rank was high, for one his age, and while part of that might have been talent it was also undeniably because we were running out of College-taught officers and most the veterans of the old legions we had left had loyalties too complex to be entrusted dangerous postings. I could not put men and women still green around the edges and then become furious when they made mistakes.

"Recall Legate Asadel," I said, opening my eyes. "Move him to a garrison where he can't do any damage and replace him with someone more seasoned."

"No one in Praes will raise a ruckus of the civilians, Catherine," Juniper said. "By going into Callow they were abandoning Tower law."

I saw Vivienne wince from the corner of my eye.

"Aye," I said. "That's true. And also the finest argument I've heard for Black's old dream of putting every highborn in the Wasteland to the sword. Recall Asadel, Juniper. That's an order."

She nodded.

"That won't be all," I said. "Get on with it."

"Governess Abreha deemed the attack on her household troops to be treason, given her Tower-granted rank," Juniper said. "General Sacker replied that she was following orders from the Black Knight, supreme commander of the Legions of Terror, and so therefore it was Abreha's own interference with her operations that was treason. She lodged an official protest with the Tower."

"The Empress won't knife High Lady Abreha in the back so soon," Hakram said. "Not to Sacker, of all people, who has ties to the Matrons and remains a close associate of the Carrion Lord. Malicia might need Abreha either dead or disgraced, but if she throws her under the wheels now then she might as well abdicate to the Black Knight."

If a general's mere claim to be working at Black's behest when he was on the other side of the continent was enough to make the Dread Empress back down, then Adjutant was absolutely correct: she'd have effectively stated herself to be less influential than one of her own right hand's servants, and so by Wasteland standards she'd be meat on the plate. On the other hand, could she really afford to throw to the side the Legions-in-Exile? Given that she'd lost Foramen to the Confederation of the Grey Eyries and her coastlands were a bloody wound, I'd argue not.

"The Empress is considering the petition," Juniper said. "But has yet to act on it. General Sacker seized the western shore of the Wasiliti and dug in. It's been a standoff with Governess Abreha ever since."

I grimaced.

"We need to find out who General Sacker answers to," I said. "It best be Black, because if it's the Matrons we have trouble on our hands."

The fledgling goblin nation south of the Hungering Sands could only benefit from enmity between Praes and Callow deepening, since history had made it clear that the Tribes could only fail if they attempted to stand against the Dread Empire on their own. An embittered Callow, on the other hand, would have a vested interested in keeping the Confederation standing as a thorn in the Wasteland's side. And considering my kingdom had largely adopted the war doctrines introduced by the Reforms, we'd keep needing goblin steel and munitions only they could produce. They'd have good we wanted, and we'd share a common enemy – alliances had been built on less. Unfortunately for the Matrons, they were planning their schemes blind. They had no real idea of what went on this far west, and they would not be aware of anything related to the Accords. They were fighting last century's war, not this one, playing a game of Good Queens and Dread Empresses when that was the very manner of existence I want to strike a match over. If they were brought into the talks, I suspected they'd sign. If nothing else, the clause establishing that a signatory nation attacked by a non-signatory one could call on the aid of all other signatories would get them interested. Either as a deterrent for a non-signatory Praes, or because Praes *had* signed and they could not afford to be on the other side of that rule.

Yet they were blind, at the moment, at a lot of damage could be done by an

assembly of vicious old goblins matrons pursuing what they saw as their own interests.

"Vivienne," I finally said. "Anything to add?"

She bit her lip.

"There are rumours," she said, "that Malicia is calling near every highborn in Praes to the Tower."

My brow rose.

"Why?" I asked.

"I don't believe anyone knows aside from her," Vivienne admitted. "The usual rumours are there – the edict making it treason to claim the Name of Chancellor is to be ended, she seeks another Black Knight or a spouse – but there's nothing certain. Whatever she's planning, though there's a lot of expectation."

"Given the recent string of disasters, such a great assembly of highborn would either see her deposed or her reign secured for many years by a great victory," Hakram opined. "She's rolling the dice on her reign."

*Malicia doesn't roll dice*, I thought. *She only ever plays when she believes she'll win for sure.* Sometimes she was disastrously wrong about that, as she had been at Second Liesse, but no one was without blind spots and I suspected in some ways Black was hers. This, though? This was Wasteland politics and she'd danced around these well-dressed killers without missing a step for decades. If she was acting now it was because she had something in the works that'd secure her hold on Praes. She would not expose herself to the wolves of the Imperial Court for anything less, in my eyes. I breathed out.

"Send an official messenger to the Carrion Lord, then," I drily said. "Requesting a sharing of intelligence concerning Praes tomorrow. Odds are he'll know more than us."

Vivienne nodded, I noted, instead of Juniper. Interesting, that the Hellhound would recognize her as the higher authority in diplomatic matters even when those matters involved Black and the Legions. It was the implicit mark of a respect I'd been well aware did not exist when I left for the Everdark.

"We need to determine where the army's headed," Juniper bluntly said. "We're wearing thing, Catherine. Your return and a win did wonders for morale, but it's been a long winter and we fought through most of it. Even if it's up north we're headed, I want winter quarters raised and a rotation of leave for soldiers. The edge will grow ragged otherwise."

"I can't give you an answer to that before the diplomacy's been worked through, Juniper," I replied just as bluntly. "And for that I need to sit with the Pilgrim, and likely Arnaud Brogloise – if not the First Prince herself through scrying link."

Whatever the Hellhound would have answered to that I was not fated to know, for before she could speak the Advisor Kivule was introduced. My eyes moved in surprise to Akua's veiled silhouette even as she entered the tent and bowed.

"The Hierophant is awake, Your Majesty," the shade said.

I rose to my feet, ignoring the throb of pain from my leg.

"Meeting adjourned," I said, and they all knew better than to gainsay me on that.

# Chapter 60

# Melancholy

> "And after Okoro was taken its King Berengar Rohanon was dragged before the people in the place of Faded Jackals, where his hands were cut for having reached beyond his grasp and his head scalped for having dared to claim kingship over Praesi. His Dread Majesty ordered him driven into the Wasteland, bearing his hands around his neck and his scalp scribed with for all crusaders this warning: 'There is only one crown east of the river Wasaliti, and once more will you be taught to dread it.'"
>
> Extract from 'Commentaries on the Campaigns of Dread Emperor Terribilis the Second'

The Sisters were in the tent. Their presence was like a whisper on the edge of my mind, and though they'd not hidden their presence by Masego's bedside neither had they drawn my attention to it. It had my fingers clenching, and my growing ill-temper was noticeable enough my legionary escort gave me a wider berth as I quickened my limping. I'd had a reputation for having a foul temper even before my anger began frosting over tables, and trading Winter for Night had not put away that repute. Sve Noc knew what lines they could and could not cross without our bargain fraying, and they would not be so foolish as to try to force the Night onto an unwilling Hierophant. But they were not above making that offer when he was freshly awake and grieving, still in shock from the loss of his magic.

Crows were carrion birds, and just like carrion the Sisters were preying on the vulnerable to attempt patronage of another powerful figure – for Masego was that still, even bedridden and stripped of sorcery. My anger was less from the crafty offer I suspected was being made and more from the way that I had no solid grounds for wroth or recourse if I wanted to denounce what they were doing. It was a sharp reminder that the Sisters were my patrons and allies, not my followers, and they had schemes of their own. And Masego, though one of the Woe, was not my sworn man or a subject of the crown of Callow: any claim

I could make over his loyalties was one he'd given out by his own hand, and by the same could withdraw.

The crows were never far from my thoughts and often pointed address within those was enough to earn their attention, but they did not deign answer my insistence this time. The same tent where I'd slept was shaded in subtle ways when I found it, the shadows it cast and kept within its folds too deep and cool even with the falling dusk. There was power at work, the attention of sister-goddesses manifest. I dismissed my escort abruptly and strode past the folds, catching sight of Sve Noc perched atop the armchair I'd slumbered in while a half-naked and sitting Masego looked at them from his sickbed. Feathered in darkness and ink-eyed, the crows seemed almost too large for the chair and even the tent – not that it seemed to cow my friend.

The dark-skinned sorcerer, eye cloth fastened loosely over his glittering glass eyes, was still painfully thin from his time in the Dead King's thrall but his face was calm and his hands steady. His long braids were still matted from their lack of washing, the silver trinkets woven in them shining dully in the lamplight, but even abed looking at him was like looking at an open flame. The burn was feverish, perhaps, but grief and tragedy had not seen its intensity wane. All this I took within a heartbeat, as I arrived to what must have been the tail-end of the offer tendered.

"Faith kept will be kept in kind," Andronike said. "And in the end, all will be Night."

Masego's eyes pivoted under the cloth to glance at me, and the Sisters needed no sight to know of my presence, so when I cleared my throat there was no hint of surprise on any's face.

"Faith can wait until another evening," I said. "There will be-"

"That won't be necessary, Catherine," Hierophant quietly interrupted.

Wings spread and with a few lazy beats Komena was on my shoulder, as displeased by my meddling as I was by hers. Andronike, though, perched herself on the side of Masego's bed. Peering at him curiously with dark eyes more god than bird no matter the shape of them.

"You have been hollowed," Andronike cawed. "Miracle can yet mend this."

The urge came, quicksilver and fleeting, to intervene once more. If the Sisters alone had requested the stilling of my tongue I would not have held it, but Masego had as well and so let the urge pass.

"There is only one side of apotheosis of interest to me," Hierophant said, "and it is not the one that involves kneeling."

"You are yet young," Komena said from my shoulder. "We can wait, though the bargain will not twice be so sweet."

"It will eat away at you," Andronike told him. "From the inside, it will-"

Sudden as it was, it caught me by surprise like few things in my life before it: Masego's nimble fingers, mage-deft and long, snapped up and seized the crow addressing him by the throat. They *squeezed*, and as Komena cawed in

protest and beat her wings against my shoulder the Warlock's son let out a scornful hiss.

"Do not ever attempt to peer into my mind, covetous vermin," the Hierophant harshly rebuked.

Night flooded the room as the behest of livid lesser gods, thick and oppressive current like veils of shadow, but his Name burned like a clear and unyielding flame.

"I knew Winter well, before you fed on it," Masego said, eyes burning with Summer flame, "shall I rip it out through the stitches of your belly? Ruin will run down the course of you into the heart of your entire people, little spiders. Did you believe you could make yourself the life of your kind without also being its death?"

He barked out a laugh.

"Lucky you, that it was Akua Sahelian and not I who accompanied her below," he said. "Else I would have cut out your ravenous eyes long ago and made a banner of your butchered remains."

"Masego," I said. "Enough."

Summer-bright eyes flicked to me, then returned to Komena on my shoulder. My fingers clenched.

"Masego," I repeated sharply. "*Enough*."

Scoffing, he released his grip on Andronike. She flew away in wroth, and I saw that the flesh of Hierophant's hand looked as if it'd been frostbitten where it'd been touching the divine crow.

"And that's why," I calmly said, "you speak to me before trying to bargain with one of the Woe."

"Offence was given," Komena cried out, the sound cacophonous and somehow blinding.

"Your tried to look into the head of a man whose Name is practically made of the death of gods, you fucking fools," I barked. "What did you *think* was going to happen?"

Before they could answer I pressed on.

"You didn't think," I said. "You got greedy, you got hasty, and then you got spanked. Take it as a reminder that there are things up here on the surface that are nastier than you. And be thankful all it cost you was a few moments of indignity."

The fury pouring out of them and into the Night was like the burn of sudden ice, but I refused to be bowled over by it. They'd made a mistake, believing that dangling power in front of a grieving man was all it'd take to induce another Named to bargain. They'd taken him for one of the Firstborn and for that blindness very nearly ended up losing more than a few feathers.

"I carried your banner from victory to victory," I said, "because I've been careful. Because I've been patient and cautious and I've picked my battles. If you begin to sidle up to every Named on a ragged edge and offer power for

rites, you're not goddesses: you're cut-rate devils. And one of those days, sure as dusk, you'll end up stepping blind into a story that'll end you."

The fury did not wane in the slightest, but I met it unbowed. I felt the slight touch of their thoughts against mine, a feather's brush looking for the taste of honesty and finding it. Still, few gods were in the habit of apologizing. The Sisters flew out with malcontent cawing, blowing out of the tent and leaving it lighter for their absence. I breathed out in their wake, still feeling where Komena's talons had dug into my shoulder even if no blood had been drawn and no mark would be left behind. Though Masego's face and torso were facing me, I caught through the cloth that his eyes had followed the crows out before finally returning to me. The radiance of his Name, not visible but like a taste hanging in the air, finally dimmed into nothingness. It left him panting and visibly tired. Leaning against my staff, I limped up to his bed and swallowed a wince when he tensed up at my approach. Very slowly, I sat on the side near his legs.

"I see you still get cranky when woken up early," I said.

He didn't blink, for the lack of eyelid, but the way he angled his head good as implied it.

"I was expecting anger," Masego admitted. "For this, and... the rest."

"Stealing a city, cutting up Arcadia and nearly wiping an entire principality off the face of Creation," I elaborated. "Including most of the people you care about in any significant manner."

He winced.

"Yes," he said. "That."

I sighed.

"I *am* angry," I told him. "But for large parts of that you weren't in your right mind. And now that you are, I expect all those things you were trying to deny – and the scope of what you nearly did – are about to start sinking in. We will, one day, have an unpleasant discussion about this. But it won't be today, and when we have it you won't be..."

I hesitated, looking for the right words, but Masego smiled bitterly.

"My fathers will be no less dead in a few days, Catherine," he said. "Nor will..."

His lips thinned.

"Nor will my sorcery have returned," he said, as if forcing himself. "The severing should have killed me. Would have, had it not been so improbably precise. I still wonder what stayed his hand, for it would have been child's play to snuff me out at the end. Much easier than this."

It was my turn to hesitate, though the moment I did I knew I'd have to speak. His glass eyes missed nothing and Masego had known me long enough he could discern the expressions of my face much more accurately than most people's.

"I bargained for your life," I said, "when I had a shard of his soul in my grasp."

He tiredly leaned back against pillows that'd not been there when I left in the morning. Archer's work, I thought. Which meant they were probably stolen, but I could ask her about that later.

"Thank you," Masego solemnly said. "For that. For coming, too."

"We all came, Zeze," I quietly said. "And we will again, if we need to. Don't doubt that."

There was a long moment of silence, and finally he nodded. His breath rasped out along with words barely more than a murmur.

"He killed Indrani. Using me."

I reached out a hand towards his own, and after the moment he accepted the implicit offer. We threaded fingers and I nodded.

"The Grey Pilgrim brought her back," I said.

"As Trismegistus said he would," Masego quietly replied. "And yet the last thing she will remember before dying is my hand raised and my lips speaking an incantation."

I let silence pass, sensing there was more he wanted to say.

"That is unkind," the braided man finally said. "Isn't it? To her even more than I."

He looked to me as if asking confirmation, unsure and tone hesitant.

"It would be unkind with any of us," I told him. "But to her more than the rest of us."

"I don't know how to mend that," Masego whispered. "Catherine, I don't know how to mend any of it."

This was, I thought, the first time he'd even obliquely acknowledged that Indrani might have feelings for him. I was not certain whether his careful handling of her came out of a gentle nature – which he had, somehow, not lost in our years of war and hatred – or because he considered himself to have a distinctive relationship with Archer, and it was not my place to ask. But the acknowledgement alone was more than I'd sometimes thought this entire affair would earn of him unless Indrani pressed the matter.

"She won't blame you, Zeze," I quietly said. "You have to know that. It might have been your hand but it was not your will, and that's the part that matters."

"Is it?" he asked. "Since I was a child, always I've been told these sweeping... truths. Eulogies of the perception of my fellows, the triumphant veracity of ties. And near always they proved false, for though my own fathers were as much reason as they were blood that is a *rare* thing. A memory, a pain, these are things that linger. Principles are beautiful – they are the bones of Creation and what we make of it – but they do not course in veins. They are... distant."

Archer was a creature of blood and not reason, he did not say. Or needed to. It was true, I wouldn't deny, that in some ways more than any of us Indrani followed her instincts. How much would principle matter, he was asking, when she still remembered the raised hand and the death that followed?

"You're looking at it like the depth can only mean it'll hurt more," I gently said. "That's only half the coin, Masego. It also means you want to see the best in them, to get past the roughness, because what you love about them weighs heavier than what hurt you."

I had, in my attempt to soothe the fear, somehow worsened this I realized. The way his face clenched made that plain. He did not speak immediately, and I did not dare to further talk lest I once more stumble over something blindly.

"It didn't," Masego hoarsely said. "I was so *angry* with them, Cat. They said sorry, about hiding what they knew from me, but they weren't. Not really. Not the way you showed me, where it *stings* that you did the wrong thing and its stays with you. They were just sorry I knew they'd hidden things from me, and that doesn't count. And they tried, you know. After. To say things or give me things or act ways that would make me less angry, makes us good again. But I couldn't trust it, because I knew they'd just make the same choice again if they had to, so I stayed angry. Even..."

He swallowed.

"Even on the day they died," he said. "I knew they were planning to bind me. I am not a *fool*, Catherine. They were going to put me in a cage so I'd be out of the way when the Empress went after you, when Callow was hurt until it knelt. And it rankled, that they would. It surprised me, though, when it rankled they just... didn't care about the rest. I know you want me to care about the people, Cat, but it's hard. They're not very interesting, as a rule. And they're so *ignorant*."

He hesitated.

"But I don't want them to be hurt, either," Masego said. "If things can be made better for everyone, shouldn't they? It just seemed so obvious, but my fathers didn't care. Or they couldn't see it, and isn't that worse? So I was even angrier with them. And I told them to be careful, when I left, but it was almost a lie because after the battle I was going to disappear. And the last thing I said to them was... tainted, Cat. I couldn't be not angry, even if I loved them."

"It's all right to hate something they did," I told him quietly, thinking of hungry deaths still being reaped. "It doesn't mean you hated *them*."

Gods, but how fragile he looked in that moment. How could this be the same man who'd seized a goddess by the throat not an hour ago, threatened the ruin of an entire people for their patrons having crossed him? Exposed like a raw nerve and heartfelt until he bled, yet even stripped of the sorcery he'd spent his entire life embracing he could still daunt a lesser god. I understood, now, why to someone like Indrani the mixture might be intoxicating. Strength and vulnerability all at once, someone she could respect without feeling threatened. Masego was, in her eyes, a peer without being a rival.

"I thought Papa I could bring back, at least," the dark-skinned man admitted. "I cannot account for a soul, and Father had already passed beyond my reach. There was naught to be done there. But Papa was a devil. Sufficient precision should have been enough."

"But it wasn't," I said.

I had seen only part of the string of failures that made a wasteland of the Arcadian shard, but they must have gone on for months before that and there'd be no indication that success had been looming.

"No," Masego said. "Always something was missing. I'd believed it a question of accuracy, and perhaps if Trismegistus had not stolen the use of my aspect the gap could have been bridged. But the more I think of it, of what I had begun to glimpse, the more I doubt it. Papa was unique. He did not have a soul, Catherine, but he *was* unique."

Of the incubus that'd been one of Masego's father, the ancient devil known as Tikoloshe, I knew precious little and so I did not dare venture an opinion. What did I know of these matters, anyway, that I could disagree with my own Hierophant? If he believed his father had been singular, an exception that surpassed the stuff he'd been made of, I would believe him. And though I could not say I had been fond of the incubus I'd never met or Warlock who I had known and scorned, I could at least share in the grief of this man who was family to me.

"Some things stay lost," I murmured. "You have to learn to make your peace with that."

I winced, after, realizing it could easily be taken as my speaking of his magic instead of his fathers.

"How carefully you tread," he gently mocked me. "As if speaking it out loud would break me: I have lost the Gift, in every meaningful way."

Which, I silently noted, did not mean *every* way. Given Masego's lasting obsession with being exact in all things, I did not take that as a coincidence – though it hardly seemed the time to pursue the matter. I thought of Vivienne, in that moment, of the way she's seemed to terribly convinced that making a mistake or losing her Name meant she was no longer one of us. Like she'd be discarded the moment she faltered or changed. I would not, I decided, let Zeze fall into that same pit.

"Losing your sorcery doesn't meant you're not one of us anymore," I told him. "Being one of the Woe – us loving you – it's not *conditional*. It's not the Hierophant I came for, and it wasn't the Apprentice that became part of my family. It's you, and that's not something you can lose."

He squeezed my fingers, though looking at his face I realized with a degree of strange amusement that in that moment *he* was the one trying to comfort me.

"I did not believe that," he assured me. "I won't leave you to stand alone like Uncle Amadeus did, so don't worry about me leaving."

I mastered myself just in time not to breathe in sharply. Sometimes, I thought, Masego saw things more clearly than any of us. I saw him hesitate once more, after, and made myself squeeze his fingers back in reassurance.

"I could have," he said.

My brow rose.

"Could have what?"

"I could have begun apotheosis," Masego whispered. "I had the souls. The weight. The bones. But I wanted to bring my father back, instead. But I still remember, Cat."

My eyes narrowed.

"Remember what?" I asked.

"How gods are made," he whispered. "And so how they are unmade."

I matched his gaze, hidden as it was by the eye cloth.

"The Dead King?" I murmured.

"Oh yes," Hierophant murmured. "Even him. And Catherine, I think I *want* to kill him."

He leaned forward, as if confiding a great secret.

"I believe," Masego solemnly told me, "I might have become nettled by this affair."

"Well," I smiled, thin and bladelike, "we've certainly started picked fights with lesser gods over less."

And so we spoke, just the two of us, of the last king of Sephirah's end.

# Chapter 61

# Reformation

> "Zarei, of short stride
> saw the long's pride
> and carved, laughing
> found them wanting:
> chased into shadow
> by one mighty blow."
>
> Extract from the 'Zarei Veste', a Firstborn traditional epic

Night had become my time, refreshing to my tired bones like a cool drink on a parching day. I enjoyed the quiet of it, the veil of stillness laid down by the dark under the stirrings of creatures nocturnal. Without so much spinning my thought came clearer, less cluttered, and these days what already lay within my own mind was quite enough clutter already. It felt, at times, like I was attempting to juggle half the continent – it felt that way because it was, essentially, what I was trying to do. Yet while there might have been quiet awaiting us at the heart of the drow's tent-city, there was hardly any stillness to be found: with dusk passing the curse of the pale light had passed, and the Firstborn tread under the moon's unblinking eye like shifting shadows. After my Lord of Silent Steps' report I'd expected for there to be a tautness to the air, but that had perhaps been naïve of me. Drow didn't complain or riot or indicate their displeasure, because every last one of them was born to the knowledge that all it took was irritating someone stronger than them once to end up killed. The only drow who were vocal about much of anything were the Mighty and even among those only sigil-holders could really be said to be outspoken, that cabal of the few who'd spent years slaying all comers until they rose to the summit of the pyramid of strife. No, instead of a boiling cauldron about to tip over the tent-city of the Firstborn looked like half a festival.

A drow one, anyway.

Grey-skinned dzulu wearing the colours and signs of their sigils, either painted on skin or woven into cloth, had come out under moonlight to play. I was used to a soldier's vices of choice being drinking and gambling, but those

were the favourites of the Legions. Here it was instead the old amusements of the Everdark that reigned, and they were less bloody in nature than I'd expected. Standing before a tall heap of piled stones drow would set on their brow a thin leathery chord set with a single small stone and claim in cadenced Crepuscular that their tongue was made of flame. Another drow would then step up to them, and call them an eight-year-snake, after which they would each sing a couplet with the challenger going second. It seemed to me that, more often than not, they were citing old and well-known texts with only just enough adjusted to brutally mock their opponent or boast of their own obvious superiority in all things. Hakram sent me a look that was disturbingly pleasing, coming from an orc that hefty, and I allowed our steps to slow so we'd catch some of it. One dzulu from the Sudone claimed that its opponent was –

"*Cunning as cattle, fearsome as a trout*,
*Beloved of nerezim, quiet as a shout!"*

– which had the watching dzulu laughing in approval. The other singer, one of the Jindrich, went the other way instead. Boasting shamelessly, it announced it would –

*"Swallow pale light and make it night,*
*Harvest from death its very breath,*
*Weave with loom a second gloom!"*

Which had a few of the Soln in the crowd and most the Jindrich ululating in approval, some even calling out a name: Zarei Stride-Carver. After both songs had been sung in full the dzulu cast small tokens – trinkets, pieces of cloth, even simple stones – at the feet of one or the other, deciding whose song had been the finest. The Sudone dzulu won, that time, and triumphantly called out that for the fourth time its tongue was flame.

"There are traditions much like this in the Lesser Steppes," Adjutant murmured as we both watched another drow step up and challenge the victor.

The steppes beyond the Wasiliti, I knew that meant. Where the Clans had been able to hang on to more of their old ways, further from Miezan steel and the Tower's schemes.

"Duels of singing?" I asked.

"And steel as well," Hakram said. "Though there was a time, Catherine, when no great warrior would have wielded the axe without the verse."

I eyed him amusedly.

"If you want to challenge one them, I could always translate into Crepuscular for you," I offered.

He looked genuinely tempted but eventually shook his head, clicking his fangs in polite refusal.

"Too much would be lost in translation," he said. "And though I was taught old and cherished words, there are few I can claim as my own."

I thought of Nauk, in that moment, Nauk who'd written *In Dread Crown* and whose song was still sung even after the warpriests of the Dominion had taken him from me. I caught the exact moment Hakram thought of him too,

and we watched the Firstborn trade singing barbs in silence as we shared in the same grief. I half-smiled at the defending champion's verse – it'd just claimed it would make a tomb for the Tomb-maker – and we let it flow out of us, like a mouthful of wakeleaf smoke offered up to the wind.

"The formula they speak, at the start," Hakram said.

"My tongue is made of flame," I quoted, then my lips quirked. "You are but an eight-year-snake."

He inclined his head.

"What does it mean?"

"I honestly don't know," I said. "Rumena, care to share?"

I felt the general's mild irritation through the Night at having once again failed to approach me unnoticed and savoured that for the very petty victory that it was. The general of the Southern Expedition strode to my side in silence, filling the empty space at my left.

"It an old story, Losara Queen," Rumena said.

"Oh," I said, sweetly similing. "So you were there?"

"I see," General Rumena gravely said. "Now that you have servants to flatter you again, you have resumed your delusion of being amusing. I had thought your cured of this ailment, Queen of Lost and Found."

"Careful, buddy," I said, jutting a thumb at the singing drow. "One of those just promised to put you in a tomb, are you sure you want to spend your last moments failing to get the best of me?"

Rumena glanced at Hakram, pale silver-blue eyes lingering on the missing hand.

"The orc has only one hand and still a defter touch with words," it told me.

"He hasn't even said anything," I protested.

I winced the moment I said it, feeling the sense of mocking satisfaction wafting off of it into the Night. The prick.

"One of these days," I told it. "One of these days, Rumena."

"It is true," the Tomb-maker conceded, "you might truly have a chance, if I am asleep."

Ouch. Well, it was probably a good thing I wasn't going up there to sing with the old bastard anytime soon.

"It is from a legend of the ancient days, before the Twilight Sages," the old drow told Hakram. "There was once a manner of snake that was said to be born with the favour of the Shrouded Gods, manifest as stone on its head. Should it live for nine years, and devour flesh every day, it would grow to become *izmej*. That is, flame-tongued and immortal, swimming through stone with on its brow the shine of pale light."

*Dragon*, I thought, but it was not like the dragons I knew of – which were, anyway, all but disappeared these days.

"And so an eight-year-snake is one that could not become *izmej*," Hakram thoughtfully said. "What happens, if a singer is the victor nine times?"

"None who cast token in the contest may kill the nine-year-snake for a span nine nights," Rumena said. "Immortality, Deadhand. For a time."

It murmured in Crepuscular, after that, citing the Tenets of Night. *For glory fades and stone crumbles, no victor forever crowned.* The words were sobering, for they brought to mind the reason I'd come to the tent-city in the first place. Under the currents of celebration here there was a lit sharper that'd blow unless I put out the fuse quick enough.

"The Zoitsa Sigil is still under control?" I asked.

"The children that were disciplined have recovered," Rumena said, "yet word of your impending arrival has stayed hands for now. The Lutesuk and the Vachikna will require adjudication as well, if your intent is to prevent killing between all Mighty."

"Between all Firstborn," I sharply corrected. "Take me to them, then."

The general's pale eyes flicked to Hakram.

"The Adjutant's presence will be commented upon," the old drow said.

"Let them comment," I grunted. "He can't understand Crepuscular anyway, I'm bringing him as an advisor."

"*Ade Varul*," Rumena said, eyes narrowing. "Yes, this would be accepted."

It's sounded the same, to an extent, but the meaning had been different: truth-bearer, or truth-keeper maybe? It was from an older form of Crepuscular, the one drow tended to use for formal titles.

"*Mais encore?"* I said in Chantant, just to show it wasn't the only one who could speak all fancy.

"When the Empire Ever Dark still stood, it was the title given to those who learned precedents of law and bore old scrolls of histories to provide these during adjudication," General Rumena said. "A learned servant."

"In service of who?" I asked.

"The Twilight Sages," the Tomb-maker. "Or those they appointed to pass judgement in their stead."

It was easy to forget, I thought, that there'd been a time where the Firstborn had known laws more elaborate than the rule of the hardest hand. I nodded my assent, though in truth even an oblique tie with the fools who'd nearly destroyed their entire race for fear of death had me uneasy. Very few would remain that had known those days, I reminded myself. And of those that did, only Rumena had come south instead of marching with the Sisters themselves. We moved as swiftly as my limp around, eyes lingering on the distractions that'd seized the camp. Small packs gathered around the small colourful tiles that were the centrepiece of a game of *inic cin*, carefully placing down their own to make or break patterns according to the labyrinthine rules of their game – hardly any two sigils allowed the same set of patterns, and drow from the outer rings would rather kiss a dwarf than begin the game with a *lizard-fish prowling* pattern already on the floor instead of empty space, the way Firstborn from deeper in the Everdark insisted the game was meant to be played. There were

more earthy entertainments as well, ones I was more familiar with: javelin-throwing and wrestling, as well as the madman's bargain that was the *por neroc*, the axe-fortune. I'd yet so see anyone play that game without bleeding, and not for lack of trying.

Firstborn were more prone to indulging in luxurious meals or elaborate concoctions than hard drinking, as a rule, since liquor was usually reserved for the very powerful or the very much powerless. For the former it was a statement of might – that even drunk they could take all comers – while for the latter it was a tacit admission that their lives could be reaped at any time and there was nothing they could do about it. That might change, in time, at least if the drow were guided towards ways that bled them less often and eagerly by their own hands. Still, I doubted they'd ever become great drinkers of the wines and liquors of Calernia, anymore than the nations of the surface were at risk of becoming enamoured of the drow's own drinks. I suspected that the Firstborn tasted things rather differently than we did, because some of the things they ate and drank... Ugh. There was a reason that I'd sometimes used their mushroom-based liquor on Archer as a punishment. I set the ponderings aside as we found the heart of the tent-city, and the Firstborn that awaited us there. What must have been the entire Zoitsa Sigil – which would keep that name even after Mighty Zoitsa's death until another Mighty claimed the sigil – was patiently standing and awaiting us. An open space had been cleared on the snowy grounds, fitting the thousand or so drow in what I could only call a hierarchy laid bare. Four rylleh were seated at the front, then jawor behind them, then ispe behind those, leading to what must have been nine hundred and change dzulu. The Zoitsa were not a large sigil, though given that they had twelve jawor among their number I could see why they wouldn't be taken as easy meat either.

"You stand in the presence of the Queen of Lost and Found, the First Under the Night," General Rumena called out. "*Kneel*."

They did. And they stayed kneeling, as I considered the approach I wanted to take. Ivah's report had mentioned Rumena savaging the two most prominent claimants, and through the Night I could easily tell who those would be – they were significantly stronger than the other two, though not so much that the weaker pair allying against one would not see that particular rylleh killed. Unless they had a particular lethal Secret, anyway, but that struck me as unlikely. Drow that lucked into one of those tended to rise quickly through the ranks until they either died or became sigil-holders. I limped forward, leaning on my staff of yew as I cast a cursory glance around us. This was no Legion camp, there was no such thing as restricted sections of it: anyone brave enough linger where they could either hear or see could, unless someone chase them away. And there were plenty of curious Firstborn, though I noted they were largely ispe. The lowest of the Mighty. Sigil-holders, I grasped, were sending people to keep an eye on the judgement I was meant to render. Whatever decision was handed out tonight, it would not be long before the greatest Mighty of

my host knew of it. That was trouble, for already I'd once denied them the prize that had been the Twilight Crown. If I further chipped away at their ways I might begin to encounter resistance, which given the hold sigil-holders had on their followers would be... more than inconvenient.

"You who would claim the Zoitsa Sigil, rise," I said. "And come before me."

I'd fully expected all four rylleh to rise, but instead it was only three. One of the weaker pair, I thought, must have been convincing enough to earn the other's backing. The drow came to stand before my scrutinizing gaze, calm-faced and straight-backed.

"Decree was given," I said. "The Southern Expedition is as one great cabal, and until it has ended no Firstborn may slay another. Yet I am told you would have broken the edict, if not for General Rumena's reminder. Explain yourself."

The weakest of the three kneeled.

"Losara Queen," it said, "I am-"

"Bereft of a name or my mercy, until you have given me an answer," I mildly said.

It didn't flinch at my words, though its face blanked and I felt the malicious pleasure of the other two rylleh through the Night. It'd earned the rebuke, I thought, the moment it tried to smooth-talk me out of anything.

"Night cannot be left to fade, O Great One," the rylleh said. "Mighty Zoitsa must have successor, and when strife is had over who that Mighty should be there is only one manner of settling the claims known to us. I aim not to break the Night's decree, only to obey the Tenets of Night."

Meaning that none of the three were willing to back down and let one of the others harvest the Night from Zoitsa's corpse, which meant duels to the death were the traditional solution as established by Sve Noc. Lovely. The leftmost rylleh knelt.

"Losara Queen, this one recognizes the truth of the great cabal binding us," it said. "And so this one implores your holy judgement in deciding who is worthy of rising, in place of strife."

And there it was, my opening. All I needed to do was accept the invitation and this could all be settled in moments without blood being spilled. That this particular rylleh had been clear-eyed enough to realize both that I wouldn't allow blood being spilled and that easing my way to judgement would incline me well towards it made it a strong candidate for sigil-holder, I thought, though also someone to watch. And yet I stilled my tongue, because what I did here would echo. Through the ears and tongues of the ispe lingering at the edges of this clearing, yes, but also through the years to come. I was setting a *precedent*, and it was not something I should do lightly. I turned my eyes to the third rylleh, the last one still standing.

"And you?" I said. "What words would you speak?"

It knelt, smoothly.

"None, Losara Queen," it rasped. "I do not presume to reach beyond my grasp."

Tasting its words through the Night, I decided it was speaking the truth – or at least that it believed what it was saying. If I was to wade in an make an appointment through the awarding of Zoitsa's corpse, then this one was the safe bet. Not too ambitious, steady. Likely more set in the old ways than either of the other two, but with enough deference for Sve Noc and through them myself that it would broadly balance out. This one, I decided, was the choice if I wanted to avoid making waves among sigil-holders. If I appointed the second speaker, it'd be seen as my raising ambitious lickspittles. Those not willing to become my creatures would feel threatened and react accordingly. The first speaker, the one I'd chastened, was trickier to parse in implications. It was the weakest of the three, which would ruffle some feathers but perhaps also raise the hopes of Firstborns who'd hit the limit of what they could claim with their own strength that in my service they might rise further still. I wasn't one to particularly enjoy a smooth-talker, and this one reminded me a little of Praesi highborn, but vague dislike was not reason enough to exclude them as a candidate.

"If you had the pick of three highborn for a lordship," I said in Kharsum, "what measure would you use to weigh the right choice?"

Adjutant was at my side, a towering presence of calm that passed on a portion of that serenity to me.

"The three," he replied in his native tongue. "Are they the only people I can pick?"

"Without making a mess, yes," I said. "And no matter which I choose, I'll have intervened in the succession of a noble line – while using royal authority."

Religious, in truth, but it would not be too inaccurate to compare the kind of influence I now commanded among the drow to what a Good Queen might have commanded in the Old Kingdom.

"Letting the succession pass without intervention isn't in the cards," he half-asked, half-stated.

"They'd go at each other like Wasteland nobles over it," I said. "Only without the subtlety. It'd be setting an even worse precedent, as far as I'm concerned."

If I exempted strife over the succession of sigil-holders from the ban on drow killing each other, then the gate would be cracked open. As far as I was concerned, any possible benefit to be obtained from a higher concentration of Night in some former rylleh's hands was far below what I got by keeping the drow who knew how to use their own tricks in possession of those tricks. And that was in a military view, anyway. The moral aspects of it were... well, I couldn't keep raising my nose a ritualized murder for power being a central tenet of drow culture if I simply allowed it to keep going on when I could do otherwise.

"If you are bound to rancor for any intervention at all," Adjutant pragmatically said, "appoint the most apt candidate. At least you'll be getting the most out of what it cost you."

Sound advice. Following it, all that remained before passing down judgement was considering which of the three rylleh would be most valuable to my intentions. Gods, probably the first of the three. They'd – no, that was the wrong way to think about it. The most apt candidate was the one that'd best serve the interest of the sigil it led, not necessarily my own. *Ah*, I thought, *but why appoint a lord at all?* I thought of a thin man in ragged robes, keeping records no one would read for a revolution that pulsed out of him like a titan's breath. *How many of us are there, tyrant,* he'd asked, *and how many of you?* I could not use old means save to reach old ends.

"General Rumena," I said. "Send for the Firstborn."

The old drow's head bowed by a fraction.

"Which sigils?" it asked.

"All of them," I said. "Every last one of you."

If I was to hand down judgement, it would not be to seek the least of three evils.

I would try to do *better*.

# Chapter 62

# Pledged

> "Power is as wealth; that which is yours has always been snatched from another."
>
> Dread Emperor Venal

General Rumena had sent for them and they had come.

The Firstborn, I'd understood since my first steps past the murk of Gloom, were the ruin of a people. Even the name of their realm was the remnant of olden nights: from Empire Ever Dark to a brutal tapestry of sigils haunting the last gasps known simply known as the Everdark. They had been, when I journeyed through their ancient broken cities and their endless tribal wars, little more than a desperate ritual masquerading as a people. Sve Noc had bargained for their salvation of their people, made a pact with Below, yet it was *survival* they had sought and there their ambitions had ended. Wise of them, perhaps, given how insistently the Twilight Sages had courted the doom of their kind until they were slaughtered in their own seat of power to earn audience with those the drow called the Shrouded Gods. Under the auspices of Komena and Andronike the Firstborn had carved out their old glories and made of them hovels and walls, forgotten how to read their own sacred writings and traded steel for obsidian. Cut after cut, they'd forgotten what they used to be until what they'd become was but distant kin to the people who'd raised the great works I'd seen but the barest fraction of.

I'd taken me some time to understand how much more they'd lost than things like knowing how to build sewers or make steel tools, or a hundred other small practical bits of knowledge that made life easier for people who knew them. No, the wound was deeper than that. There'd never been a day in my life where I did not know that if I sought the right books, or the right stories, I could not know the history of my people. Who we had been in ages past and through that how we'd become who we were. What it meant, when a well-dressed Proceran tread a street and my people began humming the tune of *Red The Flowers*. Why at every summer fair there was an evening where primroses

were hung form the tallest tree or roof and comical plays were had under them until dawn – a last defiance in the name of the Albans, smothered in madness so long ago. Hells, I'd even been able to find out why early in the spring so many grizzled old men and women filled the taverns of Laure and that'd actually been fairly dangerous to openly acknowledge. That old soldiers still mourned the last defeat of the Conquest drink in hand had not been one of those things people talked about fit they didn't want to draw the attention of the Eyes. Not too loudly, anyway.

Even during Black's decades of occupation the old histories had not been burned. Oh, he was a cannier man than that. He'd restricted grimoires and weapons, eradicated every legacy of the paladins of the White Hand, but the histories he'd not even tried to torch. Viciously elegant as always, he'd simply made the histories he preferred cheaper and easier to obtain before letting human nature do the rest. Yet for someone designated enough to digging, Callow's past was there to find. Even under the Praesi, I'd known more of the truth of my people than any drow born in the last thousand years could claim to know of theirs. I'd seen the truth of that laid bare between the Lord of Silent Steps and the Tomb-maker, Ivah and Rumena. The younger looked at the Firstborn and saw the only thing it had ever known, a history that was closed circle of murder under the Night, while the older drow held a rank in the host of an empire that no longer existed, commanding soldiers that were long dead. Rumena treated even other sigil-holders as children because that was what they were, in its eyes: children putting on the regalia of the empire that'd birthed them, thieving magpies making a nest of rubies and golden bracelets. It wasn't wrong, I thought, to believe that. It was true, that the Firstborn born of this era wore old honours and spoke old words without knowing the truth of them, having made mystical of mundane through the passing of the years. And still, looking at this host of magpies before me, I could not deny that they were beautiful.

Fifty thousand strong, spread out before me as a sea that'd swept away tents and bedding and distractions until all that stood in the moonlight was flesh and bone. They were a riot of colour, these warriors sworn to a hundred sigils: red and silver, yellow gold and radiant green and deep azure blue. Few sigils shared the same colours, and none the same symbols. My own Losara, stayed mine through even Winter's death, had taken to drawing the silver tree down the ridge of their nose and encircling their eyes to finish the pattern. The effect was striking, a mask of purple and silver whose roots were the lips and teeth of warriors. The golden sunflower on ochre that was Rumena's own sigil-symbol was more often tattooed with needles on cheeks or necks, though every drow out there seemed to have their own manner of bearing their sigil. Their manifold banners traced the air lazily under the trailing fingers of the wind, each speaking a claim or story or boast, and even their armaments were as works of arts. Oh, the dzulu bore spears and shields and practical tools of killing, but the Mighty? Every one of them treated both their body and armaments as works of art. Artifacts shaped in Night likely older than some

Callowan cities had been painted or polished or touched with strips of cloths and ribbons.

The warlord in me, the general, looked upon them and saw only chaos. An army of wild folk, without standardized equipment, the doctrine to use them and the discipline to do so well. But part of me I'd stolen back from eternity along with my death, the one that could savour a good smoke and a sunny day and the chill of cold against my cheeks, that part looked at them and saw that even though they were the bastard children of the Empire Ever Dark the Firstborn were nothing less than splendid. Like a precious vase shattered and made into mosaic, still imperfect and broken but no less lovely for it. I would not forget that, I told myself, looking upon the proud ranks of the Mighty and their dzulu warriors behind them. In some ways I knew less of their people than even the least of them, and if I was to have a hand in the shape their kind would take long after my death I would move that hand with aware of my own ignorance. *Our ways are harsh, but they are not without graces.* Malicia had told me that once, years ago, because even what she hated about the Wasteland was still part of Praes. And so it'd been part of her bones and her flesh and her breath, taken in with her mother's milk. I could not mold the nature of the Firstborn like clay, uproot everything that was at the heart of them because it displeased me.

I was a cold-eyed stranger speaking hard truths, not any kind of saviour. And truth was, the closest the Firstborn would ever have to watchful angels was the pair ink-feathered crow slowly circling above us all, high under the stars. I breathed out, watching the mist and whishing it was smoke instead, but I could hardly nurse a pipe throughout this. *Merciless Gods, I wish.*

"Are you worthy?" I asked, and it rippled across the night.

Thousands of lips spoke the same question I had asked of the Mighty before the Twilight Crown: *sa vrede*. The tale of that moment had already spread through the throng last night, when it was still fresh. Not to all, but to enough. And though my question found echoes aplently, none dared to answer it.

"The Mighty Zoitsa was slain, and its Night awaits a worthy taker," I said. "Yet it was decreed under Night that no Firstborn may slay another before the Southern Expedition has ended. And so now I am asked who is worthy of that Night, who is worthy to *rise*."

I laughed.

"Did we not answer this question already, you who were born of blood?" I sang out. "Did you not learn that answer well?"

Fear and anger and uncertainty wafted up in the Night, a sea of emotion I could hardly touch lest I risk drowning in it. High priestess or not, I was only one woman and a mortal one at that.

"I wonder, you who claim might," I said, "are you ashamed now to speak again before dzulu what you admitted in the shade of dusk? Is *vanity* the truest answer you have to give?"

That stung them, as it had been meant to. No, some said. I did not reply, and in the silence they were forced to confess the word again and again, louder and louder until none among the entire host of the Firstborn could claim they had not heard it. It was Mighty who had been questioned, but it was all who answered in the end – for if the great among them could not be said to be worthy, which of the lesser dared claimed themselves to be instead?

"There is no shame in this," I said. "I am First Under the Night, and I do not claim to be worthy where you are not – else would it not be my right, my due, to rip the Night out of every single one of you?"

Fear strengthened, but also respect. The drow were not a people to resent threats, or for that matter to think well of weakness. A reminder that my power towered over that of even their greatest Mighty made everything else easier to swallow, for was it not the privilege of the strong to do as they would of the weak? That was the principle, anyway. As it always was with those, the reality was rather more nuanced.

"But there is shame," I spoke, and there my voice sharpened, "in knowing yourself unworthy and *remaining* so. There is shame in sloth, in apathy, in seeing the flaws in what you are and not seeking to be more."

A fine line I must walk here, for though the sentiment I spoke was old and beloved to their kind it also went hand in hand with the spilling of blood. At least, I wryly thought, I was by now an old hand at riding tigers and I'd yet to be eaten for it.

"I see before me hands hallowed in blood and little else," I said. "What have you offered the Night, save for strife?"

I struck my staff against the snowy ground, the yew hitting it with a clapping sound and kicking off a gust of wind.

"When the Last Dusk comes to take you all and tally is taken of the deeds of the Firstborn," I said, "what will any have you fill the pages with, save for death?"

There I sneered.

"Death," I said. "Every creature's given end. No great gift, to hurry what is certain."

And there came the turbulence, for I had begun to speak of worthiness, of who was fit to hold a sigil, and now I was sneering down at the only measure the drow knew how to use: the long arm and blade it wielded. If not killing and claiming Night, what then was to be the path taken? And there, there I could not bestow upon them an answer like a saving grace made flesh. Because I could hardly see to my own soul, most days, and dared not speak to an entire people's. Because I still knew so little of the Firstborn, of what they were and might yet be. Because I would not be my father, a well-meaning tyrant with a blade in hand intent on cutting out the ugliness of a culture until no imperfections remained. The drow were not children, to be led by the hand. I could speak to them of a horizon, but it they chose to chase it that decision would be of their own making.

"Those of you who hold sigils stand only below Sve Noc and those they have raised of their own hand," I said. "You possess deep wells of Night, have bloody deeds of valour and cunning to your name. You have the weight of many years behind you, and an edge honed by as many victories. Yet the keen blade you have made of yourself goes unused. It was sent south in these lands to teach the Burning Lands the return of the Empire Ever Dark, yet what will follow our victory?"

I paused, my gaze swept the crowd.

"Rust," I said. "Rust awaits you. Your sharpness will grow dull, your fire gut out. Lest you find higher purpose and seek it with those of like soul."

I raised my voice, pitched it to resound.

"The Mighty Zoitsa was slain," I said, "and its Night awaits a taker. None under this sky are worthy, yet it must not remain so. And so, Firstborn, I charge you to *strive*. To seek excellence in all things, and through this conquer eternity."

I felt the feather-light touch of the Sisters against my thoughts, like a finger sliding down a page. My patron goddesses perceived the shape of my thoughts, the decree I would pass down to their people. I felt them brush up against me, those great looming presences, and taste of their judgement. Komena sat astride the wall, the remains of the woman who'd once commanded soldiers displeased but the idol of sacred strife pleased. It was Andronike whose attitude would settle the scale, and her judgement came more slowly than her sister's. Beyond even my own thoughts she gazed upon the many ends such a decree might lead, the scattered strands, and where she went I could not follow. One who had touched the godhead, as the Sisters had, could follow the strands in ways beyond my comprehension. In silence, Sve Noc drifted down from the darkened sky on long wings. Down and down they went, until they dropped on my shoulders with sharp talons. I had their blessing, silent as it was, and the simple act of them perching on my shoulders had fifty thousand drow shivering. This was not an omen or an oracle, some religious text interpreted through the lens of years.

Sve Noc was true to them, true as snow or shadow or obsidian's edge, and they had granted me their blessing beyond dispute. I raised my hand, palm up, and on it coalesced in Night what I had taken from the corpse of the Mighty Zoitsa. Power, given the shape of the sigil-symbol: a heavyset key, whose four teeth were as tortured antlers.

"This is the sigil of the Zoitsa," I said. "It will be held before the pale light comes."

A shiver, a ripple. Excitement like a crowd awaiting the first blood of a duel.

"All of you who are Zoitsa," I said. "May lay claim to the sigil."

I leaned forward.

"I took oaths from some of you, once, and though those nights are passed there was truth to our ways," I said. "To hold this sigil is to make an oath, to

strive to be worthy of the honour bestowed. And through this oath, power is gained, for the oath is the promise of a deed to come."

I grinned, sharp and mean.

"Yet there can only be one oath, and many will be posed," I continued. "And so there must be a beginning and an end, for no victor can ever be crowned. . . "

*And in the end, all will be Night*, the drow returned, finishing the verse from the Tenets of Night I had cited. I had thought of the terms, as Rumena assembled all the sigils, and found that the irony of them please me. It ran deeper than that, of course. A foundation set in song was set in something deeper than stone, more poignant than law. And if you knew the right song, the right stories? All you needed was to give the first push, and stone would tumble down the slope on its own.

"The oath will hold for nine years," I said. "And upon the last dusk end, the sigil open to claiming once more. The keeping of oaths and bestowal of Night is a duty I bestow upon my own sigil, for the Losara are the children of the lost and found."

I raised a hand.

"That burden will be the duty of the Losara, to discharge without friend nor enemy so long as there is empire," I said, "and so in the keeping of oaths they will not rise or fall so long as they remain Losara."

Balance, balance must be had. If I was going to make Ivah and my warriors the priesthood that harvested and bestowed the Night, then they could not partake of that bounty – otherwise I might as well simply name the Losara the founding nobility of the Empire Ever Dark, saving their kind a few centuries of intrigue and treachery before we reached that result anyway. My sigil would serve as a priesthood, taking no sides in the discharge of their duty, and that meant barring them from the greater games of power.

"Which oath will be worthiest," I said. "You wonder this, do you not? If I will speak for the Night when every great one passes, choosing oath."

I laughed harshly.

"Are you children, Firstborn, that you must be held by your hands?" I said. "Are you without eyes, without ears, without tongue? Can you not choose your own path?"

I struck down my staff once more.

"I give you nothing save for tenets under the Night," I said. "To perish or flourish will outcome brought by your own hand, and the Shrouded Gods take any who speak otherwise."

My grin returned, for it had been some time since fate had last allowed me to bask so deeply in well-tailored irony.

"Any who are Zoitsa may lay claim to the sigil," I said. "And so any of the Zoitsa may offer oath that will be sought for nine years as they hold the sigil."

I let that sink in, then struck again.

"And it will be the same hands as it has always been, that will tell between snake and *izmej*," I said. "For when oaths are offered, it will be the Zoitsa who choose which will own their sigil with tokens."

They would, in the end, vote on the oath that would bind their sigil together for nine years with the elected sigil-holder keeping the Night for that duration. It would, I believed, forced the strongest of ay sigil's Mighty to care for the weakest – lest, when nine years had passed, they find the strength that had led them to the summit lent to another for another purpose. There would be more, beyond this. The sigil-holders that still lived would be charged make oaths as well, though they would keep their Night when the nine years had passed. It would only be the rulership that would be open to challenge on that night, though it would be decreed than any sigil-holder that died while in that role would see their Night turned into oath-Night. The trick to all of it, what they wouldn't care about until it was too late, was that it would be sacred under Sve Noc for any drow to leave a sigil whenever they so wished without violence being visited upon them. Sigils would still make their own laws for those they allowed into their fold, but no longer would Mighty be able to keep other drow in their service by force. I meant to hang tyranny with the rope of expedience, for if sigil-holders treated their followers like animals what drow would willingly remain in their sigil? Still, the deeper workings could wait for a time still.

"You who are Zoitsa and would put an oath to the Zoitsa, step forward," I said.

I smothered a madwoman's grin, when this time instead of three candidates I got thirty-nine.

"Hear that?" I murmured, low enough only the Sisters could hear. "That's the sound of your people taking an axe to the old order."

I was hearing it too, and it warmed the cockles of my damned villainous heart.

# Chapter 63

# Draft

> "Rebel prisoners, Black Knight? Ah, you must mean the fresh orc rations."
>
> Dread Emperor Foul I, the Frugal

Under moonlight Ivah of the Losara sat at my side, wielding ink and parchment, and made record of oaths.

We begun with the Zoitsa, for they were the reason of my coming as well as the first attempt to make old stones into a fledgling temple. I had given this crucible of acclamation the shape of their singing-rites, and that aspect they embraced with relish. It was not merely oaths that were offered to the many waiting ears of the Zoitsa Sigil but verses crafted with deft hands and heady cadence. The first pledges were mundane, enemies that would be defeated and protections that would be ensured. One ispe then hazarded the pledge of sharing the sigil's Night with all Zoitsa, and though the oath was met with shocked and disapproving silence, the words had broken the levee. It was not merely prudent, if well-spoken, promises that were made but instead ambitions unveiled. A jawor spoke of raising a city where no pale light would ever reach for the Zoitsa to live in, another of arming even every dzulu with coats of steel and shining blades. The rylleh, older hand and the subtler games of sigils, let others come forward to gauge the sigil's wants before speaking their own oaths.

The same drow that'd not presumed to speak to me before now swore to swell the ranks of the Zoitsa so it would become one of the great sigils, while the ambitious one who'd invited me to pass judgement instead swore that the Night of every Zoitsa to die in the wars would be passed to a dzulu proving themselves worthy. I felt through the Night the last oath earned the most approval, at least until the fourth rylleh, the one who had not even stood forward to lay claim to the sigil until now, spoke its own pledge-

*"host of empire will we be,*
*servants first to right*
*if Zoitsa bend the knee*

*let it be only to Night"*

The Night thrummed with approval, and not only from those drow who bore the colours of the Zoitsa. Morovoy was the name of the rylleh that had made the oath, and it had been clever in its shaping. The verses of it made it clear that for its span of nine years it would have the sigil suborn its own ambitions to the needs of the reborn Empire Ever Dark, serving as army and obeying the orders of leaders appointed by the Night. The other Firstborn had sought to earn acclaim through pretty ambitions and heady boasts, but Morovoy's pledge instead harkened back to the old dream: a nation of drow, proud and mighty under darkened sky. It was opening the door to any who wanted to bare blade for that purpose, at least for a span of nine years, and in offering such selfless oath was making all the pledges of those that'd spoken before it seem... base. Almost petty. When tokens were set down to match oaths, Morovoy earned more than half those cast and more than double of its closest rival. I sent Ivah to bestow the Night I had shaped into a sigil, after that chosen oath was written down, and so the first crucible of the nigh was passed.

The hurdle, after that, was that those already holding sigils need take oaths of their own. It'd taken hours to gather fifty thousand drown and even longer to clear room for them all to stand, so I'd had time to do more than ponder the shape of the reformation I wanted to offer. I'd made arrangements as well, quietly reaching out to those in the Southern Expedition that were most beholden to me. It was why the Losara had not stirred, when I set them apart from the rest of the kind and charged them to never rise too high nor fall too low. It was why though many of the sigil-holders were taken by surprise by the changing tides, not all were. In the silence that followed the ascension of Morovoy, Mighty Jindrich strode forward. The same hard-headed, choleric warrior that Rumena and I had taken to using as a battering ram whenever we needed something dead or broken. It was feckless and brutal, though prone to forgiving those that amused it. Yet its faith in Sve Noc was deep and militant, and it thought nothing of making oath if it was the will of the Night. And so Mighty Jindrich stood before tens of thousands of its kind, white-toothed and red-handed, and it sang a pledge-

*"to be the point of the spear*
*ever furthest from the rear;*
*to battle under veil of night*
*and the glare of palest light;*
*hear me: nine years' spread*
*a hundred victories tread!"*

I'd expected the Jindrich Sigil to flinch at the pledge, of fighting as the vanguard wherever fight was to be found and to forge a hundred victories in nine years, but that was not what I felt from them. Oh, far form it. They were burning with the kind of hard pride that would have any people but the Firstborn howling. In the Jindrich, their faces painted azure and white with the jagged fang-like wings of their sigil-symbol, I found boiling blood and a

thirst for blood. The took after their sigil-holder, and other drow listened to such an oath with envy – oh, some would leave the sigil, but there would be twice as many petitioning for entry. One after another, the sigil-holders who had once been of my Peerage followed suit. Mighty Soln's pledge to found a cabal with any other sigil willing to help raise another Tvarigu in the heart of the Burning Lands had the crowd rippling in approval and a few feet stomping down, but when after it finished speaking Rumena stepped up fifty thousand drow went still as statues. The old drow laughed, softly, and offered the trace of a bow at the crows on my shoulder. It spoke simply, cadenced but with an implacability that was beyond boast-

"*before nine years have passed,*
*Keter's gates will lie broken*
*as trembles Death's holdfast.*"

I breathed out sharply at the oath the general had just made. A heartbeat passed and the sheer wave of fervour that raged through the Night had me leaning against my staff for support. Drow raised their voices in an ululating cry, honouring the old monster who'd promised it would lead any following it to smash down the gates of the Crown of the Dead. The ancient creature closed its eyes, breathed the cool air of Procer's winter night, and smiled the smile of one who would cast their wroth against even gods. And still Ivah wrote, ink on parchment, for the Losara would keep records so long as there were records to be kept. I only left the Firstborn two hours before dawn, having granted delay to those few sigil-holders who had no oath yet to pledge, but that number was few. Before dawn my Lord of Silent Steps would have begun transcribing its records to a book whose pages would be the one of the greatest things I had ever made.

Whether it would be a great triumph or disaster, only time would tell.

—

Hakram and I found our way back through the dark, passing legionaries on watch and the odd still-lit tent, but it was a surprise to find that my own was lit up with sprites and magelights. My feet slowed as I heard laughter from inside, glimpsing two silhouettes – one on a bed, the other seated by its side. A man and woman, I thought, and though the words were indistinct Indrani's voice was a familiar drawl.

"I can hear what they're saying," Adjutant murmured, the offer implicit.

I'd be able to as well, if I drew on the Night. Instead I breathed out slowly and shook my head.

"Leave them to it," I said.

The orc's eyes moved to me, unreadable.

"They have their own matters to settle," I said. "And if I'm there. . . "

"The war follows you," Hakram completed, clicking his fangs.

I shrugged, affecting nonchalance, though I held out little hope so shallow a deception would not be seen through by my Adjutant.

"Hells, Hakram," I said, "I might as well *be* the war, to those two. No, let them have a night without red on the horizon and talk of plans."

"It doesn't have to be that way," he gently told me.

I thought of Vivienne, scared she would be cast out and left out in the wilds, and the way I'd used that fear to bring her a little closer to the woman I needed her to be. Not lightly, not without qualms, not for selfish reasons. But I'd still done it.

"It does," I disagreed.

There might come a day where that was no longer the case, but until the continent no longer teetered on the brink then the queen's needs were more important than the woman's wants. I clapped Hakram's shoulder, and together we went to find somewhere else for me to sleep.

—

I woke up with Morning Bell, still tired but knowing there was too much on my plate to be able to justify sleeping any longer. Adjutant, already awake, passed along that both Masego and Indrani were still sleeping in so instead I broke fast with Juniper and Vivienne. The Hellhound had always been – rather despicably so, in my opinion – a morning person so while cheer was no more in the cards than usual she was still noticeably more animated than either myself or Vivienne. Who, I'd noted over the years, had never really gotten used to staying awake most of the day. Neither thieving nor heroics were always work to be done under the sun, at least not in an occupied Callow. So while Vivienne and I blearily drank our morning brews and poked at porridge, Juniper sprinkled bits of jerky into hers and dug in with relish as she began expounding on this Proceran book she'd found. Some history of the First League War penned by a prince of Lyonis she'd found a Lower Miezan translation of. The title – one of those long, elaborate ones highborn Proceran scholars were so fond of – she spoke scathingly of, but apparently it was a fascinating look at the events and much less drily written than most histories. Vivienne leaned towards me as the Hellhound told us all about how Helikean *kataphraktoi* had actually begun as a tradition before Theodosius, contrary to popular belief.

"This is torture," the heiress-designate to Callow murmured.

"Just don't mention the Commentaries," I whispered back. "It'd be like tossing meat at a wolf."

Usually it only got this way when we drank, though, so I was somewhat surprised. By now Aisha should have… *Ah*, I thought, looking at the empty seat where Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara would usually be seated. *There's your trouble.* The living and breathing person that served as the better part of Juniper's social graces was missing, and so we were being subjected to the full Hellhound treatment.

"Fascinating," I lied, just after a sentence. "Where's Aisha, by the way?"

"Liaising with the Legions-in-Exile," Juniper growled. "We're taking full stock of the armies down to company size so we can adjust the doctrine for whatever battles are ahead."

Ah, and there was no one else in the Hellhound's general staff that'd get that done nearly as quickly or neatly as Aisha so there she went. She'd probably been absent form general staff meetings too, which would only make the Hellhound grumpier.

"I'm sure it'll be done soon," I said.

"It'd help if you could tell us where winter quarters will be," the orc bluntly said.

"I'll see if I can get that settled today," I sighed, then sipped at my tea.

The warmth of it seeped into me, and I glanced at the other Callowan at the table. As much out of need as out of mercy, I threw Vivienne a bone.

"I'll need you to send a messenger to Arnaud Brogloise," I said. "Today will be convenient for the audience he requested. I'll be expecting you at that table, Lady Dartwick."

She nodded.

"And the Dominion?" she asked.

I glanced at Juniper.

"We're overdue a fireside evening, the lot of us," I said. "I expect at some point during that evening the Pilgrim will swing by for a chat, if he's ready to talk."

"Tonight?" the Hellhound asked. "We've all got-"

"Competent subordinates," I interrupted. "We can afford a few hours by a fire, Juniper. If you believe your staff so incompetent that if you have a drink they'll be lost-"

"I never said that," the Hellhound bristled.

"Good," I smiled, "then you can bring the aragh."

I hadn't had a taste of that since becoming mortal again and I was curious if my recollections from the old days were still accurate.

"You baited me," Juniper growled.

"Can't win them all, Marshal," I grinned, and toasted her with my steaming mug.

Vivienne shot me an amused look before making her retreat, and a wise woman she was. This time, when Juniper began to talk about the logistics of the Army of Callow, the glint in her eye made it very clear the torture was entirely on purpose.

—

It was not until Noon Bell that I met with Arnaud Brogloise, plenipotentiary envoy for the First Prince of Procer. I'd been ready for talks earlier, but the other side had not. Apparently the Grand Alliance's camp was like an anthill that'd been just gotten a good kick now that scrying was restored to Iserre and Hasenbach's Order of the Red Lion could arrange talks with Salia. Not just Salia, though, likely most of the Alliance's signatories. No doubt the Blood wanted to speak with Levante and their Holy Seljun, if only to gain a veneer of lawfulness for whatever they'd get up to regardless of what their figurehead ruler wanted. Given the number of highborn of all stripes who'd want

access to scrying and what must be a highly limited amount of mages that could use such sorcery – as well as spell formulas a generation behind the Empire's, which meant the further two-way scrying went the more relays would be required and the more prone to failure the magic would be – I wouldn't be surprised if they were working their practitioners to the edge of burning out. Still, at least the development meant I could rely on the former Prince of Cantal having freshly spoken with Hasenbach.

This was the closest I'd get to speaking directly with the First Prince before getting to Salia, I suspected.

This was not a formal negotiation, only a private audience, so I'd seen no need to overburden this with ceremony and entourages. On the side of the oaken table I'd claimed Hakram sat at my right and Vivienne at my left, while Arnaud Brogloise had brought with him only a pale redheaded scribe whose accessories seemed to indicate was meant to serve as both note-keeper and scholarly expert. The ink and quill made the first plain, while the veritable pile of tomes and scrolls he'd brought in with a legionary's help implied the second. I knew from experience that someone well-learned in where the writing you were looking for tended to shave hours off of discussions such as these, so I rather appreciated the expertise the Alamans had brought with him.

"Your Majesty," Arnaud Brogloise greeted me. "Lady Dartwick, Lord Adjutant."

I craned my neck back.

"I'm unfamiliar with the proper address for a plenipotentiary envoy," I admitted.

"It is 'lord envoy', though it is only a courtesy title," the middle-aged replied, smiling amicably. "Yet if I may be bold?"

My brow rose and I nodded permission.

"It is my understanding that you are not partial to formalities," Brogloise said. "We could dispense with them, if you would allow it, and you could simply call me Arnaud."

I smiled back.

"Did you know that I could hear heartbeats, back when I was Sovereign of Moonless Nights?" I mildly said. "If I pricked my ear, I could ever hear blood flowing in someone's veins. Smell their fear and anger."

His face expressed only confusion. He really was, I thought, one of the finest actors I'd ever seen. The Alamans might even be better at it than Akua, which was impressive in all the worst ways.

"I'm aware I'll find about as much genuine emotion at the heart of you than I would in door hinge, my lord envoy," I said. "So spare us both the affability."

The ruddy face slackened, moving towards blankness though not quite reaching it. To be entirely vacant would have been an effort as well, while this was simply the release of a pretence.

"If you'd prefer, Your Majesty," he calmly said. "Shall we attend the matters at hand?"

"If you would," I agreed.

"Her Most Serene Highness has, after consideration, decided to honour the Grey Pilgrim's non-binding promise of a peace conference," Brogloise stated.

*How magnanimous of her*, I drily thought. I'd grown more diplomatic in my old age, so I refrained from rolling my eyes. Hasenbach might not be happy about Tariq agreeing in her name to anything, but she needed the truce and conference badly. Refusing to honour the Pilgrim's agreement with the Tyrant would have been cutting off her nose to spite her face, considering it'd set the League back on the warpath and mortally offend the Dominion.

"And the guarantee of truce until the conference has ended?" Vivienne asked.

"Will be honoured in full," the Alamans agreed.

"Including the Legions-in-Exile?" Hakram asked.

"So long as the Queen of Callow formally agrees to take responsibility for their actions while they remain on Proceran soil," Brogloise said.

Mhm. So, Cordelia had recognized that at this point she didn't have the strength or influence to push the issue when it came to the Exile Legions. Making them my problem was a way to deal with it, since she knew by now I needed the goodwill of the Grand Alliance for the Accords and letting the Praesi loose anywhere in Procer was a good way to throw away every inch of progress I'd made there. Still, I'd take it.

"Agreed," I said.

The redhead scribe's quill scratched against parchment.

"However," the former prince said, "the Highest Assembly formally requests that the escaped prisoner of war Amadeus of the Green Stretch be turned over for trial."

"The Highest Assembly has been heard," I mildly said. "Though I will caution that considering he never surrendered to the Principate and was tortured while in custody, by Callowan law you have no grounds for such a request."

"Indeed, this has been acknowledged," Arnaud Brogloise said, to my surprise.

That, I thought, had been much too easy considering how despised Black was in these parts. Was Cordelia sparing him as a favour to me so she could call that favour in elsewhere? Shit, if it came to that I might actually have to agree.

"However, as a Named military commander who carried out plans of mass murder of civilians he would be considered in *egregious* breach of the Liesse Accords," the former prince said.

Ah, I thought. And there it was.

"Procer has not signed the Liesse Accords," I said.

"It will, if you agree to apply them to the Black Knight," Arnaud Brogloise plainly said.

The bluntness of it jolted me. He was actually serious, I realized, and he wasn't just speaking hot air: the powers Cordelia had invested in him meant he could sign agreements in her name in a legally binding manner.

"It would be selective application of the articles, unless you also intend to pursue the trial of the Grey Pilgrim for the massacre of a port town and an entire half-legion of Praesi legionaries," Vivienne noted. "Or of the Queen of Callow for the particulars of the Battle of the Camps."

"Guarantees can be made that this will not be the case," the envoy said.

"You're missing the point," I flatly said. "If the Accords are used from the very moment they're signed as a tool to pursue enmities, they'll not last the decade."

Hakram, at my right, was looking intently at our Alamans friend. He'd noticed something, then.

"A matter to be discussed in more detail at a later date, then," Brogloise said. "The First Prince is offering to host the conference in Salia, Your Majesty, and seeks your opinion on the matter."

Adjutant moved a fraction, and so I stilled my tongue. I inclined my head towards him without looking.

"In the eventuality this is agreed on, where does the First Prince suggest the Army of Callow and the Legions-in-Exile march on?" Hakram asked.

"Escort would be allowed up to four thousand for every ruler attending the conference," the envoy replied. "Four hundred into the city itself."

"And the armies themselves?" I asked.

Arnaud Brogloise glanced at his scribe, who bowed at him then myself before rising to snatch a half-dozen scrolls from the pile. Maps, I realized, reading the letters on the seals.

"In this matter," the former Prince of Cantal said, "Her Most Serene Highness is willing to entertain your proposals."

I grinned. I'd been a while since I last had a good haggle, I mused, so this ought to get interesting.

# Chapter 64

# Breathe

> "Fifty-three: a trusted companion who, after a string of personal disappointments, begins to dress in darker colours should no longer be considered a trusted companion."
>
> "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

I didn't mind heading out to Salia for the talks, and there were so many of those to be had: the peace conference, Callow's petition to join the Grand Alliance and the Liesse Accords themselves. The treaties making up the Grand Alliance had first been signed in the Proceran capital, so the symbolism in Callow doing the same there would be powerful, and for the rest having the Highest Assembly at hand would save a great deal of time. Considering most armies in Iserre had fought months of strenuous skirmishes and battles, I foresaw the First Prince's invitation would be accepted. In truth, considering it was Arnaud Brogloise who'd approached me with the notion in private, odds were the Dominion had already agreed and Hasenbach was simply sounding me out to avoid public embarrassment if I refused. The First Prince was too clever not to know the moment she got everyone else to agree on Salia she'd effectively forced Kairos' hand, since him having a fit then would mark him the enemy of everyone invested in seeing peace secured. No, I understood why Cordelia Hasenbach's capital would be the seat of the talks and indeed preferred it that way for reasons of my own.

But we were haggling, so damned if I wouldn't get something in exchange.

The First Prince, through her envoy, had been pushing for the Army of Callow and the Exile Legions to make camp in northwest Brabant but we flatly refused. Reports from the Jacks made it clear that the principality of Brabant was overwhelmed by refugees from the lakeside holdings to the north, and that the front against the Dead King in Hainaut had been on the edge of collapse for some time. If we raised winter quarter there my armies were the second line of defence whether they liked it or not and we'd be surrounding by hungry, desperate people. We pushed for northern Arans instead, which was more

than reasonable in my opinion: it put my soldiers close enough to the northern passage they could be supplied by Callow through it while propping up the right flank of the Hainaut front. Where it got messy was my insistence that the armies be allowed to raise their camps close to a city and my soldiers be granted access to said city while on leave. Brogloise had not been particularly inclined to grant me adjacency to anything but the dead until I started hinting Salia might be a little too far for my tastes. That had the tune changing pitch, as I'd thought it might.

He still demurred from outright agreeing until Prince Ariel of Arans was consulted over the matter, though I threw in agreement to the four thousand escort and four hundred retinue in Salia to make sure it'd be worth the candle to Cordelia. I made it plain that the drow were not my slaves or minions but allies from another nation, the Empire Ever Dark, and that the Firstborn required an emissary when time came to discuss both peace and the Accords.

"You want the Highest Assembly to recognize the legitimacy of this Empire Ever Dark," Brogloise mildly said.

"If you'd prefer," I said, "the princes and princesses could come explain to the sigil-holders why without a vote being held in Salia they can't belong to a real nation."

"It'd be extending diplomatic recognition to, well," and there the envoy looked faintly embarrassed, "the grisly minions of some wicked foreign deity."

"I'm not asking you to trade embassies," I patiently said. "I'm asking you to recognize that fifty thousand warriors would get the Firstborn a seat at the table even if they required newborn babies as refreshments. How many more enemies can Procer afford to make right now, Brogloise?"

There was more nuance to the situation that I would have liked, as it happened. As a rule, the Principate didn't usually consider itself bound by treaties to entities beholden to the Hellgods. Whoever held the Tower was usually Archheretic of the East, which meant no agreements with them need be upheld, and neither the Kingdom of the Dead nor the Chain of Hunger offered treaties. Agreements in the Free Cities were subject to the authority of the League itself, which meant none of those cities sworn to Below were usually a direct interlocutor to the Principate save in secret pacts not admitted to. In short, there was very little precedent for Procer making any sort of treaty with a state that worshipped the Gods Below and considering it worth more than what the ink and parchment had cost. Largely, I could admit in the privacy of my own thoughts, because very few of those states ever put much stock in keeping to their word. On the other hand, as of now I was still Queen of Callow and if the Principate was incapable of negotiating with me – still a villain, regardless of the waning of my Name – then this would all head downhill rather fast. The former Prince of Cantal retreated somewhat gracefully at that, noting that even if official recognition could not be guaranteed then at least a legal equivalent could be.

It'd do. I would not expect miracles, even when the Principate was so deeply

in trouble. It had been the preeminent power of Calernia, on the surface at least, for too long. The arrogance had been bred into its rulers by generations of genuinely being some of the wealthiest and most influential individuals on the continent. I'd not coddle the highborn, when the time came, but neither would I got out of my way to step on their toes. My deep personal dislike for most royalty of the west was no reason to get in my own way when it came to greater purposes. We discussed a few other details of logistics, namely where the escort of four thousand would be offered amenities – as it turned out, from towns less than a day's march from Salia itself – and the practicalities of bringing an armed retinue into the capital. I had no intention of turning over any of my people who were alleged to break laws to Procer for trial, but I indicated I was willing to hold them to that standard while they stayed in Salia so long as it broke no laws of Callow or regulations of its army. I gave an inch on my insistence that any such lawbreaking would be dealt with by Callowan trials, allowing for an observer appointed by the First Prince to sit in on the proceedings should it come to that.

We ended the talks soon after that, since Hasenbach now needed to herd her royal cats before she could agree to what I'd required. Vivienne and Hakram both stayed with me after the man left, the three of us seated in a silence that was rather contemplative. The former thief had kept notes herself throughout most of the talks, though mostly on the exact language of what had been agreed between Brogloise and myself. It'd been a surprisingly large amount, though less than one might expect from literal hours of talking. Still, I could not help but notice that a great deal of the tediousness I associated with diplomacy vanished when I ended up in an arguable position of strength. *Fancy that*, I sardonically thought. I shook away the cynical amusement. Pleasant as indulging it could be, I had no time to waste on indulgence at the moment.

"You saw something, didn't you?" I asked Hakram instead.

"Not in him, but in what he spoke," Adjutant agreed. "It is a question of logistics, Catherine. Hasenbach cannot agree to signing the Accords without having first consulted the Highest Assembly, yes?"

I cocked my head to the side, not bothering to assent to something be both knew to be true.

"Arnaud Brogloise has had the written text of them since the night of the battle," Hakram continued. "Which means that, up to this meeting being held, Hasenbach and the Highest Assembly had a day and a half to both read the papers, debate their content and hold a vote – the offer made, of the Carrion Lord turned over in exchange for a signature? It was lawfully binding, coming from an envoy with the man's invested powers."

"Which is doable," I pointed out. "They could call session at night, if necessary. They don't necessarily need to read the whole thing themselves, either, they can have scholars they trust sum up the contents."

"Not if the Assembly also has to wrangle together succession for seven principalities too," Vivienne quietly said. "Even in times of war they have conven-

tions, Cat. And they'd have to arrange it all over scrying, too, which is faster than messengers but still a devil's delay."

I drummed my fingers against the table as I began thinking back on all that'd been said. They were right, these two. And more than they knew, considering all the different things Brogloise had agreed on in the First Prince's name."

"They'd need to vote over hosting all this in Salia," I said. "Over the amount of soldiers allowed in the capital. Shit, that should have been a tip off shouldn't it? That this is diplomacy and we still got so much *done*."

"Bad faith negotiations?" Vivienne suggested. "Hasenbach could be making promises without having held vote over them yet, banking on confirmation afterwards."

"That's too sloppy for who we're dealing with," I grunted. "Setting aside anyone wanting her deposed would be handed a pretext if she did it, she'd be playing with fire when it comes to us – and she won't risk that when Procer's out in the wilds with the wolves prowling."

"Then there remains one plausible alternative," Hakram said. "Which is that Hasenbach has held those votes and rammed them through the Highest Assembly by virtue of having the votes to pass essentially anything she'd like without debate."

"That can't be the case if the royals who abdicated here got their pick of successor on their throne," I flatly said. "There wasn't a lot of loyalty to Cordelia Hasenbach in that crowd even before the campaign cost them their crown."

I grimaced. That meant seven empty seats in a voting assembly of twenty-three, which was a significant chunk, and considering the main opposition to the First Prince had coalesced around Princess Rozala, who was here in Iserre there'd be no one with the influence to seriously get in her way. No, by simple arithmetic I could see Hasenbach having finagled what was essentially run of the place. Between the Lycaonese, the lakeside principalities and those in the south that were quaking in their boots at the thought of the League coming in to stay? On one hand, this meant I could actually make bargains with the First Prince and expect to see them bear fruit. On the other hand, this whole situation had the potential of turning into a nasty brew if accusations of tyranny were thrown around and enough people listened.

"Nothing we can do about that from here," Vivienne pragmatically said. "And I've just begun to restore contact with the Jacks in broader Procer, so it'll be some time before we can hear of what's happening in Salia."

I leaned back into my seat, closing my eyes to think. I tended to think of Hasenbach as a largely reasonable woman, when it came down to it. Arrogant and high-handed, yes, but not bloodthirsty or blind in her principles. She'd despised me and all I stood for but never closed the door to negotiation because to her diplomacy was a preferable path to war if it could lead to the same ends. I couldn't say I liked the woman, but I held to a degree of professional respect towards her. She had, after all, held her own against Black and Malicia for years

and come out ahead as often as not. So when I'd heard that she was dredging something out of Lake Artoise through Kairos I'd suspected it wouldn't be pretty, but also been inclined to take it as a precaution on her part. A weapon to unleash if all else fail, not a stick she'd begin waving as a club near everyone else to get her way. I'd been reasonably certain, deep down, that she wouldn't ever use what it was she was having dredged. Now, though? They were all justifiable, practical steps she was taking. I knew that. But there was a word for people who did things like seizing control of the Highest Assembly and digging up ancient weapons, and it wasn't *heroine*.

"Vivienne," I said, opening my eyes. "Lean on the Jacks, I don't care how many you end up burning. The situation in Salia is no longer the highest priority."

"The dredging," Hakram gravelled, studying me closely.

"Find out what Hasenbach is fishing out of the lake, Lady Dartwick," I said. "And find out *quickly*."

The woman who was likely to be my successor nodded decisively, and we left it at that.

—

If there was anyone who still kept to the ancient faith that'd had had the stones on the barrow-top raised, they'd be within their rights to call this desecration. My affairs had been removed from the heart of the Mavian prayer, brought back to my tent, but given that this would be the first fireside night we held in more than a year I'd charged Adjutant with... furnishing it properly. Which was why where some olden thinning boundaries had once been arranged, now a deep and broad fire pit had been dug by legionaries with shovels. Benches were brought up, the roughly-hewn kind that regulations frowned upon but appeared just as inevitably as washerwomen – both the kind that actually washed clothes and the one that did, as well as those impressively enterprising souls that did both – and peddlers when an army stayed in the same place for a time. The only reason the benches were discouraged were because they were a waste of wood and often got in the way of the swift deployment that Legion camps were meant to enable, though so long as legionaries left them behind most officers let the matter lie. They made for a comfortable enough arrangement around the fire, and with a handful of seats they made up the heart of the arrangement.

The drinks were as broad in arraignment, Adjutant having gotten his hand on a barrel of Laure ale as well as what I suspected to be a wide array of confiscated liquors. In an exercise of nostalgia for our College days we'd killed two pigs and put them to roast on spikes, before prudently arranging skewers of horse as well given the number of greenskins among us. For those of us with 'cow teeth' there'd be a massive communal plate of biryani as well, out here in Procer the cumin and pepper that went with the rice almost more expensive a luxury than the rest of the meal put together. I claimed my seat there not long before night fell, abusing my queenly prerogatives to get a decent bottle of wine

while I read through the last of the reports Juniper had sent me. There was speculation among our general staff that the League's armies were less than a month away from running out of food, which would be rather interesting if it were true. Already preparations for the likely march on Arans were beginning, too, though Tariq and I would have to see to the practicalities of that. A Named or two might be able to slip in and out of Twilight on their own – especially here in Iserre, where it would be so thinly parted form Creation – but not an army. That would require a gate, and a great deal of power.

I handed back the reports to the officer who'd brought them to me in the first place just before the first two of my little band of miscreants strolled in. The first I'd seen not too long ago in this very place, though Robber had apparently since led his cohort in a reckless ambush on Levantine mages he'd somehow lived through without taking a wound. The other, though, it'd been quite a while. Senior Sapper Pickler had never been what you'd call a sociable woman even at her most convivial, and between her suddenly expanded budget in building engines and my ever-broadening duties it'd been ages since we saw each other outside our work. She had, like Robber, visibly aged – her leathery skin was more deeply creased, her angular face grown gaunter. She'd gotten bigger, too, larger in height and frame than most goblins. It was said that Matron lines – and as a Matron's daughter, Pickler was of a purer strain of that than most could claim – grew larger and lived longer than most of their kind, though the rumours of sharper intellect as well I'd never put much stock in. It was easy to claim superior wits when the opposition was kept ignorant on purpose.

"Your Majesty," Pickler greeted me.

To my surprise, without a hint of irony. I glanced at Robber with a cocked eyebrow.

"It is your title," he defended.

"She's never that deferential," I flatly said. "*None* of you are ever that deferential."

The sapper was, I noticed only then, carrying a handful of scrolls.

"Pickler," I said, reluctantly amused, "are you trying to sweeten me up before asking funding for your latest project?"

A heartbeat passed.

"No," she tried.

"What's in the scrolls, Pickler?" I nonchalantly asked.

"... recipes," she slowly said. "For cooking. Which is a pastime I took up since we last spoke."

"I thought cooking was a strictly male thing for goblins," I said, eyeing Robber.

"No Matron would ever eat anything another female had a hand in making," he agreed.

"I began out of my deep respect for human culture," Pickler said. "Which I never mentioned until now because..."

Out of genuine curiosity I let her try to think her way out of this one without interruption.

"... because I believed it so obvious it did not bear mentioning," she triumphantly finished.

Her professed respect was slightly undermined by the way she'd said *human* culture instead of, you know, mentioning an actual culture. Still, I knew how to bring this to a solid finish,

"That's a shame," I mused, "I mean, I need to blow all that dwarven gold on something and you know how I love a good siege engine. I sure wish someone had schematics to show me."

Robber discretely shook his head, the filthy traitor, but she wasn't paying attention.

"I also have schematics, Your Majesty," the Senior Sapper immediately said, voice almost visibly brightening. "For unrelated reasons."

"So close," Robber moaned. "*So close*, Pickler."

I glanced at the cup in my hand, finding it mostly empty, then shrugged.

"What the Hells," I said. "Drag a seat here and show me what you've got. So long as Robber keeps pouring me wine, anyway."

By the time the others began drifting in we were half an entire bottle in – I'd ordered our mutinous manservant to begin cupbearer duties for her as well – and loudly arguing about the practicality of even greatly ameliorated scorpions against undead.

"It's not like I don't think siege has a role to play," I said. "But bolts aren't going to win us an engagement, Pickler. *Massed catapults*. That's our force multiplier."

"Why don't we just pick up stones and throw them at Keter, while we're at it," she hissed back. "Or better yet, import a dwarven pebble and toss that. *Shame on your line*, Foundling."

"And you were so sweet to me earlier," I mourned.

"Oh, a human put on a crown and started ruling other humans," she scathingly said. "How unprecedented. You still can't do abstract mathematics properly, I bet."

"I've had other things on my plate," I replied, perhaps a tad defensively.

"What's this about shaming Catherine?" a voice cheerfully called out. "I can't believe you'd leave me out of that."

The rest of the lot had come as a wave, it seemed. Archer, who'd just cheerfully thrown her hat into the ring, and with her Hakram and Masego. At a glance, Juniper and Aisha was further down the slope and climbing up while talking animatedly. Everyone, then. I leaned back into my seat.

"Don't mouth off, wench," I replied to Indrani. "I bet you can't do abstract mathematics decently either."

"Funny you would say that," Archer said, and grinned like I'd just made a mistake.

*Godsdamnit*, I thought, and prepared to take my lumps.

# Bonus Chapter: Seed II

"Patience is the art through which rivers shatter mountains."

Solon of Many Decrees, founder of the Secretariat

Deep beneath the beating heart of the Wasteland, in a repository of secrets ancient and terrible, two accomplices debated the truth of empire.

Alaya of Satus had been born to the Green Stretch, but her roots were not of the mud. Soninke of no great line was she yet Soninke still, and though some of the ways she kept to had sprung from the shores of the Wasaliti her years in Ater had seen her embrace the Wasteland's rites. A caged bird in the Dread Empire's most gilded cage, she had learned the songs of power from the carrion circling the carcass of Nefarious' reign. With watchful eye and steady hand she'd taught herself to kill without ever baring a blade and to sow ruin with but whisper, the trade and tongue of those born high. Patient and smiling, she had learned the mistakes and the triumphs of those who called themselves her betters, and behind the smile taken the measure of the ailing empire falling apart around her. Like a chirurgeon and a sculptor, her hand had marked the cut. And so Alaya of Satus asserted this: *Praes is a game that can be won*.

Amadeus of the Green Stretch was the son of corpses now buried, born of a land tread by soldiers under different banners with every season. Duni, he was, his skin the pale shame of old defeats that Praes had deemed filth even in name, and never did he forget it. It was not the Tower's promises that whispered in his sleep but the footsteps of his youth, the wheel of unending defeats seen from the side with cold eyes. In indignation he had become squire, and so sharp a blade found it that it slew his rivals and knighted him in black. To the banner he'd raised the disgraces of the Wasteland had flocked, be they green of skin and red of hand, Named hunted from above or every sharp mind and soul of steel that knew contempt but no captain. His was a company of the hungry and the lost, sworn to bleed for those unworthy of that blood. And so Amadeus of the Green Stretch asserted this: *Praes is a mould that must be broken.*

An emptying bottle of wine stayed on the table, and as arguing the fate of a realm was thirsty work it was not long before a second was opened – just as awful as the first, though to Amadeus the smile it brought in his friend was sweeter prize than the finest vintage would have been in its stead. Tipsy as

they were, the Black Knight found that he more disposed to poetic language as he might have been otherwise though Alaya hardly seemed to mind.

"If a mill only makes poor flour," Amadeus said, "one must first look at the wheat that is brought to it. Yet if, no matter what is fed to the millstone, the flour remains poor? Then the trouble is not with the wheat, it is with the mill."

"You argue then, that Praesi are not of poor make," Alaya said. "That the Empire is as a broken mill and so will only ever make broken things out of us."

"Soninke, Taghreb, Duni," Black replied. "Goblins and orcs and even ogres. There is no inherent blemish in any of these people, yet the Dread Empire spits out madmen and monsters with *historical* consistency. If the people are not the weakness, Alaya, it can only be the empire itself that is the flaw. And no amount of clever schemes can ever change that, because cleverness is the virtue of an individual and it is the structure itself that is faulty."

Dark-eyed and lounging, long hair unbound, the imperial concubine – oh, how it had something at the heart if him clench in hatred every time he heard the title – sipped at the cup in her hand before raising an eyebrow.

"Yet this mill has ground out more than what you castigate, Amadeus," Alaya pointed out. "It has whelped derelicts and disasters, true, but not only these: Maleficent first and second, Terribilis of the same. Sorcerous and Maledicta. Some of these were greater than others, but all were potent rulers."

"Ah," Black smiled, "but what circumstances were these? The Praes that Maleficent founded, that Maledicta and the first Terribilis ruled, is estranged from ours by more than thousand years. And the others you name all inherited debacles, an empire falling apart: Maleficent the Second came after the Secret Wars, Terribilis the Second after the Forty Years of Shame and Sorcerous' predecessor broke three armies in three years on the walls of Summerholm."

He shrugged.

"All three of these reigned over days where the order of things was fraying. And so I argue that our skilled rulers rose despite the lay of the Empire, not because of it," Amadeus said.

"There we disagree," Alaya frankly said. "Maleficent the Second was of middling birth and only a general in title. Sorcerous rose to prominence as the Warlock, not by ancient blood. Terribilis the Second was of a great line, true, yet never ruled as High Lord. In any other realm they would have been the shining star of a few years, then doomed to disappear when the adversity that raised them passed."

The dark-skinned beauty elegantly pointed a finger towards the ceiling, and so the Tower above it.

"The Tower and all that comes with it ensured they were able to *rule*, not merely serve," she said. "Praes does not merely follow the line of succession of an old blood, as the Callowans do, and hope greatness will come of that roll of the dice. We seek out greatness."

"And do not find it," Amadeus frankly replied. "Or at least not sufficiently often to balance the lunacy and incompetence that is much more frequently

obtained. More often than not the Tower is claimed through murder, which ensures that the crowned tyrant is a skilled murderer but guarantees none of the traits desirable in a ruler. As a method of seeking greatness, it is ineffective."

Alaya's brow rose.

"And so what is to be the cure to this ailment you have pronounced?" she asked. "To shatter the Tower and to establish instead a royal line?"

"A monarchy in the western manner would not take," Amadeus said, agreeing with what she had not said. "And to collapse the Tower would be more symbolic a gesture than practical."

"And yet you sound pleased," she said.

"You have led to the exact point I wanted to make," Black said. "The reason a broken Tower or a proclaimed royal house would both be futile gestures is the same."

"The High Seats," Alaya said.

"The reason no madman or madwoman's folly has been enough to break the Dread Empire is that, functionally speaking, more power lies with the High Lords and Ladies than the Tower."

It was a bold claim to make, though be believed it the truth, so it was not without expectation of contest that he'd spoken.

"You are not the first to make that claim," Alaya said. "Always the Haunted Scholar's old work stands at the heart of it, the same three reasons given different wording: Ater, the Legions and accretion."

Ater, City of Gates, the great capital of Praes and seat of the Tower. At more than half a million souls, it was the largest city and most populous city in the Dread Empire: the queen of the Wasteland. Within its walls the greatest works of a hundred tyrants stood, among them sown secrets and wealth beyond one's wildest dreams. The Empire could not be ruled without holding Ater, for without it the bureaucracy was masterless and near every instrument of rule save for military strength mde beyond reach. It was also a city that could not feed itself, could not pay for its own upkeep and must keep its gates agape to even enemies for the Imperial Court to be worth holding. Anyone holding Ater must either rely for food on the ever-vulnerable Green Stretch, on the practice of bloody mass field rituals, or on a highborn ally who'd then gain great power and influence from that alliance – if not outright become Chancellor.

The Legions of Terror, in principle, balanced the scales of power as the largest and strongest standing army in the Empire. In practice, without the backing of the High Seats the Legions would always begin to decline. It was taxes and tributes that funded their ranks, and a tyrant attempting to assert authority over the lords and ladies of the Wasteland would see the flow of gold and steel dry up. War on the wayward nobility was one way to force the matter, and often nobles would flock to the Tower's banner in those conflicts – but with the expectation of reward, always. Besides, the gains were temporary and civil war typically opened the Empire to Callowan raiding as well as extortion over trade by Ashur and the Free Cities. Greenskins, the Clans and

the Tribes, might serve as loyal and effective soldiers if trained but fear of the strength they might gain from such meant they were allowed to serve only as expendable auxiliaries. The Legions were a noose, but one not always tightened around the neck of the ruling tyrant's foes.

The last of the three, accretion, had first become known to Black as *Sanaa's Ruse*. An old Soninke story about a young girl outwitting her uncle in claiming her mother's inheritance. The eponymous Sanaa proposed that to avoid strife within kin a contest be used to choose who'd inherit, the rolling of a great stone over a set distance. The uncle was reluctant until Sanaa told him he would only have to roll the stone for a mile while hers would be for three, in deference to his age and power. And so he did not disagree, when Sanaa decreed that to ensure there was no cheating the stones could only be rolled in daylight. And only then did the uncle learn that his mile was up a steep hill's slope, while Sanaas' three were on flat grounds. And though he was a strong man one day's span was not enough to finish the trial, and when night fell he could no longer lay hand on his stone. So it *rolled back down the slope*.

In a way it was the same with whoever claimed the Tower, for the tyrant usually became the enemy of near every High Seat simply by rising to the throne. And all those hallowed and ancient lines had at their fingertips centuries of accumulated power, influence and wealth. They ruled from cities impregnable by most means, and though no ancient bloodline was without its murderous squabbles the kinsmen banded together when the family itself was threatened. A Dread Emperor, on the other hand, rarely inherited the allies and influence of their predecessor. A decade of consolidation of authority in Ater, enforced by wars and a river's worth of gold, could evaporate into thin air the very moment the slide of a knife decided succession. A Dread Empress must undertake the great game with only what she had brought to the Tower, while the High Seats had behind them the weight of all their line. It was not that the tyrants were powerless, for they were not: Ater was the key to ruling the Wasteland, the Tower a beacon gathering Named and with the throne came the treasury as well as the Legions. It was possible for a tyrant to rule largely as they wished, and indeed this was regularly the case. But not without the support of some the High Seats, and struggle against others.

With every fresh reign the Tower's stone went back down the slope, while the great lines slowly but surely rolled their own forward.

"It is a well-written treatise," Black said.

"It is the tedious lament of disgraced second-stringer," Alaya mildly replied. "One who fundamentally misunderstands the reason the Tower stands at all."

Amadeus inclined his head to the side, inviting her to elaborate.

"No tyrant is meant to rule absolutely save if they triumph at the same games you now condemn," she said. "That is by design. From inception, the Tower has been a way to keep Praes as a single nation through what the first tyrants knew to be inevitable civil wars. It is the greater prize that prevents the Wasteland from splintering. The rise of the bureaucracy in Ater under

Terribilis concentrated power there, which was dangerous to the fabric of Praes. A succession of Sahelian tyrants wielding such authority, for example, would have seen Aksum attempt secession within decades. And so resistance from the High Lords became entrenched, the difficulty in wielding greater authority increasing."

She flicked a finger at the side of her glass.

"This is not an accident or a flaw, Amadeus, it is the very *intent*," Alaya said. "No tyrant may wield absolute authority without being exceptional in a way that no contemporary High Seat can dispute. The middling and the lucky are removed when they overstep, leaving only the splendid to undertake great works."

"Your argument, then, is that the Empire's difficulty in regularly producing effective rulers is not a shortcoming because it is on purpose," the Black Knight calmly replied. "Which is absurd, Alaya, even if it is true. A government is meant to *function*, if it does not there is no compelling reason for it to keep existing."

"It does function," she said. "It does exactly what it was meant to do, which is keep the Dread Empire together and serve as means to power for the individuals of excellence who do claim the Tower."

"The for all our pretence of being an empire we are in truth a pack of tribes, requiring a charismatic warlord to move us to accomplish anything of scale or ambition," Black said. "We both describe as disastrous method of rule, Alaya. The only difference is that in your understanding the disaster is a deliberate one."

"No," she disagreed. "That reform is required I don't deny in the slightest, so do not imply otherwise. Where our opinions differ is that you ascribe the Empire's failures to institutional blindness and idiocy, where I believe them to be the consequence of an initially sound structure having survived beyond its relevance."

"Let us compromise, then," Amadeus drily said, "and say it was blindness and idiocy that kept the structure standing past its time."

That earned him the flash of a smile, seen and gone in the heartbeat's span.

"Reform is long overdue," Alaya said. "On that we agree. Yet I suspect the manner of it required will see us differ again."

"Reform is perhaps too mild a word," Amadeus conceded. "Though rebellion has an implication of haphazardness I find rather insulting."

While Black saw no particular issue with slitting the throat of unfit authority, he had no use for sloppy tools like riots and secession. Such matters were best settled with swift, steady-handed precision: the scalpel and not the torch.

"It would need to be comprehensive," he said.

"Seizing the Tower, and then?" Alaya murmured.

"Dismantling the underpinnings of the power of the High Seats," Amadeus said. "I would begin by arranging for mage academies under the Tower's direct authority and outlawing those of the nobles."

"And already we have civil war," she smiled.

He was no fool, and so had suspected that might very well be the case. Though household troops represented the foundational military strength of any Wasteland highborn, it was through mages that most lines rose or fell. A talented practitioner, helped by a cadre of skilled mages and using a potent ritual, could turn around a campaign or make all manners of obstacles disappear. All the great lines had sunk fortunes into finding, teaching and binding all those born with a strong Gift in their holdings – though some such policies were better implemented than others, with Wolof and Kahtan's traditionally the finest in Praes.

"There will be civil war regardless," Black bluntly replied. "That is inevitable. Resistance by the High Lords can then be used as a pretext to begin purges of the aristocracy."

"To weaken the lines?" she asked. "It would cow them, for a time."

"It would be convenient to pretend as much at first," Amadeus noted. "Though the intention is the extinction of every High Seat and significant landholding line in Praes."

Alaya went still, then after a moment studied him very closely.

"You do not jest," she stated.

"I am aware a significant amount of mages would be lost by doing so," the Black Knight noted. "Yet if the cities of the Empire are to be purged of demons, their wards and walls pulled down and their private armies folded into the Legions then no highborn of influence can be allowed to live. I suppose children younger than six could be spared but offering any further mercy would be guaranteeing an insurrection some years down the line. It would be best to exterminate the aristocracy entirely, to my eye, but Wekesa is certain that would represent a catastrophic drop in mage births in the following generation. Minor lines can be folded into the bureaucracy instead, with the old High Seats turned into provinces in the Miezan manner – with appointed, non-hereditary governors of limited terms."

There was a long moment of silence.

"Maddie, they would fight you to the death over this," she said.

"That is," the Black Knight smiled, thin and bladelike, "the idea."

"The civil war, assuming you can even win it and –" she raised a hand to silence his interruption, "and I know you believe you would, given time to prepare, or we wouldn't be having this conversation but Amadeus you've not even *begun* to see what they can do when feeling truly desperate – yet even assuming you do win it, it would take decades and it would ruin Praes as thoroughly as Triumphant's conquests. And we would never entirely recover from the losses, not after the purges you describe."

"Amputating a diseased limb is not weakening yourself," Amadeus calmly replied. "It is salvaging one's body whilst it can still be done. We would be lessened in some ways, perhaps. But from that position, we would then be capable of genuine growth. It is an acceptable loss."

"It is a brute force solution," Alaya retorted. "A chirurgeon's garb with a butcher's blade. The violence itself is not inherently unfit a means, but the impatience you would wield it with spoils the broth."

Black's brow rose, but he did not interrupt.

"Slaughtering an empire's worthy of influential, wealthy and well-armed highborn sorcerers through war is impractical," she told him. "First a more traditional reign need be established, to carefully oust them from the bureaucracy and the Legions. Then one must constrain their wealth, lead them to spend their soldiery outwards, and only then would they be ripe for the taking."

"It would still come to violence," Amadeus said. "The last step will be blade in hand."

"The last step will be unnecessary," Alaya smiled. "Irrelevance serves the essentially the same purpose as extermination, without the massive losses your method would entail. War to the knife is a messy affair, Maddie. Best the fade away instead: slowly, quietly, inexorably."

"What you describe can't be done," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said, "without first seizing the Tower."

"No," Alaya of Satus softly agreed, "it cannot."

The Black Knight sighed and reached for his cup, draining the last of the wine. Had he the choice, he'd prefer this conversation to continue for hours yet – there was still so much to say, to debate and plot. Yet what had been said here was already enough to see them both killed, if reported to the wrong ears. And if the Chancellor learned he was boon companion to a member of the Emperor's seraglio, then the very kindest outcome would be the both of them leashed through that secret being held back. No, it was time to see to the loose ends. His hand came to rest on the pommel sword, and as librarians hid in the shadows they thought him blind to he set down the empty wine cup.

"You always end up having to get your hands bloody for the both of us, don't you?" Alaya said, watching him with hooded eyes. "I think I might grow to despise that, one day."

Black's sword cleared the scabbard, and dimly he heard a few of the more cautious librarians begin to flee. As if that'd help.

"But not today," he said.

"But not today," she softly agreed.

He went out into the dark, sword in hand, and screams followed.

# Chapter 65

# Convivial

> "Note: while the assertion that one's friends 'are an anchor' held up to examination, said individuals (either dead or alive) seem no more effective in that purpose than a stone anchor of the same weight. The popularity of the saying remains baffling."
>
> Extract from the journal of Dread Emperor Malignant II

With seven expectant gazes remaining peeled on me, I was starting to feel a mite cornered. Just a mite, mind you. I'd gotten out of tighter corners than this through cunning use of diplomacy.

"I was," I began, "perhaps less than correct."

Without missing a beat the crowd began to boo me, and that vicious little wretch Robber even threw something at me over the fire. I didn't quite manage to catch it but it slid into a fold of my cloak and I picked it up there. I blinked, finding a rather fancy glass eye looking back at me. Where had he even – no, I didn't want to know. It had to be someone of stature, though, part of it was painted but there was also coloured glass and that'd expensive as all... No, if I asked then he won. I'd get Hakram to find out later. Still, I pocketed the eye without any qualms. He could make a tidy little sum from selling that, if he got around to it, so we'd just call this a... pre-emptive fine. Hells, maybe I could get General Abigail to believe I'd had one of those on the whole time.

"Do the apology, at least," Aisha called out, too well-bred to grin but with suspiciously twitching lips.

I sighed.

"Archer," I began, ignoring Indrani's enthusiastic affirmation of 'that's me, you know', "you peerless beauty whose approval I secretly crave, and that's why I'm so mean to you-"

"That sounds about right," Hakram gravely agreed.

The filthy traitor. I was surrounded by treachery of the worst tonight.

"- I retract any implication that you are incapable of abstract mathematics," I valiantly soldiered on. "There. Finished."

There was a heartbeat of silence. Masego, swaddled in a rather unnecessary amount of blankets, leaned towards Adjutant.

"Is it on purpose that she did not apologize at any point in that sentence?" Zeze asked.

Godsdamnit, now even Masego was getting in on it. The little shit absolutely did know that I'd done it on purpose, I pulled this on him all the – ah, and suddenly his sordid betrayal made a little more sense.

"Ask to be made a countess," Juniper suggested to Indrani. "Even odds she'd take that over actually saying the word 'apologize'."

That was a lie. I wouldn't go any further up the ladder than baroness to get out of this. Honorary, mind you, not landed. I shuddered to think of what Archer might get up to with regular tax revenue.

"I apologize all the time," I protested.

I got a few skeptical looks in return.

"Here's one for the road, then," I sneered. "I'm sorry you're all so thin-skinned you need apologies in the first place."

Alas, the resuming of the loud booing was the herald of diplomacy's failure. Sometimes, I sadly reflected, the other side simply wasn't willing to take the very generous and reasonable terms you offered them. That was not on you, it was on them, I reminded myself. Robber once more tossed something at me, though this time I caught it – it was, to my surprise, another *glass* eye. Just as prettily made, although the heft was lighter and oh Night the iris was brown on this one instead of blue. And angled in the opposite direction, implying my Special Tribune might have murdered not one but *two* foreign highborn officers just so he could use their glass eye as toy. For once the actual specifics of something he'd done had managed to surprise me, though the spirit of the affair I was painfully familiar with. I pocketed it too, because the little bastard would have hit me with it on the chin if I hadn't caught it. It was decided by a tribunal of the people that I would have last pick of a cut from the pig that was nearly done roasting, my threats to have them all tried for treason leaving the unruly mob indifferent. Truly, they had gone mad with power.

Juniper insisted on making the cuts herself when shed judged the meat properly roasted, ignoring Indrani's protests that it should have another quarter hour of being turned with spices sprinkled on the searing fat. I sided with the Hellhound, half out of spite for Indrani knowing all about Stygian abstracts when she'd been raised in the *middle of the damned woods* and half because I rather did miss the taste of a pig roasted in the College way: mostly unseasoned, and still juicy the way orcs preferred meat to be if it couldn't be bleeding outright. Adjutant squatted by the fire with plates while Robber was charged with bringing the communal plate of biryani. Aisha was, to my mild amusement, the first to receive a plate and by sheer coincidence got some of the choicest cuts. Masego requested belly meat and the Marshal of Callow allowed him a fat slice, which Robber claimed to be blatant favoritism, and as bickering exploded I reached for my pipe with a smothered smile. Indrani sidled up to

me casually, leaning on my shoulder like a pest as I stuffed and lit a packet of wakeleaf.

"We're missing some people," Archer said.

Her tone wasn't quiet, not exactly, but it was pitched not to carry.

"Vivienne will come when she's done with the Jacks," I said. "Whenever that happens to be."

"Not who I meant," she replied.

I craned back my neck just to glance at her. Indrani looked down at me, eyes serious, though face to face like this I felt the urge to kiss her. I set aside the impulse.

"Akua can't really be here if Vivienne is," I murmured. "And if she's allowed to sit with us just until Vivienne arrives that's worse than not being invited, I'd wager."

Not the last because it made plain the tensions between my appointed successor and the monster I'd absurdly enough come to like – and more importantly, rely on. I could expect Akua to take such a situation with a degree of elegance, if not necessarily enthusiasm under the mask, but I doubted Vivienne would be so agreeable.

"I think they'd both surprise you," Indrani said. "It's personal, between them, but our little thief also knows a thing or two about sitting around a fire with people you were trying to kill not so long ago. Still, once more not who I was speaking of."

Ah. Her. I lowered my head and breathed in through the shaft of my pipe, the acrid smoke filling my throat and my lungs. I let the taste and warmth of it stick with me, and only then breathed out a long stream. I should learn to do tricks, I decided. With the smoke.

"I bet Hakram's been tiptoeing around it all careful-like," she drawled. "Like he doesn't want to needle tender skin. But you're made of rougher stuff than that, aren't you?"

Tiptoeing wasn't the right way to put it. A perch had been offered, on occasion, and my refusal to grasp it had seen the matter implicitly closed without it ever being outright put into words.

"You'd know," I murmured, not wagging my eyebrows but conveying the sentiment by voice. "Although it's been a while, so maybe you forgot."

"Godsdamn," Archer whistled, sounding impressed. "You never get that racy where people might hear. You *really* don't want to talk about it, do you?"

"There's nothing to talk about," I stiffly said. "She declined twice, I don't see the need to keep inviting her."

I wasn't a bloody widower in desperate need of a second wife, in so dire a bind I'd buy a white stallion and learn to recite Valencian poetry just to impress. Cordial disregard suited me just fine, and to be honest it was probably safer for her. Enemies wouldn't bother going after a love affair gone cold if trying to get to me, not when there were deeper and more obvious bindings in my life.

"You won't even say her name," Indrani grunted, undertone amused. "Yeah, you're *totally* over how that went down. How dare I suggest otherwise."

"Senior Mage Kilian can be fetched, if you require it so deeply," I replied in a clipped tone. "If she declines, shall I have dragged in chains? She doesn't fucking want to be here, Indrani."

"It's a bad habit, that thing you do," Archer seriously said. "When if it's not a blade at your throat, you let relationships stay ambiguous by doing nothing. Bet she might have changer her tune, if you'd let a few more months pass before asking again."

"It's been quite a bit longer than that," I coldly said. "I won't open up a casket just so you can sate your curiosity, 'Drani."

"Oh, that one's probably cracked beyond mending," she casually replied. "But it doesn't have to be that way all around. Send for Akua. And make her stay, even when Vivienne joins."

My eyes narrowed.

"You don't give a shit about Kilian, do you?" I said. "You just wanted me to feel raw enough I'd agree to this."

The ochre-skinned woman grinned, sharp and pale.

"Sure," Indrani admitted. "But that doesn't mean it isn't true."

We should have gotten her started on the liquor earlier, I darkly thought. Might have spared me all this. I turned to meet her gaze, unflinching, until our silence was interrupted by Hakram sliding a plate full of pork and biryani on my lap. He glanced at us, dark eyes missing nothing.

"Juniper cracked open a bottle of aragh," Adjutant said. "Or do you two need to take a walk?"

"Nah," Indrani smiled. "Aragh sounds good. We're done here."

She broke our stare first, strolling away nonchalantly, and Hakram cocked a hairless brow at me in her wake. Underestimating them both, was I? I doubted it, but beyond that assertion I saw a truth she'd not mentioned. If there was going to be strife, when would we next have so relatively safe a moment to handle it? Certainly not in Salia, or up north fighting the dead. *Fuck*. I really hated it when Indrani pulled the whole incisive insight thing on me, but now that I knew I was taking a greater risk by not handling this now I couldn't really justify not doing it. Knowing Archer had manoeuvred me didn't make it any less effective.

"Invite Akua up," I sighed.

He cocked his head to the side.

"Ought to make for an interesting evening," he simply said.

Adjutant moved away, boots crinkling against the icing snow, to tread downslope until he'd cross the wards and send one of the legionaries to pass the message along. Ah well, it wasn't even guaranteed she'd come. I glanced down at my plate and frowned.

"Tenderloin?" I called out at Juniper. "Really, the *tenderloin*? I should have you hanged."

I saw Indrani pout and flip Robber a silver as Aisha hid a smile behind her hand.

"Let me go halfsies with Aisha's cuts," I wheedled.

Robber cursed in Taghrebi and flipped back the silver to Indrani, who took an overly showy bow. No one seemed particularly inclined to consider my suggestion, the bastards.

"None of you are ever becoming a countess, mark my words," I bitterly said, and dug into my pork.

Pickler passed me the bottle of aragh, though, so maybe at least one of them would make it to baroness.

—

My wakeleaf was half-finished by the time Akua glided her way through the raised stones of the Mavian prayer. She'd chosen a rather conservative appearance, by her standards: a high-waisted dress with a long ruffled skirt, in red and yellow touched by eldritch patterns of gold brocade. Given that it was long-sleeved and went up to the beginning of her neck, it was one of the tamer things I'd seen her wear. Still, it was well-fitted and on a woman who looked like Akua Sahelian did that was enough to draw a lingering second look. I puffed out a mouthful of smoke as she approached the fire, bowing slightly towards me as she came to warm hands that needed no warmth against the roaring fire. I nodded back, and both of us pretended not to notice every conversation had died the moment she arrived. I took a moment to study reactions – Indrani was pleased, Hakram pleasant and Masego... staring with fascination at her torso? Must have been an arcane pattern that interested him. Those I'd anticipated rather well, though, so it was the others that got me curious. Robber was grinning, one of those needle-filled offerings that meant amusement so sharp it might as well have been spite. Pickler was indifferent, though the way she'd shuffled on the bench implied surprise and maybe a little curiosity. Aisha had put on the highborn face, a mask of pleasantry so perfect if might as well have been made of marble. Her I wouldn't get much out of unless I asked. Juniper's face was disgruntled, and without any hint of the respect I'd expected an orc to bear for someone who'd faced more than half the armies of Praes and Callow on the field without flinching.

Robber would test her, then, which I wasn't all that worried about. Juniper, though? Contempt might be more dangerous there than antipathy and I suspected that was the way she was leaning.

"Spooky Saddie, sit your ass down," Archer called out. "You're not fooling anyone with the warming hands thing, you're a damned ghost."

"How have you not run out of those by now?" I said, reluctantly impressed. "Also, shade. Shade is the word you were looking for."

"What can I say," Indrani mused, blitherly ignoring my correction, "I'm just a giver at heart."

"She has a list," Akua slyly said. "She keeps it in her arrow-bag and her next one is Revenant Rags."

Archer spluttered out it was lie, Robber cackled loudly before swearing to steal it and just like that the spell of silence was broken. Conversations resumed. Wasteland highborn, huh. I suspected she'd be on decent terms with half the people here before the night was out. She had a knack for charming others, even those who should know better. I let the warm chatter wash over me as I leaned back into my seat and smoked my pipe, following the threads of two different conversations at the same time. Juniper and Pickler had dragged a highly amused Indrani into a debate about whether or not her bow, due to its ridiculous size and the way her arrows were closer to javelins, was still a bow or in fact an exotic siege weapon. Pickler's insistence that it was a derivative of a ballista by any reasonable set of principles ran into Juniper's flat reminder that 'she draws the string, with her arm, because it's a bow', while Archer's insistence that while she was a trebuchet in the sack she was also handy with a string did absolutely nothing to help.

Robber was spinning an elaborate yarn about smuggling an ass – a donkey, not the other kind – in a cadet-captain's room back his War College days for the benefit of a seemingly amused Akua, with the occasional dry correction by Hakram. Masego and Aisha, significantly more sober than most people around this fire, were discussing whether the old Alamans legends about the *morions*, barrow and underground-dwelling creatures that had a rapacious hunger for gold, silver and jewels, were an extinct people or simply dwarf-sightings made legend by the passing of time. It seemed the subject was of particular interest to Aisha, because I was bestowed the rare sight of Hierophant knowing visibly less about a subject than his interlocutor. As the one of the few people here who'd actually seen and spoken with dwarves I contributed a few details, though mostly I enjoyed the sensation of closest thing to home I'd felt in a very long time. Still, I was not so much at ease I'd not kept an eye and ear on where the first knife would come from. And as expected, two yarns later Robber turned a sharp grin and sharper words on Akua.

"Mind you, the fun didn't end when we left Ater," he drawled. "There was this one time – this was when you were still Governess in Laure, before we murdered your every ally and broke everything you ever strove for – when the Boss sent me south to kill your buddies as they moved west. Would have kept it up for even longer, except I was torturing this guy named Mulin who claimed to be under your protection and-"

Akua's brow rose.

"Mulin," she said. "Would you happen to mean Mulade Humin, by any chance?"

"Friend of yours?" Robber grinned.

"No, but the Lady of Salizan sent a cart's worth of gold ingots with him," Akua mused. "Never did get these. He was the heir to the holdings, so his mother was rather cross, but I did wonder what had happened to him."

"Borer slit his throat," the goblin said. "And I'm not saying we ate him, but Hells we were low on rations and if it's Wasteland highborn anything goes,

right?"

He was, I thought, looking to shock her. To get a reaction out of her. But then Robber had known little of the Empire's high nobility, save when standing against them on a battlefield. As a student in the War College, he would have been considered under the protection of my father back in the day – who was known to brutally murder any highborn meddling with the College, and quite publicly at that. He believedt he knew what Akua Sahelian would be like, I thought, but he rather didn't.

"Was he a screamer?" she asked.

Robber blinked.

"When you tortured him," Akua clarified, "was he a screamer? Because there's been these persistent rumours about the Humin-"

"Oh, come off it," Aisha interrupted. "Even if spice birds did exist, which no one has ever proved-"

"There's Miezan records, Bishara," Akua solemnly said.

"By *Calavia*," the Taghreb replied, sounding deeply offended. "The same hack who wrote about giant crabs living in the Wasaliti and insisted the Blessed Isle was a nest for crocodiles that spoke riddles in High Tyrian. She wrote to entertain patricians in Mieza, not as true historian."

"I can't comment on Calavia's accuracy in all things," Akua said, "yet I once shared a table with Mulade Humin when we were nine, and by the noises he made when I ate the last spice cookies you'd think I ate his firstborn using only forks."

"Is it me, or is it kind of titillating when those two argue about things?" Indrani pensively asked.

*Godsdamnit, Archer. If you're going to say things like that, at least say something I don't kind of agree with deep down.* So both of them were rather good looking, and them getting heated over debate was a good look. It wasn't my fault I had eyes! Still, best not to say that. Akua hardly needed the encouragement and trying to get Aisha into bed had terrible idea written all over for all sorts of reasons. I set aside the distracting though but focusing on more practical matters. The more the two of them spoke, I saw, the more out of his depth Robber looked. I sympathized, but then trying to take the shade on in courtly games like this was not the wisest choice he'd ever made. I'd seen few people outright chew through Akua when it came to this, Vivienne most vividly coming to mind. Even Black's attempt to humiliate and terrorize her into doing something unwise by making her nail her own hand to a table had not borne the fruit he'd wanted it to, back in the day, and Akua in those years had been nowhere as smooth as she now was. Without having ever drawn blood as he meant to Robber was turned aside, and the conversations moved on. When lively debate over the kind of riddles in High Tyrian a talking crocodile might have feasibly asked – Archer, the filthy show off, started quoting riddles from 'Tyrant and the Fool' in the play's original tradertalk, a tongue that had common Baalite roots – I found Aisha elegantly sitting at my side.

"My queen," Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara said.

"I thought I'd trained you out of that," I sighed.

"It's been some time," she smiled. "And this is a serious enough affair."

My brow rose, and I decided to pass the last of the aragh to a distracted Hakram instead of drinking it.

"I'm listening," I said.

Aisha's lips thinned, then she leaned forward and lowered her voice.

"Do you mean," she softly asked, "for Akua Sahelian to be Dread Empress of Praes?"

# Chapter 66

# Silvered

> "Trust given is a gift, costing only the giver. Trust earned is in balance, worth as much to earner as granter."
>
> King Edward Alban of Callow, best known for annexing the Kingdom of Liesse

The urge was there to laugh in disbelief, though I didn't. Aisha was deadly serious in her question, and she was one the better-informed officers at the highest rung of the Army of Callow. She had Juniper's ear, working relationships or personal connections with most the Woe and the rest of my closest collaborators. She was, as it happened, one of the few people who knew of the Liesse Accords even if that knowledge was modest. If she could believe that, then others would.

"I do not," I said.

The Staff Tribune nodded in graceful acknowledgement, lovely heart-shaped face touched by the firelight.

"Then this is a mistake," she murmured, discretely glancing at Akua without turning.

I kept any hint of displeasure from showing on my face. Of all my old College companions I'd always had one of the more complex relationships with Aisha Bishara. Her high birth in an old Wasteland line had made it difficult to trust her, at first, and back in the days where Juniper and I had been more frequently at odds her open siding with her friend as made her one of the Hellhounds and not one of 'mine', so to speak. We'd gotten past that, over the months and years, but I'd never hidden my belief that quite a few Wasteland highborn belonged dangling from a rope and that'd always lain between us. Aisha was more careful not to offend, ever stepping lightly around matters she thought our very different origins would make contentious. Frowning now or thinning my lips would have her shuttering immediately, and that was the opposite of what I wanted. I gazed where the Taghreb had flicked the glance, finding Akua effortlessly drawing Masego into what had become a debate over

the poetries of the east by mentioning the 'riddling-sorcerers of the Nameless City'. The blind mage let out an amused huff and a began declaiming something in a dialect of Mtethwa I could barely make out a few words from.

"There are lines in Praes that are older than the Sahelians," Aisha Bishara murmured. "Others who have more often climbed the Tower, or through whose veins greater gifts flow. Yet one of that shade's kin ruled Wolof, when the Empire was first founded, and where every other great line of that days has withered and died the Sahelians still thrive."

I rolled my cup against the flat of my palm, eyes hooded as I listened to Aisha in pensive silence.

"That woman right there is of the blood of the original murder, Catherine Foundling," she whispered. "The first iron-sharp treachery. All under the sun have known this since the Tower was first raised, and yet again and again the Sahelians have betrayed through surprise. Because they are charming, my queen. They are beautiful and fascinating and so very *useful* that certainly it couldn't hurt to bring them into the fold just the once."

Aisha bared the fainted hint of teeth at me, almost like an orc would have.

"They are like ink, that lot," she said. "It only takes one drop in a cup water, and no matter how much you pour from that day on it will never be entirely pure again. And now you have let one of the finest makings of that line into your hearth, Catherine."

Her fingers clenched, her gloves crinkling.

"She'll have half of them charmed by the end of the night," the Staff Tribune clinically said. "The rest uncertain. I expect she could ever turn Juniper's opinion of her around, given long enough."

"You maker her sound like a force of nature," I said.

We watched the laughter and warmth unfolding before us, separate from it as if a transparent wall of dread had been slammed down between us.

"She was Named," Aisha simply said. "And she rose high during years were the iron was sharp like rarely before."

An elegantly backhanded compliment sent my way, that. There was a reason I'd more than once mulled stealing the Staff Tribune away from the army and making her my foremost diplomat.

"She remains impressive, even as a shade," I admitted. "And you're not without reason to worry."

"And yet," Aisha said.

"And yet," I agreed.

A heartbeat passed.

"This is indiscreet, and perhaps insolent to ask," Aisha delicately said, "but are you-"

I waved the notion away before she could even finish.

"I am," I said, "Callowan."

I'd come to learn that just as the Wasteland's worst excesses needed to be excised from its flesh, so did Callow's own spiteful inclinations. But in the end,

I was more than mind and principle, more than thought. I was flesh, too, and like so many of my people my bones were made of grudge. There were some trespasses that could not be forgiven or forgot. One hundred thousand souls. Some follies were beyond forgiveness even were it wished. Sometimes, tough, forgiveness was not the heart of a story.

"I will have long a price as I can conceive, in due time," I murmured. "Worry not of that."

"You have lingering eyes," Aisha hesitantly said.

"They've lingered on you as well," I amusedly replied. "Shall I make you empress instead, Lady Bishara?"

Her cheeks reddened the slightest bit, which was unexpectedly charming. Ah, if it didn't have *terrible idea* written all over it... The embarrassment passed, swiftly mastered.

"Rarely has there ever been more poisoned a chalice than the Tower," the dark-eyed woman somberly said. "I would not dare drink of that cup. Yet someone must hold it, and that person cannot be Malicia."

Something hard and cold passed in the cast of her face, at that, whisked away by the noblewoman's mask but not quite quickly enough.

"Agreed," I replied. "And Aisha, about Ratface-"

She curtly shook her head.

"I thank you, Catherine, but I will grieve Hasan in my own way," she said.

Aisha was the only person I'd ever known to call him Hasan instead or Ratface regularly. They'd been lovers, back at the College. A strange pairing, given Ratface's deep hatred of the nobility and Aisha's open pride in her own heritage, but they'd both been incredibly lovely and the intensity of a passion could make up for a lot of differences. They'd parted ways before I met either of them, though Ratface had remained... inclined in the years after. I'd thought Aisha less attached, but now I wondered. Faded affections could find fresh life in other forms, and remain sweet at heart for the good times once shared. I nodded in deference to her grief, for it was greater than mine and it had older claim on the shade of the man who'd died in my service at Malicia's order. Damn her for that, and so many other things.

"It'll be Black, if I have my way," I said.

A moment passed as Aisha mulled over what I'd just said.

"You usually do," she finally said, tone faintly rueful. "It will be a bloodletting that makes the War of Thirteen Tyrants and One pale, if he rises."

"Change will come," I said. "If fought, it will not come gently."

"They'll fight," Aisha tiredly said. "That is our nature, for good or ill."

"It can't be like it was before," I told her. "You know that. Nor *should* it. We've come too far for that."

"And her?" the lovely tribune said, glancing at Akua. "Where does she stand, in this new world of yours?"

"Nowhere gentle," I said. "Though that will be a choice of her own making."

"Will it?" Aisha said. "I imagine many have thought themselves her captain, in days past. I see none still drawing breath."

"If I were trying to conquer her, I'd fail," I softly said. "I've known that from the start. She has ever been my better at those games."

"And yet," Aisha repeated, the echo almost chiding.

"Always she's had a knack for masks," I said. "More than wearing them she *became* them, you know. It was why she wielded her Name so well."

"Masks are shed, eventually," Aisha warned.

"What if you didn't want to shed it?" I said. "What if wearing that mask you got all these things that some part of you, deep down, had been craving? Because Sahelians are still humans, Aisha. There are some things you can't train yourself out of no matter how hard you try."

"There are things she will crave deeper still," she said. "For that too was taught. And when the opportunity comes, the same choice that has always been made will be made."

I smiled, and remembered a winding talk had some time ago under morning sun. *You have seen the worst of us*, she'd said. *And through that knowing taken our measure. But there is more, Catherine.* She'd seemingly been speaking of her own kind, of the High Lords and Ladies. But there'd been the slightest chink in the mask when she'd spoken of her great-uncle who'd fled to Nicae. *If even a Sahelian can have the taste for peace, there is yet something left to be kindled.* A little too sharp, a little too brittle. The first hint of the bile she'd vented on Kairos Theodosian the same dawn that's seen the birth of the Ways. And I knew, of course, that she was not beyond such exquisite deception. That she might have been weaving that intricate web around me since the moment she saved my life in the Everdark. But it wouldn't matter, I thought, watching Akua Sahelian letting out a snort of laughter at some pointed comment Indrani had made. It wouldn't matter because she'd *want* it to be true.

"Be watchful, Aisha," I said. "I will be as well. But that arrow has already been loosed, and I will not gainsay it now."

"May the Gods avert their eyes from it all," she murmured. "You've always had an uncanny way for seeing what others do not, Catherine. I will trust in it once more."

"With open eyes," I smiled.

"Is that not the finest manner of trust?" Aisha smiled back.

She drifted away just as easily as she'd come when there was a lull in the conversation for her to slide into, adding her thread to the weave of it with practiced grace. Sometimes I envied how easily it seemed to come to the high-born around me, the social graces I still struggled with even when I genuinely meant to use them. There was something to be said for training from one's youth, even if the other aspects of nobility held little worth in my eyes. The hours passed smoothly, after that, eased by the wine and food and warmth. Twice more Robber tried to needle Akua into anger and struck only at smoke, until even Pickler looked discomfited on his behalf. He did not try a third time.

With the greenskins swiftly moving for second portions of meat and the cask of ale being opened conversation bloomed in every direction, sometimes coming together for virulent debates but just as often staying a chaotic multitude. A warmth had seeped in me that had little to do with the fire or the drink, though I'd partaken of both generously. Still I sensed it immediately when two people passed through the outer wards surrounding the tumulus maybe half a bell before midnight. I wove Night to have a look, and to my surprise found two familiar faces walking up the hill.

Marshal Grem One-Eye, the grizzled old orc who was still thought by many the finest general alive, was carrying two bottles of aragh and from the sounds of it complaining that my father hadn't even offered to carry one – to which Black piously informed him that as a recovering hostage he could not trust himself to carry out such strenuous labour. A few of my people heard the steps before the two came in sight, but there was a beat of surprise when they were fully seen in the firelight.

"Black, Marshal Grem," I greeted them. "Have a seat, it's not like we're lacking room."

The orc Marshal – Black's, not mine – sniffed the air with a bemused look on his craggy face.

"Is that horse I'm smelling?" Grem One-Eye said. "Haven't had a skewer of that in decades. Last time was. . . "

"Fleeing after that raid on the Wall," Black said, lips twitching. "When those Iarsmai riders went after us."

"Wait, I think I had a Name dream about that back in the day," I said. "When you lot went after the Commander of the Watch?"

"Oh man, I heard about that," Archer enthused. "I mean, no lie, the Lady is terrible at telling stories-"

"No lie indeed," Black said, lips quirking outright.

"- but this one she actually made pretty entertaining," Indrani finished.

"Did she mention the part where the Commander beat Black like a rented mule?" I said. "It was almost embarrassing to see."

"That detail certainly never made it to Court," Akua slyly added.

"A grave exaggeration," Black said, eyeing me from the side. "I was maneuvering her into a killing blow."

"While she was manoeuvring you down a set of stairs, head first," I drily replied.

He slid into a seat not far from me while Grem passed the bottles to a – oh Gods, that was just wrong – *blushing* Juniper. I'd forgotten she had this uh, intense sort of admiration for Black. She half-glared at me for having the gall to mention that the legendary Carrion Lord had once been thrown down a set of stairs. Gods, I should find a way to pass along that one dream I had where he and Ranger were getting all. . . bright-eyed at each other. That ought to cure her from this right quick.

"We must have been fleeing on foot for half a day before they caught up," the Marshal of Praes said. "Flat grounds, maybe a bell from the marches proper. Twenty of them, with this big man in mail the ranking officer."

"The cousin to Duchess Kegan's husband, we later learned," Black said.

The old orc grinned.

"The Watch is coming, he said," Marshal Grem recounted. "Soon you will be in longbow range. You cannot escape our sight. Surrender now, or-"

Indrani made a whistling sound, like an arrow loosed, then a fleshy hit.

"So Hye shot him, naturally," Black said. "Right in the throat."

"And Wekesa, still drenched in sweat from the running and looking like a rumpled cat, he leans forward and he says all cool as ice," Grem One-Eye began.

"Guess he didn't see *that* coming," the two old killers guffawed together.

They chuckled with the ease of two old friends sharing a worn and beloved joke, now thrown around as much for the fondness of the tale as for whatever waning humour it might have once held. I shared a look of secondhand embarrassment with Masego and Indrani. Calamities, huh. They were a great deal less dignified once you'd had a close look at them. Those left, anyway, I thought with a grimace. Sabah I'd mourn for she was worth mourning, but the Warlock I grieved more for how his death had pained and would pain Masego more than anything else. Little about the man had endeared him to me.

"Here, Marshal," Juniper said, passing him a skewer of juicy horse meat.

"Thank you, Marshal," Grem replied, openly amused.

"Sisters take me, let's be done with the titles for the night," I grunted.

"Your Majestic Highreachingness, I must protest," Indrani gravely said. "It would be most improper of your loyal subjects to behave in such a manner. And also us."

"Reaching high shelves is her only weakness, as it happens," Robber drawled.

"Really," I flatly said. "The *goblin* is going to make height jokes."

"I am a veritable titan, by my people's standards," the Special Tribune shamelessly lied.

"I've seen piles of apples taller than you," I scathingly replied.

"Ah," Robber replied without missing a beat, "but did you see *over* them?"

That cut a little too close to home so I replied with a gesture more than mildly obscene and a few curses in Taghrebi that had Aisha tittering in amusement before her face suddenly went blank. *Ah*, I sadly thought, my own memory prompted by the sight. It'd been the same man who'd taught them to the both of us, then.

"I have a question, Marshal Grem, about your assault on the Wall during the Conquest," Pickler said. "If you don't mind."

"Grem will do, around a fire," the old orc gravelled. "You're Old Wither's daughter, I hear?"

Pickler's face tightened with discomfort as the mention of her mother, the Matron of the High Ridge tribe.

"I am," she said.

"She tried to have my liver ripped out, once," Grem said. "Not even because she disliked me, mind you, she was just trying to insult Ranker by eating an ally's flesh."

"I am," Pickler slowly said, "sorry?"

The grizzled orc quietly laughed.

"Not much like that old horror, are you?" he said, baring teeth. "Ask your question, girl."

Even as Pickler began a long question about the order of battle for siege when attacking the fortresses of the Wall I tuned out the taking and leaned closer to Black.

"You actually here for the company, or the other thing?" I quietly asked.

"I expect the Pilgrim will arrive come midnight," he replied just as quietly. "And if you are to speak of the Wandering Bard, as I expect you will, one whose veracity might be ascertained might be of some use to you."

I felt a sliver of gratefulness at that, though I knew he would bring as many complications as he did uses by being there. Tariq could no longer see through me unless Sve Noc let him, these days, and even if they did let him it would be considered suspect. Black, on the other hands, was no longer even Named. The Peregrine should be able to use his trick without any complications, though I doubted someone like the Grey Pilgrim would find much to approve of in my father. My brow raised, when I caught a detail. I'd never actually told him that the Sisters could ward of the attentions of the Choir of Mercy – and likely an aspect, as I doubted angels would so frequently lend a helping hand even to their apparent favourite.

"Come now," Black smiled, before I could say anything. "Pacts with lesser gods are not so rare as to be unheard of. Wekesa spent many a year trying to mimic through ritual the benefits one gains through such patronage without the drawbacks, though to only middling success."

"It's not quite as clear-cut as that," I said. "We have give and take."

"No doubt," the green-eyed man said. "Besides, considering the trials you've put your soul through over the last few years I doubt there are many takers left."

I gasped.

"Are you making fun of the state of my immortal soul, you perfidious heretic?" I said.

"I suppose I must be a heretic indeed, if the Arch-heretic of the East deems me so," he mused.

Gods but I'd missed insulting the man. There were still so many things left unsaid between us, recriminations still simmering and hard arguments yet to be had, but what had been so deeply wounded in the aftermath of Akua's Folly felt... lighter tonight. Not healed, and perhaps it never would be, but not quite so raw. It helped, I thought, that I had been allowed to feel for my own path so far from him that it was impossible for any part of it to have been his notion. Whatever the reasons the two older men had come, they certainly kept

the conversation going. Black eventually went to sit by Masego's side, the two of them conversing quietly, and that I did not approach. The grief they shared went back to long before I'd entered either's life, and I would be an unwelcome interloper if I attempted to be part of it. Vivienne had yet to come, which had me frowning. She would not snub an evening like this out of anger at Akua being here, so it likely meant the Jacks were finding something of us. I'd like for her to be there, regardless, but I couldn't deny that finally getting even a bare bones report about whatever it was the First Prince was dredging out of Lake Artoise would be a relief. As it turned out, though, like so often Black was right.

Mere heartbeats before midnight, the wards shivered as the Grey Pilgrim passed through.

# Chapter 67

# Starlight

> "Without enemy, without backbone."
>
> Callowan saying

I didn't even have to say anything.

Black had been watching me discreetly ever since midnight's threshold, and a simple nod of acknowledgement did the trick. Unlike me the green-eyed man had no connection to the wards that surrounded the tumulus, but by using me as a tripwire he'd effectively learned of the Peregrine's arrival mere heartbeats after I did. Just because the man had lost his name hardly meant he'd ceased being perceptive – or dangerous. I slowly rose to my feet, hand reach for my yew staff, and watched from the corner of my eye as the former Black Knight drew away from the circle that'd gathered to listen to an old campaign story of Grem One-Eye's. Hakram's eyes found me, silently questioning in the dark, but I shook my head. The fewer people there for those talks the better, for though I trusted Adjutant as I would trust my own hand the Grey Pilgrim had no reason to do the same. I'd not further muddle the waters of what might already be troublesome talks simply for the base comfort of having Hakram at my side. I slipped away, not unseen of my friends but at least unquestioned, and tread between the dark silhouettes of the stones raised by the ancient Mavii. Far above stars hung in the night sky, pale constellations set in ink. Leather boots creaking against the snow I advanced, the edges of the cloak on my back skimming against smooth stone.

Tariq Fleetfoot stood a few feet further down the slope, upright and steady for such an old man. Robes of faded grey fell loosely down his frame, so used as to be halfway to raggedness, and the last wisps of white hair on his head stood out starkly as he gazed up at the stars. He did not have a staff, the gnarled old thing he'd snapped over his knee as the finishing touch to the Twilight Crown. In the days since that he could have easily found another, I knew, yet he had not. It tasted to me of a loss, something surrendered that would never be had again. None who'd given away their crown would ever find a way to fill that

void and the lack of a walking stick was the least of it. Black drifted out of the stones a heartbeat after I did, tread quietly as the long coat he wore trailed behind him. Tariq's jaw shifted, as I looked, a tensing so slight I might have missed it were I not already studying him. Wariness, I thought. The Pilgrim recognized Black's footsteps, near silent as they were, and he was *wary* of the man they belonged to. I knew not what had passed between those two when my teacher was held prisoner, before his soul was mutilated, but the cold spite in the Carrion Lord's eyes and the strain in Tariq's shoulders did not speak to anything pleasant. Still, they were both pragmatic men in their own way. Like it or not they were in the same boat, and neither would be inclined to behave in a way that might just tip it over for all of us.

"Your Majesty," the Pilgrim calmly said. "A beautiful night, isn't it?"

"Iserre has its beauties," I acknowledged.

The old hero half-smiled, then turned to dip his head respectfully.

"I invited myself to an evening of comradery, and for that I apologize," Tariq said.

"You should," Black noted. "I brought liquor, at least. Is your presence meant to be the gift?"

There was a slight pause, then he muttered *heroes* in a scathing tone. I sent him a warning look, but he was visibly unmoved. A consequence, I grimly thought, of having me try on those when I'd been a great deal less dangerous than I now was.

"Apologies twofold then, Black Queen," the Pilgrim lightly replied. "Yet I believed it wiser to have this conversation away from prying eyes, and before too long had passed."

An opportunity he'd not have again soon, I understood even if he did not spell it out. I was not all that surprised that the Peregrine had somehow slipped past a dozen layers of wards, patrols and watchmen to arrive unseen in the very heart of my camp. He was, after all the, the Grey Pilgrim: appearing sudden and unexpected was his wont, as much a part of his Name as the ashen-coloured robes. But he'd pulled this off because I was apart from the rest of my army, and my watchful patrons. If he'd tried to pull this on the tent where I slept, the Sisters might just have taken offence and good luck trying to keep *that* quiet.

"You were not unforeseen," I said. "I require no apology."

"Your kindness is appreciated," the old man said. "I received the papers sent by the Lord Adjutant, Queen Catherine. They were... an interesting read."

Well, it wasn't like I'd expected the man to gush, slap me on the back and ask where he had to sign. Had I hoped for that, just a little bit? O Night, yes. I was in no way above easy victories when I could have them, which was tragically infrequent. Fingers tight on the dead yew in my grip, I carefully stepped down the slope until I was standing at the hero's left. Black, never one to allow subtle theatrics to pass him by when they cost nothing, nonchalantly cut through behind me and came to stand at my left. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes, knowing it'd only further entertain him.

"I expect you have questions," I said.

Objections, too, but best get the clarifications out of the way first.

"Those were not the full text," the Pilgrim said.

"The simplified manuscript," I said. "Though no tricks were plied, Peregrine. I did not hide anything I thought might be contentious, only removed the many inkwells' worth of minutiae that the full treaty will need to properly function."

"Function," Tariq repeated, blue eyes crinkling. "Yes, that is the word I was seeking."

He breathed out, mist rising up easily on such a windless night.

"I have issue, as you must have anticipated, with some of the laws you would set," the old man said. "Yet that is not so great a thing, for even if your terms were accepted without amendment I would wager the Liesse Accords being harbinger of more good than not."

The Pilgrim's already-crease face, wrinkled by long years of saving lives and taking them, grew serious.

"And so I must ask, Your Majesty," he said, "what it is you intend as the function of your Accords? Their purpose, for I have glimpsed the lay of your work and it is neither salvation nor abolition."

Oh, that was an ornate way to put it but no less true for that. I'd known from the very moment the thought of the Accords had begun to haunt me that there was only so much I could accomplish through them. It'd be a pretty thing, a treaty that promised a hundred or a thousand years of peace between all who signed it, but that was a fool's dream. Old Terribilis the Second, the canniest of the Old Tyrants in so many ways, had once said that armies were like water: they took the path of least resistance. The line had stuck with me, even more than the rest of the Commentaries, and I'd seen since that the wisdom of it ran deeper than Terribilis had claimed. People, more often than not, took the path of least resistance. Because it was easier, because it was encouraged, because no one liked to struggle or get hurt. If I raised a dam in the way of our own nature – and, like it or not, people had been waging war one each other since the First Dawn – then perhaps it might hold for a time but it would inevitably break. And perhaps wreak greater destruction than before for the containment attempted. I could not change what lay at the heart of mankind, or orcs, or goblins or even the drow for that matter. I was not even sure the Gods could, and even at my most arrogant I'd never claimed to reach those heights. What I could do, though, was create a set of rules. Not *too* limiting, lest they be bucked, but limiting enough that never again would a city be broken by the strife of Named.

"I told you the first time we ever spoke," I said. "What I cannot break-"

"You will regulate," Tariq softly finished. "I remember. You spoke of your teacher too, that day."

Black looked mildly curious, eyeing us both.

"He cannot conceive of a word where he does not win, you said," the Peregrine reminded me.

*And this is not a victory*, he left unspoken. I'd known that was going to be one of the harder parts to navigate, though, for some time. That the Accords required trust in more than just me on the side of Below's champions, lest trust in them die when I did. Part of me wondered if my teacher would take as an insult a remark I'd never intended to make it to his ears, though I stood by it still, and I flicked a glance to the side. He did not seem aggrieved, though only a fool would take what could be seen on Amadeus of the Green Stretch's face as the sum of his thoughts.

"Yet I have lost," Black said. "Undeniably so."

I stilled. I'd not expected for him to speak in answer, save perhaps to send the occasional measured barb towards the Peregrine. Indecision warred in my mind, for though the Accords were my creation and I was circumspect of letting my teacher speak to or for them I could not hold them in my arms like some babe in need of soothing. They would grow larger than me, I knew, from the moment they were signed. They must, for if they did not this was no more than some Old Tyrant's madness: though I would have chosen law and treaties rather than an invisible army or fortresses aflight, the doom of it would be just as certain. And so, though if felt like control of this was slipping through my fingers, I kept my mouth shut.

"Have you?" Tariq mildly asked. "You stand free once more, a leader of armies. Aligned with one of the rising stars of our age, shielded from judgement and assured seat and voice when the lay of this war and what will follow is writ. *Have* you lost, Amadeus of the Green Stretch?"

Part of me was almost offended on my teacher's behalf, for I had seen victories of his making and they had little in common with the stuff of these days. Yet there was another quieter voice in the back of my mind that, while not agreeing with the Pilgrim had said, found it was not senseless. For someone who'd been a severed soul mere days ago, Black had returned to a degree of prominence with almost blinding swiftness. The itch was there to speak up, to intervene, because there was too much riding on this talk and this night for me to feel content in silence. I mastered it with some difficulty, knowing stepping in now might end up disastrous. My teacher had turned to look at the Pilgrim, pale green eyes considering, until he suddenly let out a biting sting of laughter.

"A *victory*, Peregrine?" he scorned. "This night, this moon, this year? The span of my days I have spent in the service of that searing, fleeting thing that'd even the scales for the smallest of instants and you would claim *this* to be it?"

The dark-haired man, though those locks now knew white as well, laughed once more. It was a sound like a bag being peremptorily emptied, a cup drunk to the last drop. More will than instinct.

"Those few I love are dropping like flies," Amadeus of the Green Stretch harshly said. "My kindred atop the Tower spirals ever deeper into old follies

and the order I have worked my hand to the bone raising has burst like an overripe fruit. The manner of things that have been lost. . . "

He shook his head, then smiled. Thin and wide and much too sharp, the blade-smile I'd come to know so well.

"These have been *calamitous* years, Peregrine," the Carrion Lord said. "What gains were had always came at too high a price, and while I will not partake of regret neither will I shy from the truth that not a single of those games proved worth the candle."

"You bleed," Tariq acknowledged. "You rage, frozen and bitter as that poison is. But you are not cowed. You have ruled, but what do you know of rules? Am I to believe you will now put a yoke around your neck out of sentiment?"

The old hero eyed the aging villain with disdain.

"There is only so much of that in you," the Pilgrim said. "And it never bore more than a feather's weight on the scales, Lord of Carrion. I have seen the laws that would be the fabric of the Accords, and I see good in them for even if the children of Above will find their hands bound in some ways it is but a *pittance* to what it will cost Below's favoured monsters. You will be stripped of manners of terror and brutality in myriad, forced to measure your wickedness and moderate your cruelties. You will be bound by fetters and told at the edge of the blade that ambitions cannot be without restraint. I see nothing, have seen nothing, in you that would take any of this as more than wasted ink."

"It must be a pleasant world to live in, where any that stand opposite of you must be either grasping or grasped," Black smiled. "Either the creature of the Gods Below or their apostle in wickedness – either way, what sin can there be in breaking us?"

He chuckled.

"Well, if I must be wicked to hold regard then wicked I shall be," the Carrion Lord said, eyes coldly glinting. "I'll speak for the crooked and cruel, pilgrim of grey, and give you the answer you deman."

Under starlight the dark-haired man took a dramatic bow, and I could see in the cast if his face that he was relishing this. The chance to speak without measuring every word, considering the consequence on the balance of his Role and Name. To. . . cut loose, after a lifetime of ironclad control. Praesi, I thought, not entirely without fondness.

"The first conspiracy will bloom," the Carrion Lord said, "before the ink is dry."

My fingers tightened. That was not what I had expected of him. Or wanted. He grinned, a slice of pale bone cutting through the dark.

"We will twist around the spirit of every rule while obeying the letter," the green-eyed man said. "We will lie and cheat and hide our sins, while dragging into light those of our foes and rivals. We will seek to twist the laws as a tool for our ambitions and a sword to slay our enemies. We will hide behind every protection afforded and make red art of the details that save or slay. We will

defend our advantages and seek to unmake yours, never once faltering in our callous greed."

The grin went wider still, a madman's grin. A challenge.

"And yet we will uphold the Liesse Accords, you broken old thing, and wage war on any that would unmake them," the Carrion Lord said. "Merciless Gods, you think they tip the scale in *your* favour? Your entire breed are servants of stillness, shaped from the clay of recoil. You came out victors of the Age of Wonders, but this... *Age of Order* will be ours body and soul."

"You are mad," the Grey Pilgrim said, tone hushed.

"That may well be," the Carrion Lord laughed, "but am I *lying*?"

Tariq's face tightened.

"Peace will smother your kind out of existence," the old hero said. "This I know and have seen many a time. Under law you will reach too high and pay the price of vainglory."

"Why now, Tariq Fleetfoot," the Carrion Lord replied with languid amusement, "that rather sounds like a wager."

The Levantine's fingers clenched.

"This could have been a beautiful thing," he said. "The principles of Good made into law, however slightly. You *soil* this by your very existence."

"I have only ever recognized one sin and one grace," the green-eyed villain replied. "Your whimpering sense of virtue is as dust to me, Peregrine. Choke on it and perish, as you should have decades ago."

Well, this was just lovely. Still it rung close enough to an accord from both sides that I wouldn't be interceding for everybody if I stepped in now. You know, before two of the most powerful people on the fucking face of Calernia started pulling each other's pigtails and calling their Gods a lie. Charming stuff all around, though I'd give it to Black that while he might have been a vicious shit about this he'd at least more or less gotten results.

"Glad to see we're all friends now," I said, perfectly willing to keep repeating the sentence louder and louder until objections died out.

Neither of them contradicted me. Well, would you look at that. Maybe they *were* clever after all.

"I am in agreement with the principle of the Liesse Accords," Tariq tightly said. "Though when talks are had in Salia, I will argue against the articles I believe to be unsound."

"I expected no less," I said.

It was an effort to keep my voice steady, to keep the sheer fucking *triumph* out of it. Because if Tariq was in agreement with even just the principles of the Accords, then I was pretty sure a majority of living heroes would fall in line. There were probably heroes out there more powerful, but there were none more respected or influential. Getting Below's side of the fence in order would be trickier, but if Black held the Tower and the Tyrant's head ended up on a spike? It could be done. The fucking shape was there, now. *It could be done*. My excitement ebbed, though, when I remembered this conversation was not

yet over. And that what we had to speak about might shake the foundations of the rest, if it went poorly. I hesitated on how to bring it up at all, and to hide the indecision reached for my pipe once more. Black gave me a mildly disapproving look.

"Wakeleaf is an ungainly vice," he said. "One of the few things I ever agreed with Tikoloshe about."

"I've tried that wine you keep bottles of," I replied, stuffing my pipe, "and I'm not getting a lecture on ungainly vices from a man who regularly drinks something that tastes like rat poison. *Muddy* rat poison."

"The mud makes all the difference," my teacher pleasantly agreed.

I passed my palm over the pipe, black flame bloom amongst the stuffing, and breathed in sharply. Well, indirect talk had never been my strong suit so it was doubtful trying my hand at it now would somehow yield success with the godsdamned Grey Pilgrim of all people. Direct it was, then. I breathed out, let the smoke rise up towards the night sky and took the plunge.

"Pilgrim," I said, "we need to talk about the Wandering Bard."

Except I didn't.

I was, instead, standing to the side of the three people – the Grey Pilgrim, the Black Queen and the Carrion Lord – standing in the starlight and snow as they spoke. I could even see the smoke wafting up from both my mouth and pipe. *Shit*, I thought.

"Catherine, Catherine, *Catherine*," a woman's voice said, sounding almost pained. "You were so close but now you're fucking it all up."

I looked at where the voice had come from – to the side, perched atop one of the raised stones, the Wandering Bard was seated. Slender and dark-haired, with blue eyes and a rather attractive face. The accent, though, I had recognized. Alamans.

"Really," I said, "Alamans? What, where there no other bodies left?"

The Bard cocked her head to the side, looking surprised and more than a little amused.

"That is *uncanny*," she muttered.

Raising a silver flask I'd not seen her grab, she shrugged and took a swallow.

"Right," the Intercessor grinned after wiping her mouth. "So I'd say it's about time we had a little chat, you and I."

# Chapter 68

# Apropos

> "A good liar finds every lie a fetter."
>
> Arlesite saying

It shouldn't be possible, I thought. How did this somehow not qualify as direct intervention? I was looking at myself standing between the Peregrine and the Carrion Lord, smoke coming up from my pipe hanging still in the air like it'd been frozen stiff. The Bard had what, stolen my soul out of my body under the nose of Sve Noc and slowed the flow of time to a crawl? Considering anything sorcerous touching upon time was known to be requiring the kind of power that'd break a kingdom to steal away a mere heartbeat this had to be a Name thing, but even if that proved true this was... My fingers clenched. *No, Cat, you damned fool*, I grimly thought. *You're looking for a heavy-handed miracle when this one's the reigning queen of smoke and mirrors.* I'd stood here before, though I'd been brought into such a folded moment by another old monster's will. The difference was that the Dead King preferred titanic scenes – an old crusade assaulting the walls of Keter, the chaotic field some had already taken to calling the Princes' Graveyard – while the Intercessor had subtler tastes. A lighter touch that hinted at powers she likely did not possess, but who could know for sure? Some sardonic jest at my expense, or an attempt to rattle me?

"Going in circles, are we?" the Bard drawled. "That's fine. We got time, Cat."

This was an illusion, I thought, or perhaps a memory made into something both more and less. Yet it was exquisitely woven, I'd admit, for the silhouette of the Intercessor perched atop the old stone was flawlessly touched by the cast of starlight that could not truly exist. The shoddy lute on her lap, more driftwood than instrument, was as much one of her signatures as the shining silver flask in her hand. This thing of many faces and a hundredfold in years, there were some who might call it a god. One that sat astride the boundary between the Gods and Creation, like some fickle high priestess of inscrutable designs. And

for all that Kairos Theodosian had whispered in my ear secrets of her nature, there was still much more that remained unknown to me.

"So it seems," I finally said. "What name do you happen to go by these days, Almorava?"

"Marguerite of Baillons, at your service," the Bard said, bowing foppishly.

"Does it not get tedious?" I curiously asked. "Trading names and faces so often?"

"You'd be surprised what people can get used to," the Intercessor said, then looked me up and down. "Or maybe not. You've had an interesting few years, haven't you?"

"Same as you," I calmly replied. "Heard you a little spot of trouble down south. Tyrant's a tricky one, eh?"

"You get a particularly sharp one every few centuries," Marguerite nonchalantly admitted. "Mind you, that boy's not making it to thirty."

*I don't think he's trying all that hard to*, I thought. I did not voice it, though, for though Kairos Theodosian was my foe and had betrayed me many a time – and would again, given occasion – I would still choose him over the Intercessor every time.

"Is this a warning, then?" I mildly asked. "That I need to fall in line if *I* want to make it to that age?"

She laughed, dark-haired and blue-eyed and looking frightfully young for what I knew her to be. Barely out of girlhood, and on such an ancient creature that was almost obscene.

"Shit, Cat, you think this is what – some kind of intimidation racket?" she grinned. "Behave now, young girl. No more slaughtering your enemies or I'll slap your buttocks with a wooden branch."

Her tone was gently mocking, though her face turned serious quickly enough.

"This is a favour I'm doing you, Catherine," the Wandering Bard said. "Because you're trying real hard to do some good and it might even work. If you stop getting in your own way, just the *once*."

Ah. So we were starting with the friendly, smiling face then. Like I'd swallow that.

"I do make it a point of always believing ambiguous immortal creatures without question, when they assure me they're doing me a favour," I prettily smiled. "So, do I need to sign something before you take my soul or will a spoken bargain be enough?"

I winked exaggeratedly.

"For the first of my three wishes-" I began.

"You really are a terrible asshole," the Intercessor said, almost admiring. "Hells, I bet even Nessie gets a little vexed at times and he's gotten pretty hard to ruffle over the millennia."

I was never going to get those wishes, was I? The disappointment only grew with the passing of years.

"You would know," I smiled.

A heartbeat passed as she studied me.

"Spinning this out won't allow the sisters to take you out of here," Marguerite sighed. "You can stop trying to delay now."

Shit. And I'd been trying to hard not to actually think about it just in case she could pick up on things like that.

"Fine," I said. "You want to talk, Bard, let's talk. What do you want?"

"I'd like for you to not help Nessie wiggle out of this, is what I'd like," the Intercessor said. "I don't mind your Accords, Catherine. I think they might even do some good for a century or two, before they become a noose around the neck of Calernia. If you get them signed, well, congratulations. But you're about to scrap most your efforts before the year is out, and while that's mostly on your head and I'd usually abstain from the mess what *does* matter to me is that you're endangering more important endeavours."

Even if we'd been under the noon sun instead of under the veil of night, I thought, I would not have been able to read the woman perched atop the stone. She'd been a weaver of words for longer than Callow had stood and though the Wandering Bard was hardly unbeatable or infallible she was not someone I'd ever have a solid grasp on. Still, even knowing she might be spinning a web of lies tailored exactly for me I had to keep her talking. When else was I ever going to have the opportunity of stealing a glimpse of what she intended?

"And what would those endeavours be?" I pressed.

"Killing the Dead King," the Intercessor said. "For good. Not a soul-shard or an inhabited corpse, not his endless legion of expendable intermediaries. Neshamah King, he who once reigned over Sephirah and so doomed it."

"I've no quarrel with that end," I shrugged.

Which was nothing but the truth. Creation would be better off without the Dead King, there was no denying that. I fully intended on seeing it done, too, if the price for it was not ruinously steep. That did not mean, though, that whatever the Bard had planned was to be blindly welcomed. Assuming she was speaking the truth, which I would not. *And now*, I thought, *comes the demand.* Oh it'd be disguised, but the tricks being plied on me were not unfamiliar. A common enemy, a common striving, had first been established. Then it'd been hinted that she would not oppose my own heart's desire, seeing the Liesse Accords signed, so long as I did not begin a feud with her. Now she'd make her demand, reasonable and modest, and she might even go a step further by throwing in a bribe. Some secret that'd be of use to me, or a light nudge that'd help me along the way. So, I wondered, what was it to be? Was I to bite my tongue when it came to sharing with the Pilgrim what I knew of her? Or perhaps it'd be something subtler, a particular secret that need be kept.

"Good," Marguerite smiled. "Then when he offers you a truce – and he will, that much is certain – do not put your weight behind accepting it."

I pushed down my surprise, keeping my face a bland mask. *What?* I'd considered the offers Neshamah had half-extended while in Liesse, since the end of the battle, the truces of ten or a hundred years. Tempting as they were,

in retrospect the former more than the latter, I'd been growing increasingly inclined to refuse them outright. The long game was his more than ours, in the end, and the Dead King would never had made the offer if he did not gain from it more than we. Yet this was not what I'd expected of the Bard. I'd taken this little aside of ours, much as she pretended otherwise, as a tacit admission that my speaking against her to the Pilgrim might do damage. That she must prevent it. Yet she now spoke as if her great concern was war on Keter and nothing else, which was raising my hackles. I'd seen her act in the name of Below as well as Above, which meant she was not the heroine she oft presented herself as, but what she truly *wanted* did remain a mystery to me. The destruction of the Dead King was a believable striving for this entity, along with the admittedly chilling notion that there was little she was not willing to sacrifice to see it done, but it was… too clean. The two scheming immortals, plotting and scheming across the span of history with Calernia as their pawns?

It had the shape of a story to it and that was what had me wary. The Bard's trade was the peddling of stories, and I could not help but think I was being sold one right now.

"And why shouldn't I?" I said. "A reprieve would allow us to gather stronger forces before marching on Keter."

Was I playing into her hand, I thought, by keeping her talking no matter my true intent? I could not know, but ignorance was cure to nothing at all even lies taught something of what was.

"You'd be clinging to the wrong story," the Bard calmly explained. "In truce he will 'hold' the territories he seized in Procer. And after the truce runs out, you'll take them back from him. Drive him back to Keter. And that'll be your victory."

She paused.

"And so nothing will change," she said. "Oh, I burned a shard of him when he got greedy in Arcadia. That's a loss for him, it is, but it's a drop in the ocean. I did not wait *centuries* to let him slip away now, Catherine Foundling, not when he could be destroyed instead."

"You're implying that if the war is unbroken by truce, our victory will be in Keter instead," I slowly said.

That by cutting a deal, we'd dilute the substance of the triumph that could be had. Which, while sounding to me of a repugnant repudiation of the practical for nebulous 'principles', sounded quite a lot like some of the hero-talk I'd heard over the years. No truce with the Enemy and all that. And coming out of the Intercessor's mouth it was a lot harder to dismiss, I thought, for though I still doubted the virtue of such a stance I wouldn't deny that as a story-knife it might just hold up. The more complicated a tale the less strongly it bound, in my experience, and I doubted anything short of steel fetters would keep the Dead King dead. Besides, this entire affair assumed we'd be able to win the war in the first place. Which was far from certain, in my opinion.

"He needs Keter, you know," Marguerite idly said. "Everything else he can spare, but Keter? Without it he's no longer the King of Death, he's simply Evil in a box – and that, my dear, delivers him into my hands sure as dawn. So he'll fight for the city tooth and nail, and that's how he ends."

"If that's true," I said, "why would he ever wage war? Why not simply close the borders of his kingdom and avoid the risk entirely?"

After a grisly demonstration of power or two, harsh enough they were seared into the Principate's cultural memory, it was unlikely Procer would try his lands again. Few rulers would be fool enough to seek war with the peace of death to the north when there were better lands south and east to annex instead.

"Because I haven't given him a choice," the Bard candidly said. "If not regularly bled of strength by a war he'll gather enough to try something genuinely dangerous, like conquering another Hell or ingesting another kingdom into the Serenity. So I've arranged for the war to be taken to him, again and again."

"Not this time, though," I said. "He's the one who wanted to sally out, and he's taking risks. Why?"

She laughed, fiendishly pleased.

"Because he's been cornered, Catherine," the Bard said, "by the passing of time. The Kingdom Under will have taken the entire continent underground soon. And on the surface cities are getting larger. Sorcery and learning keeping crawling forward. Larger, more stable alliances are forming. By the time there is a Twentieth Crusade, it'll be able to *win*."

"So he needs to do something now," I said. "A sweeping change of some kind."

"Oh, he caught onto that some time ago," Marguerite said. "There's a reason Procer is such a bloody mess. Ever wonder why the dead strike so often at the Lycaonese while the Alamans by the lakes are an afterthought?"

*Because there are much fewer Lycaonese, and they lack allies in the broader Principate,* I'd thought. It was much more feasible to slowly eradicate the northerners and their smaller population than it was with the lakeside Alamans, whose principalities tended to be more populated further from the coasts regardless.

"You're implying he's been sabotaging the Principate," I said.

"He's been sowing hate between those tribes since before there *was* a Principate, Catherine," she replied. "Keeping them estranged, shaping their stories one incursion at a time so that when the black days come they'll be too far gone to band together."

"If you've known for so long then why did it come to this?" I flatly said.

"First Prince isn't a Name," the Intercessor sighed. "That's what I work with, like your teacher told you. Names. I can't touch the Nameless outside of some very narrow boundaries. And what a funny coincidence it is, that the Principate took the shape it bears to this day after Nessie and his friend in the Tower ran roughshod over it. You following me yet, Foundling? Kairos isn't the

only one who's ever pulled a fast one over me. The entire bloody nation has been a fire in my lap since its founding."

It was, I thought, believable enough. Though there was one detail more than the rest I focused on.

"Narrow boundaries," I repeated, hinting at a question.

She looked amused.

"You spoke of me," the Bard said. "It was enough, given who you are."

And wasn't that just the loveliest of ambiguous sentences? Who I was. It might even be true, given that I'd avoided speaking of her as much as I could. The last time I could recall, in truth, had been with the Tyrant of Helike and we'd been hiding behind the madness of the Hierarch unleashed on that night. She would not have known anything that was spoken in that carefully forged blind spot, Kairos having no doubt made it largely to check her. And that, more than anything else, was what had me convinced she was lying. Because it was a pretty story she was selling me, but she did in fact have a way to get to the First Prince: the Augur, her cousin and most trusted of advisors. She'd had that way in for years now, and still the Tenth Crusade had headed east instead of north. There was, I thought, a greater game afoot than she would have me believe. Oh, if I pressed no doubt she'd have an answer for me. A reasonable one, too, as for why it had all unfolded the way it had. But my instincts were screaming I was being had, somehow, for some reason. *Why would you tell me any of this? Why are we having this conversation at all? You'd have me believe this is your first true opportunity, but since when would you see this as an opportunity at all? A sculptor does not owe a chisel an explanation.*

Gods Below and Everburning, what was her fucking game?

"What are you, really?" I quietly asked, looking into eyes that were not the first she'd ever worn. "You're Named, but like none I've ever seen. And for all your pretences you're not a heroine."

"I'm what was made so that no one ever eats the world," the Intercessor said. "I am herald before the ruin; envoy when it waxes beyond restraint. What I am has no name in any tongue still known to the living or the dead, and many have gone mad seeking it. I've had as many faces as there are graves and never once did I taste true death."

The old thing smiled.

"I am not an arbiter," she said. "When the hour is kind, I am granted kind purpose. When the hour is wicked, I do what I must. And when the hour is mine, I seek the story that will free Creation. Until I have found it, you grasping thing, I see to the monsters that slip through the cracks. So crawl through the muck and do the passing things you can, but do not once presume to meddle in the greater works beyond your understanding – I will not tolerate the meddling of amateurs."

She had given me, I thought, I reasonable enough answers. Not justifications, and only barely would I call them explanations, but it… held up. More or less. Enough that I could glimpse the shape a tale that'd make sense of it

all. And that was why I doubted it, but I did have to wonder – had I sunk too deep into lunacy, that a plausible tale was enough to have me disbelieve? Had I become like Kairos, baring knives at the faintest hint of weakness? *Or is this kind of hesitation exactly what she wants from me by doing this?* The trouble here was that I had so very little to bring out as argument if I wanted to qualify the Intercessor an enemy in the eyes of the Pilgrim. She'd pulled strings for the death of Captain, it was true, but Sabah had spent a lifetime as an enforcer for my teacher and through him the Tower. She'd had a hand in the sundering between Black and Malicia being so deep and bitter, but again what sin would that be in the Pilgrim's eyes? I had the words of Kairos Theodosian, which to Tariq would be less than nothing, and the memories of the Sisters when they had sought out Below and encountered the Bard as an envoy. Which, while less than sunny a cast for the Intercessor, was not utterly damning. What else could I bring up, save the words of the very Dead King we were not gathering against? Even I could not that deny that for all the hints of more sinister intent I'd seen her put the finger on the scales for Good rather more often than the other way around.

I had little to say, which begged the question of whether or not I was truly looking at an enemy. Oh, she'd sought my death once or twice – but then I'd been a rising villain attempting to claim Callow and considering the amount of deaths I'd personally brought down on Creation since I couldn't fault her on principle either. In strategy, perhaps, but then given the scale she worked on it would have been painfully arrogant of me to pretend I knew everything she did. I kept my fingers from clenching, for it was too obvious a tell. Was that the answer, then? That I was to kneel and trust in the benevolence of some eldritch creature's designs, to step only where she deigned to let me step and babble out thanks for the *privilege*? No, I thought. Even if all she'd spoke was true, she no more owned the right to shape the Creation than any of us. She was my enemy, come what may. But not one I could face tonight, with preparations so feeble. If she caught even a hint that I was coming for her... I'd only be able to act in surprise once, and I doubted there would ever be a second chance. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them, allowing the conflict I genuinely felt to touch my face.

"You'll back the Accords?" I asked.

"I'll let them stand on their own merits," the Intercessor said. "Neither more nor less."

I spat to the side.

"Then we're done here, Bard," I said.

She peered at me, seemingly amused.

"That we are," she agreed.

I blinked, tasting the warmth of smoke in my mouth, and Tariq Fleetfoot's face creased.

"Why must we speak of her?" the old hero asked, tone wary.

And this was the moment, I thought, where I hinted arrangement had been made and began to bide my time until I could strike. Plotted behind bling spots with the Hierophant and learned from the sharp madness of the Hierarch. Like a clever little villain attempting to snuff out a great light. It was a story, I realized in a moment of cold dread. I'd been sold yet another story, on the sly, and come so very close to embracing it wholeheartedly. I'd not bit the bait when she'd approached me as a smiling offeror of advice and bargains, so she'd changed the story. The immortals warring over the world I'd again refused, silently as I had, and in doing so tumbled down the most dangerous of the three stories she'd woven. Believing it was my own notion every step of the way.

"I do believe she just tried to kill me," I thoughtfully said. "So let's drag out into the light every dirty little secret I know about her."

Back in the old days, if I'd gone down the hill to meet the Exiled Prince in an honourable duel he would have made sport of me. I would have been, after all, fighting him on his own terms. Why would I offer the Intercessor the courtesy I'd refused him, even if clothed differently? I would not fight a weaver of stories the way she wanted to be fought, damn her.

Elegant had never been my strength, so time to drag us both into the mud.

# Chapter 69

# Repute

> "Assertion that the end justifies the means in in truth embrace of the Heavens, for it is they who will decide the Last Dusk and so all justice then derives from them."
>
> Hektor the Ecclesiast, Atalante preacher

It was a little unsettling to see that even without the Name my teacher could still shed the face of Amadeus of the Green Stretch and become the Black Knight. A single sentence and humanity slid down his face like morning dew, leaving behind a cold-eyed thing weighing the necessity of harsh violences to visit. The Grey Pilgrim, on the other hand, did not look surprised. Troubled, the lines on his face deepening with weariness, but not surprised at all. The blue-eyed old man cast a glance at Black, fingers tightening with something like concern at what he saw, but the faint weight that was the attention of the Choir of Mercy scrutinizing him was batted away like overbold fingers. Perched atop the same stone where the Intercessor had sat, two great and shadow-feathered crows gazing down with merciless eyes. They had no claim on my father, I knew, and he was the kind of man who would rather die straight-backed than accept patronage. The extended warding had been offered as a courtesy to me, their thoughts whispered against mine, though all three of us knew they'd have mourned losing out on an opportunity to take a swipe at a Choir without starting a celestial war.

I breathed in smoke, disconcerted by the way it was warm and barely touched when it felt like that pipe had been lit for so long. Masego had told me, once, that there was no such thing as time: only the perception of it, and entropy's ruining touch. I couldn't quite grasp that, truth be told, for even entropy's encroachment must be measured by *something*. Yet the disparity between the acrid smoke against my tongue, the weight of the dragonbone pipe still mostly-full, and the span of the conversation I'd had with the Wandering Bard? They'd lent me a glimpse, perhaps, at what he meant. Had I still been Winter's Queen, such a sliver of understanding would have been turned into peril and artifice

without batting an eye. As the priestess to dark goddesses, instead I hoarded it away the way I did so many other half-espied revelations and the secrets they led to. I had little wisdom of my own to offer, but I was not above passing through that which had been bestowed upon me by wiser souls.

"That is an accusation not without gravity," the Peregrine said.

He flicked a glance at Sve Noc, as if he'd felt their intervention, though what he saw there had him recoil from the unpleasantness. The cold night went colder still, and as the stars above grew more radiant from the wroth of the Ophanim the Sisters cawed out in mockery – though their touch against my mind was agitated, as the attention of an irate Choir of Mercy felt like a burn on their godhead. To my eye, there were times and places where Sve Noc would cow the Ophanim should it come to a contest of might. After they'd taken a petty shot at Mercy's own favourite son was not one of them, though. I cleared my throat, intent on distracting the angels by distracting their champion.

"You don't look all that surprised, though," I mused. "Something you'd like to say, Tariq?"

The white-haired hero turned his attention to me, and as expected the weight of Sve Noc's chiding began to wane with the turn. *You're welcome*, I uncharitably thought. *Now please cease screwing with the hero I'm trying to convince, if you would.* Komena cawed in irritation at my gall, though Androniké signified amusement. I forced myself to ignore the distracting dance of their thoughts against mine, for this was too important a talk to attend to it only half-listening.

"That though you've been known to have… broad an understanding of what constitutes as such an attempt, I have no difficulty believing there was dispute," the Peregrine said. "Younger Bestowed might defer to my decision to take a chance on you out of respect, even if disagreeing, but the Bard is both my elder and greater in the service of the Heavens. She would not feel bound to yield to my decisions."

I breathed out and did not clench my fingers, for it would have been an obvious tell of my sharply risen anger. A *broad fucking understanding*, was it? Coming from a man who'd tried to send me to my death or shackling down the spine of a redemption story, that was a little rich. He could try to pretend he'd kept his hands clean all he wanted, in the hands of a Named a story was no less murderous a tool than a knife.

"You admit to the likeliness of an ally's attack and in the same breath castigate her for having a dainty disposition," Black mildly said. "Come now, Pilgrim, if you're in the business of betrayal at least have the decency to display some *skill* at it."

He looked like a person again, and not a monster with a mask of clay, but beneath the calm affability he'd painted over his face I could see the blades were still bare. I'd seen him smile just as pleasantly before he Spoke and ordered Akua to nail her own hand to a table.

"I scheme no treachery, Carrion Lord," the old hero bit back. "And jeering at me will not serve whatever purpose you seek from it."

"And he's going to stop anyway, isn't he?" I sharply said.

Wondering, beneath the sharpness, if he was being so acerbic with the Pilgrim for the very purpose of my reining him in or if he was simply enjoying mocking a hero. Knowing Black, I grimly thought, it was likely to be both.

"If I must," he nonchalantly shrugged. "Shall we then return to the Peregrine simultaneously absolving himself of responsibility for the actions of his ally while also refusing to denounce her? 'Twas a charming bit of rhetoric. Add a few insincere protestations of friendship and it'll be like I never left Praes."

Ouch. That one had to sting a bit, especially when taken by someone whose understanding of the Wasteland would be through the latest horrors mighty enough to leave Praes and become a peril for everyone else.

"I do not condone attack, if attack was had," the Grey Pilgrim sharply replied. "Do not speak for me, much less with viper claims. Yet neither will I pretend that all servants of Above will follow me in making bargain with the Black Queen. As for the Wandering Bard, her Bestowal forbids as much as it allows. Behaving with grace will ensure she neither wants nor *can* act against any of you."

"She's not a heroine, Pilgrim," I said. "I've seen her make pacts on behalf of Below. If you don't believe me, I'll even ask the Sisters to let your little winged friends have a look at me to ascertain the veracity of what I saw."

That either the Ophanim or Tariq Fleetfoot himself would feel entitled to have a look at my bloody soul simply so that my words would be given due weight was infuriating, but that was the nature of the game. Trust was ever in short supply, in matters such as this. Especially when accusations were being thrown around.

"So have I," the Grey Pilgrim calmly said.

I went still with utter surprise. *What?*

"I suspect I am a great deal more learned in what the duties of the Wandering Bard entail than you, Queen Catherine," the old man continued. "An envoy does not decide the substance of the offer they carry, and some of the bargains the Bard was sent to offer were dark indeed."

"You know she has a greater game, then," I pressed.

"I know that across the faces she has worn she has warred against Keter wherever there was war to be had, and ever done good over evil whenever the choice was given to her," Tariq said. "That the Gods Above do not have sole claim on her works does not mean she is not a heroine."

"The moment before this conversation began, she dragged me out for an aside," I flatly said. "And she-"

"It does not matter what was said, Queen Catherine," the Pilgrim told me. "For you were being tested, as I have seen others Bestowed be and once was myself. By choosing rectitude over baseness, you emerged unharmed and proved you were not a menace that must be seen to."

"So you're agreeing, then, that the Wandering Bard just took a swing at me," I slowly said.

He frowned.

"She would have if you were less than you are," he said, as if it was evident. "You were not, and so this was merely confirmation."

Black laughed, softly, the sound of it like cool silk.

"See, Catherine, there was nothing to it," he smiled, sharp and cold. "The ordeal would only have stung were you a heretic, which makes wanton use of it perfectly permissible. Indeed, how dare any of us question the Wandering Bard's right to pursue our demise whenever the whim takes her? How very impious."

"He's being a bit of a shit right now," I said, "so it rather pains me to agree with him, Tariq. Even if you trust in the Bard – and Gods, I'd like to know what you have on her for that to be the case – then how the Hells does that translate to her getting the right to pull things like this? Nobody here is your fucking vassal, Pilgrim, much less Above's. This wasn't a test, it was a fucking act of war. And you're defending her right to have done it."

"I trust in a woman I have seen dedicated a lifetime to carrying out good deeds wherever and whenever she could," the Pilgrim said. "I have known her to do this since before either of you were born, and in her deeds she has not spared heroes when they courted disaster. I do not know what she intended by acting as she did tonight, nor do I blindly presume it was righteous. Nor will I, just as blindly, accept your belief that she is... by your words, some manner of sinister immortal schemer?"

"You've seen part of her work," I flatly said. "I've seen others, and they're hardly pleasant. Her enmity with the Dead King is more or less the only thing I take as a given with her. She was part of the Lone Swordsman' band, before he called down Contrition on Liesse. She was in the Free Cities before it all went to shit there, and she had a hand in Akua's Folly as well – though the exact nature of what she did remains unclear."

"And so she fought the occupation of Callow through every means at her disposal, when the rest of the servants of the Heavens forsook their duty to the fallen kingdom," Tariq kindly said. "I've no doubt her actions were harmful to you or others beloved of you, but that does not make her sinister – only a foe you never evened your scores with."

This wasn't going to work, I thought. And it was why the Bard had been so utterly unworried about my talking with Tariq: she'd known she had decades if not half a century of a solid record with the man that'd weight against whatever I said. And the more I made this about the places where I'd fought her, the more this became a personal grudge between myself and his old friend. Bringing in Black's run-ins with her would make it even worse, given that the Pilgrim would wholeheartedly endorse the decimation of the Calamities and the break-up of the partnerships that'd kept Malicia's reign so strong. My teacher had mentioned she'd openly admitted to allowing a heroine to die so that Sabah's

death would be set in stone by a story, but she'd also likely been fucking with his head at the time so that his break with myself and Malicia burned all involved. And even if he believed us... well, Captain had killed more than a dozen heroes over the span of her career. From a practical Good perspective, trading a young heroine for the death of an old monster and the first crack in the Calamities would be worth it. I'd been counting on the shock of the Intercessor having acted on Below's behalf to create the Night to jar him into re-examining their history, but there'd *been* no surprise. Which left me only with a second-hand memory in which the Bard had still outright advised annihilation over taking the bargain.

Shit. She'd covered all her angles there, hadn't she? It made sense. The Grey Pilgrim had been Above's foremost agent in the west of Calernia for at least half a century now, by sheer dint of the stories he'd have been involved in they would have encountered each other quite a bit. Plenty of time to work on him, which once more made sense considering how influential a man he'd been headed towards being for a very long time. No, it would have been absurd for the Intercessor *not* to foster strong ties with him: she was too old and too fair a hand at weaving to have left such an obvious loose end unattended. And to have attended to it in a manner that I couldn't feasibly shake right now, I grimly thought. I had interests in common with the Peregrine, maybe even some shared principles, but also a red history that'd turned amicable only very recently. Hells, I'd *killed* the woman that'd probably been the closest thing he had to a friend without wings not even a week ago. Truce and my begetting the Liesse Accords was not enough to have him cut ties with the Bard. It'd be like going at an iron chain with a butter knife: how long had she spent to ensure the strength of those ties? How much time had been... Oh, *oh*. No, I'd been thinking about this all wrong, hadn't I? I'd learned a few tricks in the art of bargains and how to wag my tongue instead of my sword-hand, but in the end I was not more silver-tongued than *the* silvertongue.

It'd been laughable of me to even try, because once more I was letting the Bard pick the face of our struggle.

The Intercessor had invested time and effort and trustworthiness in her relationship with the Grey Pilgrim, but while he trusted her he did not seem to defer to her outright. When he defended her actions, it was as an act of trust. Trust she'd earned over decades, and I'd tried to fight with respect mere days old. I'd been so fixated on removing the Wandering Bard from this entirely I'd missed the obvious: that the ties went both ways. That if she was relying on relationships she'd forged in the past to have a finger in every pie, then she had to live up to the terms she had set to those relationships. And considering the high esteem in which the Grey Pilgrim apparently held her, the standards she'd set could not be low. So if I made a reasonable request born out of reasonable – if, in the Pilgrim's eyes, still unwarranted – fears then unless she had a damned good reason then she couldn't go against it. No, wouldn't be enough, I thought as I parsed out what doors it closed for her in truth. Relying on the decades

of trust she'd be able to make apologetic noises but get away with it by simple virtue of producing one of various skeleton keys: it was necessary to beat the Dead King, allowing it would have caused suffering in years to come, had to prevent the rise of a great Evil. The Pilgrim would be angry, maybe, but the expectation would still be there that as long as the damage wasn't too bad for the greater good I'd have to grin and fucking bear it. On the other hand, was I good? They couldn't both treat me like Triumphant incipient and expect me to be their own personal Choir of Endurance. I'd surprised heroes pleasantly over the last few years because their expectations of me were low.

Well, they were certainly the easiest kind to live up to. Feigning indignation here would be risky, for though Tariq's inability to understand that one could be good without being Good had left him strikingly naïve in some ways he was frighteningly perceptive in others. Thankfully, I wouldn't have to. My jaw clenched and I did not have to look far for the anger. I'd stowed away the wroth, chosen the benefits of a clear head over it, but it had not *disappeared*. How many times was I supposed to let the whip crack against my back because my *betters* were not willing to see to their own? How many times was I supposed to let it go, that to kill me or mine was a virtue but that daring to crawl out of the ash alive – much less fight back – was a sin? I blew out the wakeleaf smoke, and the bitterness that lingered against my tongue was not only from the herb. There were parts of my father's madness that I would never make my own, but some that'd always rung true: in the end, in their eyes we were not equal. And we'd never be people until we followed their rules and spoke their prayers, until we'd admitted that their way was right and ours was wrong.

"For small slights," I hissed, "long prices."

The Pilgrim's blue eyes widened in startlement, and he raised his hands in appeasement.

"Your Majesty-" he began.

"Yes," I coldly said. "That is who I am, Peregrine. The Black Queen. The Arch-heretic of the East. It seems you have forgot how we came to stand here on this night. Shall I help you remember?"

"There is no need for threats," the Pilgrim evenly said.

And yet I could see it in his eyes, the rising awareness of who it was he was dealing with. *Remember, you arrogant old priest,* I thought. *Remember that you did not take me for Triumphant come again without reason and then curb your fucking priestly tongue.*

"You sing the praises of she who strikes at me and declare her worthy of passing judgement upon my works," I mocked. "*You*, Tariq Fleetfoot? By what right?"

I grinned, sharp and vicious.

"You are not victor here on this field," I said. "You are the defeated, breathing only by the grace of the aspect I *ripped* out of you with my own hand. Your plots I shattered, your armies I routed and your own Choir stepped aside when faced with the glare of my purpose. And now you strut about like a green boy,

arrogating the rights to lecture me when it is only my mercy that spared your throat my boot."

"This is not the talk of an ally," the Grey Pilgrim warningly said.

"You do not behave like one," I snarled. "And if you can only conceive of amity as vassalage, then this truce is at an end."

"You have sacrificed much to deliver it," the Peregrine reminded me flatly. "And through such savage actions you would end any chance of the Accords being signed."

I laughed, full-throated and cold.

"You think I'd give you a choice?" I smiled. "You think I chose peace because I *fear* the other path? I'll not fight the Grand Alliance, Pilgrim. I'll leave and let you die like whimpering dogs, alone in the dark."

I took a step forward, limping, and he drew back.

"I'll return only when I have the full might of the East behind me in array of war, and when I come back wherever the veil of night falls all will have a choice," I snarled. "You can take up a sword and join my war against Keter, or you can do it as a *walking corpse*. If treaties and alliances fail, I'll take steel and fire to the Dead King as Dread Empress, Victorious."

His eyes went cold.

"You will find me waiting at the end of that road," the Grey Pilgrim said.

"At the end?" I grinned. "You'll be the first damned thing I step on, Peregrine."

He looked at me searchingly, looking for lie or weakness, and found none. Harsh as my words had been, Gods but the truth of them simmered in my belly. I had chosen peace, but I was not beholden to it. And if the only way through was crowned in dread, then so be it.

"What do you want, Black Queen?" the old man finally asked.

"WANDERING BARD," I screamed out into the night. "INTERCESSOR."

I waited a beat, to see if she would appear. She did not. No matter, it would be enough to attract her gaze.

"You spoke for that faceless thing, Peregrine," I said. "And so now you answer for her as well. If you shelter and safeguard her, then you are responsible for her actions: if she schemes against me or mine, if she moves against truce or Accords, then I will take it as betrayal from both of you."

My jaw clenched.

"That will not be without *consequence*."

And I would tell every soul willing to listen. I'd tell the First Prince, I'd tell Princess Rozala, I'd tell the Blood and every hero willing to hear me shout from behind a blood wall. But most of all, I'd just told the Pilgrim himself. From now on, if she acted against me she was knowingly fucking over the Accords and the truce that was the only thing keeping Procer standing in the war on Keter. If she pulled something, she now had to justify it to Tariq as something more important than the death of several million people. Silvertongue or not, there wasn't much that would even those scales. This was, I ruefully thought,

the principles of the Accords used once more: the practical realities of Creation being used to restrain its stories. Ties went both ways, didn't they? Sure, if the prize was worth it the Bard would make her move anyway. But she'd lose the Pilgrim, and when she did strike I fully intended on being ready for her. *If you're without ties, you have no strings to pull*, I thought. *If you keep them, though, then a strong enough tug on the strings makes it a thin line between puppet and puppeteer.* Tariq looked tired and grieved, but I was out of pity to spare.

"At dawn I'll begin work on the gates into the Twilight Ways for the armies," I said. "Be there or not, as you wish."

I began hiking my way back up before he answered, intent on returning to the soothing warmth of fire and booze and good company. And before the end of the night, I thought, there would be a need to speak with Masego. He'd get whatever he needed to test his Quartered Seasons theory, even if I ended up cutting corners elsewhere for the allocated resources.

Deicide, sadly, was unlikely to come on the cheap.

# Chapter 70

# Dawning

> "For light blinds just as surely as the dark, and hatred binds just as surely as love."
>
> Sherehazad the Seer, Taghreb poet

I woke up to the feeling of bony elbows digging into my ribs. It surprised me not because I'd forgotten that Indrani and I had ended up in bed – I still felt pleasurably sore from those exertions, so it'd have been a shame to – but because she was still here. In my bed, though for once she was only mildly hogging the covers. The gift of awareness Sve Noc had granted me, I sometimes suspected without strictly *meaning* to, had me mindful that dawn was a little more than an hour away. It'd not been a long night of sleep and to be honest I still felt a little drunk, but worse come to worse I'd take a nap come the afternoon. I might need to whatever my intentions, if raising a gate into Twilight was as exhausting as I suspected it would be. My mind recoiled at the thought of it, for I would need the guidance of the Sisters to see it done and that was rarely pleasant or gentle thing. I stretched and yawned to keep my thoughts moving instead of lingering on the coming unpleasantness, sliding out of the blanket and sitting on the edge of the bed. Indrani began to stir awake and I smoothed away a puzzled frown. I'd wondered if our arrangement would be set aside until she'd resolved whatever she was going to resolve with Masego, but truth be told I'd not been entirely surprised we'd ended up in bed after the rough few days we'd had.

Honesty compelled me to admit I'd not needed much convincing when she'd offered, either.

That she'd stay afterwards, though, that had me wondering. Not at whether or not this was blooming into something more romantic in nature – for all that Akua had once claimed I had difficulty separating bedplay from attachment, Indrani and I had always been very clear that neither of us was likely to ever fall in love with the other – but at the nature of whatever accord she was trying to reach with Zeze. I doubted a man raised by the Warlock and an incubus

would be all that inclined to give a single thought to what people might or might not consider proper, but I disliked not knowing what I was involved in. Even if only peripherally. That was on a personal note, anyway. As the nominal leader of the Woe, there were concerns about what all this fumbling might mean for our little band. *Though in all fairness*, I grimly thought, *if it's such a great concern I probably shouldn't be sleeping with Archer.* I bet Black would never have – huh, no, he most definitely had. With Ranger, of all women. I cast a speculative look at Indrani as she opened her eyes. Comparisons between the Woe and the Calamities had begun before the Queen of Summer had even granted us the name, so if I was to be my generations equivalent of Black and Indrani of Ranger? Ugh. That did feel a little sordid.

Indrani took my lingering gaze for something else entirely, and just so happened to stretch in a way that pushed back the covers and arched up her breasts. Pure coincidence, no doubt. Well. It would have been rude not to appreciate the sights, really, if you thought about it. Best not to mention that earlier thought about equivalences, I decided. Archer was not, as a rule, all that opposed to sordidness. She did like to rub my nose in it, though, so no need to hand her a full quiver.

"Don't suppose I could convince you to stay in bed a little longer," Indrani said, voice still husky from sleep.

And perhaps something else as well, though that might just be my continuing look at the smooth expanse of brown skin laid out before me.

"Any more of that and we'll break the cot," I smiled. "Wasn't made for two people, much less that sort of... exercise."

"Wouldn't be as an issue if I tied your wrists again," Indrani airily said.

Now that was just unfair. And surely I could spare a bit of time before leaving the tent. Or perhaps half my time. Unfortunately, my awareness of looming dawn made it clear that was not the case despite my body's insistence otherwise.

"I'll need time to prepare the grounds for the ritual," I reluctantly said.

She sighed, though from the sly look in her eye I'd say my hesitation had been the prize she'd been after from the start. Indrani always turned pixie, after a shared night, as if the shedding of clothes brought out her vainest sort of guiles.

"Boring," she said, waving a hand in dismissal. "Still, I'm already up. No point in going back to bed alone."

I snorted. Yeah, she hadn't been expecting me to accept then. It was still night out, and so it was not all that difficult to spin black flames around the stone basin to the side of my bed until the water within it was warm. I took the cloth to the side of it and began by washing my face, though I ceased when I felt Indrani looking at me.

"Not happening," I said.

I swept my unbound hair back over my shoulder as I spoke, aware from how frequently Indrani liked to grip it that she had something of a fascination there.

I didn't have curves to display, unlike my friend, but I was hardly unattractive to her. It was my arms, though, that she was looking at.

"You're getting wiry," Archer said, sounding fascinated. "Haven't seen your body change that much since the Folly."

Had I gained muscles? Strange, since I wasn't walking around in plate or sparring regularly anymore. Some of my surprise must have shown on my face, as she continued to speak.

"You were bulkier when we first met," Indrani said. "Warrior-framed. You look more like a hunter now, made for the long stride instead of the shield wall."

"You're feeling rather poetic this morning," I drily said.

"Been a while since slept in the same bed," she smiled. "Don't get used to it."

I wet the cloth again, for the wetness had cooled, and wiped the lower half of my face to hide my hesitation. Ah, well. If I waited for either Indrani or Masego to tell me what was going on, I'd still be waiting on my deathbed.

"Should," I delicately began, "I get used to *this*?"

I flicked a few fingers at the messy bed we'd been sharing. Her expression was difficult to parse, and not for the lack of light in the tent: a sliver of Night had seen to that.

"Not sure yet," she said. "But I did tell you, back in Great Lotow – that is that, and this is this."

*For you, maybe*, I thought. I wasn't sure exactly what she was trying to have with Masego, but any manner of pairing would rather imply he could have an opinion as well. It wasn't that I expected Zeze to suddenly make like an Alamans priest and condemn the pleasures of the flesh as wayward. Mores aside, he was not above those himself: me might not have any interest in bedplay, but I'd seen him dig into fresh apple tarts like a starving orc would a pig. He'd not been overweight when we first met without reason. Still, I honestly had no idea of what he'd want of a relationship – any relationship – that wasn't friendship or family. Didn't help that I'd never heard him express a desire for one. His fathers had been married and a closed circle, as far as I knew, and among the rest of the band of Named who'd raised him Sabah had been happily wed and mother while Black had his... rapport with the Lady of the Lake, though I'd been made to understand that they only met every few years for a short span. Gods, none of us had been raised in a traditional family, had we? Orphan, diabolist and incubus, *Ranger*. Vivienne's mother had been assassinated by the Empire, after all. Although, now that I thought about it, Hakram's childhood had not been all that unusual by orc standards. He'd simply been an ill-fit for his clan, and later the College.

Hells, that might actually go some way in explaining why he tended to be the most stable of us.

"Still, I'll not be offended if our company lapses until you have your house in order," I told her.

She ought to know already, but sometimes it was best to have those things stated outright.

"And who will you work out your tensions with, then?" she grinned. "I suppose our shady friend might be up to scratching that itch, but you'll have to train her up to snuff first."

I frowned.

"That's thrice now that people have commented on that," I said.

Hakram had asked me directly, and though last night Aisha's question had been a great deal more circumspect it'd been of the same vein.

"Come off it," Archer said. "It's hardly the first time I've jested about the Mighty Shadow Lass' neckline plunging whenever she thinks you're looking. No need to be troubled over it, Cat: she's a looker, and invites the looking. It's hardly a sin to accept the invitation now and then."

On occasion it felt otherwise, though that voice was the same that reminded me there could be no just reason for allowing the Doom of Liesse to breathe free air. That a hundred thousand souls demanded, if not lasting torment, at least as painful an execution as I could carry out. I could not entirely articulate why it was worse that I found her attractive added to the rest, but it'd always had that taste against my tongue. That I'd grown to like, and in some ways even trust, Akua Sahelian was worse still. The fate I meant for her was just in the ways that mattered, I truly did believe, but I suspected many would disagree. And so the wheel spun, the endless loop of wondering if I being swayed or played or if the whispers were black and brutal vengeance indignant at being denied. I'd wondered these wonderings before, and no truth had come of the spinning. Which had me glancing thoughtfully at Archer, curious if that'd all been a skillful to steer the conversation away from a subject she was not yet ready to speak of. Given her enduring reluctance to simply state as much – for which I blamed Ranger, who'd beaten into her head while young that admitting anything of the sort was naked weakness – I wouldn't put it past her. Best let those sleeping dogs lie for now, then.

"You can't lecture me about sin, you wench. Who's the priestess here?" I lightly replied.

That devolved into petty bickering, not that there'd been any doubt, and we washed up and dressed in quick order after that. Hakram was sleeping, for once, but we still found a fire going outside my tent and a pair of legionaries awaiting by it with breakfast. We chatted over the porridge as cuts from last night's meal – horse, by the smell of it – were put over flame. The two were lieutenants, one from General Istrid's old legion and the other one of mine since Marchford though she'd first seen combat when Winter struck at my demesne. The lieutenant from the Sixth was an old Soninke and quite obviously a bastard from some noble line by the cultured, highborn manner of speaking. They were both respectful but neither gazed at me with the near-awe I got from so many young legionaries these days. It was both a great deal more comfortable and

made conversation easier. Archer left early after stealing half my horse meat, alleging she was going to have a look at Masego.

"Bring him, if he's awake," I said.

Pilgrim might not like it, but I was less than charitably inclined towards the man right now. As for the Sisters, unless they wanted to be present at every gate-crafting then the knowledge of how to craft it would have to be passed and I could think of none more fitting than Hierophant to hold it. Their last talk had, uh, not been all that civil but no grudge should be kept over that. They'd acted like carrion and so been treated as such, and it was doubtful Masego would keep a grudge on his side. I felt Sve Noc's attention, brought by the thought pertaining to them, and their silence was implicit agreement. They gained nothing from being at odds with Hierophant, though I doubted it was writ in their fates they'd be bosom friends anytime soon. I finished breaking my fast, thanked the officers and claimed a steaming cup of the herbal concoction Adjutant had arranged to be waiting for me before I began my trek back up the slope of the barrow. My fondness for the place had grown with the use I'd made of it, but Sve Noc and Akua were all adamant: the heart of the old Mavian prayers was where the boundaries were thinnest. It'd be significantly easier to make a passage there, though sentimentality aside I'd had more practical objections.

The raised stones would make it more difficult for large amounts of people to pass through, and this gate into the Twilight Ways was meant for my armies to use. The footpaths up the slope were difficult, which meant there were no roads for supply carts and siege engines to feasibly employ. Besides, unless we knocked down the stones it'd be effectively impossible to take them through. My advisory triumvirate of assorted crows and shade had uncertain when I'd asked them whether after the passage was made it'd unmake it to bring down the stones. Akua insisted that it was a 'boundary echo' that made the place appropriate, and so it wouldn't matter, but Andronike had disagreed. Something about an indent having a particular shape, and not existing without that shape. I was a decade of schooling in sorcery short to understand Akua's opinion and short an apotheosis to properly understand Andronike's. Still, even if the entire thing proved unworkable without the stones then at least we'd have a working pathway into Twilight for small groups and schematics for the second one to be made. The wards and workings around the tumulus had been removed, so there was nothing keeping the cold bite of the night wind away as I limped up the hill. I drew on Night to chase away the cold, though it was more an illusion cast on myself than true warmth.

I'd been able to feel her through the Night even before calling on it, so my face betrayed no surprise when after passing between the circle stones I found Akua Sahelian waiting atop the barrow. She'd eschewed dresses for a heavy yet elegant cloak line with fox fur, its deep red tones perfectly married to the heavy velour robes she wore below. She did not turn as I limped forward, nor when I came to stand by her side and sipped at the herbal brew in my hands.

"Deep thoughts?" I said. "I've a copper or two to spare for them."

She did not immediately reply. Unlike with the drow, I could not taste of Akua's emotions through the Night. The Sisters had told me it was because she partook of their bounty only through me, and the nature of that tie was older than the touch of the Night itself. It'd been inherited through the Mantle of Woe and Winter's last gasps, which made things rather more complicated. Amusingly enough, in some ways my patron goddesses were as much in the dark as I: there was no precedent to any of this, and no understanding of sorcery or power was so comprehensive that this extraordinary an unfolding would be perfectly grasped. A reminder, perhaps, of the unbridgeable gap between gods and Gods. The shade's eyes were not on me or even the dry riverbed of what had once been a place halfway to Arcadia: she was, instead, gazing at the now empty firepit that'd been dug yesterday.

"Do you remember Barika Unonti?" Akua suddenly asked.

Truth be told, for all their high birth and purported importance most of the then-Heiress' helpers had half-faded from my memory. Sneers and tittering and arrogance could only have so many flavours without my keeping them in my remembrance only as some Wasteland brat who'd insisted on crossing me until death ensued. Barika, though? Her I remembered. The way I'd broken her finger, the first time I attended court in the Tower, and been punished for that mistake. More for the way she'd died. Convinced she was untouchable, even after helping Akua open a Lesser Breach straight into Liesse. I'd put a crossbow bolt in her eye as she knelt, and she'd died before she could even be surprised. And that death I'd made into salt to rub into Akua's wounds that day, when I'd ordered her buried in consecrated grounds so that nothing of her could ever be brought back from the afterlife.

"I do," I said. "She taught me a valuable lesson."

"Looking back now," Akua said, "I suspect she might have been my friend. Or as close to that as our understanding of the sentiment allowed."

And still, I thought, the young Heiress had left her behind as an illusory decoy knowing I might very kill her for what was about to be unleashed. Part of me scorned her for that, though another wondered of the cold choices I'd made sending some of those I loved into battle and wondered if the difference there was not shallower than I'd wish. I did not answer. In part for my role in how Barika Unonti had died, no matter how worthy of that death she had been, but also in a moment of wonder. I'd suspected, even back then, that of all her followers Unonti was likely the only one she had any degree of real fondness for beyond that which usefulness garnered. It'd been years since I killed the girl, much less thought of her, but her mistress remembered her still. It was a small thing, and fragile. And it tasted like triumph to my tongue, for the fate I had promised Akua Sahelian was beginning to take shape.

"I used to think you lacked the knack for cruelty, did you know?" the shade smiled. "Oh, you've a way with the striking: to evoke fear or loyalty with an act

and turn of phrase. Yet I always found your ways to be… clear. Lacking that touch of malice my people drink along with mother's milk."

A moment passed, wind stirring both our long cloaks.

"But not anymore," I said.

"Last night," Akua pensively said, "might be the single most cruel act I was ever subjected to."

I did not protest. Because it was true. Because this was the sound of bile being bled out of tainted veins.

"I cannot even muster rancor, Catherine," she said. "For it was a misery entirely of my own making, and exquisitely brought besides."

"It doesn't have to be that way," I said.

She laughed, bleakly.

"Doesn't it?" Akua said. "For I was allowed, for just a moment, the taste of something I might have had. And oh it was a *heady* thing, my queen. A place by your hearth, partaking of the warmth and belonging that radiates from it. And though they love you and have long despised me, your favour alone was enough for me to be made welcome. For them to…"

She turned to me with burning golden eyes.

"Do you not understand that the laughs should have been empty?" she hissed. "That it should have been artifice, at show put on for purpose. I am a better liar than any of them, Catherine Foundling, than any of you. I know the face of truth. After years of enmity all it took for them to make room for me by the fire was a word from you. *I could have had all of this years ago*."

"Yes," I agreed, "you could have."

"The closest I have to match to last night is a girl I sent to die," Akua bitterly said. "You've devised a poison so sweet I will crave the taste of it."

I looked at her, in the dark before the dawn, and knew that in that moment either I had been made of fool or I had won. Once more I chose silence, knowing that the slightest hint of what might be taken as gloat would send the entire delicate edifice tumbling down.

We were silent still, when the others arrived.

# Chapter 71

# Verge

> "I am told awe is made half of reverence and half of fear. Let us find out, knights of the Callow, if terror alone will be enough to teach it to the likes of you."
>
> Dread Emperor Nihilis I, the Tanner

The last of them arrived half an hour before dawn's start.

Since I'd been granted my first command in the Legions I'd gotten used to the way that large-scale ritual magic tended to require more people than you'd think, at least when it needed to be done quick and dirty – as was usually the way, when on campaign. It was often a question of needing to pool power so no one died or burned out feeding the ritual though I'd lucked out more than I'd realized when Masego, in those days still the Apprentice, had joined the Fifteenth. There was a reason that Black had preferred massed spells to the old standard of ritual cadres when he'd rebuilt the Legions of Terror from the ground up after the Praesi civil war: it standardized the arsenal of a legion's casters. It'd become increasingly clear over the years that the way it was mostly Wasteland highborn that used cadres of ritual mages along with their personal armies wasn't a coincidence. The heart of the matter was that for a circle of sorcerers to be able to use a ritual together without significant preparations it required for them to be highly skilled, familiar with each other and learned in that particular ritual. That meant keeping mage cadres together, for the Legions, which Black would very much try to avoid since by simple odds it'd mean a lot of Soninke and Taghreb officers of noble birth forming cliques with disproportionated influence inside a legion.

One set of rules for the aristocrats and another one for the soldiers was something my teacher had spent decades trying to dismantle, he wouldn't tacitly endorse its resurrection in the very institution he'd spent so many years shaping. The Fifteenth, and later the Army of Callow, had avoided much of these issues by simple virtue of having Masego along. I'd not understood the importance of the role he played in large-scale battlefield sorceries until our

last campaigns, where his absence had effectively made disappear half our ritual arsenal into thin air and robbed me of the High Arcana savant I'd turn towards for answers whenever some strange phenomenon appeared. Oh, Zeze had taught my mages some rough and relatively simple rituals to use on battlefields: his Lightning Strikes and the Spears of Fire remained a staple of the Army of Callow, who unlike the Legions simply didn't *have* enough mages to be able to afford massed spells as a tactic. But even with those, without his presence there was significant drop in range, power and rate of fire. It wasn't just that he'd used to have rather impressive reserves, but rather that having Masego standing among a ritual was like having someone to conduct a choir. He made up for the imprecisions of others, guided through the stumbles and kept precise the manipulations in the way that someone who wasn't him just... couldn't.

Akua had once compared it to having one of the finest swordsmen on the continent running recruits through formation drills, and she wasn't entirely wrong. Still, with the Dead King's cut those days had seemingly come at an end and the crowd that'd gathered was not a throng of half-awed young mages taking Masego's every word for sorcerous gospel. With the mere arrival of Hierophant and Archer, our company had grown to the sort of dawn tales were made of. Two black-winged goddesses, silently looming atop raised stones in the shape of great and terrible crows. The Doom of Liesse, veiled and silent but not grown much the lesser from her hour of folly. Hierophant, stripped of sorcery but still vivisector of miracles and the kind of man whose insights even gods flinched from. Archer and myself were perhaps lesser figures, for what mattered. All that was required from me in this thinning darkness was a steady hand and the wielding of Night, while she was here as the hand propping up Masego as well as one who had more than once tread the demimonde between Creation and the Twilight Ways without needing any guidance. Should the Pilgrim demur from coming, it would be Archer whose intuitions would be relied on when the burn was made. Yet Tariq did come, in the end, though not alone: bleary-looking and huddling inside a thick cloak of fur, the Rogue Sorcerer was with him. And with those last two there were none left to await, so I drew first blood against the silence.

"Morning," I said. "Or close enough."

Only Masego, I noted, was kind-hearted enough to reply with a full return of the courtesy. Roland shivered inside his cloak, and the Peregrine merely nodded. His face bore the manner of calmness that one wore around a foe, I thought, and though I'd known provoking a return to that was necessary to tie the Intercessor's hands I still regretted it. It would have been pleasant, to be on decent terms with the unspoken doyen of Above's champions.

"Dawn's just around the corner and it'll make everything more difficult when it comes, so I'll spare us all the small talk," I said. "Most of my advisors in matters eldritch say this is where making a stable gate into Twilight will be most straightforward."

"You'll need an anchor for the other side," the Sorcerer said.

"If the aspiration was a clean cut followed by material shoring up, perhaps," Masego dismissed. "Night is not so precise, from what I've observed, and none of the appropriate ritual substances have been gathered here."

I glanced at Roland, who unlike most people subjected to Zeze's mild puzzlement at their 'ignorance' did not seem to have taken offence in the slightest. If anything, he rather looked like he wanted to have ink and parchment on hand. That ought to take care of itself without my intervention, then. Good. The Rogue Sorcerer was by a significant margin the friendliest hero I'd encountered, and I had no intention of letting academic rivalry get in the way of that.

"The Hierophant is right," I said. "What I'll need, though, is... a sense of where to aim for. Which I don't have, unlike some of you. Archer might be able to help, but the person atop this barrow with the deepest tie to Twilight should need no introduction."

Namely the man who had once borne the Twilight Crown, for however short a span. Bearing a mantle like that left marks, I'd know that better than most. It was no coincidence that I'd been able to feel this very place's affinity with Arcadia long after having divested myself of the last of Winter within me. The Grey Pilgrim eyed me warily, though he did not outright decline. As expected of the man, he could already tell where this was headed and was less than enthused.

"Oh," Roland said, shivering from the cold. "Resonance, to shape the depth at which the damage will be inflicted. Yes, that would work. A brute force solution, though."

Archer could serve that purpose as well, but her ties were nowhere as deep. She'd tread the grounds of Twilight for longer than any of us, journeyed through its nook and crannies and even stood open-eyed while the transition from stolen shard of Arcadia to a realm took place. None of these were small things. But the Grey Pilgrim had given the last crown and borne the burden of giving the Twilight Ways their face and shape. The difference was extensive and would likely make a difference in my being knocked out for a day or a week. Figuratively speaking, one hoped, though my advisory triumvirate had not been willing to commit to it.

"Fine tools come from refinement over years and decades," Akua said. "This is work without precedent, Sorcerer."

The last word she spoke with the faintest hint of dubiousness. Had I been worried about the wrong Soninke, then? Shit. She was usually better about this stuff than Zeze, but then this one was a hero as well as a practitioner.

"He is correct," Masego noted. "This is not unlike making a gate by melting stone and shaping it into a threshold."

"And we've so many people observing to establish if there's a better way to do it, next time we must," I said, cutting in before pride could get anything started.

Mages, huh. And I thought it was the brawlers like Indrani and myself that had troubles with surfeit of swaggering.

"And how is this resonance to be acquired, Black Queen?" the Grey Pilgrim asked.

I suppressed a grimace.

"A close look at the traces Twilight left on you," I said.

"Soul-gazing," Tariq flatly said.

Little thick, coming from a man I was pretty sure had an aspect essentially dedicated to that and constantly used it on everyone, but I'd cut him so slack considering who'd be doing that gazing. Namely the Sisters, who for all my occasional appreciation for them were not the kindest or best-inclined of entities on Creation.

"An intermediary will be provided, should you so wish," I said, inclining my head towards Akua.

Wouldn't be as precise a reading, as for all her talents the shade did not benefit from the indescribable senses and perceptions that sprang from apotheosis, but she *was* talented. What she did pass along to me would be more than enough, and as she was not sworn to serve the Sisters the scrutiny might be more acceptable. Maybe. I wasn't sure where Mercy would fall on that, much less Tariq himself.

"And who would you be?" the Pilgrim openly asked, eyeing Akua cautiously. "We have met before, that much is undeniable. And yet I now see you standing as a bound spirit before me."

They'd met? I frowned, raking my memories and finding no instance. Even during the Princes' Graveyard there should have been no acquaintance. The Battle of the Camps, I realized. Akua had run around wearing my body while I'd been stranded in an endless Winter nightmare and she'd even fought an assembled band of heroes. The Pilgrim would have had a look at her then, and though she had body of her own now I supposed the substance of what she was had not changed too much.

"I am one in the service of the Black Queen of Callow," Akua smilingly said. "Naught else is of import here."

"You chose this appearance," Tariq frowned. "But are not bound to it. What are you, spirit? I have never seen the likes of you, not even in the olden-most barrows of the Brocelian."

"Dawn's coming, Peregrine," I flatly said. "She's bound to me and can wield Night without being in the service of Sve Noc. There will be no more offhand a manner to see this done, if you'll accede to it at all."

"Presumably the Ophanim would slay all here, if attempt was made to wound your soul," Roland pointed out in an aside.

"That is a presumption, yes," Masego calmly agreed.

Archer smothered a smile, and to be honest so did I. It was hardly the time, but the earnestness he'd spoken what would be a boast in another man's mouth made it amusingly endearing. The Pilgrim's eyes were closed, no doubt

conferring with the Ophanim, and glimmered still with Light when they finally opened anew.

"So be it," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Trespass not, spirit, lest you find more than you bargained for."

"Worry not, Peregrine," Akua amicably said. "I've always held angels in high esteem."

It was an effort not to choke. I supposed she technically wasn't lying, considering she'd wanted to use one of the Hashmallim as fuel for her doomsday fortress. After all the posturing I'd expected some degree of ceremony, but what unfolded instead was the shade striding forward and silently asking for permission before laying her hand on the Pilgrim's shoulder. He acceded with a nod, and closed his eyes once more as hers remained wide open. After a long moment she let out a long breath and jerkily nodded towards me. I hobbled forward and raised my hand, which she caught by the wrist: the sliver of Night she'd called on seeped into my own. I'd expected this process to be far beyond my ability to fathom, but to my surprise found it rather familiar. It was not unlike the sensation of opening a fairy gate, the sense of the needle going through the fabric and being… fated, for a lack of better term, to leave the cloth again in another place. What Akua had sensed from the Pilgrim and passed to me was not so sharp and narrow, but it was kin to that. A way to put it, I thought, would be that fairy gates under Winter had been the act of needling while what the shade had shared was having touched the cloth. I already knew from experience that trying to grasp the knowledge perfectly would result mostly into a searing headache, so I let it linger half-known and instead breathed out.

"For I have seen crowns broken and forged anew, snatched a star from the starlit sky and traded a season for half the world," I whispered in Crepuscular. "Now that dawn crawls forward unbid, o Sve Noc, grant me might to wield and the conceit to wield it fearlessly. Where there is rampart let my hand make a road, and Creation deny not my will."

The crows cawed, a resounding cry like the crack of a whip against the night sky, and Night flooded my veins thick and pure. I almost lost my foot but at my side Akua held me up by my elbow, having left Tariq to stand alone, and I gasped as I forced my staff of yew to rise.

"*Deny not my will*," I hissed once more.

Night struck out, like a wave and a strike of thunder, like a flood raging down a riverbed long gone dry. And where it found resistance, I clenched my fingers against the long haft of few and *burned* Creation. Scarred it, so that the blackened and bleeding scabs would stand at the threshold and mark the path to be taken. It was like riding a tide, every moment a struggle, and I swallowed a scream as I felt my strength ebbing. I would not break, not before the work was done. Not even when the coolness of Night lazed like smoke in my veins, tainting my every sense, and in the far distance I felt the distant glare of light marching like a harsh vanguard.

"Catherine," Akua whispered against my ear. "Catherine, you have to stop."

Was she holding me? When had she? Some pried off the hand that'd gone around my waist and it was put around a shoulder at least. Someone taller than I. I grit my teeth, for all the distractions had loosened my grip on the Night – the work had slowed, suffered. Long and delicate fingers joined mine on the staff, and like a miracle the veil on my eyes lifted. Ironclad will became intertwined with my own and I shared a feral, savage grin with Hierophant without either of us ever looking away from the howling darkness before us.

"You can still wield," I whispered.

Ashkaran, I dimly realized.

"A god rode my mind, Catherine, for many months," Hierophant whispered back. "I have *learned things*."

Power billowed out, and I was no longer a fool of a girl clinging to a tiger: we were Woe, standing side by side, and though we were battered things no creature in this world or any other had ever earned *submission* of us. We painted in Night with bold strokes, feeling those around us flee backwards for the storm in the making. Komena laughed in the back of my mind, and it was eagerly that she opened the floodgates between us. Andronike hesitated, until a splash of Night boiled stone like water and we shaped it like clay without ever glancing – after that there was a well of hunger, and Gods Below but the power they granted us. Raised stones melted away into liquid strings like festival banners, spinning into roiling winds of Night. With four hands we sculpted the stone prayer to long-dead gods of Arcadia and usurped the old sacraments like thieving masons in the garments of priests. Two tall pillars, covered with words that were a godless prayer in a dead tongue, were molded and carved. And atop them dropped down the closing of the threshold, a stone like door being slammed shut. Woven from the scabs and burns, sealed in rock where the nature of it could be obscured. Power would fade in time, we knew. But the hurt, the scar? Some transgressions had weight by virtue of being what they were. This would hold for a very, very long time.

After an eternity we half-fell to the ground, Masego's fingers clumsily leaving my staff as I used it to steers us away from tumbling down like drunks. We still crouched, exhausted and exhilarated, as the sense robbed from us by the scale of what we'd wielded and built slowly began to trickle back into our minds. We'd felt something like this once before, in Dormer. There'd been more of us, though, Adjutant and Archer as well. We'd marched forward into the heart of the enemy, bearing the story of the Woe like a banner. This had been a smaller thing, I thought, the Queen of Lost and Found and the Hierophant crafting a miracle out of power and pride. But, Gods... it'd been like a drink of the sweetest of wines, like honey on the soul, and some part of me almost wept that it'd ended.

"Look, Cat," Masego croaked out. "Look."

I followed his trembling finger and beheld the gate of stone we had raised. The runes inscribed on the two great pillars that I knew, just *knew*, were twenty feet tall and twenty apart were no as gibberish to my eye where before I had

known them as if they were my native tongue. But the thrum of them, the crawling flow of power going up them through the barrow like they were rooted there, it sang to me. Of the Twilight just beyond, a mere smear of blood on stone away. And all that power was kept bound, kept locked, by the rough and massive stone pressing down – and the scars it held within, like a secret under seal.

"It's beautiful," I said.

And it was, in its own terrible way. We stayed there in the snow for a long time, at the heart of a circle of raised stones we'd unmade and forged anew, a barren barrow-top caressed by the winds. We stayed there until dawn crested in the distance, the faraway lights that'd be the final touch on our work.

"'lo and behold," I murmured.

The first rays of the sun struck the stone and, as if reflecting from the spiralling runes and stretches of ancient symbols, spun like a dust whirl between the tall pillars. Just long enough a glimpse could be had of the realm beyond, of the endless starlit sky and the shady hills that could be journeyed to any journey's end.

"There's always something more, isn't there?" Masego whispered. "Another horizon, another wonder. Another threshold to cross into deeper unknowns."

It was his own truth he spoke, I thought, but in I heard the echo of Indrani's as well. But what was restlessness in her, wanderlust, in him was instead awe.

"We're not done yet, Masego," I said. "We've bled to get where we stand, and when we come out on the other side we'll not be the same people who began the journey. But we are so very far from done."

He nodded, slowly

"Tomorrow will be ours," the Hierophant agreed, tone tranquil the way old and dark waters were tranquil. "And if there are any who would deny us that, we will **Wrest** it from them with bloody hands."

The word sang, and the world with it, as my old friend found the truth of third aspect and we sat silent in the warm light of dawn.

# Interlude: Iron

> "There are only two sorts of freedom to be found in Praes: the tyrant's freedom, and the freedom to do as the tyrant said."
>
> Extract from the memoirs of Hiram Banu, the Ninety-Year Chancellor

Her Most Serene Highness Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer, Princess of Salia, Prince of Rhenia and Warden of the West found that her patience ran thin, these days. Not for a freshly developed failure of character, she'd decided, but rather because there was simply so much to do and so little time to see it done. Petty temporizing from others had once been something to tolerate out of courtesy, to maintain the ties of etiquette binding all to civility and so providing a common tongue, yet now ever instance was measurable loss. And never a frivolous one, either, for all the decisions of middling import she could pass on to subordinates she already had weeks ago. Therefore, when the First Prince of Procer entered her solar at a brisk pace she was quietly irked by the absence of one of the three men she'd sent for. The Principate of Procer could be said to have three great assemblies of spies, when counting those attached to the sole office of the First Prince and not the particular of who sat on the throne. The first and foremost was the Circle of Thorns, whose webs of informants abroad had been the eyes and ears of the rulers of Procer for centuries now: its current highest patron, the skeletal and balding Louis of Sartrons, rose smoothly as she entered. A noticeable moment later the other man in the room, Balthazar Serigny, followed suit.

That hirsute bear of a man, his face a bold battlefield between ferocious eyebrows and an uncompromising beard, was the head of the Silver Letters. A pack of thieves and assassins grown so successful some centuries past they were given official sanction and from then on used as the spies of the First Princes within the boundaries of the Principate itself. Balthazar the Bastard, as his subordinates called him without speaking of the circumstances of his birth, had opposed Cordelia's rise to power during the Great War and remained in place after her crowning largely because he was too difficult to swiftly replace and the successor she'd handpicked for him was not yet ready. There should have been a third on his feet there, Simon of Gorgeault, standing in the name of the Holy Society. That one was as much a diplomat as a spy, for

the Holy Society and its assembly of highborn lay brothers and sisters was at times more an informal channel of communication with the House of Light than shadowy obtainers of secrets. Gorgeault's lateness grated on her more than it should have, Cordelia knew, for knowing the man it would not be without reason. Yet his close ties with the House and in particular the Holies – that informal assembly of the influential within the House whose equally informal decisions ever became formal policy – were doing him no favour in her eyes of late.

"A good morn to you both," the First Prince of Procer calmly said.

She paused long enough to allow the two spymasters to return the courtesy.

"Be seated," Cordelia Hasenbach ordered. "We will begin without Brother Simon."

The blonde Lycaonese pressed her skirts against her legs to more elegantly sit her chair, dismissing the attending servants with a polite shake of the head when inquiries were made by silent look. She had no intention of entertaining these men long enough for refreshments to be required, much less a meal. Besides, should she offer either etiquette would require small talk be made over them before serious matters were spoken of and she had absolutely no intention of wasting half an hour on inanities when Procer was rarely more than one calamitous day away from annihilation.

"We will attend to the Iserran situation first," Cordelia stated. "Gentlemen, am I to understand that disaster was truly averted?"

The men shared a silent glance, the rapacious-faced head of the Circle and the half-wild former fantassin who'd killed and blackmailed his way to supreme prominence in the Silver Letters. It was the latter that spoke first, first clearing his throat in a surprisingly dainty manner for a man of his looks and conduct.

"We have confirmed that the foreign forces have all begun to evacuate the plains," Balthazar the Bastard said. "It was made known to the rank and file of both the Army of Callow and the Legions of Terror that winter quarters will be raised in Arans before they went through the gate, so I believe it likely the Black Queen intends to keep her word."

Of that there had been little doubt in the First Prince's mind: she'd read a transcript of these Liesse Accords, passed along by hasty scrying. It was becoming increasingly evident they'd all severely underestimated Catherine Foundling, and that her game was a long one indeed. Cordelia's cold blue eyes moved to the other man sitting across from her, inviting elaboration.

"The League of Free Cities has agreed to begin marching south, and to the offered sale of supplies as the costs you offered," Louis said. "The Hierarch himself is said to have granted full authority to his advisory council over the matter, though the Tyrant of Helike remains the dominant force among it."

Though not by so large a margin as he would have been before what her people had taken to calling the Princes' Graveyard. An ornate affectation, given only a single royal had died instead of abdicated, yet the Alamans fondness for grand appellations was not do be denied. The League's audacious – foolish,

some would call it – march through the Waning Woods to take the Principate by surprise had meant it would need to live off the land after the supplies it brought began to run out, given the lack of supply train. The situation for them was not yet dire, yet the Circle of Thorns had learned that they had perhaps two months left before their grain ran out. Which was something of an issue for the invaders, given that the Carrion Lord had already stolen or torched every granary in the heartlands of the Principate: there was nothing left for them to steal in turn. Offering just enough supplies to fend off starvation in exchange for a retreat south had been a gamble, but a necessary one. She could not let more than a hundred thousand foreigners camp in Iserre while talks took place here in Salia. For one, it was much too close to the capital. More importantly, if the League's armies stayed in Iserre so much enough of a force to check it even if truce was currently being had.

Oh, Kairos Theodosian would no doubt turn on her as soon as the conference came at an end and he'd secured whatever prize he now sought. Yet by that time the armies of the League would be much further south, perhaps as far as Tenerife, and the military situation would have changed. The Black Queen had, after all, admitted to making bargain with the Kingdom Under concerning sale of armaments and implied to Arnaud that arrangement could be had there between herself and the Principate. That meant delaying resumption of hostilities with the League a valid tactic, for by the time the blades came out again the massed levies Cordelia had ordered in all southern and western principalities would be furnished with fresh dwarven weaponry and be ready to hold the line against the League's treachery. It would have ruinous costs in both lives and gold, but it was either that or allowing the Tyrant of Helike to dictate the course of the war on Keter however he wished. The Prince of Rhenia had sent her own people to die and abandoned her kinsmen to the Dead – she could and *would* stomach Arlesite conscripts bleeding to defend their own lands. Louis of Satrons' pause was smoothly filled by the other spymaster a heartbeat later.

"My people in Iserre had a look at the delegations when the Black Queen opened the fairy gate for them," Balthazar said. "Getting too close was judged risky – the Jacks are sharp-eyed and there's goblins skulking around everywhere – but we believe the agreements were honoured when it comes to soldier strength."

Cordelia's brow did not rise, for she was better bred than that, yet she politely expressed surprise.

"Even the Carrion Lord?" she asked.

The offer extended had been an escort of four thousand for every representative attending the conference, which Cordelia had intended to mean the Hierarch and the Queen of Callow. Now instead there was a certain 'General Rumena' representing the interests of the Empire Ever Dark and requiring their own escort, which was unfortunate confirmation the drow were on the move once more. The suggestion the Carrion Lord would attend as representative for the Dread Empire of Praes had been like ash in Cordelia's mouth, given

the man's cold-blooded scheme for the death of thousands and thousands of innocents. In all fairness, Foundling seemed to have understood the... delicacy of that situation and offered a compromise: she'd be responsible for the man's actions while in Procer, and as her dependent he would be allowed only a thousand men in escort to be deducted from her own four thousand. The blonde Lycaonese suspected the hand of Vivienne Dartwick in those terms, whose diplomatic acumen had proven greater than one would expect of a former Chosen.

"He seems to have brought only four hundred legionaries," Balthazar said. "Though given how popular he remains with parts of the Army of Callow, he's hardly vulnerable."

Not that Cordelia was fool enough to entertain assassination at the moment. Not with his apprentice – who, it seemed, still remained fond enough of him to seek his release regardless of reports of their quarrelling after the Doom of Liesse – having become so crucial to the survival of the Principate and perhaps even the continent itself. The amount of forces coming close to Salia made her uneasy, in truth. Four thousand drow, possessed of strange eldritch powers at night by all reports, four thousand eastern legionaries and a mixed force of four thousand from the League whose finest were from Helike. The Dominion would bring four thousand of their own, though they'd proved unreliable allies in many ways, and the First Prince had provided four thousand of her own soldiery to stand for the Thalassocracy of Ashur under thin pretence. Salia was hardly undefended, of course, and Princess Rozala Malanza would be bringing ten thousand soldiers besides as a guarantee. Yet sixteen thousand foreign soldiers within a day's march of the capital was not something to take lightly in any circumstances, much less these. Countries grown weak often found their allies had grown hungry.

"Then it seems we had survived the crucible," First Prince Cordelia calmly said, "and must now begin preparing for the one waiting beyond the horizon."

"If I may, Your Most Serene Highness?" Louis of Sartons asked, and she moved her had in concession. "Our allies in Ashur are becoming increasingly desperate, and when word of the bargain struck for the retreat of the League that despair will turn to fury."

It would, Cordelia privately agreed, for every step that took the armies of the League further from Procer took them closer to the shores of the Thalassocracy. All the while the fleets of Nicae kept blockading the island-nation and sinking even fishing boats, very clearly aiming to starve Ashur into submission. The bargain would be seen as a betrayal, not entirely without reason, and Cordelia's assurances that this was maneuvering would ring hollow so long as they were not paired with some manner of relief for Ashur. Which she could not provide so long as the League's fleets had the run of the Samite Gulf, given that no Arlesite principality had a considerable military fleet to call on. Largely because of Ashuran bribes and threats, one might uncharitably add.

"We will have to exert pressure on the League during the conference," Cordelia agreed. "Lest we lose Ashur entirely to spite or surrender. If a common front

is put forward to at least allow for grain barges to be allowed through, there would be hope to offer."

"That would require Callow to back us against the Free Cities," Balthazar grunted. "They're trying to get a foot in the Grand Alliance so it's not impossible, but the Black Queen's no fool. She'll not let herself be brought into the fold before she squeezed us dry of every concession she can prior to alliance."

"I am not so certain," Louis disagreed, bony face gone pensive. "No force under her command has ever resorted to looting or foraging while campaigning in our lands. Though I would agree she has distaste for the well-bred, I would venture she'd be rather sympathetic to the plight of starving Ashurans. It is not an uncommon trait, in tyrants who have popular support."

Cordelia was, in fact, inclined to agree with the leader of the Circle of Thorns. Catherine Foundling had a record of trying to spare commoners the worst of war even when it was inconvenient to her armies, and the Army of Callow's regulations were perhaps the strictest on the continent when it came to civilians. Unfortunately, the First Prince found it dubious that the Back Queen would antagonize the League of Free Cities on behalf of the Grand Alliance without some manner of concession. Which was not unreasonable, given that she would be taking on risks for nations that had warred on her own, but *was* most definitely unfortunate. The fair-haired First Prince only had so many concessions she could make and was reluctant to begin doling them out too early in negotiations. She might have to regardless, Cordelia grimly conceded. Choices were the privilege of those mighty enough to afford choosing.

"There will be a need to approach her in private after she arrives," the First Prince finally said.

That much had never been in doubt, truth be told, though the extent of matters in need of discussion sometimes felt like to Cordelia like it increased by the day. The First Prince found herself in the unpleasant diplomatic quagmire of having to negotiate with a need to preserve an empire's dignity without having an empire's might to ensure it. Whatever alliances she might have once been able to call on were now stretched thin, the Chosen so unreliable as to be worthless and to add one more complication the Silver Letters were adamant that the Black Queen had become somewhat *popular* with Alliance armies that'd been on the field. The entire host had been plagued with dreams, allegedly the work of the Choir of Mercy, that had shown a span of the 'heroics' that'd taken place in these Twilight Ways. The result had been flattering to the Queen of Callow's reputation, to say the least, though the transcripts of some of these dreams had been disturbing to read. The cunning that Foundling had shown that night was more dangerous than the power, in Cordelia's eyes, though the power was the stuff of nightmares as well.

Now it was good as certain that the Callowans would follow their queen with fanatical devotion into any war she chose to wage – Gods Above, even as some kind of priestess of darkness she'd received the tacit blessing of *angels* – which would be a great boon if these negotiations saw fruit but a cataclysm oth-

erwise. More worrisome was the apparent oath by every great line of the Blood to support her bid for joining the Grand Alliance, as it'd received the approval of the Grey Pilgrim. To Levantines, that might carry as much weight as that of the Choir he was said to be servant of. When Rozala Malanza's soldiers came to Salia, and the Levantines with them, they would find a city that still spoke of the Black Queen as the Arch-heretic of the East and a perfidious enemy. The survivors of the campaign in Iserre would not take well to being called liars, much less the potentially disastrous epithet of heretic. It could all turn into an ugly circumstance with frightening ease if Cordelia was not very, very careful. Merciful Heavens, what had the world come to when she could expect the Black Queen to be a calming influence on the proceedings?

The First Prince would not be blinded by relief at a withheld blade or a sudden surge of sentiment, yet she could not deny that Catherine Foundling seemed to be trying to claw back the continent from the brink of they abyss. She was a horribly inconvenient person, it was true, but she'd also proved she was capable of restraint and a degree of foresight – which Cordelia could not truthfully say of all those who had a seat in the Highest Assembly. That Calernia might end up bound by a set of treaties even more far-reaching than those of the Grand Alliance had rankled, at first, but looking upon the content of the Liesse Accords the First Prince had been forced to concede they might be of genuine help in stabilizing the continent. That the rules of behaviour they proposed were elemental meant they were likely to be functional in practice even when binding such fractious individuals, and that most Chosen and Damned would be inclined towards enforcing them: a flying fortress rarely benefited anyone but the one flying it, and so even another villain might delight in seeing it brought down along with a rival. And as for the Chosen, Cordelia was far past needing convincing they too were in need of similar *restraints*. That the same plague that'd wiped out a detachment of Praesi legionaries had also wiped out an entire town on the shore of Lake Artoise without a single breakout elsewhere before or since was a damning hint of who was responsible for it.

There would be consequences to that, one day.

The dawning truth of the last few days had been that the Black Queen intended to bring forth an order to Calernia, and that this order was not too inimical to the order that Cordelia Hasenbach had been trying to bring forth since she was but a girl. It was not the resounding victory for Good that the First Prince had wanted, yet it was compromise she was willing to live with. She fully intended on securing as many gains as she could for Procer and the Grand Alliance, yet she would do so with the preservation of the Accords in mind. In truth, there were some aspects she'd found thrilling. This posited city in the Red Flower Vales? It was, she hoped, an end to wars between Callow and Procer. With this Cardinal forbidding the march of armies and the only other land-route between the two realms the Stairway up north, war would become highly impractical to wage. Three kittens and a ribbon could defend the narrow

pass of the Stairway against a princely army, if they had the nerve, and having a great city at the crossroads between the east and the west of Calernia would allow for trade between adjoining realms to flourish and make hostility even more costly a prospect. And there was much to gain, in having such a neutral ground where diplomacy would be had even on the darkest days. No, Cardinal would have much greater reach than even the Black Queen seemed to realize.

A sharp rap against the closed door had Cordelia raising her voice to grant entrance to the servant. A man in livery hurried in at her invitation and after courtly bows came to whisper in her ear. The First Prince of Procer's lips slightly thinned and she nodded a dismissal.

"Brother Simon's absence should be excused, it seems," Cordelia Hasenbach crisply said. "For he has been detained by order of the House of Light. The Holies are calling the Highest Assembly to session."

Two of the most skilled spymasters alive looked at her with faces betraying utter surprise.

"That's madness," Balthazar said.

"It's treason," Louis said, tone cold. "In time of war, no less. Your Most Serene Highness, this cannot be allowed to pass."

"Nor will it," Cordelia Hasenbach said, voice like iron. "It appears I have at last found an *end to my patience*."

# Interlude: Rope

"First, gifted:
Iron to bind
And rope to kill."
-First of the three so

---

called 'Mavian Entreaties', found on raised stones across much of eastern and Procer

The anger had come, white-hot and blinding, but it did not last for Cordelia had learned calm at her mother's knee. Mother might have never held an audience or passed judgement without swallowing a sigh of impatience at been the bare bones ceremony of a Lycaonese court, but then she'd never been a creature of halls and laws. The Rhenian blonde still remembered being taken on her first hunt out in the mountains, her ever-restless mother still as a statue for half a night as they waited for the stray ratling to come into arrow's reach. *Patience, sparrow*, Mother had whispered. *Patience and quiet and take your kill only when the time is ripe.* The arrow had taken the ratling in the flank instead of the neck and even at seven Cordelia had been ashamed at the mistake, but the lesson of the night had lasted longer than the chagrin. It had been years since the First Prince had held a blade larger than a knife, much less strung and fired one of the sturdy shortbows her people kept for children and the weak, but unlike Margaret Hasenbach – once Papenheim – she'd not been born for the song of steel and strife. These halls, these laws, were the blades she knew how to wield.

And it seemed someone had begun quite the ambitious game, just under her nose.

The thought lingered and spread after she sent out her messengers, summoning to the ancient palace of the Merovins every trustworthy sword and spear she had in Salia. After that release of anger, the venting of frustration, her temper cooled and she began considering the details of this apparent folly. The Holies had called into session the Highest Assembly, which while truly a power they held if only obliquely – the House of Light had the right to present petitions directly to the Assembly on any day of the year, even on days where no session had been called, which meant the act presenting such a petition could turn into functional summons to one – had been used only sparingly since the

Liturgical Wars. They had also ordered the arrest of Brother Simon by their own guards, along with consignment to one of the House's basilicas in the capital. The summons themselves were not an overreach on the surface, though likely in practice, yet the arrest of one of Cordelia's own spymasters and formal court official was a direct challenge to the office of First Prince. One done in wartime, when she held an absolute majority in the Assembly that could not easily be shaken.

Using Simon of Gorgeault's arrest and detainment as a pretext to discipline the Holies would not be a popular measure, not when darkness loomed to the north and faith in Above was the last comfort for so many, but neither would it be the stuff riots were made of. Not when Cordelia had paid lips to whisper her preferred telling of the tale in every great tavern and brothel of Salia, which the priests knew well she had. They had, in the past, complained of her savaging of the reputation of Amadis Milenan and his allies through such means by the intermediary of the now-arrested Brother Simon. They would know that so long as sanctions were fair and artfully phrased, she would be able to lay them without much trouble. And that after such lasting conflict she would settle for nothing less than a crippling: confiscation of wealth, grain and lands. Every priest not serving provable purpose in their current position sent to the norther fronts to provide healing and moral succour. Cordelia had been pressing for these measures or milder manners of them for some time now and been denied again and again. There was no true short-term gain the First Prince could think of that would be worth the bleeding she would inflict on them in its wake. That was concerning as it meant, in all likelihood, that the House of Light intended to force her to abdicate.

*Agnes would have warned me*, Cordelia thought. Though her cousin's peering eyes had been on the darkness to the north and the madness in Iserre, she would not have missed so glaring an attack. And mentioned it even if it were doomed to failure, which the fair-haired prince was unwilling to believe out of hand. There was always a way to end a reign, even if it was a simple as a knife in unscrupulous hands. And so the deeper game she'd glimpsed began to take shape for while one failing was a mistake and two ineptitude, but three could only be *deliberate*. Of that sudden awareness Cordelia gave no outwards sign, though assessing her current situation she felt her stomach clench. The Rhenian princess had moved from her solar to the beautiful *Gallerie des Hérons* after sending out her summons, for the gallery with the great windows overlooked the outer courtyard where her trusted soldiers would be coming to gather. It was large enough to accommodate an assembly of captains before they set out as well, which she'd been giving instructions in arranging even as she considered the words she'd speak when addressing them. She'd had servants fetching tablecloths and refreshments to make the entire affair seem less of a hasty arrangement, but the great gallery was rather empty of other company.

The First Prince idly strode towards the great open glass window, a time-

worn but still powerful enchantment on the windowsill keeping out most of the wind and cold from winter's last gasps. Cordelia pretended to enjoy the view, though in truth she'd been gazing to see if any of her Lycaonese soldiers had come. They had not, and the soldiers in the courtyard below were all in the livery of Salia itself – which meant they were little more than city guard, and of suspect loyalty. Half a step had her body angled so she could study the gallery through its reflection on the glass, as she casually set a hand on the lukewarm windowsill and allowed fatigue she truly felt to reach her face. Eight, nine, ten servants in the hall. All with an Alamans look to them, none that she'd brought with her from Rhenia. Louis of Sartrons had departed some time ago to reach out to any Circle of Thorns agents in the capital, yet the second of her three spymasters had remained at her side. Balthazar the Bastard had taken being so surprised by the Holies poorly and been in constant conference with some of his spies since. He offered fresh reports to Cordelia regularly, having early on found out where Brother Simon was being held and confirmed that ever current sitter of the Assembly had been sent for by the House of Light.

Even as the First Prince watched, a woman in rough fantassin leathers was allowed in by the guards guarding the southern entry to the gallery and made her way to where the head of the Sliver Letters was seated to whisper in his ear. The ferocious-looking spymaster heard her out, replied in a low tone and sent her off. Cordelia looked away before her scrutiny could be noticed, instead assessing the guards surrounding her. Eight at the southern and northern entrances, all in Salian livery. There were another three discreet doors in the gallery, from what the tall blonde could recall, though through the glass reflection she could only see two. Servant entrances for two of the three, and the last would lead to a privy room for guests too inebriated to stray far to relieve themselves when feasts where held in this gallery. She knew which of the three was the first servant door – one of the maids she had sent for cloths mere moments had left through it – yet did not know the other two, which meant attempting to leave through one risky. Cordelia knew there would not be two chances to slip the noose, which was why she studied the soldiers assembling below in the courtyard. Near fifty now, still all Salians. Could that many truly have turned their cloak?

Were she trying to isolate the First Prince of Procer within her own palace she would have only moved after ensuring she had enough conspirators to do so, yet there was no telling if her enemies had been forced to move early. Having kept the jaws closing around her hidden so far might mean as much, springing from fear of what she might do were she aware, or it might simply be consequence of a preference for discretion. The odds were better down there, she thought, than with the guards at the entrances. The courtyard must be at least ten feet below, and solid stone. Her blue dress, while not so impractical as to make it impossible for her to move quickly, would still be ungainly. The First Prince of Procer kept herself from stiffening when her spymaster's recognizably heavy gait was heard before her. She turned to glance at the approaching

Balthazar, allowing the faintest hint of impatience to touch her face.

"Your Most Serene Highness," the black-haired man said. "I've news from the city."

"Speak," Cordelia invited.

"There have been riots in the streets," he grimaced. "The priests have claimed that you mean to crown yourself queen and incited the people to violence."

"Unfortunate," the First Prince of Procer said. "They will have to be dispersed, by club if not by speech. Best to act promptly before the unrest can spread. How many soldiers have arrived?"

"Two hundred in the palace barracks, and those that can be seen below," Balthazar said. "I would starkly advise against taking to the street with numbers less than five hundred, Your Highness. Salian riots see stones thrown and knives bared even in times of plenty."

And there it was, she thought. A feasible reason for her to stay here in this hall, cooling her heels as the city went to the dogs around her and conspirators carried out their coup. Balthazar Serigny was one of them, of that there can be no doubt. The Holies could not have her unseated without a vote in the Highest Assembly, and they could not possibly be so foolish as to expect that such a vote could be won without preparation. The House of Light must have reached out to fence-sitters and the discontent, which the Silver Letters should not have missed given their heavy presence in Salia. And to think that Cordelia herself had ordered them to strengthen their presence, in order to expunge the last of the Eyes of the Empire from the capital. She'd invited the wolf at her table, believing it a hound. At least, the Rhenian thought, the conspirators had failed to secure enough votes to unseat her properly. They would not be resorting to such methods if they could use legitimate ones instead. On the other hand, if she was made prisoner and another candidate for her office presented how many of her allies would truly stay with her? Cordelia's grip on the Highest Assembly had not been gentle, though she had been careful never to ruffle feathers without good reason. Some would turn, though, she knew. Some already had under her very nose.

"Send for Captain Haas," she said, making her face imply restrained desire for a frown.

Balthazar would not accede to that, for Andrea Haas was the head of her personal retinue and a hardened killer besides. Cordelia's heart clenched when she realized that her old compatriot had likely been assassinated as a prelude to the coup, though it could not be certain. Agnes... no, they would not touch Agnes. The Augur was too important a strategic asset for them to hurt even if she was Cordelia's cousin. *I can do nothing for anyone from the bear's den*, the First Prince thought. *First I must escape.* Balthazar grimaced, as if reluctant, and she gazed at him with polite impatience until he gave answer.

"Captain Haas had been drinking," the spymaster said. "And is half in a stupor, at the moment. I would send for a priest to sober her, Your Highness,

but given the circumstances. . . ”

“As you say,” the First Prince of Procer said. “The entire priesthood is suspect until proven otherwise.”

“I’ll send for the current ranking officer, if you’d like,” Balthazar offered. “A Lieutenant Beringer, I believe.”

So the conspirators had even sunk hooks in one of hers, Cordelia thought with distaste. It could be a hostage had been taken, she considered, but then she would not glorify the stuff her people were made of. They could be just as venal and treacherous as anyone else, and there were some who might say that the way Cordelia Hasenbach had sent no host to bolster the defence of the Lycaonese realms meant she’d betrayed them first. All of her soldiers here had kin who had either fought at Twilight’s Pass or died there. No, their loyalties were no so ironclad as they might have been a year past.

“So long as it does not detract from muster,” she idly said. “It seems the Hellgods have my plans in their eye, tonight.”

“We’ll crush them as soon as we have our forces in order, Your Highness,” Balthazar Serigny said. “It is a matter of an hour at most.”

Cordelia inclined her head by a fraction and then looked back down into the courtyard, a clear if silent dismissal. There were perhaps a hundred soldier now, some of which had noticed her presence. Not a single one wore anything other than a Salian tabard. There was movement in the corner of her eye, and the First Prince almost tensed before she forced herself not to – and then Balthazar nailed the windowsill with a dagger, biting into the wood, just as her fingers clenched against the wood until they paled.

“Always were sharp, weren’t you? For a savage,” the man casually said, and whistled.

Half the servants unsheathed knives, while a pair of guard on the southern entrance and a single one to the north were slain by their comrades without hesitation. One of the maids tried to run for a door, but a thin man in servant’s livery threw a blade without missing a beat and it went through the back of her skull. The others screamed, and obeyed when told to sit on the ground with their hands behind their head.

“It was the lack of a flinch, was is not?” Cordelia calmly asked.

“It’s a good trick, when you’re dealing with a scheming one,” Balthazar grinned. “Anyone would flinch, expect someone thinking they might have a reason *not* to. What was it that gave us away?”

“Agnes would have warned me,” the First Prince said. “If she did not, it was because someone prevented her from doing so.”

And only the Silver Letters, of all the many possible conspirators in the city, had the means of doing that. They had, in the end, caught the most damning of the weakness in an oracle: a warning meant nothing if it went unheard. It had been four days, since Cordelia last spoke to her cousin. She’d meant to do so, she truly had, yet there was so much to do and if the Augur had an important insight she’d send a messenger to say as much. The servant who were not

Silver Letters had all obeyed and knelt, and Cordelia felt her blood turn cold when she saw Balthazar trade a look with one of the assassins.

"No," she hurried said. "Do not-"

Throats cut the servants dropped to the side, one after another, as they twitched and gurgled the last of their life away. Cordelia did not look away. She had not known their names, not one of them. Yet she would learn them, if she survived, these innocents who had lost their lives because she'd not been quite as clever as she thought she was.

"That was unnecessary," the First Prince said, voice raw.

The bearded man chortled.

"Going soft, are you?" Balthazar said. "Can't have witnesses to this, Hasenbach, lest the priests find their scruples after the deed is done and decide to turn on me."

"So the Holies truly are in revolt," Cordelia said, forcing calm. "You did not simply suborn some of my people and feed me a lie."

"Wouldn't move without them," the spymaster said. "No, without the righteous sort at my back this would have been mere wickedness."

The man grinned, revealing crooked teeth.

"This is Above's work, though, or I've been assured," Balthazar said. "Though the full amnesty was more to my taste than some old fool's early absolution, I'll tell no lie."

Amnesty. And there it was, why she'd kept speaking to this stain of a person even as the blood of innocents spread across the panelled floor. Balthazar Serigny was a gloater, and one who had a particular distaste for his social superiors as well as Lycaonese – though the second came as a surprise to her, truth be told. There'd nary been a hint of it before today. Amnesty over killings within the bounds of the capital could only be extended by the ruler of the principality of Salia, which was however happened to be the First Prince or Princess of Procer. This was, currently, Cordelia herself. The conspirators had therefore a clear successor for her in mind, one that'd gone as far as putting their name to a pardon before the bloody work of dethroning Cordelia had even begun. And there were only a very few people in Procer who could feasibly fill her seat so smoothly. Amadis Milenan might have, before his abdication, and now in his stead Princess Rozala Malanza – who in truth had become a stronger candidate than Amadis had ever been even at the peak of his influence.

Her own uncle, Prince Klaus Papenheim, might also gather such support as the foremost general in the Principate as that realm lay on the brink of destruction. Prince Ariel of Arans might squeak through as a compromise candidate, but the man lacked strong ties outside the eastern Principate. Not the kind of figurehead around which a coup would be birthed, and certainly not when hundreds of thousands of soldiers were marching through eldritch paths into his lands. No, of all these the only practicable candidate was Rozala Malanza. Who, aside from middling talent in scheming, had spent most of the last year on campaign in a principality where scrying was impossible. Which meant either

Princess Rozala had hidden her cunning very skillfully, someone of influence was behind her or this was a foreign plot to cripple Procer just as it seemed possible for it to be saved. Cordelia's heart whispered of Malicia, the old enemy in the East, but the Dead King was conceivable foe as well – though through clandestine intermediaries, for the Rhenian doubted even the lowest of the low would strike bargain with the Hidden Horror directly.

*Or*, Cordelia grimly thought, *they might be fools. They grew scared of what they saw on the horizon, rustled up someone of high enough birth and used them as a figurehead for this ill-advised butchery.* That the Holies might truly be so arrogant as to presume they'd be able to force the election of their chosen candidate without any real support seemed unconvincing, but Cordelia Hasenbach was not so conceited as to deny that the measures she'd taken to ensure the survival of Procer might lead others to act against her this dramatically. Out of fear or principle, or perhaps even the heady potion that could be brewed from both together. It did not matter, in the end. Order would be restored, and everyone who'd lent their hand to this utter lunacy made to dance at the end of a rope. Balthazar, sure he had her in hand, moved away from the window.

"Now be a good girl and sit down in a corner, Cordelia," the spymaster grinned. "You might even make it out of this alive, if you do as you're told."

He'd left the knife in the windowsill, she saw. That simplified matters. The blonde princess snatched the dagger's handle, ripping it clear of the wood. The large bearded man looked at her with a mixture of contempt and amusement. He was a former soldier, a hardened killer and significantly larger than her. There were more than a dozen soldiers and Silver Letters as well, now all casting eyes on her. Uncle Klaus, she thought, would have said something outrageously obscene before baring his sword and attempting to fight his way through. And, brave stubborn old warhorse that he was, he would have died trying.

"I suppose even the runt of the litter will know a little fighting," Balthazar Serigny laughed. "Go on then, *First Prince*. Impress me."

The princess' cool blue gaze swept the room, burning every face into her mind. Names she might not have, but this would suffice. *Patience, sparrow*, her mother's voice rang. *Patience and quiet and take your kill only when the time is ripe.*

"Before spring comes," Cordelia Hasenbach calmly said, "I will see you all hang."

Before they could reply she slashed as her own breast before dropping the dagger. Shallow but long, the wound bled vividly and began soaking her dress. Even as surprise and confusion bloomed across the faces of those looking at her, the First Prince climbed the windowsill and threw herself down into the courtyard. The landing was painful, and she did not suppress her scream as she felt her leg crack.

"Murder," Cordelia called out to the crowd of soldiers looking at her. "Treason! Serigny tried to assassinate me!"

It was time to find out, she thought, whether Alamans gallantry was an empty boast or not.

# Interlude: Candle

> "Fear not faith in the unworthy, for to be fooled is shame only on the undeserving."
>
> Extract from 'The Faith of Crowns', by Sister Salienta

Brother Simon of Gorgeault had been, for near half a bell now, wondering what manner of madness might possibly arouse the leading souls of the House of Light to such actions. His arrest had been impeccably polite, his detainment in the back hall of the Selandine Basilica coming along with a nice wine from one of the lakeside monasteries and what was admittedly the finest roasted quail he could ever remember having. The accompanying plums had been flavoured in the manner of the famous 'sacred recipe': dipped in sweet brandy for seven days and seven nights. The name was a delicious little jest for the learned, as it was said that before Arianna Galadon had first founded the House of Light in the west she'd for seven days and seven nights prayed by the shores of the Lake Artoise. A shame that his enjoyment of the meal had been spoiled by the way a pair of armed guards waited by the door, a reminder that any attempt to leave would be tactfully but firmly rebuffed.

Simon was morbidly curious as to whether they'd go as far as striking him, should he insist. Though only a lay brother and so not hallowed by vows, he was not without repute in the House. Looking at the cast of the tanned faces – Arlesites both, and from the resemblance perhaps even kin – he decided that violence was not so improbable. The grandees of the House must have brought hands they were certain of from isolated holdings in Valencis and Orense, where the ancient grants of fortress-monasteries by the Arlesite *reales* had never been rescinded. It was an open secret among certain circles that orphans were taken in and raise for such purposes, particularly after long winters when desperate families found they had too many mouths to feed. The House of Light might be forbidden by law to field armies, but it was hardly defenceless.

Simon sipped at the potent red in his cup, enjoying the bouquet even as he considered what must now be done. In here he was isolated from his fellows in the Holy Society, which barred him from ascertaining how deeply this conspiracy ran. For this was a conspiracy, there could be no doubt about it. He'd been

taken when coming to the basilica for an urgent council with a dear friend, Sister Dominique, whose position in the middle ranks of the Holies meant anything she deemed urgent was very much so indeed. Alas there had been no Dominique awaiting when he arrived, only a handful of apologetic priests and a detachment of guards. Brother Simon wondered if she had betrayed his trust of her own initiative or been ordered to.

Oh, there'd never been any doubt that Dom's greater loyalty would be the Heavens and their House. That much had been made clear when they'd... parted ways many years year ago, after she'd refused the deeper courtship he sought. *I will suffer none to rival Above in my affections, love, not even you*, she'd said. He'd believed the friendship to have survive the end of their other tie, but this seemed to be a day of revelations. Simon drank a deeper sip than was strictly proper, wasting the vintage like some Callowan lout. It was the way of the Ebb and the Flow, he consoled himself. It seemed his vigilance as the First Prince's eye on House affairs had lapsed, for he'd glimpsed no hint of the conspiracy before it struck. The failure stung, more from the consequences of it than his wounded pride.

By now, he thought, that animal Balthazar would have seized Her Highness and a purge of her loyalists would be taking place. None, and the Lycaonese least of all, could be counted on to take the deposition of a Hasenbach withy anything remotely like *placidity*. The Holies would have sent for the current sitters of the Highest Assembly before making their move, but the cautious among them would have delayed setting out. It might not matter: First Prince Cordelia's most ardent supporters were all on the northern fronts, leaving only *assermentés* to speak for them, and there were tricks of procedure to deal with those. If enough of the royalty in the city had turned conspirator, anyhow. An outright majority from the onset was laughably improbable, but even half a dozen princes would be enough for the fence-sitters to believe the conspirators had a chance. Especially with the Silver Letters and the House behind them, and the First Prince kept under watch until she could be formally deposed and perhaps even put to judgement.

Simon's ponderings were jarred astray when the door between the guards was opened, a woman in pale robes striding through. Age had been kind to Dominique of Blancbriand, tinting her hair more silver than grey and leaving her both straight-backed and lithe. Those grey-green eyes, though, ever smiling? They had not changed at all since he'd first gazed on them when they were both fifteen and Simon still believed his rightful name to be Simone. The lay brother drank again, for it would be a terrible faux pas to let the Principate begin its inevitable spiral into annihilation without being at least slightly drunk.

"Brother Simon," Sister Dominique greeted him.

Her smile was forced. For being sent here against her will, pretending she had not been the bait in the trap to catch him, or because she was being forced to civility by circumstance? He could not tell. It ought to be interesting to find out.

"Sister Dominique," he replied, setting down his cup to daintily wipe his lips with the attendant silk cloth. "I am sad to say you've missed the quail."

She looked mildly taken aback. At his lack of open resentment, perhaps? He nearly sniffed in disapproval. If that were the case, she had spent too long speaking with House firebrands. Even if a lay brother, Simon was an Alamans of proper birth. It was to be expected he would walk to even the gallows with a *bon mot* and splendid indifference, much less suffer a turn of the Ebb with grace.

"I already ate, though I thank you for the courtesy," Dominique said.

"Ah, but at least let me offer you a cup of wine," Simon gregariously said. "You there, with the sword."

As both guards bore such a weapon, there was some degree of confusion until the one to the left gestured at himself hesitantly.

"Indeed," the spymaster said, "do fetch a cup for Sister Dominique – and make it silver, by the Gods. This is a coup, not a Lycaonese debutante ball."

He did not bother to speak to the guard any further, knowing that in circumstances such as this one confidence was the key to being obeyed. He invited his old friend to sit across from him, smiling pleasantly as if he were host instead of prisoner. Poorly hiding her bemusement, Dominique sat.

"Why are you. . . " she began hesitantly.

"It is an Arlesite red," Simon told her, sounding surprised as he glanced at the bottle by his now-finished plate. "Copper would taint the bouquet."

It was not what she'd been speaking of, as they both knew, but that was they way to get to someone with the upper hand talking: confusion and blithe refusal to acknowledge they had anything of the sort. Simon's fascinating summer as a young man with a Lantern lodge in Tartessos had taught him that a gentleman could get away with nearly anything, given sufficient audacity and an amicable bearing.

"You seem in a congenial mood," Dominique ventured.

Simon smiled and from the corner of his eye saw the guard returning with a silver goblet in hand. The man hesitantly set it on the table, as if he did not know quite how it should be done, and after an awkward half-bow made as if to leave. The lay brother restrained him with a gesture and let out the faintest hint of a sigh.

"My good man," he said, "Sister Dominique is one of the Holies. Do you intend to make her pour her own wine?"

The guard looked vaguely panicked for a moment, before venturing a *no* touched by a heavy Tolesian accent. Ah, as he'd thought. Most definitely one of those trusted sword arms from Arlesite lands, likely even a lay brother himself. Proper vows taken would naturally forbid violence, save if given exemption by holy tribunal, but these had only rarely been granted since the Liturgical Wars. The man clumsily poured wine for his old friend, who protested it was unnecessary all the while. The guard looked deeply relieved when Simon dismissed him, further marking himself as a figure of authority.

"I had feared you might be distressed," Dominique cautiously said, after taking a polite sip from her cup.

"Aggrieved, perhaps," Simon conceded. "These cloak and dagger theatrics are rather unseemly for servants of the Heavens, though I can understand the necessities involved."

Something like relief touched her grey-green eyes, and that burned Simon more than all the rest. For it meant she did care for him, after all, at least a little. Yet she'd gone through with it anyway. It would have been better if she were only using their old closeness, he thought. Cleaner.

"I argued for your involvement, Simon, I truly did," Dominique told him. "I told them that your silence was out of hopelessness, not malfeasance. They might even have listened, had Serigny not argued so strenuously that you were Hasenbach's creature body and soul."

"Of course he did, the brute," the diplomat sighed. "His value would have lessened if you had another among you with close access to her."

Gaze careful as he spoke, he found no hint of a hesitation before she nodded in acknowledgement. Good. Balthazar the Bastard's involvement had been a given, since such a great plot could hardly have taken place in Salia without the notice of the Silver Letters, but it was heartening to learn even by implication that the Circle of Thorns was not involved. Louis de Sartrons had no part of this... spasm of lunacy.

"The Silver Letters were too valuable to antagonize by insisting," Dominique told him, faintly apologetic. "And there were fears he might turn on us if he felt the cause to be in too frail a state."

Now, it was most unlikely either the Holies or a creature as leery as Serigny would have put treason to act without a patron of sufficient influence. There were only so many of these in Procer, these days, and among those one stood out above all others: Princess Rozala Malanza of Aequitan. She hardly seemed the kind of woman to try her hand at such an affair, but then the most successful of ambitions were often the most skillfully hidden. A prod was in order to see what might yet come tumbling out.

"I imagine he pressed Princess Malanza for a pardon before committing to anything," Simon idly said. "I've never known the Bastard to have faith in anything but favours rendered."

Dominique looked at him amusedly, nursing her cup.

"Clever Simon," she said. "Fishing for answers, are we?"

Ah, and yet she did not deny. That was telling, for all she had not outright told.

"I imagine I shall have to resign my position in the Holy Society, after her election," he mused. "A poor way to end my tenure, but retirement would not be such a terrible thing at my age."

"It might not have to be so," Dominique said.

He made his eyes widen in surprise and leaned forward when she invited him to do so.

"We have been corresponding with her for months," she murmured, "and she's expressed very devout sentiments. There was talk of restoring the House's ancient seat in the Highest Assembly, Simon. Not even after the Liturgical Wars was that seriously spoken of, but with the Hidden Horror warring on us Malanza says the Heavens must be brought to the fore once more."

To Simon's knowledge Rozala Malanza was no more devout than most Proceran royalty – that was to say, she had Salienta's tongue and Bastien's hand – though he rather doubted the Holies had been suddenly convinced of her deep and abiding respect for the House of Light. Of her deep and abiding desire for overthrowing the woman who'd made her mother drink poison, however? That they'd believe, and perhaps simple base hunger for power as well. And in such dark times, well, why would Princess Malanza not restore the House's long-abolished seat in the Assembly? It was only natural to pay stronger heed to the light of Above when the night grew long. That such a seat would bring the influence of the Holies to heights not seen since the fresh first days of the Assembly must not have weighed on the scales at all, surely.

Brother Simon de Gorgeault had spent most his life serving as a bridge between the royalty of Procer and its priesthood, finding loyalty belonging to neither but instead to a higher calling: peace. He had served, willing, for he saw in the Holy Society a function that would prevent the coming of another three Liturgical Wars. Pride in robes and crowns was an unfortunately common affliction, and a company of men and women with a foot on both shores went a long way in smoothing away conflicts that might otherwise have grown into harsher things. Yet the truth was that Simon had oft leaned more strongly towards the House, as for all its many flaws it served Good more genuinely than any other institution on Calernia. Princes and princesses, even the finest among them, so often chased venality and power at the expense of those they were meant to be the just stewards of.

It was a bitter thing, to be faced with the truth that the House of Light could be just as grasping.

"It would be a grand thing," Simon breathed out in wonder.

Dominique leaned back, smiling contentedly.

"The seat could not be yours, naturally," she told him. "Yet you might say I am the foremost candidate for it, and should election confirm me I would find great comfort in the keeping of an advisor knowledgeable in such matters."

Not the most subtle of offers, though it did have the benefit of both plausibility and political significance.

"I would be honoured," the lay brother smilingly lied.

They both sipped at their wine.

"It will be different, under First Princess Rozala," Sister Dominique casually told him. "There'll be no more of Hasenbach's heresies and tyranny. Gods, the gall of that woman. She might as well have declared herself queen, stacking the Assembly with her lickspittles and those she bullied into submission.

And for what? To make peace with the Arch-heretic if the East and her helper the Carrion Lord."

"No mortal ruler can overturn the decision of a conclave," Simon agreed.

In truth he'd wrestled with the First Prince's decision himself, in private. That Cordelia Hasenbach had grown increasingly ironhanded could not be denied, though he'd always reminded himself that every method she had used to strengthen her influence was legal and with recorded precedent. The peace talks with the Black Queen and the Carrion Lord had been... hard to swallow. Both were infamous Damned who had wrought great suffering on the Principate, and the Queen of Callow in particular had been declared Arch-heretic of the East by a greater conclave. Bargaining with such a monster was to stray from the path the Gods Above had set for their children, undeniably, yet what else was there to be done?

Would the Gods truly prefer the destruction of Procer and all its people to making peace with one of the Damned? Simon could not believe it so. Such a thought reminded him too much of the light gone cold in the eyes of some of the older priests, those who spoke of shepherding needing the stick as well as the kindness and how sparing one was straying from the will of the Gods. There was valour, there was virtue even, in refusing to compromise with Evil even in the face of death. In holding principles above life. Yet Simon de Gorgeault could find no Good in sending millions to their death when it need not be so. It was a poor shepherd that let wolves take the entire flock.

"And this talk of sending priests to the north as if they were soldiers, this demanding the House's belongings as if they were hers to dispose of," Dominique continued, tone genuinely angry. "Did you know there are no House holdings in Lycaonese principalities, Simon? All lands belong to the princes and even chapels must pay *rent* as if they were tenant farmers. That is what Cordelia Hasenbach sought, mark my words. It had to be done."

"It must have been a difficult decision," he said, sounding sympathetic.

Her goblet was mostly empty by now, and he poured it full anew without her taking much notice. She'd always been a lightweight.

"Of course not," she replied. "The will of the Heavens was clear. A choice made in clarity is hardly a choice at all."

"I can only imagine," the silver-haired man said.

"There will be no need to stretch your spirit for such," Dominique teased suddenly learning forward. "I had expected this to be difficult, Simon, but I did your faith disservice. In truth I came to make request of you, before your pleasant hospitality distracted me."

"Anything, for you," Simon smiled.

"The Holy Society's eyes in the city are needed," Sister Dominique told him. "And they will not acquiesce to lending aid without your word."

"What shall we seek?" he asked.

"Serigny botched the work," his old friend said with open aversion. "Hasenbach tricked some of the palace garrison into protecting her and escaped into

the city with a handful of soldiers. We need to know with whom she took refuge, but her lackeys have barred their manses to all priesthood. Your fellows, though, will not find all such doors closed to them."

It was a labour not to close his eyes and breathe out. *Oh, Gods grant you allmercy*. They'd lost the First Prince. Even if it was truly Rozala Malanza who'd been trading letters with the conspirators all this time then their pardons were now no better than scrap parchment. Nothing less than civil war would topple Cordelia Hasenbach if she was not a kept prisoner, and that left them as the fools who'd tried to execute a coup mere days before foreign armies arrived. If they did not find the First Prince soon, everyone involved in this was as good as dead. Her Highness was no Alamans or Arlesite, to hesitate at chastising priests: she'd hang them all without batting an eye. Serigny, at least, would know that well. And he would not be afraid of turning to great bloodshed if he felt cornered. Something needed to be done.

"Of course," Simon agreed. "I shall need ink and quill."

"I'll have them brought," Dominique smiled.

"Simpler to walk to a scrivener's desk, I would think," he amusedly said. "It would be unseemly to send guards back and forth like fetching boys."

"I suppose," Sister Dominique chuckled. "You'll need to write quite a few letters, besides."

They rose, and to steel himself Simon drained the last of his cup. He gallantly offered up his arm for his old friend to take and they made for the end of the hall unhurriedly.

"There are some who will need to speak with me in person," Simon said, sounding pensive. "So it is plain I am not being coerced, you see. Still, given the... ruckus outside an escort would not go amiss."

"I will send for guards from the cathedral," she assured him. "Though I'll need to sit in on such councils, you understand. The Holies would not agree otherwise."

"It is only natural," Simon dismissed. "I am not yet trusted."

Dominique patted his arm approvingly, like one would a dear friend. Or a pet.

"You have always been blessed with an understanding nature, Simon," she said. "It is one of your greater virtues."

He made himself look pleased.

"I shall blush if you continue in this vein," he warned.

A discreet glance ahead told him the guards were only half paying attention to them as they approached. The timing, he thought, would be of some importance.

"Did I ever tell you of the summer I spent in Tartessos?" Simon smiled.

"With the Lanterns?" Dominique said. "Little, in truth."

She did not sound particularly regretful of that.

"They must have some wisdom to their teachings, I suppose," she conceded.

*I remember when you were hungry*, Simon thought. *When you burned with a need to read every book, speak with every stranger from a faraway place. When your eyes grew dark for the late nights and you were furious of your body needing to sleep at all. I remember how beautiful the flame that moved you was, Dominique, and I mourn that woman for you are only what's left of her.* Was this what happened, he wondered, when you began to believe there were no more answers left to seek?

"They refused to humour me before I ventured with a band into the Brocelian," Simon said, almost nostalgic. "It was a rather fascinating experience. I met this woman, you see, by the name of Elvera. And she knew a remarkable trick."

"Did she," Sister Dominique patiently smiled.

"Oh yes," Brother Simon smiled back, gently extricating his arm just as they passed the guards.

This would be his seventy-fourth winter, and it had been much too long since he'd undertaken strenuous exercise. Yet for all that his limbs no longer had the limberness of his youth, utter surprise had wings of its own. His fingers smoothly drew the sword of the guard to his left and he pivoted slightly, ramming the pommel in the other guard's face. Another pivot and he thrust the point of the sword backwards into the first guard's throat. Dominique yelled out in surprise, the other guard rocked back in pain and surprise as Simon ripped free the sword only to cut into the back of the survivor's neck. Messy blow, the lay brothed judged. A killing one, but the death would be more painful than if he'd cut deeper. He left the sword in the corpse and both dropped a heartbeat later. Ah, but the bloodspray had rather marred his robes it seemed.

"It does work better with an axe," the silver-haired man noted. "She was quite right about that."

"You madman," Sister Dominique hissed. "What are you-"

"You were correct," Simon pleasantly said. "A choice made in clarity is hardly a choice at all."

Best to make a run for it, Simon de Gorgeault mused as a woman he'd once loved cursed him loudly. Though she'd let it slip that there were so few guards here an escort would require more to be sent for from as far as the cathedral, it was unlikely there would only be two.

Time to see if these old bones still remembered how to run in the face of certain death.

# Interlude: Harp

"Second, beholden:
Candle to blind
And harp to still."

Second of the three so-called 'Mavian Entreaties

*Les Horizons Lugubres* was a tavern in the same sense that silk was cloth.

None could lay foot within its glass and stone gardens without first having been vouched for by three patrons, and though the hall's outside looked rather trivial its insides were a maze of shifting private alcoves: they changed with the sun and the moon, the season and the weather, so that no two hours spent there would be quite the same. The nature of the establishment had made it a favourite of the Circle of Thorns since decades before Louis of Satrons' tenure at the head of the league began, though it was under his stewardship that the Circle became the hidden proprietors of it. Tonight's surroundings were the work of a young woman from the principality of Orne, he'd been told, an artist who had one walked the fields of the Red Flowers Vales seeking inspiration. The influence was plain to the eye, though for all the provincial origins it was exquisite to the eye. Redwood tables and sculptures of colours glass – angled so that the moon's shifting radiance and shadows would mimic the touch of wind on grass – were flanked by panes of green and grey painted in the Bourdonnier manner, with the occasional glinting metal thrown in *pêle-mêle* to hint at the armour of fallen knights and fantassins. It was all rather appropriate, given the reason the Circle was convening, and the tart Lange red the affair had been paired with by their sommelier lent the hasty proceedings a much-needed touch of civility.

After the last of them arrived and took a seat, being poured their glass by the colleague to their left rather than a servant according to one of the Circle's more practical traditions, Louis of Sartrons rose to his feet. His glass went up, matched by that of the other twelve men and women in the room, and he cleared his throat.

"To Procer, and Her Most Serene Highness," he toasted.

His words were politely echoed, and as one they drank before settling into their seats. Louis waited a few moments, tinted light casting red shadows like

claws on his skeletal face, before addressing his peers.

"It would appear a coup is underway," the spymaster said. "As of now the involvement of the Holies of the House of Light and the Silver Letters under Balthazar Serigny have been confirmed. The extent of the conspiracy beyond this is unclear, though a degree of royal involvement is only to be expected."

At the other end of the table, the comfortably withered Antonie of Bientaillant rapped her knuckles against the table to signify a desire to address the table. Louis acceded to the request with a sight inclination of the head.

"My friends in city guard tell me the conspiracy claims to be acting on the behalf of Princess Rozala Malanza, though they have not made this widely known," Antonie said.

Bertrand de Gonfallond, sharp-eyed and younger than most in this room, rapped his knuckles but a moment later. Louis paused for a moment longer than necessary before allowing him to speak, an unspoken reminder that lack of courtesy to a fellow patron of the Circle had no excuse.

"Given the prominence of Balthazar Serigny within the coup," Bertrand said, "we must consider that this was made known to Antonie's friends on purpose. Balthazar has some knowledge of our laws, as you all know."

It was not impossible, Louis thought, or in truth even unlikely. The Circle of Thorns served no master but the Principate itself, that was its governing principle and foremost law. Not the First Prince, not the Highest Assembly and certainly not the House of Light. Given that the highest office in Procer was not hereditary, it had been understood by wise minds early in the nation's history that the Principate's spies abroad could be beholden to any one family or institution. The Circle must ever be above the fray of schemes within the bounds of Procer, intervening only when there was foreign involvement. If the Circle took sides in the Assembly's little squabbles, it risked endangering itself and therefore the Principate's eyes abroad. In truth that vaunted neutrality had been bent, on occasion, but never too far. Those who would have the ambition of playing throne-maker in the Assembly were weeded out early in their tenure with the Circle, long before reaching positions of true influence. Were these years of peace, or even less strenuous a war, an attempt to dethrone Cordelia Hasenbach by another princess would merit no debate. And it was undeniable that even in these... delicate times the only acceptable successor to the First Prince was Rozala Malanza, as no one else had the support or popularity to keep the Principate from falling apart.

Yet Procer had come upon the antechamber of the end times, and now the lines between the foreign and the domestic had blurred. It did not help that the Bastard might be behind what Antonie's people had learned, as their young colleague had noted. The head of the Silver Letters had learned too much for comfort of their laws and methods during the Great War, and he was in no way above using Princess Malanza's name as a shield to keep the Circle out of this affair until the dust had settled. To his left another knuckle rapped the table, Alejandra of Cuenera departing from her usual sullen silence to raise her voice.

"It matters not if Seregny attempts to trifle with us," she said, voice faintly accented. "It is not ours to decided whether Cordelia Hasenbach or Rozala Malanza will rule. It is ours to unearth whether the attempted transition of power is free of the Enemy's meddling."

There was a rippling murmur at the table at that, as much in consternation as approbation. Several knuckles rapped, though Louis chose that of Joachim of Essenrer – one of the elders among them, and the sole Lycaonese. The Circle had been careful that there should always be at least one from the northern principalities among them, though recruitment was oft difficult. They could not claim to speak to the interests of Procer without the rearguard of their empire having a voice at their table.

"It will be necessary to carve into the Silver Letters," Joachim said, voice oddly powerful for a man so old his skin looked paper-thin. "They are the weak link. The House will have everything of import in cloisters and basilicas, but the letter-openers brought in too many for every safehouse to truly be secure."

Louis hid his amused smirk at the dig at their opposition behind a sip of wine, as many others at the table. *Letter-openers*, Joachim had mocked them as, for the head of the Circle at the time of their rise to legal employ had mocked the thugs as a 'confederacy of letter-openers and cutpurses'. There were some who said the name of Silver Letters itself had come from the way their first founders had made much of their wealth opening the correspondence of the wealthy and powerful to extort coin by blackmail. The smirk faded along with the taste of the wine on his palate as Louis de Satrons digested the rest of his colleague had said. It was true but it would also carry consequences unless acted on properly.

"It appears I will have to be led astray by my personal loyalty to Her Highness," the head of the Circle of Thorns calmly said. "As is our way, I will depart early to allow you to write the denunciation without my presence."

He paused a moment. Louis supposed he should mayhaps be moved to say more, as if it proved that the Silver Letters or their fellow conspirators had not been induced by a foreign power this would be the last time he addressed the Circle as its leader. Perhaps at all. Yet he had never been particularly prone to such flights of fancy, in truth, and he had known everyone at this table for decades. Theirs was not a profession that allowed for sentiment, and he would not insult their common service to the Principate by looking back upon it with unnecessary nostalgia. Theirs was grim and often foul work, and those who carried it out oft came to grim and foul ends. They had all known that long before earning a seat at this table.

"You know of my endorsement for my successor," Louis said. "And for the seat my removal would leace empty. As for the rest…"

He rose to his feet once more and raised his glass.

"Let none lay hand on this land," Louis de Sartrons said.

Glass roses to match his, as one.

"Without bleeding for it," they replied, every last hard-eyed.

*You will be as a circle of thorns set around Procer*, their ancient founder Clément Merovins had charged, *so that none may lay hand on this land without bleeding for it.* If there was rot in the flesh, if the Enemy prowled Salia on this night, then they would rip it out root and stem.

—

Balthazar had not taken a seat at the table, instead leaning against the wall of the ornate Hall of Herons as he indulged himself by studying those seated.

He'd not known the full breadth of their plot, as was not unusual in such things, yet at this hour of truth the masks had come down when this council had brought out those who wished to form the heart of the coming reign. It was no small company, near a hundred to his count. His Silver Letters and the Holies had formed the heart of the conspiracy so he had known the involvement of near everyone of import, but now the rest of the lot had come slinking into the palace he'd taken for them to gather like maggots on a corpse he found the disparity of those involved to be somewhat troubling. That they'd run thin in matters princely was only to be expected, given that near every royal that remained in Procer was on one of the northern fronts, but a harvest of two was not so trifling a thing: Prince Arsene of Bayeux, one of Amadis' old hounds now trained to heed Malanza's hand, had been the easy mark.

He had much to gain from the Princess of Aequitan rising to higher office, as one of her inherited partisans. Princess Cotilde of Aisne had been a surprise when he'd first learned of her, and even now she seemed highly uncomfortable in the company of the others. It was principle that'd turned her against Hasenbach, he gathered. The consolidation of the Highest Assembly into a tame thing had smacked to her of tyranny, and she'd approached the Holies for moral guidance and advice – only to be brought into the fold of the conspiracy instead. There were only two other royals in the city, Renato of Salamans and Ariel of Arans, neither of which had been judged safe enough to invite.

Prince Renato was one of Hasenbach's loyalists, now more than ever as a war against the League of Free Cities had miraculously spared his lands, and while Prince Ariel was more ambiguous in his allegiances he also had a great many soldiers marching on his lands through these 'Twilight Ways'. Both had only reluctantly accepted the summons to a session of the Highest Assembly, and immediately begun delaying on actually moving towards the physical assembly until their spies could have better notion of what was taking place. They'd learn little, Balthazar had seen to that. Between the bloody chaos in the streets of Salia and the mysterious deaths of the few captains and officials best known in the right circles to trade whispers for bribes the easiest ways to gather information had been neatly closed.

The true trouble with those two was that now that Hasenbach had made a fool of him and escaped his *own damned hands* it was quite possible she'd taken refuge in the manse of one of them. Both princes had refused entrance to both the city guard and the House of Light, Prince Renato's captain of the guard splitting open the head of an overly ambitious city watch officer without

batting an eye. Those manses could be taken, the conspirators had the numbers for it, but it'd be hard fighting and neither of the royals part of the coup were willing to agree to it.

The precedent might be dangerous to their kind, after all.

A motion passed in the Highest Assembly could pry open those gates, most likely, but the masquerade there had to be played out first. For all that the conspiracy was currently lacking princes, with a little enthusiasm it could begin the work of *making* a few. There were candidates on hand, Hasenbach had seen to that when she'd begun her little trick with the restored Guillermont Decree – she'd had men and women of the right blood and birth to serve as successor-candidates for every principality left leaderless by the Princes' Graveyard. Much like how those who'd plotted to unseat the Lycaonese savage had enjoyed the very refreshments in this hall that Hasenbach had arranged for her own captains, these royal candidates would now be crowned and made the conspiracy's creatures instead of the First Prince's.

It would begin soon, for the summons to the Highest Assembly would soon have been sent a full bell ago and when that time was reached the sessions could begin even with the absent. A mere two votes would not be enough to pass anything, of course, but there the Holies had come of some use. While the crowned heads were away from Salia they had left behind *assermentés*, sworn surrogates who could vote in their stead. By oath these surrogates were to vote only by the will of their prince or princess, yet the House of Light had applied both fear and faith to good effect.

It was the will of the Heavens that certain measures be passed, and to vote even by oathbreaking was sinless. To refuse was to serve the Enemy, whose dark hands had touched the heart of Cordelia Hasenbach and corrupted her body and soul. Those priests could not convince Balthazar had seen to himself, now that the Augur was no longer an issue: hostages, blackmail and naked threats had been enough to secure a narrow majority. He'd have preferred to hold the session without even waiting for the whole bell to pass, but both the royals and the Holies had refused to hear of it. Rozala Malanza's ascension to holy rule was not to be marred by even the slightest of procedural faults. The former fantassin thought them fools for it, for though they worried of such details being used to overthrow Malanza down the line they were forgetting they first had to get the fucking princess on the throne.

Which he suspected would be harder to achieve than expected, given the discordance of conspirators he was looking at. There were Salians there, officers in the city guard and the garrison as well as bureaucratic officials. Hasenbach's harsh measures against corruption in the capital had seen kinsmen from most great families in the region lose a sinecure and the assorted income, and as she'd refrained from purging the old guard that'd acted with probity quite a few had nursed private hatreds of the First Prince for years and only now come out to settle them. It'd been Balthazar himself who dug out half of those malcontents, having his fresh flush of agents in the capital find out who had

grudges while ostensibly looking for 'Praesi infiltrators', yet Prince Arsene and the Holies had stumbled across quite a few themselves.

It'd been the realization of exactly how many enemies Cordelia Hasenbach has made that'd prompted the conspiracy to act, as well as the understanding that the window of opportunity was slight. A coup could not be had while there were foreign armies within marching distance of the capital, and Malanza had been exceedingly clear that she could not be seen to be doing the overthrowing herself: it had to be settled before she arrived in Salia. Still, the Gods had smiled on them when the time came. Some scrivener in the House had unearthed a precedent from the Liturgical Wars about a priestess' regency in Segovia that'd had one of the holdover faction in the Holies swing over into the camp preaching direct action, swinging the House of Light's influence entirely behind the coup just in time.

Some agents of Prince Arsene had caught sight of the priests moving guards into the city and the Prince of Bayeux had tentatively reached out to the Holies, adding the weight of his own growing conspiracy to their own. It'd all fallen into place, just before the last chance any of them would have for years if ever, and so Balthazar had set aside his own wariness of Princess Rozala in favour of backing the coup to the hilt. Never again would he have such an opportunity and Balthazar Serigny would not let that fucking murdering savage rule one moment longer than he had to. Not when his own sister had never even gotten a grave in Brus, just gotten thrown into a mass grave with the rest of the fantassins by the northern butchers.

He might have suffered through that, in truth, even if that'd been the day where he'd thrown his support entirely behind Princess Constance of Aisne. But Salieri getting an arrow in the back for coming too close of the Neustrian camp after dark? Balthazar considered himself a callous man and did so with some pride. Callouses were what grew from rough use, honest use, and though poets and highborn could afford sentiment the likes of him found just as costly as any other luxury. Yet even for him, a sister and a husband was too much. It'd been like poison in his veins every time he looked at Hasenbach, the knowledge that if she'd just stayed in her fucking frozen wasteland like Lycaonese were meant to then someone proper could have put an end to the Great War and the only two people he'd ever slightly cared about would still be alive.

And he could do nothing, for even *intent* would be smelled out by Hasenbach's pet oracle Chosen. So he'd smiled and served and waited, even as she made plain she meant to replace him with some twit from Lyonis. He'd kept it all inside him and placed men and women he owed in useful places because one day, *one day*, there would be an opening. And it had come, hadn't it? Because there truly *had* been Eyes of the Empire in the Salia, and his people had caught them along with their papers – including a dated suggestion of how to arrange the murder of the First Prince, mentioning the Carrion Lord's own theories of how the powers of the Augur worked.

Given that the eastern monster had run a merry chase around the heart-

lans while making a fool of every force in the west until the Peregrine caught him by surprise, Balthazar had read those 'theories' with great interest. And, upon deciding they were reasonable, finally reached out to the Holies afterwards, to... lend a hand, and perhaps a few suggestions. Not that they'd ever trusted him, which was admittedly not unwise of them. Seven priests from the very upper ranks of the Holies were in attendance now, representing the House of Light along with their swarm of lesser priest attendants. The priests had been scheming for longer than any of them, as it turned out. Balthazar had seen some of their correspondence with Malanza, and while it'd begun innocently enough also it'd begun months ago and grown increasingly treasonous as it went.

The Princess of Aequitan had struck gold when she'd raised the notion of restoring the House's seat in the Highest Assembly, by his reckoning. That'd been enough to move the ambitious to begin convincing the not, and after that it'd only been a matter of time until enough priests fell on her side. I'd been bold of her to use the royal seal of Aequitan on some of the correspondence, though Balthazar had noted she'd been clever enough to do so only on those letters which were seemingly innocent. Not all had been penned by her, for perhaps a third were identical to the samples of former prince Louis Rohanon's handwriting the Silver Letters had in their possession. Yet given how deep the once-ruler of Creusens was known to be in her councils that was not unexpected, if surprisingly trusting of her. It might be that Rohanon was to be her formal consort after her election.

It was unfortunate that the situation in Iserre had made it impossible to send someone directly in the army camp – Sophie of Lyonis was watching Malanza like a hawk for exactly such a thing – but it had been observed by his agents that the letters were in fact coming from the heart of the coalition army. He'd even intercepted one, and used it as an introduction to begin his own private correspondence with the princess. That'd been the last confirmation needed for Balthazar, as while someone else might be willing to offer him an empty pardon there was no one else who should be interested in very obliquely suggesting that Rozala Malanza's younger brother and rival claimant, at court here in Salia, should perhaps meet with an unfortunate accident in the chaos of the events to come. She likely had her own agents to arrange such a thing, Balthazar knew, so he'd taken the request for what it was: an extension of trust to bring him more fully into her camp.

It would be a pleasure to work with a woman such a deft hand at the Ebb and Flow, especially one who had the foresight to *hide* it unlike so many of her peers.

"- and so the House of Light had begun to debate whether the actions of Simon of Gorgeault have made him graceless, as the known murderer of lay brothers of the House."

The spymaster's eyes snapped up at the old man who'd been speaking, of the Holies from the south.

"A clarification," Balthazar the Bastard said. "Was Brother Simon harmed before being returned to confinement?"

Gods, let them not have bled the old man. Balthazar was not particularly fond of him, but the Holy Society had friends in many high places and if they began whining about their leader being harmed during the coup there'd be an outrage. The Arlesite priest purpled at being questioned in such a manner, but there was no one in this hall who did not know who Balthazar Serigny was now – or why crossing him would be a costly mistake.

"He was not," the Holy said.

Balthazar's brow rose in surprise. Gorgeault was long past his prime, but it was known in some circles he'd had quite the adventurous youth. He would not have gone quietly.

"He was not harmed at all?" the spymaster pressed.

The priest spoke through gritted teeth.

"He was not returned to confinement, cutthroat," the Holy reluctantly said. "He escaped."

Oh. Oh, those fucking fools. Did they not realize how that changed things? Balthazar, much as it burned to admit it, had blundered when he'd failed to seize Hasenbach more forcefully. But now the Silver Letters were out in force, every priest in the city was keeping an eye out for her and the manses of her supporters were under constant watch. It was known she'd fled into the high districts after making it out of the palace, and those had been closed down by guards and garrison so it was a certainty she was still in there. If she was in anywhere but the manses, it was only a matter of time before she was found. If she was in one of the manses, she could only wait helplessly there. It was still a dangerous situation, given the cunning of their quarry, but one that could be salvaged: especially if the Highest Assembly came through. But now Gorgeault would be out in the streets, and all his little friends and their little hiding places that no one else knew about would be opened to Hasenbach the fucking moment the other spy found her. Which he would, because for an old sack of bones he was sharp as goblin steel.

"Serigny," Prince Arsene said, voice cutting through the room and demanding silence by simple virtues of his station. "What troubles you?"

"It troubles me that our friends in the cloth have let slip one of the few individuals capable pf smuggling Cordelia Hasenbach out of the capital," the head of the Silver Letter flatly said.

The silence that fell was deafening.

"That cannot be allowed," another of the Holies said. "She is to stand judgement before the Heavens and the Highest Assembly."

"Shall either bother themselves to fetch her?" Balthazar cuttingly replied.

Anger from the priests, which like most of them was growing rather tiresome.

"Enough," Prince Arsene yelled, and when heeded lowered his voice. "You have a suggestion to make, I take it?"

"I'll need at least two thousand men," the spymaster said. "Retinues, city guard or garrison it matters not so long as they are steady and will obey orders."

"And what will they be ordered?" a Salian captain suspiciously asked.

"We know what part of the city Hasenbach has fled into, and we've sealed it off," Balthazar Serigny evenly said. "Yet I have received fresh information that, in her despair, the Wicked Prince has struck a bargain with Below and is now attempting to bring forth demons into the city."

There was a pause.

"For the sake of Salia," the Bastard smiled, "we shall have to burn her out."

—

Wearing heavy cloaks, in deference to the last winter chill and not any great need for discretion, two tall silhouettes strode within the southernmost gate of Salia. The Witch of the Woods frowned, smelling blood and smoke, and inclined her head to the side questioningly.

"Order must be restored," the White Knight calmly agreed.

# Interlude: Bone

> "Here's the only justice I care to bring across the Vales: a sword in a just hand."
>
> Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow, the Queen of Blades

The stone hit the man square in the cheek and he screamed in pain as bone broke blood began trickling down. Another few followed, though most were detritus snatched off the street instead of loose pavement. This was the first time Sister Marie ever saw a stoning with her own eyes, though some of the older scriptures did mention the practice in specific circumstances – traitors in Salamans had been dealt with in such a manner, in those ancient days when the Arlesen Confederacy stood and the Gigantes still tried to bring their rebellious escaped slaves to heel on occasion. A case could be made, Sister Marie decided, that in these troubled days a northern in Salia was close enough to a traitor for... this not to be without precedent.

"Please," the man begged. "I'm not even Lycaonese, it's a-"

A clump of thrown ice interrupted the man's words. Was that a tooth Sister Marie had glimpsed? Hard to tell, for the torches cast only wavering light and the screams of the crowd were distracting. Odds were the man truly wasn't Lycaonese – he'd hardly be the first one with a vaguely northern name to be dragged out of his shop tonight to stand before the judgement of the crowd – but it hardly mattered. The young priestess' sermon had whipped up a frenzy in the odd hundred Salians who attended her temple regularly, and it was not an easily quelled thing. Brother Rémi, who stood between her and the Holies, had been clear that nothing must be said that would temper the righteous wrath of the people against Princess Hasenbach's attempt to make herself a queen.

"Procer is no queendom," Sister Marie screamed, to the approving roar of the crowd, "it is an assembly of the highest in the eyes of the Heavens, and let all tyrants-"

Her eye caught sight of a glinting thing, spinning. She turned in surprise as a dark-skinned man caught a coin with an open palm. The crowd had parted around him without even realizing it, Sister Marie realized. Like a school of small fish around a larger one. Calm eyes found her own, serene in the midst of the screaming chaos. A heartbeat later there was a burn of blinding Light

and she felt searing pain going through her skull before she felt nothing at all. Sister Marie's headless corpse fell to the ground, everything about the neck turned to ash.

"Disperse," the White Knight evenly told the crowd.

—

Louis de Satrons found, to his surprise, that he must have missed field work. He did not consider himself a sentimental sort, but there was a strange pleasure to seeing to the necessities by your own hand. Like filing a nail, he thought, or cracking a joint. The man before him the dark room was awake, though the hood on his face had been enough to cow him into stillness for now. Perhaps the Silver Letter agent even believed that by keeping his focus he'd be able to retrace his steps to this particular safehouse. If so, the head of the Circle of Thorns commended him for his dedication. Not that it would help.

"Proceed," Louis ordered.

The hood was ripped off by one of his helpers, and the unremarkable face of a middle-aged man with luxurious blond curls was revealed. The spy blinked at the sudden restoration of his sight, but found he could not see well: surrounded by glowing magelight orbs, the man was bound sitting in the sole island of light within the interrogation room. Louis' own presence would be reduced to a voice from the dark until he wished it otherwise.

"You're making a fucking mistake, whoever you are," the spy called out.

"My mother," Louis said, voice dry as dust, "was a huntress of great skill. Stag, boar – even geese and swans in our lands by the shores of Lake Artoise. She insisted I learn, but I never succeeded at sharing her enthusiasm for the affair."

"They'll know I'm missing," the man said, fear beginning to win over anger in his tone.

Few good things ever happened to bound men in dark rooms being told wistful stories.

"If you return me to my people I'll argue leniency," the spy tried. "Otherwise they'll fucking rip you apart, I don't care how high your birth is. I'm a Silver-"

"Letter," one of Louis' helpers completed from behind the prisoner. "We know."

"Then what do you want?" the prisoner hissed.

"From you?" Louis said. "Nothing you will not give soon enough."

He slowly rose to his feet, then glanced to the side. There was quite the selection awaiting, for the Circle's facilities in the city were well-equipped.

"But there is one part of her insistence I thank my mother for, to this day," Louis de Sartrons mused out loud. "For she was old-fashioned, and demanded I skin and cut my kills myself instead of allowing a servant to do so in my stead."

His fingers closed around the flensing knife, elegantly inlaid with silver.

"Look, I'm willing to talk," the spy hastily said. "Just tell me what you want to know and-"

"You know nothing of import," the helper said. "Your position is that of a bottom-feeder in Balthazar's band of beasts."

"Then what is it you *want*?" the spy desperately said.

"For you to scream loudly enough that it will carry to our other prisoners," Louis mildly said.

It truly had been kind of Mother, to ensure he would learn young to have a precise hand with a knife. And how to use it, too: there was surprisingly little difference between a stag and a man.

Under the skin, anyway.

—

"What's the damned holdup?" Prince Arsene yelled from atop his horse.

Balthazar Serigny supressed a sneer. The man had insisted on coming yet barely left the palace grounds before beginning to complain about every little thing. The tall spymaster discreetly palmed a knife in the long sleeve of his greatcoat and barreled forward on foot, elbowing the soldiers ahead of him so he could reach the front of the column. There was little difficulty in finding out what the trouble was when he'd arrived there, however. The men and women in their way were a ramshackle bunch, a patchwork of different arms and uniforms when they even had either. There was Salian city guard in there, and garrison as well, but others were civilians: many fair-haired and older, Lycaonese veterans who'd dragged themselves awake and into the streets in the name of one of their own. The loyalty Hasenbach still commanded among her kind even after abandoning them to the wolves was outright disturbing. Some youths in elaborate arms and armour, clearly highborn and perhaps even distant royalty, had *gallantly* gathered as well. They were the loudest by far. Their challenges to the soldiers that were in principle led by Prince Arsene of Bayeux – and in practice by Captain Julien, who Balthazar owned – were both boastful and improbable, as was Alamans custom.

The spymaster was reluctantly impressed by the young woman who baldly asserted she would kill them all with half an icicle, one handed, if they dared to take another step forward.

Still, this was a waste of time and time was his most dangerous foe at the moment. With every passing moment that old fuck Simon had been loose in the capital for longer and the chances he'd found Hasenbach rose. And though Balthazar's middling esteem for the man had dropped even further when he'd failed to sniff out such a large conspiracy amongst the Holies, there was no denying that the Holy Society had a wide array of friends and hiding holes in the city: if Brother Simon got his hands on the savage, the coup was unlikely to recover from it. Which meant there was no time to humour the fools who'd raised a ramshackle barricade across the street, barring the way to the near three thousand men the conspiracy had gathered to smother any chance of Hasenbach's escape in the crib. There were a few hundreds at most and would be swept away in moments if it came to blades. The head of the Silver Letters shoved aside one of his own soldiers, who was standing around hesitantly as

insults were hurled at her. Fucking Salian garrison, they had no spine and hardly more pride. The former fantassin approached the barricade and raised his voice.

"By order of the Highest Assembly, you are charged to disperse," Balthazar called out. "You are aiding treason and heresy by standing in our way."

That saw some hesitating, for both offences he'd named were capital ones and there tended to be generous in doling out death when it came to rooting them out. A hirstute, bearded old man – drunk, by the looks of him, leapt over the barricade with only a long knife in hand.

"Crook," the man said, Lycaonese accent thick. "Crook and servant of crooks. Hannoven fell for you and now you slide the knife."

"You will not get another warning," Balthazar called out, ignoring him in favour of the crowd.

"*Lest dawn fail*," the old man screamed, and hundreds roared it out with him.

Fools that they were, they charged out from the barricade. Balthazar hastily retreated, loudly calling for a shield wall to be formed, and the slaughter began.

—

Francesco grit his teeth and struck again, finally smashing through the wooden shutters. The others let out a whoop of joy and Anselme helped him clear away the broken remains before going through the window. Moments later the other man opened the door from the inside and the lot of them went into the shop, a few looking for any coin that might be kept by the drapier but less ambitious looters simply grabbing every roll of cloth and displayed tapestries they could. It was all a sin, Francesco knew, but virtue did not fill stomachs. That pretty tapestry displaying verses from the Book of All Things might, though, so while ashamed he carefully unhooked it before folding it under his arm. From the ripping sound to his side, not all his fellows had been so delicate in taking it. What waste.

"Drop everything," a woman's voice called out. "Or you'll not leave here alive!"

The drapier herself had come out from the back, he saw when he turned. She was overweight and long past fifty, so the sight of her brandishing a slender duellist's sword while in a nightdress was more laughable than worrying.

"We'll take the sword too, thank you," Alessandra chortled, mocking the woman they were robbing.

It was a hard crowd he ran with these days, but with a crime to his name the city guard ran him off whenever he tried to attend the First Prince's alms-givings. Who else was he to run with, if he did not want to starve or die of cold out in the streets? Francesco caught a flicker from the corner of his eye and saw a coin spinning up – and though it spun so well and high it should have touched the ceiling instead it vanished. There was some hooded figured leaning against the doorsill behind them all, but Francesco barely noticed for the silhouette that'd spun the coin moved like the wind and then Alessandra's

head was rolling on the floor. The man, for Francesco now saw it was a man, paused to take a look at Anselme before killing him too.

One stroke of his longsword, that was all it took, and as the looters began to flee the stranger repeated the process again and again. A look, a strike, a death. The drapier had pissed herself at the sight, though he could hardly judge her since he'd done the same. The man finally turned to him, tall and dark-skinned and with eyes that Francesco met entirely by accident. Within he saw a spinning coin, silver, one side bearing crossed swords and the other laurels. And then it ceased, and laurels was what he came back to himself and knew this to be a glimpse of madness. The stranger's sword rested against his neck, and he tapped it lightly with the flat side.

"Amend your ways," the White Knight said. "While you still can."

Then he moved to the side and Francesco flinched in anticipation of a changed mind or a cruel game coming at an end, but the man instead took a look at the drapier – who'd fallen on her knees and dropped the sword, trembling in terror.

"You have reason to be afraid," the stranger coldly said. "They see all."

There was a flash of light and the drapier's charred corpse tumbled back, half the face whispering ash. The man took a last glance around before walking out of the charnel yard, the hooded figure following him without a word.

Francesco threw up and nearly choked on the filth, for he was weeping in relief.

—

"Interesting," Louis de Sartrons said, washing his hands clean in a water basin.

He dried them with a silk cloth before setting it aside. The full weight of his attention went to the woman at his side and the report she had recited by memory. Promising that she would have such talent for recall without any notes, though Louis was in no position to make an official commendation. If it turned out that the Silver Letters had not been used by a foreign power, then his ordered abductions and torture of their members would be taken a gross overreach of the Circle's mandate. Should this be the case, he would confess to having abused the resources of the organization out of his deep personal loyalty for Cordelia Hasenbach and take full responsibility. For that fiction to be kept, however, it must appear as if he'd acted on his own unknown to his peers. A commendation on record would rather strike a discordant note.

"It appears that as far back as five months ago the Silver Letters began unearthing Praesi infiltration," his helper said. "Interrogation of a captured spy yielded information that led them to several safehouses, including two holding scrolls and correspondence. Balthazar Serigny is said to have taken great personal interest in the findings of the second one."

"And we missed operations of this scale?" Louis frowned. "How?"

"Of all these, only the two Eyes of the Empire in Madame Soucillon's brothel were known to us. Their capture and death were made to look like criminal activity, however, so they raised no alarms," the woman replied. "As for the rest,

the Silver Letters appear to have found a genuine Praesi spy chain unknown to us."

That the Bastard had not passed along everything related to the Dread Empire to the Circle of Thorns at first opportunity was impolite, but not outright damning. It could be argued that the Circle's inability to ferret out the Praesi had voided obligation for the Silver Letters, and this incident in and of itself was not enough to justify the assault on them Louis had ordered. As he had said earlier, however, it was an *interesting* detail.

"Have every known and suspected Praesi infiltrator in the city looked in on, immediately," Louis de Satrons finally said. "And it is time we deploy all our... acquisition assets."

"Sir?" she murmured, sounding surprised.

"Find me someone who had a notion of what was in that correspondence the Bastard took," the spymaster order. "Neither gentleness nor discretion are any longer a concern in achieving this."

—

"Are the firebreaks ready?" Balthazar asked.

The wind had picked up, though by the standards of Salian winter this was still a rather mild night. Though the tall killer knew that decisive action was needed for Hasenbach to be put down, he had no intention of burning down the entire capital. Though Princess Malanza might be grateful for what he'd done, she'd still have to order him killed to appease the mob. Not being a fool, he'd ordered firebreaks to be dug around the high districts and great masses of snow carted up to prevent the fires about to be lit from spreading. It would be enough, most likely. With a little luck it'd even snow later that night or come morning, and even the embers would be put out.

"They are," Captain Julien agreed. "Are you certain this is wise, sir? Lots of royals have manses in this part of the capital. They might take issue with returning to ashes instead of a nice *salon*."

"These are hard times, Julien," Balthazar mildly said. "And we've confirmed that Prince Cordelia has set mages to summoning demons to take back the city somewhere within the districts. The ritual must be disrupted no matter the costs."

The other man did not believe him the slightest, though he was wise enough to keep silent. In truth, though for those of some learning this was a wild accusation Balthazar had not chosen that particular excuse without reason. Few Procerans knew much of magic and it was well known that Hasenbach had brought some of the magickers back to prominence by founding her Order of the Red Lion. Those with little knowledge of sorcery, which happened to be the overwhelming majority of the Principate, would find it believable enough. As for the learned, they would know well enough not the cross a broadly popular First Princess with great command of the Highest Assembly and the enthusiastic backing of the House of Light.

"So be it," Captain Julien said, murmuring *Gods save us all* under his breath.

For all his dithering, he was prompt in having the fires started. Balthazar had ordered they begin with the northmost sections and rake their way down, to flush out Hasenbach if it was possible: it was still best to have her imprisoned instead of dead if possible, though not so such a great extent he'd let an opportunity to put an arrow in her pass. The high districts had sewers, which he had watched by his people, and every way out of them was currently held by soldiers and guards. The noose would not be slipped, not by a woman who was suspected to have a broken leg. The torches hit the oil-soaked bundles of wood and roared out, beginning to spread into the attached manse. As the fire crackled merrily Balthazar the Bastard smiled, for he'd have the savage in chains before dawn even if he had to go street by damned street.

—

Lieutenant Pauline had been feeling nauseous for near half an hour, now, and emptying her stomach had helped absolutely nothing. She was city guard, she told herself, she wasn't *meant* to handle messes like this. There must have been at least two hundred corpses scattered around the street where the 'authorities' had clashed with the 'rebels', most of them belonging to the poor fuckers who'd gone after garrison soldiers under Julien while armed about as well as your average street tough. The shield wall had scythed through them like wheat, though stubbornly quite a few had kept coming. Some old veterans and garrison men stayed loyalist had tried to get a shield wall of their own going, but Captain Julien had brought archers and there weren't enough shields on the rebel side to be able to even remotely take an organized volley.

The whole thing had been a massacre, and the smell of it was now lingering in her nose and mouth even when she covered it with cloth and faced wind blowing the other way. Gods, if only she'd not had a taste for poppy brew. If her debts had not been so deep the Silver Letters would never... It mattered not. They were deep as could be, and she owed to the wrong sort of folks. Hasenbach had been a decent enough sort to the people of the capital but not so saintly Pauline would burn down her own life for the First Prince's sake. Weren't no saints anywhere in Salia, as far as she could tell, and a woman had to take care of herself when the going got rough. She just wished the *stench* would go away.

"Stack the bodies together properly," she yelled through the cloth. "The carts need to be able to pass through the street when they're carried out. And all of you just standing around, lend a fucking hand would you?"

Only her own guards heeded the instruction, the idling soldiers and fantassins – Silver Letters, most likely – ignoring her outright. Considering they made for half the hundred she'd been left with, it was no surprise this bloody mess was going on forever. Even if the damned carts did finally get here they'd all be stuck waiting until guts and corpses no longer clogged the way. The Bastard ran this coup, looked liked, and he'd not trusted her enough to let her

guards handle this alone. Fair enough, but the man could at least have left her with more than godsdamned watchers if she was to have this street cleaned up enough it didn't look like a butcher's yard under morning light.

"Half of them," a man's voice calmly said, "were hardly even armed."

Lieutenant Pauline nearly jumped out of her own skin. The man who'd talked was some tall foreign fucker, though well-dressed. Probably one of Balthazar's, if he'd made it through the other blockades unimpeded. Maybe he'd know when the carts would be coming. There was a hooded woman at his side, the guard then noted, and she could see bits of a mask in the shadows beneath. Yeah, definitely some sort of spies.

"They were armed enough," Pauline grunted. "And you're sounding awful judgy for one of theirs, I got to say."

"I do not judge," the dark-skinned man refuted. "Though judgement has been passed on you nonetheless."

"You're not one of Balthazar's," Lieutenant Pauline said, stomach sinking.

"No," the White Knight said. "Though I expect we shall meet in due time. I shall mark the exculpated, Antigone. For the rest, do as you will."

The woman cocked her hooded head to the side as the wind suddenly picked up, and the last thing Pauline ever saw as a blade shining like the sun.

—

"And you are quite certain," Louis de Sartrons said, "that it concerned the Augur's limitations?"

"Yes," the dark-haired prisoner said. "I saw only part of the scroll, but it claimed to contain the Carrion Lord's own thoughts on the matter."

And there it was, the trap the Tower had laid. It'd been done cleverly enough, the emaciated spymaster had to admit. If that scroll had been found on the first foray of the Silver Letters, Balthazar would have recognized it for the dangled bait that it was. Instead it'd been a progressive, heady climb for the other spymaster: information extracted that led to more, operations successful but never too easily, until he'd found quite the cache of compromising documents including this particular scroll. Likely Serigny had held some doubts as well, but ultimately decided that not even the Empire was so callous as to sacrifice near a hundred spies and hirelings altogether to simply feed someone information. He never quite had gotten the measure of the Eyes of the Empire, had he? Oh Balthazar had prevented their successes on occasion but there was a reason that the Webweaver's pawns were for Louis and his peers to deal with and not the Bastard. Clever as Balthazar could be on occasion, he was used to the deceptions of the Ebb and Flow: shifting alliances and secrecy, the labyrinthine procedures and precedents of the Highest Assembly paired with blackmail and the occasional assassination.

And the Tower did use those means, it was true. But the Tower was a cursed beast that swallowed its own tail, there was no gambit too ruthless for it. Worse, after the Scribe and the mysterious Lady Ime had wrested the reins from the hands of their predecessors they had proved to be exquisitely deft

hands at the game. Some of the ways the Circle's agents in Mercantis had been dislodged had been so superbly executed that Louis had been more admiring than angry when reading the reports. Under the tenure of those two, the Eyes of the Empire had become the peer of the Circle of Thorns in every way. He had a great deal of respect for that society, and he'd studied them for decades: this had the telltale marks of a Praesi conspiracy all over it. It was always their preference to fund and empower local turncoats rather than to introduce a plot of their own whenever possible. Under Dread Empress Malicia the Empire had turned again and again its wealth into poison flowing through the veins of the Principate, and this was no different.

Yet when the reports from the other order had had given began to pour in, what had been clear instead became muddled.

"Pardon me," Louis said. "I don't believe I heard you correctly."

"They are killing each other, sir," the helper said. "It is not a coincidence, we've ten separate instances confirmed of known or suspected Imperial agents fighting."

A factional struggle between the Eyes? It was said that the Black Knight and the Dread Empress had sundered ties, but the Circle had been dubious given the lack of follow-through on either side. It would not be the first time that those two feigned quarrels to draw out foes and slay them. It was not, however, impossible.

"In seven out of ten instances, the party being attacked was trying to start a fire in the city," the helper recited. "In two out of the seven, magic was used by the attackers. In all ten instances the attackers won and retreated. We have several being followed."

The mages, Louis thought, were the trouble here. The great advantage of Praes spies was the ability to transmit what they learned by scrying, which greatly complicated ascertaining if a suspect individual was truly in contact with handlers. Which was why the Eyes so carefully guarded the identities of their mages in Procer, often preferring to lose an entire band of spies on the ground rather than endanger that more important component. Two had already been outed tonight, and more might follow. Which meant either this gambit, whatever its meaning, was worth burning them and potentially a very significant potion of the Eyes of the Empire in Salia – if not all of Procer.

Or, he grimly conceded, there truly was factional fighting within the Eyes. Between the Empress and the Carrion Lord, or more practically speaking Lady Ime and the Scribe. The former was said to never leave the Tower, if she even truly existed, but the latter... She was alleged to have been in the heartlands at some point in the past, though the information had been judged unreliable. It was not impossible for her to be in Salia at this very moment. One side was attempting to start fires, another to prevent such actions. It could not be that arson itself was the liability, for given the utter chaos in the capital it'd be nearly impossible to seriously contend that Praes had been responsible for the

fires. Not when Balthazar's band of pawns was happily starting a few without prompting.

"The riots will grow worse, if the fires take hold," Louis frowned, thinking out loud. "Both those of the First Prince's partisans and those of the conspirators."

More specifically the House of Light, who could stir the people to anger like few others. Still, Cordelia Hasenbach was not without friends in Salia and remained popular with the people – in particular soldiers, retired or otherwise, but also artisans and the poor.

"Fighting has begun in earnest between our own people and the Silver Letters," his helped noted. "As well as the Eyes and the Silver Letters, though that has been infrequent and we believe possibly accidental."

Louis de Sartrons' eyes sharpened.

"Where?" he asked. "Where are the Eyes and the Letters clashing?"

The particulars had to be sent for, but the ember of inspiration had struck and slowly he followed the thought to its conclusion. As always, the devil was in the details. One might credibly conjecture that at the moment there were four assemblies of spies in Salia: the Silver Letters, the Circle of Thorns, and what one might venture to term the Praesi arsonists and the Praesi hatchets. The hatchets, as it happened, were the key. Because as descriptions were confirmed it became clear that there were significantly less of them than the arsonists – this was known because some of their executioner crews were sighted several times.

The Praesi arsonists were being clipped away by the hatchets with methodical precision before they could light fires in vulnerable parts of the cities, where it might easily spread. Now, the hatchets did not intervene when Silver Letters and arsonists fought but they themselves had raided several Silver Letters safehouses. Which meant that the Praesi 'hatchets' were trying to prevent the 'arsonists' from carrying out a plot, while most likely trying to get their hands on some damning piece of evidence. Meanwhile the Silver Letters were being fallen upon from all sides, including the Circle's more martial assets, while lashing out essentially blindly.

The hatchets were being used to contain and clean up a plot someone had evidently judged ill-advised. Given their small numbers but efficiency and eerily skilled coordination, as well as their precise strikes at Silver Letters safehouses, Louis believed he knew who was heading them. He sent for his coat and arranged for an escort to accompany him back to *Les Horizons Lugubres*. The other members of the Circle would be long gone, by now, but it was not they he intended to meet.

"Sir," the helper said as he was led out, "I had a room set aside as you ordered. Who should I let the watchers expect?"

"Oh, you might say she's an old friend," Louis de Sartrons smiled, "Though I expect she'll let herself in."

—

The princes were folding, and Balthazar could almost taste the victory in the air.

The last two royals in the city that were not already at the Highest Assembly had sent messengers expressing they would not be setting out to attend, and that they would go accompanied by their retinue given the disorder in the city. They'd ordered that the blockade was to move aside for them and their escort when they arrived, which Balthazar had arrived – so long as only men on foot and by horse came, and every single one was inspected before being allowed to pass. They'd grown desperate now, enough that neither Prince Renato of Salamans nor Prince Ariel of Arans had even brought up that the head of the Silver Letters was torching the district where their own manses stood. They'd recognized it for a lost cause, and they were falling in line. Captain Julien had protested letting the retinues out in the city, but they were less than two thousand in whole so Balthazar had disagreed. They were elite soldiers, true enough, but they could not seize the city with so few. If they took the palace they might be able to hold it against greater numbers, but Balthazar had ordered than only twenty soldiers be let in by prince and any attempt to force entry with more be met with violence.

Given that the conspiracy's own soldiers were the ones on the right side of walls and gates, at the moment, even if the two princes had struck an unlikely alliance they simply did not have the strength to take the palace with steel. And even if they did, by some miracle, they could not defend it: while it might be true that the servants in the palace had been fond of Hasenbach, and some even protested her seizing, he had Silver Letters among their number that'd open secret ways into the palace if it need be retaken. Watching another manse burn down, the ferocious-looking man waited at the edge of the blaze's warmth for the latest word out of the palace. By now the Holies and Princess Clotilde ought to have crowned their pet princes, and the decrees could start being passed in earnest. Cordelia Hasenbach's deposition would likely be the first. The soldiers had begun piling the wood by the walls of another manse, while another detachment briskly inspected the servants and lesser nobles that'd come out of the last before sending them south in small groups, when the messenger did arrive. One of his own Silver Letters, he noticed, Rosalie. Less than pleasant a person, but utterly without scruples and so reliable for all manners of work.

"Have I missed the election of First Princess Rozala Malanza?" Balthazar amusedly asked.

The red-haired woman grimaced.

"You haven't," she said. "The Highest Assembly hasn't even officially convened yet."

He was, for once, more utterly surprised than furious. For a moment, at least, then fury claimed its due.

"What?" Balthazar hissed. "Are they all drunk? It's been most of a bell, what could possibly be taking so long?"

"They can't enter the Chamber of Assembly," Rosalie said.

He blinked, unsure how to respond to that. Had some enchantment been laid upon the threshold?

"They don't have the key," she explained. "There was only one, in the hands of the Master of Orders-"

"One of Hasenbach's," Balthazar frowned.

"No one can find him," Rosalie said. "He must have fled the palace. I have our people looking for him, but he could be anywhere by now."

In principle that was a blow, as the Highest Assembly could only hold session within the Chamber and any motion passed outside of it would not be binding, but only in principle.

"Are you telling me no one can simply batter down those doors?" the spymaster growled. "Given their age a few good soldiers ought to be enough."

"Princess Clotilde has refused," Rosalie darkly said. "And the Holies have agreed. They say it would cast into doubt the legitimacy of Malanza's ascension to break open the Chamber."

"Of all the bouts of bloody lunacy," Balthazar cursed.

He called for a horse, after that, and for Prince Arsene as well. This part of the city was under control, now it seemed they were needed back in the palace. Balthazar Serigny would see this coup succeed even if he had to batter down the fucking doors himself.

# Bonus Chapter: Site Hack

Some of you on the Discord server or the APGTE reddit might have come across a mention that the site was hacked last night, and indeed it was. It changed a few chapters as well as other pages to some malware link under the claim that something tragic had 'happened to the site moderator'. I was having dinner at a friend's at the time, but it was pretty easy to fix when I got home and nothing was lost. The password has been changed, so with a little luck it shouldn't happen again.

E.E.

# Interlude: Mirror

"Third, taking:
Bone to wind
And mirror to fill."
-Third of the three so

called 'Mavian Entreaties'

Louis de Sartrons had been speculating to himself as to how long he would have to wait before his guest arrived and had ultimately settled for 'less than an hour'. Which, given the sheer bloody chaos in the city and the difficulty to move around the streets – and so have information carried through them – he'd felt was generous of him. Which was why his face went blank when he entered the private alcove at *Les Horizons Lugubres* and he found someone already seated a the table.

"You are late," the Scribe said, her Chantant flawless.

The head of the Circle of Thorns, for the first time laying eyes on a woman he'd crossed blades and wits with across half of Calernia, immediately tried to commit her appearance to memory. Obtaining a description of the Webweaver had so far proved impossible, but now he saw that she was –

/

– and ink-stained hands. Louis was debating how to pass the knowledge to one of his helpers as soon as possible when he realized he had nothing to pass. The moment his eyes left the Scribe he knew nothing of her: height, colour of the eyes, even if her hair was long or short. He knew not whether her skin was dark or pale, or indeed anything at all save that she had ink-stained hands. *Fuck*, Louis thought, made unusually vulgar by the depths of his irritation.

"I would apologize, but I see you helped yourself to the wine," the spymaster replied.

Two cups had been filled, hers already touched, and though he had no intention of putting his mouth anywhere near something the Webweaver had poured he accepted the delicate crystal glass when she offered it. He settled into his seat, the two of them surrounded by swirling panels of bottle-green glass and hanging stone lanterns that seemed to transmute all of Creation in jade.

"Shall I begin by reminding you that your presence in Salia uninvited is an act of war when truce has been declared?" Louis mused.

"Then it is for the best I am not here," the Scribe replied. "Given the seriousness of the situation, shall we dispense with the preliminaries?"

Louis felt rather cheated that after all these years of wanting to meet one of his few peers in the trade he'd have to set aside the games of their kind, but he had to admit there was little time to spare. Despite what appeared to be the Webweaver's best efforts, Salia *was* on fire. Several of them, in fact.

"It would be judicious of us," the thin man conceded. "It appears that you are looking for something, my friend."

He'd been told the Eyes – or at least the faction among them not attempting to set the city increasingly more on fire – had hit yet another warehouse of the Silver Letters while taking a carriage to the *Horizons*. Whatever it was that Scribe was seeking, she was seeking it urgently.

"I am," the Scribe said. "Two things, as a matter of fact. I will require your aid in finding them."

—

Brother Simon watched the man drop, bleeding from the throat, and fall into the filth of the sewers.

Age was catching up to him, after his exertions in leaving behind the hospitality of the Holies, so he'd gone and rounded up a few friends. They had, in turn, sent for friends of theirs. One of the several results of that unfolding awareness had been Simon of Gorgeault's presence in the sewers of the high districts, under the escort of thirty well-armed fantassins. The friendly young woman who'd just snuck up to the Silver Letter who'd failed to hear them approach and decisively dispatched him sheathed her short sword then waved the others forward.

The lay brother cast a lingering look at the corpse floating on the surface of the river of excrement and trash, grimly thinking that with the amount of corpses his band had sown tonight the rats down here would be rather well-fed. He'd been breathing from his nose from the moment his escorts had ripped open the grid over the river of filth flowing into the muddy fields of the Petite Oblique – better known as Constant's Arse by Salians, as the drop into the Old River and rain-channels meant many threw their waste there for it to be washed away – and been grateful for the hurried pace into the sewers proper.

There'd been precious little crawling, for which he was thoughtful, for later in the underground tunnels the wealthy and highborn of Salia had built the sewers at near a man's height so that whenever blockage was had it could be dealt with promptly and not stink up their beautiful manses should the wind grow capricious. Balthazar was not a fool, so the Silver Letters were keeping watch in the tunnels, but a quick and heavily armed group could tear through such a cordon if it struck without hesitation. They'd met with success so far, though Brother Simon had silently tempered the victories with the knowledge that it was only a matter of time until a corpse was found.

And the moment one was, the Silver Letters would come down here in force. Perhaps even with garrison soldiers, which given their better arms and armour

would be even more troublesome to deal with. No, while his group had been able to enter the high districts by the sewers but leaving through them would be another story entirely. As it happened Simon had some notion, though the risks would not be small. Yet there must be a part of the district where the blaze was weaker, and given enough wet blankets and snow… It had better chances of success than assault, anyhow, given the numbers the conspirators had surrounded the districts with.

"Here," a voice whispered.

Simon followed the gesture with his eyes and found indentations in the wall, with rusting iron grips above them. A makeshift ladder to return above, thank the Gods.

"Where will we be?" the old man asked.

"Maybe a street away from Prince Renato's manse," the same fantassin who'd been guiding them through the sewer said. "Can't be sure if there'll be people, so we have to move fast."

It was agreed upon in murmurs, and one of the fantassins took the lead in climbing up. A heavy wooden trapdoor barded in steel was opened and lowered as quietly as possible and they all fled upwards one after another. The night wind was a blessing after the stink of below, Simon thought, even though it carried the scent of burning in the distance. There were soldiers in the distance to the side, piling up wood, but they were busy with their work and did not look their way. The infiltrators hurried regardless, closing the trapdoor as quick as they could and fleeing for the shadows. They were hailed the moment they arrived in sight of the walls of the Prince of Salamans, and even earlier than Brother Simon had believed they would be: Renato's retinue was out in the streets in great numbers, as if preparing to leave.

Simon was not unknown to the prince himself, though none of the officers among the soldiers knew him by sight, yet the lingering stink of his travels by sewer earned him *some* consideration when he claimed to be at odds with the conspirators. The head of the Holy Society had attempted to have the Prince of Salamans warned that he would be coming, but the messengers must have been waylaid for he was unexpected. Prince Renato himself was having his horse saddled when Simon was brought to him in the outer courtyard.

"Brother Simon," the moustachioed Arlesite said. "I am told that the Holy Society has been protesting this lunacy."

"It did even when I was still prisoner of the House of Light, Your Grace," Simon agreed. "I am pleased to see you of a like mind."

"There will be a reckoning for tonight," Prince Renato warned. "One way or another."

The lay brother mutedly nodded.

"I may have a method to smuggle Her Most Serene Highness out of the districts, if I may be allowed to speak with her," Simon said.

The Arlesite prince's face flickered with surprise.

"You do not know, then," Renato said. "She is not here, Brother Simon. It was a ruse."

Before Simon could ask where the First Prince had then gone, genuinely bemused, both of them turned when soldiers in the courtyard began to yell in surprise. The lay brother swallowed drily, when he saw what appeared to be an entire manse rise high in the night sky before being suddenly smashed downwards to a chorus of screams.

That, Simon of Gorgeault thought, rather changed things.

—

"It would be easier to look if I knew what to send my colleagues looking for," Louis mildly said.

He'd promised nothing, not that his word given in such a situation would be of any worth at all. His duty was to Procer and Procer alone. Everything else was noise.

"The first is correspondence taken from one of the Empire's safehouses," she said. "It includes an entirely academic exercise by the Black Knight as to how one might arrange the assassination of Cordelia Hasenbach past of the vigilance of the Augur."

*Academic*, was it? Louis knew of no less than twelve plots aimed at the murder of the First Prince since her coronation that could be traced back to either the woman in front of him or the black-cloaked devil she answered to. They'd been thwarted in part by the Circle, in part by Agnes Hasenbach's unerring guidance and in part by the quality of guards Cordelia Hasenbach surrounded herself with. The only surprise here was that, if the Scribe was so desperately seeking to get her hands on the scroll that'd entice Balthazar into treason, it might genuinely be the Carrion Lord's own words. It was a feasible explanation for why she might be trying so hard to find it: the revelation would be damaging to her master.

Or, his naturally suspicious mind whispered, after planting that ruinous seed the Scribe was now attempting to remove the evidence. Yet she had revealed that scroll's existence to him while she must be uncertain of whether he knew of it or not, which meant whatever drove her was urgent enough she was willing to take the risk that the Circle would take the correspondence itself. *Or that she infiltrated the Circle deeply enough she already knew of our awareness*, he mused. *In which case she is building credibility for a later lie.* Ah, but he'd not felt this vital in in decades. It was like a stiff tonic dragging him back to the days of his youth, when the burning in his bones had not yet calmed. It was quite exhilarating, to want to crush someone *so very utterly* as he did the Scribe.

"As for the second, it is stolen imperial property currently held in a Silver Letters warehouse," the Webweaver said. "Which is why you will help me, Louis de Sartrons."

"There can be no legal theft of Praesi property while in a state of war with the Dread Empire," Louis noted. "And that is a bold claim besides."

"Also an accurate one," the Scribe said. "For after the legionary detachment accompanying the Carrion Lord onto Lake Artoise by barge was wiped out, the boats were brought back to shore. And the Silver Letters had hired hands there, ready to claim first pick of what lay in the holds."

The old spymaster forced himself to recall what he knew of the force that'd been found dead to the last on the barges, allegedly through some terrible miracle of the Grey Pilgrim's. Numbers had been moderate, the only officer of note had been the veteran from the Conquest known as Marshal Ranker – Ranker, yes. A goblin.

"Goblin munitions," Louis said with feigned serenity. "They seized goblin munitions."

"The Silver Letters have been contracting alchemists in attempts to divine the recipe for our traditional munitions," the Scribe agreed. "They have also brought into the city what I estimate to be three full cart's worth of goblinfire."

—

Prince Renato brought only a small escort when they sallied out, all mounted, and provided a mount for Simon as well. There was no point in bringing great strength, for they'd seen rise in the sky how such would be answered. No, best to flee if things went badly and for that horses and few soldiers were best. Brother Simon felt almost guilty of such wariness against what could only be one of the Chosen but not all such souls were kindly ones, much less kindly hands. The Regicide had famously held no compunctions in tearing through whoever stood in her way when she pursued a quarry and the lay brother had heard... troubling things about the Grey Pilgrim. Long before the man became involved with the Black Queen, too. The ten riders went down the street at a brisk trot, finding a graveyard of broken stone and corpses among which two silhouettes stood. One turned towards them, masked and cloaked in green, while the other spoke to a kneeling man. Simon spurred his mount onwards, casting his voice loudly.

"Hail, Chosen," the lay brother said.

The hero who'd been speaking with a soldier glanced back, revealing dark skin to the torchlight, and Simon was thus able to name him: this would be the Ashuran hero that had been summoned by the First Prince, the White Knight. Whispered, among some priestly circles, to be in the service of the Choir of Judgement. The Chosen look back at the kneeling soldier, and before Simon could so much as speak another word the kneeling man's head was rolling among the stones. Some of the soldiers behind him breathed in sharply at the sight, either shocked or afraid.

"You are not of these Silver Letters," the other Chosen stated, her voice a woman's. "Who then are you?"

There was something about the words that had Simon's mind askew. Almost like the heroine had not been speaking Chantant, though obviously she *had* been.

"I am Brother Simon of Gorgeault, from the Holy Society," the diplomat introduced himself.

"Prince Renato of Salamans," the prince introduced himself, leading his mount to stand by Simon's.

Brave man, the prince. Arlesites often were, though they had a way of turning that virtue into a vice.

"I am the Witch of the Woods," the heroine said. "He is the White Knight. We seek the man called Balthazar Serigny. Do you know where he is?"

The White Knight turned to look at them, eyes utterly serene even as his sword dripped blood.

"We are here for a reason, Antigone," the Ashuran said, almost chidingly. "To meet them, perhaps. Do you know where the First Prince is being held?"

"She has freed herself from the trap of the traitors," Prince Renato said. "Have you then come to support her cause?"

"There is no cause," the White Knight said. "She is the First Prince, that is fact. What more need be said?"

"Then you must help us," Brother Simon says. "For my colleagues will have gathered every sword they can from the city guard and the garrison, every loyal man and woman in the city, but even with the help of loyal princes and the retinues we will find it hard to take the palace."

"See?" the White Knight smiled, glancing at his comrade. "Always a reason."

—

*Oh*, Louis thought, *those utter fools*. Like no one had ever tried to piece together the goblin's recipes. The Stygian Magisterium was said to have spent a fortune in repeated failed attempts, the Thalassocracy had a standing reward for any goblin munitions in any state and even the First Prince herself had briefly tried to have alchemists reproduce the ones known as 'sharpers' before admitting that whatever the process involved was the Principate simply did not have the sorcerous know-how to match it. And now a significant portion of the Eyes of the Empire was going around the city setting fires, when they should be well aware that all it'd take was a single drop touching flame and... and the city would burn green. As was the telltale mark of the Black Queen bringing her enemies to heel.

"Malicia wants to sink the Liesse Accords," Louis said. "Yet you are attempting to protect them. Why?"

"Because I have been ordered to," the Scribe replied.

Her closeness to the Black Knight was well-documented, true enough, and with the lifting of the veil over Iserre it had become possible to scry again days ago. All it would have taken was a face-to-face conversation with the Carrion Lord and the matter would have been settled. Of course, that much implied she had already been in Salia. That she had been here and that the Eyes of the Empire in the service of Lady Ime instead of herself had somehow succeeded at fomenting such schemes without her knowledge. Which was, in a word,

*absurd*. The strife between Praesi spies was too recent, Louis decided. And though he dared not underestimate the Eyes of the Empire, neither would he overestimate them: the way Balthazar Serigny had been played, and likely other conspirators as well, was beyond the reach of most Praesi spies.

"It was your scheme, wasn't it?" Louis de Sartrons suddenly said. "All of this was plotted in concert with the Tower. And then the Carrion Lord pulled your leash."

The bones of the aftermath of the initial plot might have taken were still there. Cordelia Hasenbach dead, the House of Light irreparably discredited by the fire and the coup, Rozala Malanza crowned First Princess but illegitimately so in the eyes of most. Large swaths of the Principate would outright rebel, and even if the Dead King was beaten back there would be no keeping the Lycaonese in Procer after this. They'd fight bitterly to secede and many of Prince Cordelia's steadiest allies with them. *Either Keter devoured us whole or we'd collapse in the wake of our survival*, Louis thought half-admiringly. *And with the House perhaps purged and inevitably disgraced, there would be no one left to mediate between the combatants.* It'd been a very comprehensive scheme. Terrifyingly so. Until part of the schemers had turned against it, anyway.

"If that were the case, such a plan would have been made when Lord Black was held prisoner by heroes," the Scribe said.

"You need our help," the spymaster smiled. "To find those munitions before half the capital burns green and your master ends up being held responsible."

"You need my help," the Scribe replied, "before half your capital burns green and hundreds of thousands die."

"It will cost you," Louis de Sartrons nonchalantly said.

Her eyes narrowed, but she answered through gritted teeth. Resigned. Oh, this was delicious turn indeed.

"What do you want?" she asked.

Praes had attempted to lay hand on Procer, Louis mused with a thin smile. As the charge of the Circle of Thorns ordered, it was time for the Dread Empire to bleed for presumption.

—

Balthazar felt his face turn ashen. His mind stalled, for a moment, in utter surprise and dismay. He nodded at Rosalie in acknowledgement afterwards, who once more this might had been appointed the carrier of ill news. This time, though, much worse than the last.

"You would do well to listen for once in your misbegotten life, you jumped-up fantassin," Brother Bertran sneered, Arlesite accent thick. "If you expect to keep your station after Princess Rozala's election you should learn-"

"Shut your fucking mouth, priest," Balthazar the Bastard said, voice gone flat. "The rest of you, listen to me closely."

There was a ripple of surprise among the crowd. They'd agreed to speak with him when he'd insisted that the damned door to the Highest Assembly

needed to be battered down because of his prominence within the conspiracy, but none of these were used to being spoken to in such a manner.

"You dare speak-" Brother Betran began.

Balthazar glanced at one of his men and the priest's nose broke with a wet crunch a heartbeat later. A sheath weighed quite a bit, especially with the sword still in it.

"If we do not enter the Highest Assembly and depose Hasenbach within the hour, everyone here is dead," the large spymaster calmly said. "The princes of Salamans and Arans broke through the encirclement of the high districts and gathered a crowd of armed malcontents. They're coming for the palace."

"We have the run of the palace, Serigny," Princess Clotilde replied. "We've retinues of our own and loyalists, as well as the walls. We could hold ten times our number, and I've doubts they have gathered such."

"If that was all they had, I'd hardly care," Balthazar grunted. "We could break them all at once. But there are two Chosen with them – the White Knight and the Witch of the Woods."

"This is good news, Serigny," Sister Adelie dismissed. "We need only send an envoy and they will come to our side, perhaps even bearing Hasenbach herself. She *is* a heretic."

"The two of them have killed somewhere around three hundred people since they've entered the city, best my people can tell," Balthazar said. "At least a dozen were priests. They are coming for our heads, ladies and gentlemen, not to lend a hand."

A great deal of consternation ensued. The Holies, in particular, remained unconvinced that the Chosen would not embrace their cause. Amusingly enough there was talk of Hasenbach having seduced the White Knight, or the Witch of the Woods, or both as well as the less salacious talk that she might have lied to them so they would misunderstand the situation. One even suggested they were in truth Damned and not Chosen, though there were few takers. The more practical suggested envoys be sent to the Chosen regardless, to 'clarify the situation' to which Balthazar agreed mostly so they'd cease their shrill whining. Fear, though, finally got the lot of them moving. They all knew that so long as Hasenbach was the First Prince, they were all rebels. Deposition followed by an election, even a hasty and dubious one, would change the situation. The White Knight was said to be a scrupulous observer of the law, when there was law to be had, and even a parchment hat was better than none at all when it was raining outside. Their soldiers and guards were sent to hold the fortifications around the palace, key parts of the inside carefully garrisoned as well, and then they finally marched on the Chamber of Assembly. A strange procession of priests, highborn and spies. Only four soldiers, enough to carry a large bench that they immediately began ramming into the ancient doors. Once, twice, thrice and then the doors *opened*. Seated on the tall seat of her office, flanked by soldiers and the bearded Master of Orders, the First Prince of Procer awaited them all in the full and resplendent regalia of her rank.

"Hasenbach," Balthazar snarled. "*Why are you here?*"

"The Highest Assembly is in session, traitor," Cordelia Hasenbach said, face a mask of frigid contempt. "Where else would I be?"

# Bonus Chapter: Winter I

> "Forty-one: should personalities among your band be clashing overmuch, consider leading the band into grave peril. Either friendship or a corpse will ensue, which remedies the issue either way."
>
> "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

Merciful Gods, it truly was a terrible job but *someone* had to do it. Today that person was Ernest, and though he'd gone as far as offering up his entire savings to anyone in his company willing to go in his place there'd been no takers. Either he'd not saved up enough to tempt someone into the risk, or they'd wisely decided that a corpse could spend no coin. Captain Noémie – her rank meant she did not have to participate in the lottery, the damned lucky witch – had ordered half a dozen of his fellows to come down to the shore with him, enough that even if the Dead struck there should be at least one runner left to bring back the news. Ernest's last attempt to sway one of them into taking his place was met with jeers and one promise to comfort his sister if he did not make it back to shore. Victor, the last one had been. He'd remember that. The rowboat was cramped and uncomfortable, though even in winter it'd been kept oiled and clean so it would remain in good shape. Ernest, by what he intended to claim was a coincidence, smacked Victor in the face with the oar when his companions pushed him out into the lake.

The waters of Lake Pavin rarely froze even at winter's peak, but they were icy cold and prone to ripping currents that could easily tip over a small boat like this one. Still that was the last of Ernest's troubles this morn, for he'd been sent out to see if any of the Dead were lurking beneath the waters. Orders had come down from Prince Gaspard himself, it was said, that all forces by the shores of Lake Pavin and the Tomb were to survey the waters every day. Rumour had it that Langueroche, further up north, had fallen after heavy fighting because the undead had massed in great numbers under the surface of the lake before striking just before morning. The people had fled in time, but now the entire northwest was said to be buckling under the weight of the Dead's offensive. The young man glanced back to the distant shape of Sengrin, the fortress-town on the hilly slope where he'd been born, and prayed once more it was too small

a town to be worth the Hidden Horror's attentions. They hardly had the men to resist an incursion if it came, for many had been called north to the capital where the Enemy had struck hardest.

Yet the siege there had been broken, Ernest reminded himself. The war was not yet lost.

A scream from the shore shook him out of his thoughts, reminding him simply rowing out would serve no purpose. Carefully, he went looking through the cloth bag hung at the front of the boat and took out a handful of small round stones. As he'd been instructed to, he leant over the side of the boat and dropped three in a line. Whatever it was the priests had done to the rocks, it worked as they'd said it would: light bloomed as they sunk deeper, casting a warm and broad glow. Now he only had to wait until it touched the bottom of the lake, repeat this twice more and he could – oh, *oh Gods no*. Standing in still and silent rows at the bottom of Lake Pavin, hundreds of figures in ancient armour spread out as far as the light was cast. Ernest desperately scrabbled for the oars again and began rowing, screaming out in alarm for his companions still on the shore, but with utter terror he saw from the corner of his eye one of the stones he'd dropped bounce off the side of a skeletal thing's bronze helmet. It looked up, an eyeless leering skull, and the young soldier nearly pissed himself.

He hardly made it another twenty feet, screaming all the while, before a spear's tip punched through the bottom of the rowboat and it began taking water. He tried to keep rowing for a few heartbeats, even as more iron spikes went through the wood, but the weight was too much and his arms too weak. There were dark shapes moving under the water's surface, but what choice did he have? Cursing, he leapt off the boat towards the shore and began to swim in the icy waters. There were things trying to grasp at his feet but he was quicker than they, even though his limbs were growing numb, and he swallowed cold and scummy water but against all odds he made it near the shore. Enough he could find his footing on the ground below the water – which was then spear took him in the back of the leg and he screamed as hooks sunk into his skin and something dragged him back into the deeper lake. Fingers closed around his throat to keep him still, and though he panicked he realized after a moment they were warm. And coming from the wrong way. A large woman in plate, with a helmet shaped like a snarling badger, grinned at him.

"Stupid brave," the stranger praised. "But this hurt."

And then he was screaming and flying through the air, blood spurting as the spear that'd been put in him accompanied him still stuck in his leg. He landed half-weeping, the pain and vicious bite of the wind on his wet body too much for him to take. The wet spear broke, though the head only dig deeper into his flesh. Someone wrapped a blanket around him and faces he could hardly make out for the tears hastily brought him up to the fire near the watchtower further up the hill.

"There's a priestess on her way," someone said. "We'll take out the spear then. You did good, Ernest. Gods, you did good."

"Who was that, near the shore?" he croaked out.

"Don't know the name, but I know what the other one told us what they go by," Victor quietly said. "The Valiant Champion. Levantine, I gather."

A Chosen, Ernest shivered. With the warmth of the fire and blanket his vision was beginning to stop swimming. He looked back to the lake and thought he must have gone mad, or been poisoned, but the others breathed in sharply and some even began to pray. All along the shore, for what must have been a mile, shapes began to emerge from the water. The dead walked, garbed in iron and bronze, flesh and bone dripping water. And further from the shore great shapes broke the surface, gargantuan snakes of bone and leather and crackling sorcery. And in front of them stood only two silhouettes, sharply glared at by the morning light. Women, both one in wet plate with a great axe resting on her shoulder and the other in a coarse green cloak-tunic that went all the way to her feet. She turned, revealing that behind the long locks framing her face she wore a mask, and flicked some droplets of blood against the rocky shore. The world *shivered* and Ernest rose to his feet.

"They'll die," he said. "There's too many, and the snakes-"

"Look," another man croaked. "Gods, *look*."

Lake Pavin screamed and tore back, the waters fleeing the shore as if terrified and snapping up most the undead with them. A few soldiers who'd already reached solid ground strode forward uncertainly as the lake continued to retreat, though any who dared to approach the pair were casually dispatched by the Valiant Champion: she smashed through them like they were glass, never needing more than a single blow and moving with blinding swiftness. The snakes – there were three, Ernest now counted – broke free of the waters pulling back and with sky-tearing screams tore forward. The Chosen in the snarling badger helm glanced at her cloaked companion, who nodded distractedly. Laughing wildly, the Valiant Champion began to run towards the gargantuan monsters.

"There's a few still loose," Ernests said, glancing to the sides.

"We can handle those, at least," Victor said, grunting.

In the distance one of the great snakes struck at the Champion, who slapped the massive maw with the flat of her axe – and after a rippling sound the snake was tossed back like a rag doll, hitting the lake and causing waves.

"That's the Witch of the Woods, it is," another soldier said, grabbing his spear. "Heard about her. Walloped the Sovereign of the Red Skies real good when they fought."

"She's not even the leader of that bunch, I hear," Victor said. "It's some Ashuran knight."

Before their eyes, the waters that'd been drawn back by the Witch began to ice. Tendrils of frost went through, like ink in water, and thickened as they went. Gods, Ernest thought, what manner of a man could command women like these?

—

Hanno caught her wrist before the blade could claim more than a scratch on the Mirror Knight's chin. He would have liked to restrain the Painted Knife entirely, for the threats she was screaming in Lunara were not mild ones, but he could not. His other hand had seized the wrist of the Mirror Knight instead, catching it before he could finish drawing his sword.

"You dare?" the Mirror Knight thundered.

Not at Hanno but at the Painted Knife, who snarled back in kind.

"Enough," the White Knight said.

"The Levantine tries to slay me in broad daylight and-"

"If you do not release your grip, I will crush your wrist," White calmly said in Chantant, then changed to Lunara. "Kallia, drop your blade."

"Did you not just hear him call the Scouring of Vaccei *necessary*?" she hissed. "Thousands of my people killed, children choking to death on ashes and-"

"I will not ask twice," Hanno calmly said.

Snarling at him once more, she did. Christophe released the grip of his own blade as soon as he no longer felt threatened, though the dark-haired hero found he had little sympathy for the man. In some ways it was a relief that Procer gave birth to so few heroes, for Hanno had known none save for the Rogue Sorcerer who'd not at one point or another stirred black rage in heroes from another nation. The Mirror Knight was a good man, principled and well-meaning, yet his rustic attitudes and insistence that Procer's wars abroad had been for the good of Calernia were being received increasingly poorly by the heroes of the Dominion. If he stilled his tongue more often, it would be a negligible issue. Unfortunately, Christophe was both opiniated and frankly rather easy to bait. Which he inevitably was, by one of the several heroes who considered him pompous and in need of a good thrashing.

"Blood was spilled," the Mirror Knight flatly said. "There must be answer to that."

"Are you requesting," the White Knight peacefully asked, "the judgement of the Seraphim?"

The other man's face shuttered and he curtly shook his head in denial. The Painted Knife, whose Chantant had improved with the months she'd been in Cleves, understood enough to chortle at Christophe's expense. Hanno's gaze moved to her, quelling, and she stalked away like a proud cat. A spar with the Vagrant Spear would settle her, he hoped.

"You've lost less than thimble of blood, Christophe," a cultured voice drawled. "Shall you require less than a thimble's worth of justice to go along with it?"

The Repentant Magister had yet to finish the cup of wine in her hand, for she'd been more interested in spectating the aftermath of the careful barbs she'd sent the Mirror Knight's way than in finishing her drink. Lounging in her seat in heavy velour robes, the patrician beauty wore a sardonic smile that could widen or dwindle but never quite entirely left her face. Nephele might have renounced the sordid practices and sorceries of the Magisterium, but she'd

yet to shed their taste for making a game of others. Even after it had nearly come to blows between two heroes she seemed entirely unrepentant – which might have amused Hanno, given her Name, were he shallower sort of man. As it was, instead he considered to be as much if not more at fault for the incident as the two who'd reached for steel.

"Nephele," he warned.

"Stygians," the Myrmidon shrugged from the side, speaking Aenian. "What else can be expected, even from one claiming *repentance*?"

Bereft of her armour for once, the slender woman was sitting on his cot and polishing the large bronze shield whose holy blessings were as a song to Hanno's Name. The Repentant Magister's smile had sharpened the moment she began speaking: neither had hidden the strong and instant dislike they took to each other the very moment they met.

"When the Exarch ran you of Penthes like a whipped dog," Nephele conversationally asked in the same obscure tongue, "is it true that you were jeered at by the mob on your way out?"

Heroes were not meant to gather in great numbers, Hanno thought, not for so long. Not without a common enemy they could all strive against – and though the Dead King was that, he was simply too distant to fill the need. He could not be found on the field, which left instead a crowd of heroes each itching to fight the war on Keter in their own way without the slightest desire to heed anyone's commands or any notion of how to remain civil with others just as stubborn. Keeping the peace between them was like trying to teach humility to a cat.

"The Magister does not speak untruth," the Mirror Knight said, having ignored the exchange he could not understand. "Can the Dominion's band of *heroic* killers now cut their allies without consequences?"

"Nephele speaks to stir up amusement," Hanno flatly said. "And you gave offence with your words that was no less than the scratch of a blade."

Christophe's face set mulishly.

"I do not deny that the sanctions visited upon Vaccei were harsh, yet they were hardly-"

"Ah, I'd forgotten," the Myrmidon mused, still in Aenian. "When Procerans have a massacre, we have to call it *sanctions* instead."

"What was that?" the Mirror Knight sharply replied, having caught the tone if not understood the words.

"Is fuck him," the Myrmidon replied, her Tolesian heavily accented.

"You," Nephele helpfully clarified. "She means fuck *you*, Christophe."

The Mirror Knight reddened. He was a young man, and proud. Too many slights had been offered to him tonight for him, he'd chew on them for weeks. It was the persistence of the Repentant Magister in stirring the pot that bothered the Ashuran, as much for the stirring itself as her persistence in doing so when she'd been confronted about it. She did not usually continue past the first verbal raking of her claws on someone's back when caught out. The White

Knight's gaze moved to her hands, which he found steady, but then to the cup she was holding. Which was, as he'd noted earlier, still full. So was the open bottle at her side on the table.

"Are you drunk, Magister?" Hanno suddenly asked.

The smile vanished.

"Of course not," Nephele replied, tone serene.

A lie, Hanno thought. He glanced at the other two heroes: Christophe had followed, but as the Myrmidon spoke nothing aside from Aenian, barely passable tradertalk and a smidge of Tolesian she was utterly in the dark.

"I would ask you for use of the room, Mirror Knight," he formally asked the Proceran.

The man was still furious, but now he was also confused and aside from it all his natural manners won out – when politely asked a minor favour by someone he considered a social superior, Christophe would feel the need to grant it with aplomb. He acceded to the request. The Myrmidon would require better reason, so instead Hanno asked her to see if the Painted Knife had calmed – and if not, if she could be talked into a spar with the Vagrant Spear. The Penthesian was quite taking with the latter, if not in a romantic sense: their very public matches had become one of the favourite entertainments of the army in Cleves.

"Am I to be punished now?" the Repentant Magister smiled. "I *have* been a bad girl, and since we have the use of the room. . . "

"Would that help you?" Hanno frankly asked.

She blinked in surprise. He thought it a little sad, that she had grown so jaded of her own life she no longer genuinely sought companionship in others.

"If all it takes is asking, it is cruel no one has told Antigone," Nephele chuckled.

That brought out no reaction from him. Hanno understood the Witch of the Wilds perhaps better than anyone not of the Gigantes could, for the silent tongue they shared had a hundred thousand nuances but not a single *lie*. They knew where they stood, and what could and could not change from it. Insinuations thrown against that were like an egg tossed at a rampart.

"No, then," Hanno frowned. "Drink is not a remedy, Nephele."

"A remedy for what?" the Repentant Magister asked.

"Your hands shake without it, I think," the White Knight said. "How many bottles have you drunk?"

The heroine's face tightened, and so he knew he'd been correct.

"I am not *weak*," the sorceress said.

Hanno sat at her side. How many times did it make now he'd been in this position? The strain was getting to all of them, one way or another. They were far from home, drowning in death, and forced to stand shoulder to shoulder with people they might otherwise draw blades on. The exhaustion they felt was making them all quarrel more than they would have otherwise, for though their bodies were often kept rested by their Names the same could not be said of their minds.

"When you left Stygia, you renounced the sorceries you were taught," Hanno gently said.

"Not all," Nephele said. "Enchantment and clairvoyance, healing and strengthening. I am still mistress of these, for all I have cast aside."

But the curses and destructive sorceries the Magisterium was fond of unleashing on its enemies – or had been, before Hanno and the Ashen Priestess personally slew its finest sorcerers – she had renounced. The magics she used were useful, for all that some of their companions had expressed regret she was the one to come north with them instead of the Rogue Sorcerer, but in the face of relentless tides of death they would not save her life. Fear, Hanno thought, was at the heart of this. That could not easily be mended, but in sharing its hold could be lessened. So they spoke of many things, the two of them, for once pressed the heroine seemed almost eager to speak. They always were, when they searched his face and found no castigation there. Why they could expect it he did not know, for while Hanno often diverged in belief form his companions he had never once thought them his *lessers*. He, too, knew fear. Still remembered a corpse and a trick, words wielded like knives. *Certainty and blindness*, the monster had said. *I have ever wondered at the difference.* The sorry song of doubt, for a monster's curse in defeat might be dismissed but not so a gloat in victory.

"We must seem so petty to you, White Knight," Nephele bitterly said. "With our doubts and our failures."

"You have come a very long way to fight for the sake of people you never knew, against an enemy some claim cannot be defeated," Hanno gently said. "Even at the worst of the casual cruelty you have offered, never once did I think of you as petty."

*Why do you all hold me in such esteem*? He could not help but wonder, for even those among the heroes in Cleves that had never once obeyed his commands still seemed to consider him as a figure of authority – though not one to which they were beholden. It was as if they all knew something he did not, something that set him apart from the rest, and he knew not what it was. So instead he stilled his tongue and held Nephele when the bottle was empty and she wept for the home she loved as much a she hated, for the golden life she had left behind because she could not stand to see men in chains. He held her as she broke and helped her rise when she put herself together again. She'd not needed him, not truly. The woman she'd been the moment she spurned everything she was raised to embrace was the true face of her, not the malice that came out when fear and exhaustion won. They never seemed to understand it, Hanno had learned, that every single one of them had a light in them that was not so easily put out. He put the Repentant Magister to bed, after, and took his leave. It was not yet too late to call on Prince Gaspard and Princess Rozala, to discuss where the Dead were striking.

There would be no rest for the wicked if he could have it otherwise.

# Interlude: And Yet We Stand

> "There are some who will, for what was writ in this volume, call me traitor. Name me a hater of all that we are. But it is untrue. I weep at what we are for I see what we could be, what we tried to be until we lost our way: an empire unlike any other, where the law is just and measured and rule belongs not to one but many. It is not hatred of the patient, to despise the disease."
>
> Extract from the conclusion 'The Ruin of Empire, or, a Call to Reform of the Highest Assembly', by Princess Eliza of Salamans

Agnes still missed the tall peaks and blue skies of Rhenia, but sometimes in this particular garden it felt like she had never left. It was the bareness of it, she supposed. The palace was filled with gardens each competing to be more ornate and opulent than the last, and this one had lost the contest. A handful of bare trees, a broken headless statue of a man Cordelia insisted was First Prince Clothor Merovins, and two roughly uncomfortable stone benches. Agnes Hasenbach liked the one by the statue best, for she could glimpse the skies while enjoying the familiar sensation of being surrounded by the tall walls of the open courtyard.

The traitor-guards owned by Balthazar Serigny had allowed her to return to the garden from her rooms, and even allowed her some illusion of privacy: though every way in and out was heavily guarded, within she had been left alone. It would change nothing, of course. Not with her. The sky told her the hour was near – *hunter ascendant, the hound's eye waning* – but not quite there yet. And so the Augur tread softly on the snow to the bottom of a dying tree and bent to pick up a thin and long branch. She returned to sit on her bench and, leaning forward, began to trace signs in the snow.

Iron. Rope. Candle. Harp. Bone. Mirror.

And as she finished the last stroke on the old symbol some called the verdant mirror, she came. Leaning forward as well from her seat, the Wandering Bard gazed at the signs in the snow.

"That old Mavii trick?" the Bard chuckled. "Gods, it's been ages."

*And so*, Agnes Hasenbach thought, *it begins*.

—

Balthazar drew his sword before the savage was even finished speaking. Surprise gave way to rage at having been made sport of in such a manner: she'd never even left the palace, had she? Some servants must have hidden her in their quarters while the soldiers who'd save her ran off towards the high districts carrying some other blonde woman in her clothes. His Silver Letters dropped the bench they'd been meaning to use as a ram and reached for their own blades even as the tall spy suppressed a grimace. He had four of his own and he was fair hand with a blade himself, but Hasenbach had a fully twenty soldiers spread out in the Chamber of Assembly – all of them Salian garrison, from their tabard.

Prince Arsene of Bayeux did know his way around a sword, from what Balthazar remembered, but the Princess of Aisne would be dead weight in the fight. The priests even worse, though some might serve as healers at least, and damn Hasenbach but even though the amount of sworn delegates and royal candidates with his group meant they outnumbered her significantly few of those would be willing to draw a blade on the First Prince even if they had one, or knew how to wield it. One of the Holies – Sister Adelie, he recognized – strode forward bold as you please even as the soldiers unsheathed their own swords in response to his people.

"Cordelia Hasenbach, Prince of Rhenia, you stand accused of heresy," Sister Adelie announced, voice echoing across the chamber. "All of you, throw down your swords and-"

"The House of Light has not yet been given leave to speak," the Master of Orders cut through. "Be silent or be removed from this Chamber."

"Rosalie," Balthazar spoke softly without turning, eye on the enemy soldiers even as the priests began blustering. "Fetch reinforcements. Now. At least sixty, we may need to force the room."

His agent whispered assent and she began a slow retreat, though she'd break into a run the moment she passed the corner. Cordelia Hasenbach's blue eyes followed her leaving, but she said nothing. Did she have them surrounded, he wondered, and so did not care because Rosalie was about to be slain? Or did she truly think that he wouldn't have her dragged out of the Chamber and stabbed the moment he had the men? The woman was a northerner but not without cunning, so she could not possibly believe the latter could she?

"The Highest Assembly has been convened," Cordelia Hasenbach said. "*Assermentés*, sit the thrones to which you are sworn. I will brook no more delays."

"You've been accused of treason, heresy and tyranny," Princess Clotilde of Aisne said. "You have no right to sit that throne, Cordelia Hasenbach."

"Such accusations may be brought only before the Assembly, when it is convened," the blonde royal said. "It is not convened until the sworn delegates and the sitters present have claimed their seats. Unless, of course, you intend to give the House of Light right of trial over Proceran royalty."

*Fuck*, Balthazar thought, for though the trick itself was mere procedure it would –

"The Heavens spare none their judgement, be they high or low," Brother Bertran proclaimed.

"Curb your tongue, priest," Prince Arsene of Bayeux said. "We come to unseat a tyrant, not crown the Holies in her stead."

In mere moments one of the priest with a better head on their shoulder would step in and retract the hasty claim, or at least nudge it to the side, but the damage had already been done. Hasenbach had been aiming at neither the House nor the two royals in the Chamber: it was the sworn delegates she'd had in her sights. Who'd just seen the two great legitimate powers of the conspiracy, the crowns and the robes, turn on each other without hesitation. *They're losing trust in this coup*, Balthazar cursed as he saw many of them fall into blank expressions.

The priests had converted some by conscience but others he'd seen to with threats and those threats lost power if it did not look like Balthazar Serigny would be able to carry them out by the time dawn rose. Glaring Heavens, Rosalie needed to hurry with the reinforcements or their support would melt like snow in summer sun – and if he had to put a sword behind every neck before the votes were taken, would the White Knight truly stay his hand when he broke through the lines? Balthazar suspected not.

"The House of Light would not venture to pass judgement over royalty without the consent of the Highest Assembly," Brother Philippe of the Holies said. "This is a-"

Hasenbach gestured discreetly at the soldiers flanking her and spears were slammed into the floor with deafening fracas.

"The House of Light has yet to be given leave to speak, priest," the Master of Orders said. "Wait until your petition is brought forth, or see yourself expelled form the Chamber. *Assermentés*, to your thrones or you will be taken as abstaining from the session."

The sworn delegates, to the silence of the priests and the dismay of the other two royals in the chamber, moved towards their thrones in charged silence. Balthazar eyed Hasenbacg closely, gauging whether he might be able to close distance with her without the soldiers getting in the way, but no: he was being watched and his agents with him. *Why haven't you removed me from the Chamber yet?* he wondered. Or taken him prisoner, or anything else realty. Hasenbach had the advantage right now, before his reinforcements arrived, so why was she not acting?

—

"She'll pull through, your cousin," the Bard said, comfortingly. "Don't you worry about it."

Agnes wanly smiled.

"I have known Cordelia since we were girls," she said. "I have better measure of her than anyone else alive."

That was not a boast, though Agnes would not claim that she was closest to her royal cousin of all their kin. Yet the oracle had seen her across many

choices, many fates, many mistakes. And across none of these did Cordelia Hasenbach cease to be fundamentally the same woman she'd been when, fresh to her throne and strangled by her many responsibilities, she'd still made time for her odd cousin who liked to speak of flocks and stars. The same woman who'd sent her handmaids to look at the wares of southern merchants for bird-watching almanacs, and on Agnes' seventeenth nameday even obtained for her a Baalite eye. The truth at the heart of Cordelia Hasenbach was that she always chose kindness, when there was a choice to be made.

Agnes glanced at the play of shadows on the wall, moonlight and starlight and the denial of both, glimpsing what might yet be: crossroads, crucible, hallowing. The oldest treachery in the guise of the writ of angels. How tired she was, of walking on the line between abyss and abyss, of measuring her words as if ear was leant to every single one. How long had she been waiting for the end, now? Sometimes she got lost in the blue sky and the distant winds, listening to distant cries carried by the wind and the truths they whispered of. There were days where Agnes no longer knew her age, or the face of her mother. What had her father whispered in her ear, before he died? But she knew truths, and the coming of more, and in the end that would be enough. Her choices had been made before she was even given the opportunity to make them.

"Iron to bind, and rope to kill," the Augur quoted.

"At first they reddened those altars for blessings, for revels," the Bard said, "but it was desperation, later on. The Arlesites knew the secrets of steel, and though the Mavii were wonder-makers in stone theirs were wonders of peace."

"Fetters for hand and feet, the slow death of a night and day," the Augur said. "To call forth the lords and ladies of the fae."

"They were a thing of beauty, leading their supplicants in battle," the Bard fondly remembered. "Yet even that was not enough to turn the tide. The Arlesites had simply learned too well at the feet of the titans."

"The legends say they went willing, those who hung," Agnes said.

"There was a time," the Bard softly agreed. "When the days of the Mavii darkened, though, so did the practice. Oathbreakers, first. Then the craven. Then the defenceless. And bitter seeds bore bitter fruits."

"But they went willing, once upon a time," Agnes murmured.

The Bard nodded, silent.

"Sometimes there is a need for bleeding," the Augur said, looking up at the horizon.

Plumes of smoke had begun to rise, for Salia was burning. She would ask the Gods to forgive her, but she sought no absolution.

Let her silence drag her all the way to the Hells, if it was what she deserved.

—

The numbers in the Assembly were still in their favour, if the delegates they'd twisted the arms of held. Balthazar saw there were as many thrones empty as not, within, and if they crowned their royal candidates then Hasenbach was done for. She still had the votes for Rhenia and Salia, but the other

three Lycaonese principalities had no representatives and neither did Prince Renato and Prince Ariel. The conspiracy had the rulers of Bayeux and Aisne as well as sworn delegates for more than enough: Aequitan, Tenerife, Segovia, Brabant, Orne, Cleves and Hainaut.

Using those votes they could crown another six princes and princesses, the same who'd abdicated at the Princes' Graveyard, and from there they would have a majority of votes even in the absolute sense. The legality of the proceedings would be much harder to deny. If the sworn delegates held. If Hasenbach did not clutter the session with other matters so no such votes could be taken. *It doesn't matter*, Balthazar the Bastard thought, eyeing the soldiers still keeping watch. *Let her play queen for a little longer, it will matter not a whit when I have more swords than her.* The moment could not come too soon.

"As is ancient law, a representative for the House of Light may now come forward and speak to the petition being put to the Highest Assembly," the Master of Orders said. "Let the second order of the evening begin."

Second? What had she – if she was keeping to the pretence of legality when what could she even – oh, *fuck*. The summons by the House of Light meant the formal session had begun hours ago, when Hasenbach was the only sitter in the room. As long as she kept to majority votes that didn't require a quorum or to matters in simple need of formal recognition – without voting – then she could have done a great many things without breaking the letter of the law. Potentially, Balthazar Serigny grimly realized, every empty throne in the Chamber now had a formally recognized sworn delegate in the person of Cordelia Hasenbach. It'd never hold up to a serious contest when a full session was held, true, but then it hardly needed to.

So long as she survived the night, Hasenbach would no doubt be perfectly willing to have everything on the record for this session struck and maybe even express *apologies* for her abuse of procedure. If she sounded highly unapologetic while making such repentance, it might actually improve her popularity with some of the Alamans royalty: they did enjoy a brisk turn of fortune in the Ebb and Flow. The House of Light put forward Sister Adelie as their speaker, which the spymaster held his breath over. At leas they'd had the sense to name someone broadly familiar with the Assembly's procedures, by the looks of it. When they had the advantage the Holies could afford to break such rules as a show of power, but if they did the same on this night it would instead reek of uncouthness and desperation.

"The House of Light, in the name of the Gods Above, brings forward charges of greater heresy against the First Prince Cordelia Hasenbach," Sister Adelia announced. "Let all in Creation know that the line of Hasenbach has fallen and estranged itself from the grace of the Heavens."

"And what proof does the House of Light bring for these claims?" the Master of Order asked.

"She has made peace with the Arch-heretic of the East, declared so by a great holy conclave," Sister Adelie said, voice rising in pitch and heat. "She has

forgiven the Carrion Lord's great slaughter of Procerans and even offered truce to the wicked Tyrant of Helike and his master the butchering Hierarch."

The priestess had turned to address the delegates instead of Hasenbach and her bearded creature, to his approval: she too understood that if they were to keep the veneer of legality for all this it would be by keeping that petty lot on their side. Yet they were not without qualms, Balthazar saw, for they feared setting a precedent. If the delegates vote here, on formal record, that the House could unseat a First Prince for not obeying the dictates of a conclave then they were going to have to answer very pointed questions by their own masters as to why they'd ever allow the House such power over the Assembly. Yet Sister Adelie did speak for the House, which was very much respected in moral and holy matters, and it could not be denied that Hasenbach was making pacts with an awful lot of Damned.

"Point of order," the Master of Order said. "The First Prince, after seeking the assent of this very Highest Assembly, offered *truce* to the Queen of Callow and the League of Free Cities. Not peace. No formal agreement was reached over the fate of the Carrion Lord."

A technicality, Balthazar thought, which shouldn't matter. If the sworn delegates were going to be swayed by the accusations of heresy, they'd not care about such quibbling. If they weren't, they'd hardly care anyway. Yet Hasenbach was being very careful to keep every part of this as lawful as she could.

What was her game, and where were his damned reinforcements?

—

"They were such vain, temperamental creatures," the Bard mused. "Even at the heyday of their influence. I suppose we all are, in our own way, but the fae were always a kind apart."

"Candle to blind," Agnes quoted, "and harp to still."

"They despise being in debt, you see, even such a small one as rope-slain in their name would induce," the Bard amusedly said. "But a circle of candles would make them mindless when they witnessed it, and then beautiful songs soothed them into a more amenable disposition. Boons could be wheedled out, then, or lesser oaths."

The Augur had taken different lesson from them. A candle in the dark drew everyone's eye, even when it was what was unfolding in the shadows that needed to be seen. And a sweet song, a beloved pleasure? That was a diversion one did not want to see through, even when they could. *Never trust a man who smiles easy.* Had those been the last words of her father? No, it couldn't be. Frost had crept across a branch, in the shape of a hawk with wings extended: providence was smiling down on her. Some nights, some days, she could look until her eyes watered and hardly catch glimpses of anything. Tonight the signs were overflowing, crowding her senses like eager courtiers even when she sought no answers. The wind sang songs – death, death rising with the smoke and schemes over a treacherous altar of jade – but Agnes shook her head. She needed to centre herself, or she would be lost.

"I am Agnes Hasenbach," she murmured. "I am Agnes Hasenbach, and I am here and I am *now*."

She tightened her fingers around the stick she still held, proof of her claims, and breathed out. The secrets, the signs, slowly ebbed away.

"Oracles always have it the worse," the Bard said, sympathetic. "Mortals aren't meant to see the way you do, so close to the deeper truth of things. The kind of foes you have to fight can't be slain."

*And they always win*, Agnes thought. There would be a day where she went too deep, glimpsed things so far beyond her understanding, that there would be no coming back. Not whole, not even close to it. And she was already touching the limits of what she could do: trying to peer around the edges of the darkness that shrouded the Dead King was a thin of horror, the endless chorus of screams and crazed laughter. Or even worse, deeper in, the chilling serenity of the voices worshipping him as a god. Yet she had seen things, learned things. The Black Queen, at least, was brutally straightforward in her refusal to be seen: thrice the Augur had woken up fallen in the snow, livid claw marks that soon faded on her arms and the taste of blood in her mouth.

Yet she had learned from that too, and from that learning shaped finer sight. Or had it been the other way around? Had she first glimpsed the Wandering Bard, and learned from this? Or had she only seen the shadow of any of this, and taken all sides of the crossroads in other lives? It was hard to tell the difference, sometimes.

"You are seer as well," the Augur said.

"I see things," the Bard snorted. "But a seer I am not."

"Like a bird of misfortune perched atop the tower, you see it all below," Agnes said, and her own voice sounded distant. "Stories."

"I know many stories," the other woman agreed.

"You know stories," the Augur softly laughed. "*All* the stories, *all* the time, as if they unfolded beneath your wings and you need only look down to see the lay of them. You pick, and choose, and swoop and *how does it not drive you mad*."

Moonlight on frost – lizard, yawning – a distant bird in the night, halfway between the lone sentinel and the weeping man. *Danger*, the world whispered, *tread lightly.* As if she needed be told. She should not have spoken so much.

"It has been a very long time," the Bard lightly said, "since someone grasped that."

"It must have been about family," Agnes frowned. "He always talked about family. He was a terrible father, but he never knew it."

Eyes studied her, then looked away. The icicle it was melting and it was weakening and it would break in three, two –

"Vain, temperamental creatures," the Bard mused. "As are we all."

Broken. For now.

—

Oh, it had been a mistake to let her speak. Balthazar understood it now. Better they had all fled and only returned when they had the soldiers to drag Hasenbach out, rather than *this*. It was like watching a nine-sun Arlesite duellist toying with a notchless swaggerer. Seated on the seat that had once been that of Clothor Merovins, the founder of the Principate, Cordelia Hasebach kept silent as if this was all beneath her. The Master of Orders answered in her stead, never once hesitating.

The priests went first, Sister Adalie leading the charge. The Holies set out their case for the unseating of Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer, and though they were not without cleverness they were methodically taken apart. Dealing with villains, they said, was moral taint. It made her unfit for the office. And even the Hidden Horror had held his blow, which was clear indication of bargain struck with the abomination.

"No treaty of peace has been signed, and the Dead King's withdrawal was effected by the Black Queen and not the First Prince. This is of her own admission, confirmed by the Augur."

She was shown herself to be without mandate from the Heavens by failing to bring the Tenth Crusade to success, both in Callow and in Iserre.

"Princess Rozala Malanza held command at both the Battle of the Camps and the Princes' Graveyard."

She'd intervened in the affairs of the House of Light, which was beyond the authority of any mortal ruler, and schemed to pervert the decision of a greater holy conclave.

"No such decree has ever been passed and it would require the consent of the Highest Assembly to act against the House of Light."

She was a tyrant, having stacked the Highest Assembly with her associates in clear perversion of the rightful order of Procer as set by its founders. At that Hasenbach finally made a noise: sharp, scornful laughter as she eyed the procession of royal candidates standing to the side of the thrones. Shame burned more than a few faces. The House of Light then tried to make an argument using a precedent from the Liturgical Wars for a regency of the realm by the Holies, but unfortunately it relied on the premise of the First Prince being prisoner and so fell apart when it was pointed out that Hasenbach clearly was not and so no regency could be considered as needed. They priests were, after this, visibly at a loss.

Prince Arsene and Princess Clotilde, like Balthazar sensing that they were losing the reins, then tried as well. Arsene of Bayeux boldly suggested that the chaos in the capital was proof she had lost the trust of the people, and so of the Assembly, and that the election of another First Prince was necessary for the stability of the realm in these dark times.

"The lawful procedures to unseat a First Prince are known, and have not been attempted, which begs the question of what the Prince of Bayeux intends if it is not the lawful manner."

The Princess of Aisne instead stated that Hasenbach had overreached her authority and made a mockery of the procedures of the Highest Assembly, naming specific instances: repeated emergency votes held in quick succession, the granting of broad authority and precautionary amnesty to Arnaud Brogloise that even included the power to negotiate diplomatic settlements with Damned. Assigning the former Princess of Lyonis under the command of Princess Malanza while granting her authority *over* Princess Malanza, which undermined the very appointment made by the Highest Assembly.

None of these, Clotilde of Aisne conceded, were strictly speaking unlawful. But they were perversions of the intended meaning of the procedures of the Highest Assembly, and to allow them to happen without consequence would inevitably lead to the collapse of the Principate of its reduction into a mere kingdom. That struck a note with some of the sworn delegates, but not enough to recover from the continued verbal slaughter. The grievances were solid in their eyes, Balthazar suspected, but not worth all this strife and not in time of war.

Prince Arsene tried his hand again, insinuating that the foreign troops marching on Salia were meant to force the will of Hasenbach on even princes, but at last the savage bestirred herself. The Master of Orders hastily recognized her right to speak, cutting straight through the Prince of Bayeux's rising speech.

"Are you quite finished?" Cordelia Hasenbach calmly asked, blue eyes like ice.

Hands on the arms of the ancient throne of Salia, the blonde princess' gaze swept across the Assembly.

"For near an hour now I have sat here, awaiting a single justification for the way the capital outside this palace is *burning to the ground*," she said, voice like the crack of a whip. "For the deaths that continue to happen even now. For the loss of trust this will cause in the allies we require for our very survival. For the way our enemies will see weakness and tear at our throats."

She drummed her fingers, scathingly.

"Well?" she said. "I await still. Speak, if any of you can."

Silence reigned, and not merely for reason of procedure.

"I thought not," Cordelia tiredly said.

She breathed out slowly.

"This farce is at an end," she said. "There is not even the slightest of pretences for you to legitimately take power in Procer, and you have not the strength to do so illegitimately. Surrender now, before I am required by law to have you all put to the sword."

And then, the sweetest of sounds: armoured boots treading fast on a wooden floor. Balthazar discreetly glanced back. Rosalie was at the head of them, and though there were less men than he'd wanted – barely forty – it would be enough.

She was good at talking, Hasenbach, but it was hard to talk when you had a sword through the throat.

—

"Ah," the Bard hummed. "There we are."

"Bone to wind," the Augur said, "and mirror to fill."

"Still on that, are you?" the Bard amusedly said.

"The bone is twofold, yes," Agnes said. "It took me long to understand. Sometimes they open barrows and there are fingerbones. Around them twine was wound, very long ago. I was told this, by a tribunal of owls from Hannoven."

"Owls," the Bard slowly repeated, as if dubious.

"Owls are terrible gossips," the Augur said. "Never tell one your secrets. The twine was an oath, they told me."

"Owls, huh," the Bard muttered. "I'll have to remember that. They had it right: the twine was an oath's length. They learned to keep count, after the first few times one of the lords stayed longer than the oath lasted. Even the gentlest of the fae have sharp humour."

"Bone is also the bone of man," Agnes solemnly told her. "We stand not without it. We move not, act not. It is. . . "

The word stalled. Had the shadow always touched the tree at that angle? No, stars moved here. The moon did not blink, it circled. Ah! Solemn fingers in three, the mark of the Tribunal. Not the owls, though also with wings. The White Knight was near, and the three fingers were touching one of her own footsteps leading north. Ah, the front of the foot and not the back: forward, coming, grim ending. Yes, it was as she had seen.

"Quintessential," the Bard said.

"Yes," Agnes smiled. "To have the bone of them is to own them, to have them wound around your fingers like twine. Clever Mavii."

"Nature can be shaped," the Bard disagreed. "It can change. It doesn't even take all that much: sometimes all you need to do is throw a stone in the pond and the ripples will see it done."

*Ah*, the Augur thought, *is this what you believe we have done?*

—

Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer, Prince of Rhenia, Princess of Salia and Warden of the West, did not stand as the Silver Letters entered the Chamber of Assembly and began spreading out. She had expected this, known it was coming since the moment she decided against leaving the palace. They would try strength, when all else failed. And there were enough foes here her twenty Salians were likely to lose. And yet she stayed seated. Rhenian blue dress going down to her feet, high-collared and match for the sapphire-set circled of white gold she'd chosen to wear over her golden curls, she simply stared down at the spies that had turned on her and made all of this possible.

"And here we are," Cordelia said. "The true face of all this: swords and ambition, both bare for all to see."

"Surrender and I won't need to have you dragged out by the hair," Balthazar said, smiling wide. "Your Highness."

Him she ignored, instead looking at the Silver Letters behind him.

"If you obey him, if you truly bare swords and spill blood on the grounds of the Chamber of Assembly, it will be the end of you," she told them.

Threats would not cow the likes of them, so she need make it plain this was no such thing.

"It does not matter if I live or die," she said. "Whoever takes my place, whoever sits this Assembly, they will need to see you all dead. Publicly, loudly, excruciatingly painfully. Because if they do not make an example that resounds through the ages, one that quells the very thought of anyone ever doing something like this again, they will never be able to safely sit this hall again."

She gestured at the Holies.

"Do you believe they will protect you?" she said. "The House of Light will not even be able to protect *itself* from the consequences of this. Every priest in this room will be sacrificed by the rest of the Holies, for they have openly committed rebellion and no First Prince could countenance such of the House. Do you understand, now? If you obey Balthazar, he has killed you."

Silence struck once more, until Balthazar cleared his throat.

"She's right," he said. "Savage that she is, she's right. This got botched, so now we need to tie up all the loose ends."

The tall, hirsute killer cleared his throat.

"Hasenbach went mad, having made pacts with devils, and used her wicked powers to slaughter the entire Highest Assembly," Balthazar the Bastard announced. "We'll torch it after just to be sure."

The Silver Letters hesitated. But then they started to advance, swords high, and two began to close the doors so no one would escape. It was madness, Cordelia thought. She'd known Serigny might go mad, try to burn her out, and made certain the secret passage out was unencumbered. But this was *madness*. No, it was worse than that: it was service to the Enemy. It was every ugly, dark impulse she had tried to smooth out of Procer, growling and lunging for her throat. And now she was to flee from it, again? As if swords and brutality were enough to rule the heart of the Principate? No. No, she would not have it. She would not skitter away once more, abandoning good men to swords, this realm to the heedless animals that would rule it. She was the Warden of the West, not-

Before the doors of the Chamber could close, a sword was slid through them. As if the heavy oaken gates were light as feathers, they were forced open and a tall man in plate and a trailing cloak advanced.

"My apologies for disturbing the proceedings," the White Knight politely said. "I am looking for Balthazar Serigny."

—

The Wandering Bard went still.

"What have you done?" she hissed.

Agnes laughed, laughed, laughed.

"Exactly what you wanted me to," the Augur wheezed. "Just a little too quickly."

"She was meant to-"

"Meant," Agnes hissed. "*Meant*. As if you did not meddle, Bird of Misfortune. As if you did not pull long strings."

"You changed nothing," the Bard said.

"I changed everything," the Augur said. "She has a choice, now."

"They always make the same choices," the Bard said. "You'll learn."

"Mirror to fill," Agnes said. "With iron and rope we died, and you came. With candle and harp we danced, and you stayed."

She cackled.

"But I have the bone of you, Wandering Bard," she said. "I have the bone of you and in my mirror you found nothing but your own reflection. You have not fooled me, Longstrings."

"You may just have destroyed everything," the Bard said. "*Everything*, child. The Dead King-"

"There is one truth in this world that cannot be broken," Agnes Hasenbach, the Augur, calmly said. "I have learned this from portents many and varied, spoken to birds from strange and distant skies as well as consulted with the secret whisperers of the winds and clouds."

She leaned forward, erasing the six symbols she had drawn in the snow.

"Would you like to know them, Bird of Misfortune?" she asked.

—

And then, only then, did Cordelia rise to her feet. She nearly fell, face paling for the pain of leaning on that broken leg. This, she knew, was the White Knight. The Sword of Judgement made to walk the grounds of Creation, silver coin in one hand and death in the other. She advanced.

"Chosen," Brother Bertran called out, sounding both relieved and expectant. "These Silver Letters conspirators would murder us. Bring to them the judgement of the Seraphim, in the name of the Heavens!"

The White Knight cocked his head to the side, rolling a silver coin between his fingers.

"You are one of these that call themselves the Holies, yes?" the man asked.

"The Heavens have bestowed this honour upon us," Brother Bertran proudly agreed.

"That is certainly possible," the dark-skinned Chosen agreeably replied.

A flick and the coin went spinning, up and up and up. Cordelia's hand moved quicker than her mind, than her flesh, and she snatched it out of the air. It burned against her palm, scorching. She swallowed the pain.

"Enough," the First Prince of Procer said. "There will be no killing."

The Chosen was watching her with wide eyes, before something like surprise and awe flickered across his face.

"You are…" he said, sounding moved. "I have never seen it with my own eyes."

And she felt it too, pulsing through her veins, the mantle that was within her reach. His judgement she had ended for there was only one fit to pass it in these chambers, and it was the Warden of the West. Even the burning against her palm seemed distant, like her flesh was being filled with something – no. *No*. She fought the pull, the inevitability, everything it entailed. She fought it tooth and nail. There was nothing greater than this, this flesh, this moment and this place and the laws that bound them all. She had only one master, and it was the Principate of Procer. The coin burned into her flesh and she cast it down. The White Knight's face went ashen.

"This is," Cordelia said, "the Principate of Procer. We rule with accord and law, we mete out the same justice to the highest soul and the lowest. We fail that principle, often and utterly, as men and women have failed principles since the First Dawn. But I will not renounce it: not for a day, not for an hour, nor for a single breath. This land will know no queen, no empress, no pale-clad warden to stand above all others."

In her palm the laurels had been burned black, a wound she knew would never heal so long as she lived.

"Conspiracy will be tried by our laws," Cordelia Hasenbach. "And no one else's."

She could be the law, the First Prince knew. After this, looking in the eyes of those around her, seeing the loyalty that was blooming there. The faith. She could take it, and First Prince or not she would be the only law Procer would need. With scheme and knife, with ruthless will, she could purge the rot and turn Procer into what it should be instead of… this. *No*, Cordelia thought once more, and this time it was barely a struggle at all.

She returned to her throne, and the moment she sat the conspiracy was finished.

—

"It does not matter," the Augur said, "if on the other side stand kings and monsters and all the gods that stride this earth. It does not matter if the odds are paltry and the signs scream of defeat with every silent voice."

Blue eyes and a warm embrace. *Of course you'll live with us now. You are family. You always will be*. This, this she would not forget until that final venture beyond where she was meant to go.

"I will," Agnes said, "always, *always* bet on Cordelia Hasenbach."

# Chapter 72

# Rumours

> "Reputation is as a wild horse; gone at a gallop and returned at a trot."
>
> Arlesite saying

"Tell me what you've learned," I ordered.

The small town they envoys of the First Prince had led us to was called Roque-Faillie, and though it was not particularly pretty or luxurious it *did* have the benefit of being mostly empty. Apparently during winter most of the countryside around Salia went empty with the seasonal labourers or farms and fields the locals called *manants* migrating into the capital with whatever coin they'd saved up. The Callowan in me balked at the notion that good honest farmers could be effectively forced by poverty to take refuge in a large city, but Hakram had noted it was a little more complicated than that. Unlike my own people, who tended to leave the family home and strike out on their own unless they were in line to inherit property or trade, Alamans apparently tended to form in closely-knit clans of kin that bought property belonging to the family itself and not individuals. The young and fit worked fields during the warm seasons, the returned to the family's house or houses in Salia with that wealth once winter rolled in. It was all very communal, and rather strange to my own sensibilities. Still, practically speaking it meant that there'd been a large string of mostly empty towns and villages within a day's march of the capital where all the many envoys and armies could be settled.

According to my scouting lines – and Robber, who I'd let loose to skulk with for sole instruction not to start a diplomatic incident that wasn't fairly deniable – and the chatter amongst us diplomats, settling my men in Roque-Faillie meant I was between the League's town and the Dominion's. Amusingly enough they'd put General Rumena and its drow past the Dominion, possibly in an attempt to separate them from the rest of my delegation. Considering most of the Firstborn were prompt to violence and spoke not a whit of Chantant, I suspected anyone trying to negotiate with them on the sly would have ended

up having a rough time even if I'd not been the First Under the Night. Still, Heavens take pity on whatever poor fucker Hasenbach would send to probe the intentions of the drow before it came to negotiation. Princess Rozala had garrisoned her larger army in between us and the capital, though she'd had to split them into three smaller forces in different towns. Not that her soldiers would complain much, I imagined. Much like mine, after so many months of campaigning they'd find sleeping in an actual bed surrounded by actual walls to be the height of luxury. Worryingly, though, Malanza had promptly vanished into the city. So had the Grey Pilgrim, my watchers told me.

At a guess, it might relate to the fact that someone had set the damned capital on fire since we'd last spoken with the First Prince. The smoke was lingering over a large chunk of Salia, visible even from miles away, and if the capital of Procer was anything like Laure an uncomfortably large amount of it must have been made of wood. Probably even more, I grimly guessed. Salia was said to be the largest city on Calernia, large than even Ater which boasted around five hundred thousand souls. You couldn't house that many people in stone: no empire in Creation was so extravagantly rich. Whatever it was that'd happened, though, I needed to know of it. If I was about to be blamed for yet another fucking fire I'd not started, best I know of it before I ended up accused before Gods and men. Thankfully, we'd had Jacks in the city and Vivienne had been very far from idle these last few weeks. There was a reason I'd seen so little of her.

"There was an attempted coup," Vivienne Dartwick bluntly said.

For all that these days she was Lady Dartwick in more than an honorary sense, as my heiress-designate to the throne of Callow, she was still the head of the Jacks. I was genuinely unsure if the Fairfaxes had kept spies of their own before the Conquest, though I assumed they must have. If there'd been such a web of informants Black had long destroyed or suborned it, which meant we'd had to start very much from scratch. As a result, though the quality of the reports of the Jacks was fairly solid the eclectic nature of the organisations they'd been put together from meant there were some glaring blind spots in our tradecraft and that our people were usually very much outmatched by the spies of other nations. Not least, I'd admit, for what was likely the same reason the Fairfaxes had not had a reputation for being particularly well-informed: spies were *expensive*. Even without getting into bribes and hirelings, just keeping the Jacks fed and clothes and paid was painfully costly. If trade with Praes and Procer didn't pick up after the wars came to an end, we might have to disband parts of the Jacks simply because we couldn't afford to keep such a sprawling array of agents.

For now, though, dwarven gold would prop us up. It'd certainly opened more than a few doors in Salia that would otherwise have been closed to us, not to mention loosened a few tongues. East or west, everyone liked to make a little coin on the side.

"Fuck," I eloquently said.

This was an informal council, without even the full roster of the Woe – Masego had gone to speak with the Rogue Sorcerer and Archer had mentioned she was, Sisters bless, 'just going for a walk' – though in truth all those with an interest or proper role in the proceedings were there. Vivienne as my heiress and the head of the Jacks, Hakram as my right hand and Akua as, well, Akua Sahelian. Whether that was a good or terrible thing had wildly carried depending on the time and situation since I'd first met her, but at the very least she'd never been slow on the uptake.

"Pretty much," Vivienne agreed, brushing back a strand that'd slipped below her milkmaid braid. "City's boiling over with rumours and we don't have anyone anywhere close to the First Prince's inner circle, but we've gathered at least a little more than your average man in the street. For one, the House of Light and the Silver Letters were *heavily* involved."

The Silver Letters were one of the Principate's several informant networks – Merciless Gods, how much must it cost to run a solid network across even just the span of Procer, much less *three*? – and said to be in particular the one concerned with the affairs of Procer itself. The Circle of Thorns, the second, were charged with gathering secrets abroad. We'd caught a few of their people trying to get into my court and even the Regals before they'd been gelded, and most likely missed a few more. The Eyes of the Empire had continued to out them to me even after relations between Malicia and myself had cooled all the way to ice, though there was no telling of those had been the Tower's people or Scribe's. It was the third and last that was surprising me, though, because if the House had been part of the coup then they should have been as well.

"Not the Holy Society?" I asked. "I though their whole mandate was keeping an eye on the House."

"Their nominal head, a certain Brother Simon de Gorgeault, was sought by parts of the city guard on charges of murder and heresy for some time before the First Prince crushed the coup," Vivienne replied. "It seems he was fooled but not complicit."

"As I recall the head of the Silver Letters was an interesting little man by the name of Balthazar Serigny," Akua said. "Unless that changed?"

She glanced at Vivienne, who had not hidden her dislike in the slightest but remained professional. My spymistress shook her head.

"Interesting how?" Hakram asked.

"As in 'the Eyes have been working on him for more than a decade'. I know not to what purpose, however," Akua said. "None of my mother's spies ever rose high enough in the ranks to be brought into the scheme, though the Lady Scribe would know."

*Fuck*, I thought, this time at least refraining from speaking it out loud. We couldn't be blamed for the bloody House of Light deciding now was the time to start a fourth Liturgical War, but if the Silver Letters were the fault of the Scribe then that put us in the deeps as well. Black was viciously loyal to those he considered his own, at once both one of his best and worst traits. He likely

wouldn't have agreed to throw her to the hounds even if she deserved it a few years ago, much less now that the Calamities had begun dropping like flies.

"That makes for spies and priests," Adjutant noted in his gravelling voice. "Which princes were involved? They would have needed a candidate to replace Hasenbach."

"It's not common knowledge yet, not in the streets, but apparently this was all in the name of Princess Rozala," Vivienne said.

Akua's fine eyebrow arched, as if to remind me she had predicted the possibility of strife between the First Prince and the first halfway-decent princess I'd ever met. It didn't fit, though, not to me. We'd discussed how the two rulers might skirmish through the Highest Assembly and debate over the Accords, but neither Akua nor Hakram had ever brought up a coup as a possibility. *Neither knew Cordelia had effectively stacked the Assembly in her favour, back then*, I then reminded myself. Even still, I had a hard time reconciling the same princess who'd been the first to toss her crown, the princess who'd plunged her sword in the earth and sworn oaths of gratitude, with someone who'd risk the madness that a coup in the narrow window where we had a truce with Keter might bring on us all. She would have to know that the Lycaonese would take is a betrayal beyond forgiveness if the first First Prince of their people was deposed not even halfway through a war with the Hidden Horror.

"She left the for the capital not long after settling her soldiers," I said. "I don't suppose you know on what terms?"

"We have someone in Louis Rohanon's serving staff," Vivienne smiled. "She went livid, when it was intimated this was from her hand, and threatened something called the 'liar's leash' on anyone who'd repeat such slander. She left with hardly an escort, too."

"Don't suppose you know what this leash is?" I frowned.

My heiress shook her head.

"From context, it is likely to be unpleasant," the former thief said.

"It is an ancient Arlesite punishment for one who speaks calumny of a *real*," Akua conversationally provided. "A hook tied to a long line of twine is put through the tongue of the liar and tied to the tail of a horse, which the *real* then rides for a mile. If the liar survives the mile without the hook ripping through their tongue, the Gods Above have judged their lie to have been accidental. Otherwise, what is left of their tongue is to be carved out and buried beneath the gate of the *real*'s fortress."

Vivienne looked split between sharp irritation at being shown up on even such a slight detail and disgust as the old Arlesite ways of justice. Mind you Akua had said *real* and not prince, which was a telling detail: it meant it predated the founding of the Principate. Which for all its many, *many* flaws, was significantly less prone to elaborate executions than its predecessor-states. Mind you, I could cast no stones there without being a hypocrite. My people had indulged in some excruciatingly brutal ways of killing prove traitors, especially those who struck bargains with Praes. It'd been delightfully horrible to

read about public drawing and quarterings, or even the rarer *red hangings* as a kid – I'd taken me year to realize the unlikeliness of books about the worst excesses of Callowan 'justice' being so easy to get your hands on, Black you prick – but as I aged I'd been left to wonder at the monstrosity of hurting even a traitor so carefully they could be hanged by their entrails. Even the Deoraithe had dabbled in impalement whenever the Clans made a run at the Wall, though their worst they'd always kept for whenever they got their hands on a Dread Emperor. I supposed I shouldn't be surprised Akua knew about this, given that the Praesi had quite literally written the definitive books on this, but why would she have cared about some Arlesite... oh.

"You looked into bits like that for all over, didn't you?" I said, reluctantly amused. "When you still believed you were going to conquer the whole continent."

Akua looked only mildly embarrassed.

"Attention to ironic detail is the difference between a Triumphant and a Nihilis," she defended.

Gods, I could not wait to pass that on to Indrani and see the utter mockery that would follow. That ought to be weeks' worth of entertainment right there, maybe even a full month if Robber was dragged into it. Adjutant cleared his throat, which I allowed without resistance to drag me back to the matters at hand. As amusing as that had been, we did have more pressing matters on our hands: like the fact that someone had torched part of Salia and that someone I must by extension answer for might have been involved. Hells, assuming I wasn't just blamed on general principle. Although, the commander of the legionaries I'd brought was General Abigail so who knew? Maybe this time she'd get the blame, regardless of involvement or general infeasibility. Fucking William, I couldn't believe people still thought I was responsible for Marchford. *Both times*, *too, thank you very much Chider.*

"Cordelia Hasenbach remains First Prince, however," Hakram half-asked.

Like me, he'd assumed that if she wasn't that news would have been the first thing spoken.

"She is," Vivienne confirmed. "She also came out of the mess smelling like roses with the Highest Assembly and highly popular in Salia itself. Rumour has it she prevented the summary execution of the conspirators so they could stand proper trial instead right after they tried to assassinate her. Which brings me to another important part."

She drew breath.

"Both the White Knight and the Witch of the Woods are in the city," she said, blue-grey eyes narrowing. "The White Knight was the one attempting to pass judgement on the conspirators, before Hasenbach interrupted him."

I leaned forward in my seat, feeling a mixture of surprise and respect ripple through the other two as well.

"She told the hatchet man of the Choir of Judgement to step out?" I said, and a heartbeat later my stomach sunk. "Shit. *Shit*."

"Catherine?" Vivienne asked, sounding surprise. "I thought you'd be pleased. It shows great adherence to principles in accord with, well, the Accords."

Hakram had been with me longest and was most familiar with my way of thinking. He got it first.

"It shows will and fearlessness, as well as strong belief," Adjutant said. "And it is a powerful story: we know what brew these are the ingredient for."

"Better than even odds she got a Name out of that," I cursed. "Can you really see the White Knight backing down otherwise?"

And that was an issue, because if Cordelia had come into a Name then the Wandering Bard could now reach her at will. Fresh off her transition she'd be flush with power and confidence, if hers was anything like mine, which would make her harder to influence in some ways and significantly easier in others. Especially if the Augur vouched for the Bard, which unfortunately seemed quite possible. Hasenbach wouldn't have years of history with the Intercessor, though, no ironclad trust. I could work with that if I moved quick enough, which it seemed I'd have to.

"That is the end of the notion of Named being excluded from ruling, I'd say," Akua calmly mused. "That clause is dead in the water, if First Prince is now more than a mere title."

Wouldn't be First Prince, I thought. Too weak a story, too many strings attached. A Name that could be made illegitimate by a vote of the Highest Assembly, that had to be sanctioned by such a vote in the first place? No, it'd never form properly unless. It'd be something along one of the few lines the disparate peoples of Procer had in common belief. If not for the House of Light apparently being part of the conspiracy I would have bet on it being from holy scripture, but as things stood it'd probably drawn on a narrower stripe of commonality. The Fair Prince, maybe? Procer didn't really have any strong unifying stories, which made it difficult to predict. No point in guessing when I knew so little.

"We'll see," I grunted. "There's rule and then there's rule."

Wizards of the West had been the royal wizards of Callow for centuries and wielded both wealth and influence as well as their magic, but they'd not owned land and only rarely commanded armies. I might have to compromise on the degree of power Named were allowed in rulership, but simply flying a white flag over the matter wasn't in the cards.

"Rumours are split as to who is responsible for all this," Vivienne said. "You are prominent among them, Catherine, but both the Black Knight and the Dead King are preferred culprits. My people believe that the First Prince is actively encouraging the perception this was the work of the Hidden Horror, for both political and diplomatic reasons."

"She's discrediting the priests," Adjutant said, huffing out soft laughter. "They can't be holy men, if they were the pawns of the Dead King."

"Preparing for a purge, you think?" I asked. "She hangs the Holies and the House of Light in Procer is essentially leaderless. Given the times, the House

might look to a hero or the Assembly for leadership until they've managed to name a fresh batch of replacements."

I cocked my head to the side. There weren't a lot of prominent priestly Named, at the moment. The Grey Pilgrim, arguably, but he was effectively Levantine royalty so it was doubtful Procerans would fall behind him. Roland was Alamans, but also a wizard, and what Proceran heroes were there aside from him? There'd been some knightly man at the Battle of the Camps, if he was still alive, and I vaguely remembered the Forsworn Healer working with Proceran priests on the shield trick that'd fucked us on the first day, but I knew next to nothing about that hero save for the obvious.

"The diplomatic benefits are obvious," Akua said. "If these Holies – ah, claiming for the silent Heavens, now there's a lovely swindle – were the pawns of Keter, then everything they have done in the last few years is suspect. Including naming you as Arch-heretic of the East."

"You sound a little sad," I accused.

"Oh, it'll be useful for negotiations," the shade said. "But such an epithet is quite prestigious in certain parts, you know."

"The benefits of a retraction with Calernia at large outweigh the prestige it gained her in Praes," Hakram said.

"I would not dare imply otherwise, Adjutant," Akua said, gracefully dipping her head.

"It'll cost them, though," Vivienne suddenly said. "It was a greater conclave that declared you Arch-heretic, not just the Procerans: the Speakers from Ashur and the Lanterns from the Dominion were also involved."

"If I'm reading the Pilgrim right, the Lanterns might actually be grateful for the excuse," I said. "They're having a hard time reconciling it with Mercy not smiting me to ash. Their only way out is saying I tricked the Ophanim, which no one wants to roll the dice one while they're here to disagree."

"She's still effectively saying that her priesthood alone, of all the western ones, was compromised by the Dead King before making it shoulder the whole blame for the nomination," Vivienne said. "It's a massive loss of face for the Proceran House, Cat."

"You believe the First Prince wants to revisit the balance of power set by the Liturgical Wars," Akua said, sounding surprised but also a tad intrigued. "Arguably, Cordelia Hasenbach has been scrupulously observant of the authority of the House of Light until now. Even when it was at her detriment."

"That was before they took a swing at her," I said. "And they've been at odds with her policies for some time, too. I'm not necessarily agreeing with what Vivienne is saying but measures she would have balked at a few months ago might be on the table now."

"It would go some way in explaining her insistence on strict lawfulness in dealing with the conspiracy," Hakram said. "It allows her to drag the Holies through trials before the Highest Assembly, bringing out the ugly details of how they tried to meddle with the secular powers. She'll get support from powers

that might usually be on the fence, even the royals close to the House won't want to let it stay in a position to try this again."

"Public trials of priests while we're at war with the Dead King?" I said. "That could get messy. Not sure she'd risk that. Traitors or not, they're House. People won't be comfortable with priests in front of a tribunal when the Dead are the gate."

"I'd expect her to go for property over privileges, if she does act," Akua noted. "All those monasteries and abbeys with attendant lands. The tax emptions as well. The war efforts would justify the measures and leave the appearance of the old order intact while severely curtailing the influence of the House in truth."

"Ultimately, so long as it does not affect her ability to negotiate with us it is only somewhat relevant to our affairs," Hakram finally said.

"Our stance going forward hasn't changed," I agreed. "An additional degree of caution, maybe, but if Hasenbach is able to keep the White Knight under control it's not a major concern."

"I'd prefer if he wasn't there at all," Vivienne sighed. "Now the Tyrant gets his trial. We could have put him off for months if the Knight had stayed away."

"Not sure I'd want to find out what Kairos might do to get him to hurry up, considering he began a war with Procer just to get him there," I said. "Obviously we'll need to keep a close eye on him, Vivs, which is why your Jacks-"

It was a pleasant surprise to have a door to be knocked on, after the Everdark and the fields of Iserre. Adjutant bade our sentry to enter, and the young orc in legionary armour passed a message. The Carrion Lord requested audience and had mentioned he was bringing an old friend. *Well now*, I thought. The Jacks had done admirably well, all things considered, but it wouldn't beat hearing of this madness straight from the horse's mouth.

Time to see what the Scribe had to say for herself.

# Chapter 73

# Discerning

> "Poison is the weapon of the trade, knife the weapon of the intimate and sorcery the weapon of war. To use any for the improper purpose is the mark of inferior breeding, save if greater game is yet afoot."
>
> Extract from 'The Behaviours of Civil Conduct', by High Lady Mchumba Sahelian

Akua leaked a sensation of query into the Night, an implicit question as to whether or not she should leave given the nature of our arriving guests, but I shook my head. While she was close to neither she was likely to be a fairer hand at reading them than either Vivienne or Hakram, and that lack of closes itself was not without its uses. I doubted a distraction as petty as that would be enough to get beneath the skin of the Scribe, but it took more than one stone to build a house. Adjutant smoothly rose to fetch another two seats without my asking, while Vivienne pressed into my hand a cup before pouring her own. Cold ice-cooled water, sadly, but I did get drunk a lot faster than I used to these days so perhaps that was for the best. Only a fool blunted the edge of their sword just before tugging at a tiger's tail. *Might not be necessary*, I reminded myself. It would not do to assume hostility from Scribe because of the less than stellar terms we'd parted on last time we spoke. Or even with those in mind given that if my father asked her to play nice, I believed her likely to do so. Still, I'd recently learned that Black did not have nearly as tight a leash over the Scribe as I'd once assumed.

It would not do to presume in favour of her either.

It was still half a surprise every time to see Black in anything but plate when it was daylight, though I noted that while he wore a dark tabard and matching long-sleeved tunic the faint hint of a coat of mail could be seen under them. Hard to unlearn a lifetime's worth of paranoia, I supposed – though when it came to Praes it could not realty be called *paranoia* could it? Scribe was as slippery to the eyes as she'd always been, even when I was actively trying to watch her. It wasn't invisibility, for she was definitely there, but trying to

*notice* anything about the villainess had my attention sliding away like water off a duck's back. She had ink-stained hands, and she was not tall, although she might just have been slouching. Her clothes were loose and made of cloth. I bit the inside my cheek, using the pain as a spur as I narrowed my eyes. She had pale, seemingly bloodless lips. They were not smiling. Black took a seat at Adjutant's invitation and I only then realized how long I'd been staring at Scribe, with only little to show for it. Something to revisit later, perhaps. I sent an idle prayer to my patronesses, though who knew if they'd deign to intercede for such a trifle.

"Would I be correct in assuming you have been parsing through the reports of the Jacks?" the Carrion Lord calmly asked.

"More or less," I agreed. "Speculating as to the consequences of the mess, too. An insider's eye of the affair would be appreciated."

The last sentence I spoke casually, though none here were fool enough to believe it. I was reserving anger along with judgement, but I was less than pleased at the fact that Cordelia Hasenbach had apparently come rather close to being buried in a shallow grave. If the Eyes of the Empire truly had been either authors or helpers to this episode of convulsive stupidity, I would see to it that heads would roll unless *very* good reason was given. And I did not mean it as a figure of speech, this once. Black glanced at his aide, either ordering or encouraging.

"The Eyes of the Empire were involved," the Scribe calmly confirmed. "Not directly, but in the nascent stages of the conspiracy and on its edges when it came to a head."

"Do the Procerans know?" Vivienne flatly asked.

"The Circle of Thorns did as it took place. By now I would venture this has expanded to the First Prince and her most trusted," Scribe said.

My eyes flicked to my teacher, whose face had remained serene even as one of his oldest companions casually admitted she'd just attacked the Principate in front of Cordelia Hasenbach while we were under formal truce and headed for the negotiating table besides. He was unmoved, so there was likely more to the story. At least some semblance of a reason for me not to denounce Scribe as an agent of the Tower and send her fucking crucified corpse to the First Prince as an apology.

"Elaborate," I coldly ordered.

"After the ambush sprung by the Grey Pilgrim that saw Lord Black seized, the Tower reached out to me through the Eyes of the Empire," Scribe said. "The Empress intended a rescue mission in Salia, paired with a strike at the internal stability of Procer, and given the circumstances I agreed with the necessity. Lady Ime and myself, over the span of several months, laid the groundwork for certain factions within Procer to come to the conclusion a coup was feasible."

"The rumours that Rozala Malanza was backing the coup," Hakram gravelled. "They were not simple slander."

"It was difficult but not impossible to impersonate her by letter," Scribe agreed. "Given that neither the House of Light nor the Silver Letters use scrying mages and the First Prince's own order was rendered helpless by the interdict cast over Iserre. We've had a convincing forgery of the royal seal of Aequitan since the Proceran civil war, when we funded Aenor Malanza's bid for the throne through the Pravus Bank."

"The coup happened," I said. "Which means the trigger was pulled on this scheme, and recently too. After you were informed of my intentions for treaties with the Grand Alliance."

"I was ordered by scrying link to end any ongoing operations, erase any evidence of Praesi presence in the capital and ensure the loyalty of all agents in the city," Scribe agreed.

I glanced at Black, who inclined his head in confirmation.

"In this I did not succeed," Scribe said. "Ime had several long-term plants among our scrying mages I was unaware of, and she used the Tower's clout to mobilize the Eyes in the capital for action before I could clean up all loose ends. It appears the Empress had judged the Liesse Accords to be an existential threat to herself and her continued reign."

Well, I grimly thought, she wasn't wrong about that.

"Given actions that could not be denied, you had to ensure your loyalists among the Eyes were seen as undertaking damage control," Akua quietly said. "Which is where the Circle of Thorns was brought in. The First Prince will not take the word of anyone here as to the actions of your agents, but she will heed the reports of her own spymaster. A calculated move."

"Concessions had to be made to the Circle in order for their leader to agree not to spread knowledge of our involvement beyond the necessary, and hand over the written proof of Praesi involvement," Scribe said. "I gave formal agreement to the Praesi and Callowan delegations backing the First Prince when she requests relief ships be allowed through the Nicaean blockade around Ashur."

I'd likely have agreed to that anyway, I mused. Oh I'd have tried to exact a little something to sweeten the pot, or made a show of asking for nothing in exchange to foster a sense of debt between myself and Hasenbach, but this was not a great loss for me. I was still swimming in leverage. On the other hand, Scribe had just entered a biding commitment in my name. That she'd presumed to speak for me was galling enough. Considering that Black was effectively my dependant under Proceran law at the moment, Hasenbach would not be entirely without grounds to kick up a fuss if his aide made promises and then they were gone back on. It'd never hold without the strength to enforce it and I could cut right through by sending the Highest Assembly the charred corpse of Scribe along with a polite note informing them she in no way spoke for me, but it'd sour my reputation with some people I badly needed the willing collaboration of. Worse still, though, was that simply by speaking in my name when negotiating the cover up the Scribe had implicitly stated I was in some way related to this. Sedately, I set down my cup on the table.

"I'll not insult your intelligence by asking you if you know what you've done," I calmly said. "I assume if you were willing to be in killing distance of me, you have further explanation as why I shouldn't execute you out of general principle."

Black's lips thinned, but he did not object. Neither fucking should he. If Adjutant had entered a binding agreement on the behalf of the Black Knight, back in the day, even if my teacher had then judged it worth upholding he would have put Hakram's head on a pike as a warning for anyone else wanting to overstep. All else aside, I was the Queen of Callow and a villain in my own right. That someone not in my service or given my explicit permission had *presumed* to speak for me in such a delicate situation was worthy of violence.

"The Empress was aiming at the Accords themselves, apparently considering them the primary threat," Scribe replied, voice unruffled. "The Silver Letters brought stolen goblinfire into the city and Ime's agents set fire near their safehouses in attempts to trigger a blaze. Such an event would have destroyed large swaths of Salia and, given your reputation for the substance's use, affected popular opinion enough to make made negotiation near impossible. Especially for a weakened First Prince, be it a surviving Hasenbach or a freshly elected Malanza. The odds were more than fair that the Grand Alliance itself would collapse."

I smoothly drummed my fingers against the table. Her answer, unspoken as it'd been, was that she might have overstepped but she'd done so while in the process of averting what could have been a great crisis for me. Certainly one much worse than the minor concession this had ended up costing me – and the unfortunate implications to Scribe having spoken for me could be smoothed away by making it clear to Hasenbach it'd been an exception and not to be taken as face value again. It still got stuck in my throat that her own personal failure to get her house in order would cost me, and that Malicia's unimpeded schemes would be considered my problem, but I supposed an argument could be made that I was the one who was diplomatically cornering the Empress. Scribe's repeated mention of the Accords as the main target was certainly hinting at that heavily. Black cleared his throat.

"Regardless of circumstance," he said, "offence was given. We will offer reparations to the Kingdom of Callow for having drawn on its influence to clean up our own mistakes."

Scribe did not speak for a moment, as if reluctant.

"As of this morning, the Jacks serving under Duchess-Regent Kegan of Callow have been granted access through liaison to my informants within the Wasteland," the Scribe said, "along with a list of all suspected Malicia agents within the kingdom."

My brow rose. Those were... not small things. Black had been outing Malicia's agents in my kingdom for a while now, true, but he'd done it slowly and at a pace Vivienne was adamant had been chosen so his *own* agents would not be outed by the revelations. And the cooperation with Scribe's own faction in the

Eyes would go a long way in keeping Kegan from ending up in a grave between Ratface and Anne Kendall. Those were heavier reparations than I would have felt comfortable asking for, if I'd set the terms, which my teacher would know. *Ah*, I thought, meeting green eyes with my own. This was not just reparations it was a polite gift-assisted request not to kill Scribe for having crossed me. Which I was finding difficult to refuse, all thing considered. Black was being genuine here, I decided, this was more or less the way he dealt with allies. But there was something about the way Scribe was acting... Oh, she didn't like me. Which was fine, as the sentiment was broadly shared: the cordial beginnings of our acquaintance had begun to fade effectively the moment I sought power independent of my teacher, which I suspected had simply moved me from asset to liability in her eyes. Still, while she didn't like me I would not deny she was an intelligent woman.

Which was where the flaw could be found. My temper had waned some, these days, but not quite *that* much. So why would she test it by appearing reluctant over Black's reparations? She had to know I'd not be all that well inclined towards her, and exactly what those reparations were meant for. Meaning either she didn't consider her life or freedom worth these concessions from the perspective of the resources available to Black, which was too warped a view to be objectively credible, or she was playing me. Playing up reluctance so I'd feel more grateful for my teacher's contrastingly fair attitude? Could be, it would be just like her to damage her own reputation to prop up his own. Even made sense from a tactical perspective, given that she and I were unlikely to ever be on good terms and so the loss relative to gain was greater. Except that I could taste it in the air, now that I'd notice a flaw: I was being sold a story. Not the way the Pilgrim or the Bard would, no. That wouldn't be Scribe's game. Instead I'd been invited to stroll through a house of mirrors so that I could take in my own reflections and hold them as truth. Even my father's blunt but sincere bribery had been used as an ingredient in the brew, something I'd find and read as true and so believe the *rest* was true.

So, I was being had. And Black hadn't been brought in on it. *So was this really Malicia's ploy at all?* It was true the Empress was only losing so much even if it became public she'd helped along the coup, considering the Grand Alliance had been founded in large part to bury her and the Accords would entail her removal regardless. This could be Malicia realizing that openly allying with Keter had burned too many bridges, and that the same alliances taking shape to drive back the Kingdom of the Dead might turn towards her if victorious. Sloppy work, by her standards, but then she had to be running out of tools to use. On the other hand, if I was frustrated in my efforts to establish alliances to the west she had to know I'd be headed east instead – and with a sword in hand. Short-sighted, yes, but honestly still a feasible mistake if Malicia was desperate enough. Which she had to be, with the Tribes having taken Foremen and the Dread Empire on the edge of rebellion from repeated defeats. Feasible, though, was why people thought the hooded figures with tattooed eyes on their

skin were the true Eyes of the Empire instead of the chatty innkeepers. Feasible meant you stopped looking because you had the answer. Yet I couldn't see, frankly, what Scribe had to gain from all this.

"Appreciated," I said, not bothering to force a smile. "I'll want a report of everything that took place so no detail can be sprung on me at the table."

"Naturally," Black conceded.

He dipped his head in thanks, trusting in the word I'd just as good as given.

"Vivienne," I said, "I'll need you to arrange a scrying session with Duchess-Regent Kegan as soon as possible."

"I'll see to it immediately," she briskly replied, rising to her feet.

"Akua," I said, simultaneously dumping into the Night a sense of stillness, "we still need to bring General Rumena into the loop."

"As you say, dear heart," she smiled.

In the Night she shaped her will as a sense of action, then a question, and I assented through the same. Neither of us missed a beat, or otherwise gave sign of this.

"I'll arrange for that report presently, then," my father said, sounding rather amused as he rose to his feet.

His old friend followed suit without missing a beat.

"Scribe," I said. "A word, if you would. I'll require a few more details out of you in case Hasenbach sends for a private meeting soon. I'm not walking into that blind."

"The report-" she began.

"Eudokia," Black sharply said.

She returned to the seat. I nodded thanks at my teacher, who acknowledged them with a discreet dip. No, he most definitely hadn't been brought into this. I smiled at Hakram, who was lingering behind me, and drained my cup of water before handing it to him. Clicking his fangs in amusement, he moved to fill it again. Scribe waited patiently even as I reached for my dragonbone pipe and slowly stuffed it, only then clearing her throat.

"If you could refrain?" she said.

A heartbeat later I felt Akua's working slither around us, smooth and silent, and tapped a finger against my pipe to light it. I puffed out, waiting until Hakram had set down the filled cup at my side before speaking.

"You get one chance to tell me the truth," I said. "After that, my patience will run out."

Adjutant's muscles shifted the slightest bit, coiling as he readied for strife. He'd not hesitated in the slightest, I thought with affection.

"You are seeing shadows of your own making," Scribe said.

I breathed in, then spewed out a steam of smoke.

"Hakram," I said.

Over two hundred pounds of raw fighting orc struck with blinding quickness, leaping across the table and catching a surprised Scribe by the throat. She began screaming for help. I leaned back into my seat.

"We're under containment," I said. "Screaming won't help."

"They betrayed us?" Adjutant casually asked, slamming her against the wall and dragging her gasping form up the wall.

"She's lying," I said. "But whatever she's up to, Black isn't in on it."

"You are making a mistake," Scribe gasped. "There is no deceit, only your need to be right."

She didn't try to bring Black's name into this, for which I afforded her a sliver of respect.

"You had months with the Eyes in Procer," I said. "Oh, I'm sure that everything you told us about how it unfolded is correct in detail. That there were plants answering to Lady Ime among the mages, even that the order to start fires near possible munition locations came from the Tower. What I don't believe for a moment is that you couldn't have prevented it from happening. You had *months* with the Eyes in Procer, Scribe. What was your game?"

Black, I thought, would not question her story. It wouldn't even occur to him, I thought, the same way that it would not occur to me to wonder if Adjutant was lying to me. Too much of the bedrock of who we were depended on the certainty that they could be relied on, even when all else failed.

"Sometimes we fail, Catherine Foundling," Scribe gasped. "Sometimes it is not malice, or scheme, or treachery. Sometimes we just *fail*."

"I will torture you," I frankly said. "I won't like it, but the stakes here are too high for me to leave stones unturned out of squeamishness. I'll bleed you, and if that doesn't work I'll ask one of my people to peel your mind like an onion until the secrets come spilling out."

"We trained this in you," Scribe laughed. "I suppose it is our own doing, in the end. There is nothing to be found, Black Queen, save the unravelling of what you have wrought."

I blew out a long breath.

"Rip out an eye," I said.

It occurred to me a moment later that Hakram had only one hand left, made of bone, and that it was already holding up Scribe by the throat. I had begun to rise, to do the dirty work myself, when I saw Adjutant was moving. At the end of his stump folds of gleaming translucence were taking shape, almost spectral on appearance. They folded into themselves, methodically, until a broad clawed hand had come together. I glanced at his face, saw only the pleased baring of fangs, and the point of two claws touched above and beneath Scribe's eye. And then the hand dispersed.

"No," Adjutant said.

I blinked in surprise.

"Pain won't do anything to a woman like that, Catherine," Hakram said, calmly studying Scribe. "And neither will something live having her mind sliced open."

"We don't have anything else to threaten her with, Adjutant," I flatly said.

"We do," he disagreed. "Send for the Carrion Lord. Let him see this."

I began to tell him I'd sent Black away in the first place to spare him this when I noticed stillness. Scribe had gone utterly still, even through her aspect I could feel that. Hakram had found the pulse of her, somehow.

"She's not kept him ignorant out of disloyalty," Adjutant said. "Have you, Scribe?"

Silence.

"I suppose you would understand, wouldn't you?" Scribe rasped.

"You love him," Hakram Deadhand said, almost gently. "Not a call of the flesh or a tender feeling. The way a knife loves a steady hand, the way a sparrow loves flight. It can't be helped."

It felt wrong, to be here. Like I was intruding on a moment to which I alone of us could claim no kinship. Yet my mind turned heedless of the rest, cogs falling into place. The details had been there all along, hadn't they? The conversations I'd had with Scribe were few, but one had mattered more than the rest. When I'd tread the halls of the Tower for the fist time, and she had whispered a dangerous secret in my ear. *Ranger and I disagreed on many matters, Catherine, but there was one thing we always agreed on.* Was it really that simple, that... I hesitated to say petty, but what else could it be called? No, not petty. Personal, and in a way that was worse.

"Malicia," I croaked out. "This wasn't about Procer or the Accords or anything else. You did all this so he would have no choice but to kill Malicia when he returns to the Wasteland."

# Chapter 74

# Partial

> "Trust not oaths: from a liar they are wind, from the true they are needless."
>
> Penthesian saying

Gods, I should have seen it from the start.

What did Scribe actually care about, in that all-consuming way Named cared for things? It wasn't land or wealth or glory: all of those she could have easily claimed from her position at the side of the Carrion Lord and no one would have batted an eye. She hadn't, though, and neither had she claimed any formal authority beyond what her service to Black brought. She'd been a shadow, the spider at the centre of the web. Named could be quiet, subtle even, but rarely in the manner she'd been. I doubted more than a dozen people on Calernia knew what Assassin's face looked like, but he had a reputation. He'd done deeds, however grisly. Scribe, though? Even in Callow, where she'd effectively run the bureaucracy of the occupation for two decades, she was known as little more than Black's aide. When Named wanted something they acted, and those actions rippled consequences outwards in ways that had little to do with power – it was the Role that cast a long shadow, not unnatural swiftness of limb or the heady thrum of an aspect unleashed.

Yet when thought was given to the matter, the Scribe had been slightly more than a shadow: she'd been my teacher's shadow, in particular. There was something about Amadeus of the Green Stretch, or perhaps his ambitions, that must have drawn her to him. She had little stake in the Empire, though, and was not from it: she'd herself told me she was not born of it, and Black had once told me they'd met in Delos. I could go mad trying to parse together the desires of such a purposefully obscure stranger, though, so why even try? I could see what mattered to her simply by looking at where she hadn't... faded into the background. She'd cared for the old Calamities some, less so their children – Masego rarely spoke of her – but in the end it was my father she'd attached herself to. Fear of pain or death wouldn't work on someone like Eudokia, Adju-

tant was right about that. You'd have to threaten something she cared about, and as far as I could tell one of the few things she valued in this world was the trust between her and Black.

Hakram had caught scent of that, far before I could even begin to glimpse the shape of the truth, and so now I had a knife to rest against the throat of that trust. No longer strangled or threatened, the villainess slowly rose to her feet and talked.

"It was necessary," Scribe said. "And considering your personal and political enmities with Malicia, none of this should be unpleasant to your ear."

Akua's Folly had been permitted and even somewhat obliquely funded by the Tower, I had not forgotten that. Akua Sahelian would pay her dues for that and more, but the Dread Empress would not be spared the settling of all accounts. And her debt had only grown, with the brutal attack that'd been Night of Knives. Some of those losses had been personal, too. Ratface would not soon be forgot. Only now I had to wonder if I'd been steered, didn't I? If Scribe could do it to Black, someone she loved and trusted, she would not bat an eye before aiming me at her enemies. On the other hand, would the Empress not have tried to cast the blame on Scribe for that if she could, even if it was even slightly feasible? And there was General Istrid's death during the Doom, too. Juniper's mother had taken a knife in the back and it was still anyone's guess who'd wielded the blade. These days I was inclined to flip a coin over whether it'd been the Empress removing one of the key Black loyalists in the Legions or the Matrons getting their pieces in place and giving me opportunity to swallow up leaderless legions into the nascent Army of Callow. Which I had, promptly enough. Now, though, looking back? Malicia had lost two legions and the supreme commander of my freshly strengthened armies been given good reason to despise the Empress. There was no end to that rabbit hole, if I tumbled down it.

"As far as I'm concerned, this can only end with Malicia's head on a pike," I conceded. "But this is not a reasonable way to go about this, Scribe. Shit, you were more than just playing with fire: Procer might have *collapsed*, if someone put a knife in Hasenbach! All for something an honest conversation might have achieved instead."

"That is where," Scribe calmly said, "you are wrong."

There was no tremor to her voice, no hesitation. She believed what she said. And she also didn't give the slightest fuck about the hundreds of thousands of deaths that might come from the Principate toppling. *No*, I darkly thought, *she wouldn't*. Sabah had been the only one of the Calamities who gave more than a passing thought to the lives she took, which made it all the more a tragedy she'd been the one to die first.

"I expect we're *not* about to have a stirring discussion about whether Cordelia Hasenbach truly is the key to keeping the Principate functional," I cuttingly said.

"He would have forgiven her, Catherine Foundling," Scribe said. "Without ever using the word forgive, but that would be the truth of it nonetheless. No matter what any of us said, he'd make peace again."

"Look, I'm not going to argue he doesn't get sentimental on occasion," I said. "To be blunt, there's a reason I'm still breathing. But he's still *Black*. There's lines, and if he has to choose between the Praes he wants and Malicia-"

"He'll try for both," Scribe said. "Offer her to be his Chancellor, another leap of faith: trusting that she would be one of the few who never schemed the death of their tyrant."

"That would not be acceptable," I sharply said. "If she takes a ship across the Tyrian Sea I won't pursue, but she doesn't get to stay anywhere near the reins of power. Not after all the shit she's pulled. He knows that."

"It won't matter. He always forgives," Scribe said, and under the calm tone that were and old and cold anger. "Malicia. Ranger. Even Wekesa, who spurned one of the few ways the Empire could be corrected without steel in hand out of sheer petty apathy. He always forgives them and takes up the work instead. It will kill him, Catherine. It has been killing him for years, but this once he might as well slit his own throat. *I will not have it*."

I almost denied her, the words on the tip of my tongue, but then I thought of Arcadia. Of the Queen of Summer holding Masego and I in the palm of her hand, and how she's still not come the closest to killing me that day. *He would be angry, if I killed you,* Ranger had said, her desire to take my life almost a physical thing, *but we've been angry before. It passes.* The Scribe had known my father for a very long time, and though she was... warped in some ways, as all Named were, she was not necessarily *wrong*.

"There were ways that weren't as risky," I said.

"None that would hold under scrutiny, which you can be certain will be had," Scribe said.

And the thing was, if you counted Black's life above everything other concern I could even understand why she'd believed this was what needed to be done. And why she'd assume I'd go along with it too. As a play, it'd finished isolating Malicia from every other halfway trustworthy actor on Calernia – at this point, who aside from Kairos would even consider bargaining with her? It would ensure that Black would climb the Tower, putting someone at the head of the Empire I could trust when I abdicated, and while Hasenbach still held the reins of Procer her position was weakened just ahead of pivotal negotiations. Now that this had been carried out successfully, I only benefitted from the outcome of her scheme. Oh, no doubt she'd have preferred I never catch on, but this was not a fatal mistake to her was it? I gained nothing from outing her and would lose quite a bit from tattling. Now that the Jacks could benefit from her agents in the Wasteland, I had an actual reason to want her to keep breathing – the arrangement would likely die with her. Would Black killer her, if he knew? I honestly wasn't sure. He'd tolerate manipulations for Malicia, I suspected, but then he'd considered the Empress his superior.

Not so with this one, I thought.

"It wasn't worth the risks," I finally said. "And you know if he ever learns about this, he'll snap."

"There are three people alive who know of this," Scribe said.

I felt a pang of irritation.

"Don't be daft," I said. "He's a villain. So are you, so am I. Secrets like this always come out with the likes of us, Scribe. And if you don't do it on your own terms it'll be on some hero's instead."

There were simply so many ways for secrets to be snatched from even the grave. Some manners of necromancy, echoes in Arcadia, or even just a very improbable but not outright *impossible* human mistake. Providence wasn't a panacea for all ills that handed you everything always, the way Black had once intimated to me, but it did make sure that if there was a chance in a hundred all a hero needed to do was roll the dice.

"You speak with great certainty," she said, "yet I have buried greater sins than this and never did they rise from their graves."

"You've never been in everyone's eyes like this, though," I flatly replied. "Every great power on the continent is looking at Salia and the smouldering remains of your plot, Scribe. Hells, you've got the White Knight and the Grey Pilgrim here. Your really think two Choir busybodies like that aren't going to get even a *hint* from up on high?"

"There are limits to how much even angels can intervene," she said, sounding irritated. "It is not a rule that the Heavens see through every scheme, else there would be no purpose to ever scheming. They have no reason to even begin to look, so-"

"How are you not getting that you're not playing iron sharpens iron in the fucking Wasteland anymore?" I snapped. "This isn't killing teenage heroes in Callow before they get their first aspect, Scribe. You're trying the odds with the godsdamned fate of millions on the line, every hound the Heavens have to send sniffing at the ashes, and you think-"

A hand came to rest on my shoulder, though it was not warm.

"Cat," Hakram said. "This no longer serves a purpose."

I breathed out angrily. I'd not even noticed getting to my feet, much less the clatter of my abandoned pipe against the table. Ash had spilled, though not enough to start a fire.

"Fine," I said. "You're right. This is not acceptable, Scribe."

"A decision made in anger might be regretted," Adjutant cautioned.

My fingers clenched. My instinct was to drag her, by the hair if need be, in front of Black and let the truth spill out. But Hakram was right, there'd be long-lasting consequences to that. And until I could separate my instinct to go through with this from my harsh urge to see Scribe getting the rude awakening she'd been bargaining for, it would be best if I stayed my hand.

"I'll hold my tongue for now," I said.

"I will require guarantee that you will first speak with me, should you unwisely choose revelations," Scribe said.

*Fuck you*, I almost said, *you get nothing from me you*– but Hakram's bony fingers squeezed my shoulder slightly.

"Fine," I got out.

Both Adjtutant and I knew she might start scrambling for leverage over me the moment she left the room, but if she did take off the gloves and flay her alive before use her reanimated puppet-corpse to call off whatever she'd schemed. The days where I was willing to let the Calamities twist my arm were long past me. I snatched back my pipe, though the wakeleaf was spoiled. Out of sheer pettiness I hobbled to cut in front of Scribe as she made for the door.

Wasn't much, but it did slightly help my mood.

—

Even after the anger cooled no answers had sprung forth, because there were some choices that had no clean way through. It'd been one of my earliest lessons as the Squire, and though I wished it hadn't proved as repeatedly and brutally true there was no denying it had. I could have slipped away into a warded room with the same half-council I'd gathered earlier to debate the matter, let their advice carry me through the noise until some sort of conclusion took form. I didn't, for I'd grown weary of the same words echoing around my mind again and again. A council sounded deeply unpleasant, at the moment, and though I knew indecisiveness could be a costly thing to a woman in my position a day's staggering would not change too much. Dawn would carry with it a great many hopes, for messengers had come from Salia and the delegations were to be received at midday. As agreed, an escort of four hundred would be allowed to every representative save for Black – who was, effectively, here as an extension of my own delegation. It would have been wiser to head to bed brisk and early, but restless and the coming of darkness had me too awake for it.

I went out instead, shedding all escorts save for the handful of Mighty I sensed trailing me in the dark. The countryside around Salia was, well, rather mundane. Given all the wild things one heard about the Principate's capital I'd half expected everything within ten miles of it to be a pleasure garden dripping in jewels, but this could easily have been Callowan countryside. Lands did not look so different from one another, when covered by ice and snow. Though the village where my soldiers had been quartered, Roque-Faillie, had nothing of note all that close I was surprised to find a light fluttering in the distance after ghosting past my guards. It was coming from structure, too, though not a large one. Curiosity drove me forward, limping as I went and leaning on my staff of yew. The Mantle of Woe I'd left behind, traded instead for a warmer fur-rimmed cloak that Hakram had sown me. It was quite lovely, and he'd even reminded my whining about all my clothes being black: it was a pleasant shade of deep green instead, almost like the colour Archer favoured. I blinked in surprise

when I got a good look at where the light was coming from, for though the sight was not that odd I'd not expected to see it.

It was a small farm I was looking at, though it must have been used for cattle-herding as well by the looks of the low wall to the side. Someone had hung a lantern on the side of house, off a rusting iron hook, and I caught a grunt of effort coming from near the low wall. Light in my limp, I moved onto the snowy path and found a man working on the cattle-wall. It'd been shoddily built, I thought, more piled stone than anything else, and a large swath of it had collapsed. Some had used a shivel to break the snow and ice and was steadily stacking the stones anew. Brow raising, I took a closer look. Not a Proceran, this one, at least not by birth: his skin had that Thalassina tone to it, too pale to be Soninke but too dark to be Taghreb. Tall and built like a working man, with fuzzy hair cropped even closer than even Legion regulations demanded, he'd shed his coat. Instead he wore a long-sleeved grey tunic he'd rolled up the sleeves of, and I let my gaze linger just a moment on the muscled forearms and calloused hands. He was rather plain-faced, I saw when he turned to glanced at me, and either clean-shaven or hairless. His dark brown eyes had a sense of steadiness to them, peace almost.

"Can I help you?" he asked in flawless Chantant.

Almost embarrassed at having stared, I gestured towards the wall he was working on.

"Won't hold without mortar," I said. "And it's a little late in the year for that. Won't take properly in the cold."

He looked surprised.

"Are you a mason?" he asked.

"I have a friend who works with stone," I shrugged.

Insofar as Pickler could be said to be doing then, when she crafted engines to tear down walls. I took another few steps, moving to the side of the path so I could lean against an intact part of the cattle-wall.

"Spring is coming soon enough," the stranger said. "It may hold."

"Hopeful sort, aren't you?" I drawled.

"I see no purpose to ever assuming the worst," he replied. "It seems like a tiring way to live."

"You get more pleasant surprises that way," I hedged. "You don't have the look of a local, if you'll forgive my saying so."

"I am not," the man agreed, body shifting as he stacked another stone. "It is not my farm, if that is your question. I was given leave to use it while waiting for a friend."

"Here?" I said, genuinely surprised. "You know there's delegations close, right? The League further east and Callow's just to the west. That's a lot of jumpy soldiers."

Not to mention I'd let Robber loose. He wasn't going to around stabbing farmers – although this definitely wasn't one – but he wouldn't be above a bit of a scare if he got bored.

"I had heard," the man said. "I warned my friend, though she cared little for the warning."

"Headstrong?" I said, genuinely sympathetic.

Indrani wasn't exactly what you might call a pliable young maiden, even when I wasn't actively insulting her.

"Rather," the man said, amused. "And she dislikes cities. It will do her some good to stretch her legs."

"Been in Salia, then?" I casually asked.

"I have," he said. "We are being hosted in the city."

"Not Levantine, by the look and sound of you," I mused. "Sure as Hells not Proceran. Ashuran, then?"

"A long time ago," the man agreed, then shifted to Lower Miezan. "You are Callowan, yes?"

"Laure born and raised," I agreed in the same.

"Come with the Black Queen, I would think," he said.

"More or less," I said. "You a translator? I expect with the amount of people coming into the capital there's bound to be good coin in it."

He was perhaps in too good a shape for one, but it would rather impolite to outright call him a mercenary who'd picked up a few languages while out on campaign. A hired blade wouldn't make it into any place of import, but with foreign soldiers in Salia knowing their tongues would be a skill people were willing to pay coin for.

"I know a great many languages," the man said. "You might say I have a gift with them."

There was an almost rueful note to his voice when he said that. Yeah, that wasn't a mercenary. No idea what he actually was, but I was leaning towards whatever the Thalassocracy's equivalent of the Eyes of the Empire was.

"Were you at the Princes' Graveyard?" he suddenly asked.

I nodded.

"It is said that angels seeded dreams among soldiers of all armies," he said, dark eyes lingering on me.

I'd gotten an interested look or two in my life, and this wasn't one of them. He'd assessed me as someone who knew how their way around a blade – checked my frame, my stance, for callouses on my palm. Yeah, *definitely* not a common mercenary.

"Didn't get one," I said. "But I've heard the same."

He slowly nodded.

"Unfortunate," he said. "I'd wanted to speak with someone who had dreamt."

"Oh?" I asked. "Dubious about the Arch-heretic of the East not getting smote by angels?"

He looked amused.

"It is a meaningless title," he said.

I cocked my head to the side, honestly surprised.

"It comes from no sacred writ, it has the blessing of no Choir nor the assent of the Heavens," he elaborated, seeing my curiosity. "If priests declare the sun to be wicked, does it make it so?"

"I think you have a large enough conclave, probably yes," I mused.

The man's lips quirked into a smile. He hoisted up another stone and set it down before wiping his brow and pulling down his sleeves. Picking up his coat, he moved to sit by my side on the cattle-wall.

"You do not think much of priests, it seems," he said.

"*A* priest is usually a good thing," I drawled. "It's when you've priests in the multiple that the trouble starts. They've a way of starting to believe that whatever they agree on is the truth, and it's all downhill from there."

"Is there not a House of Light in Callow?" the man asked, sounding surprised.

"Sure," I snorted. "But it's never been overly guilty of *agreeing* on anything. Mind you, they still keep to the Book. It's the Praesi that have no priests at all."

"My mother kept to the Gods Below," the man admitted. "She was rather bemused at the notion of formal priesthood."

I glanced at him.

"Soninke?" I guessed.

He nodded. I'd been right then, he had mixed blood as was – *had* been now, I reminded myself – common in Thalassina.

"From Thalassina," he said.

I grimaced.

"Hope you didn't have any family there," I said.

"I do not know," he admitted, then frowned. "It is true, then? That the city was sunk into the sea?"

"Large chunk of it went up in smoke, way I heard it," I said. "And that much sorcery, even when you're just close. . . "

It was his turn to grimace. Yeah, I suspected that'd not been a pleasant way to die for those unlucky survivors.

"Heavens shepherd their souls beyond," he murmured.

A well-meant sentiment, I thought, though most Praesi would sneer at it. The man pushed himself off the wall and put on his coat – good make but well-worn, most likely not a noble then – and with a smile offered me his hand.

"Hanno," he introduced himself.

I went still for a heartbeat as it all came together. Slowly, I breathed out.

"Catherine," I said, clasping his wrist in a legionary's handshake.

His eyes widened, the slightest bit.

"Black Queen," Hanno of Arwad said.

"White Knight," I replied. "Fancy meeting you here."

# Chapter 75

# Analog

> "I assure you, Chancellor, that with but a few words they'll come around to agreeing with me. Almost like an incantation, really."
>
> Dread Emperor Imperious

*Good grip*, I thought, as he clasped my arm tightly once back before withdrawing.

"I was warned about you," the White Knight conversationally said.

He was a dangerous man, I knew, for heroes usually were. Yet I did not feel particularly endangered, for by all reports Hanno of Arwad was not the sort of madman who'd draw a sword thoughtlessly. I leaned on my staff to push myself up on the low cattle-wall, pressing my cloak against the back of my leg with my other hand so it wouldn't bunch up. *That's better*, I thought. Took the weight off my bad leg.

"Were you?" I replied. "You don't seem all that worried."

"Not that sort of warning," he said. "The Grey Pilgrim called you a thresher."

My brow rose. I was a city girl to the bone, true enough, but it was still a Callowan city. I knew a thing or two about farming, if only in principle.

"Like for grain?" I asked, cocking my head to the side.

He had a rather honest face, I decided, for all that it was plain. The calm on it wasn't affectation, no. It was just the consequence of being so amiably unruffled by all that went on around him, perhaps not even something he knew he showed.

"One that separates the wheat from the chaff," the White Knight quoted. "He argued that there are Bestowals that, by their nature, draw to them both great loyalty and great enmity."

"Sounds like Tariq," I conceded. "Mind you, I've always found he throws words like 'fate' around a little too easily. Anyone who ends up making waves will draw both enemies and allies, there's nothing magical about it."

"There is, when so many of those allies were once your enemies," Hanno said. "I am told that most of your closest companions fought you at some point or another."

Well, not *that* many. Indrani had introduced herself by ambushing me, I conceded. Vivienne too. Juniper and I hadn't exactly begun as bosom friends, and there was a reason that I'd ripped Akua's heart out of her chest. Shit. Hakram had always been a delight, though! And Robber had mostly been other people's problem, which by goblin standards was positively saintly. I forcefully refrained from thinking too much about how the Everdark had turned out for all involved.

"Oh Gods," I muttered. "I genuinely can't argue with that."

If I'd lost that argument in my own head, I somehow doubted it'd go my way spoken aloud. The hero softly chuckled.

"It is not unlike sculpting, I've found," Hanno said. "What your hand knows, what you have crafted, is not what the eyes of others see."

"Been mistaken a few times, have you?" I asked.

He agreed with a nod.

"Often it is misunderstood what the Choir of Judgement is," the White Knight said. "I've been asked to adjudicate land disputes, to settle disagreements over scripture and once even to decide on the rightful owner of cattle."

He breathed out, as if exasperated by the whole of it.

"The Seraphim do not attend to earthly laws or even holy writ, Black Queen," Hanno of Arwad said. "They render only one manner of judgement and it is not fettered by anything of Creation."

"That'd be the spinning coin and the," I mimed a blade across the throat, "I take it?"

"If the coin spun for ever soul on Calernia, it would show the laurels more often than not," the White Knight said. "The circumstances in which it is prone to spinning, however, have favoured the showing of the swords."

"And that doesn't bother you?" I asked.

He cocked his head to the side.

"Why would it?" the White Knight asked. "If only wicked men are judged, why would another end come of it?"

"And you don't think you're passing judgement as well?" I frowned.

"That is not my place," he said.

"The coin doesn't flip on its own, you know," I pointed out. "And as far as I know, you don't toss it for everyone you meet."

The hero looked frustrated, but only in passing. I supposed I hadn't been the first person to say as much to him. He was one of the great Names of our generation, true, but he was also a pretty personable man all things considered.

"You are Queen of Callow," the White Knight said.

"Don't suppose you could get me that in writing?" I drily said.

If getting the Sword of Judgement to put it to parchment didn't end up settling the legitimacy of my rule, nothing ever would. He blinked, visibly bemused.

"Ignore that," I sighed. "Yes, I am Queen of Callow. Couple other titles too, but that's the highest one."

"Then, unless I am mistaken, you have right of high justice over all in your kingdom," Hanno said.

That was slightly more complicated an issue than you'd think, actually. High justice – essentially the right to sit in judgement of anyone no matter how high their birth and the severity of their crime – had been moved around some these last few decades. Before the Conquest the answer would have been a straightforward yes, as the ruling king or queen of Callow had been one of the few figures able to sit in judgement over anyone. Under Black the right of high justice had in theory devolved to the imperial governors, though in practice he'd been the one holding it: though his authority came from the Tower and not a crown, he'd been the only man in the kingdom would could sit in judgement of both governors and the remaining nobles. It was no without reason that when I'd called my teacher the crownless king of Callow not even the Choir of Contrition had gainsaid me. These days my kingdom's laws were a messy jumble of old Praesi decrees and dusty Callowan laws, but as the anointed Queen of Callow I did in principle have right of high justice. If I started going after the few nobles left through even legal means, though, I'd have a rebellion on my hands. I'd allowed my court to squeeze the northern baronies in their coin purse but nowhere else, and Gods forbid I ever try to pass judgement on Duchess Kegan even if she ate a full cartload of babies in broad daylight before a hundred witnesses.

"By law I do," I conceded.

"As one with the right to pass judgement over any Callowan," Hanno said, "did you then proceed to drag every man and woman you encountered before a tribunal?"

My brow rose.

"You don't stand judgement in Callow without having broken a law," I said.

"And I do not bring into the gaze of the Seraphim every soul I encounter without reason," the White Knight replied. "Nor would I stand benumbed and allow a life to be taken before my eyes while I asked for their verdict. I do not judge, Catherine Foundling, because I recognize the fallibility of what I am and what I know. It does not mean I am blind or helpless: it means that where others have no choice but to be burdened with uncertainty, I am not."

That was rather more reasonable than I'd expected of the man, I admitted to myself. My brushes with Choirs had been less than pleasant, most of the time, so I'd been predisposed to seeing lunacy lurking in one who had openly sworn himself to do the bidding of one. Black had been less than flattering in his assessments of the man, too, though he'd also cautioned that the White Knight was both intelligent and an exceedingly dangerous and versatile killer. Then

again, I could hardly imagine my father ever sitting down to have a polite chat with a hero – or the opposite, in all fairness. Over two decades of the Calamities smothering heroes in their narrative crib had rather thoroughly burned that bridge for both sides. I still found the notion of the Seraphim being considered an authority over even a chamber pot rather revolting, but hardly enough to draw a blade over it. So long as that authority was not forced on anyone, and it stayed well out of my kingdom, it fell under the category of 'someone else's problem'. If the nations of the west wanted to grant the right of high justice to the Choir of Judgement, that was their decision to make.

Of course, there was one little issue with all this.

"And villains?" I asked. "Don't they always get a flip, White Knight?"

He smiled, though it was a distant sort of smile. One straddling the line between reminiscence and the aloofness of professional attending their trade. He stood before me, little more than a well-built man in cloth, and still he spoke with an authority that could not be denied. Conviction was at the heart of Names, I knew, and this one did not lack faith. Black was one of the finest hero-killers Calernia had ever known, and he'd gone after Hanno with the full roster of the Calamities while the White Knight led a disparate band of greenhorns. And the man stood before me still. Some of that could be laid at the Bard's feet, at her schemes, but only so much. Even the Intercessor could not make a sharp blade out of straw.

"Are all those that worship the Gods Above to be called Good?" Hanno replied.

"No," I said. "But worshipping Below is against the scriptures, isn't it? Heresy."

"Do you worship Below?" he asked.

"I curse in their name, mostly," I drawled, rather amused. "But I've been called an odd duck amongst my kind. Most villains do in fact keep to the Gods Below."

I knew Hakram did, though it was in the orc way under the name of the Hungry Gods. He wasn't particularly pious, though, and considered it a private matter besides. Indrani's utter indifference to all things religious probably counted as *some* sort of heresy, I was pretty sure, and while Akua worshipped the Hellgods in that very Praesi way that did not exclude attempted murder and usurpation that worship was not less sincere for it. That her growing fondness for heroics had not been paired with conversion to the ways of the House of Light had been a source of some amusement to me, particularly since even if she was a Wasteland aristocrat she knew her way around the Book of All Things better than I did.

"The Choir of Judgement does not follow scripture," Hanno reminded me. "It was written by mortal hands, a fetter like any other."

"But if a villain, say, made a carriage out of skulls," I said, then let the sentence hang.

"Graverobbing is not a particular concern of the Seraphim," the White Knight replied, sounding almost amused. "Especially when it is only presumptive."

"But you'd keep an eye on them, after that," I shrewdly said.

"As I would keep an eye on a man walking into a house with a bared sword," Hanno said.

While the man in front of me was far from an idiot – I suspected he'd be deeply unpleasant to argue with – I wouldn't assess him as the kind of silver-tongued schemer I'd come across more than a few times. Oh, it was possible a long game was being played even if he was a hero. But my instinct was that he was much as he put himself forward, and I'd stayed alive this long by listening to that little voice when it tugged at my attention. And right now that voice was telling me that the White Knight didn't have to be my enemy. I didn't relish the notion of angels passing judgement through someone else's hand, and I very much doubted that Hanno would stay his work even if I asked him to pretty please do so, but he could be accommodated. If he worked within the bounds of the Accords, and even worked to *enforce* them? Hells, he might be a legitimate boon. Heroes would follow the Grey Pilgrim out of respect for the man, but if the White Knight endorsed something a lot of people would take that as the blessing of the Choir of Judgement. There were parts of the continent where that carried a great deal of weight. Even now, after the Tenth Crusade and the fury that'd followed the Salian conclaves, Callow was still one of them.

Everything he'd said fit with what I knew of his actions. He'd come to be involved in the Free Cities because the Tyrant had started a war, and as far as I knew never fought where there wasn't a villain involved. He'd come as part of the southern crusade, which was a mark against him, but it was largely Black he'd been there for. And while I loved my father a great deal, I couldn't deny that he was a monster twice over. I believed him to be the man who'd stood between Praes and its worst impulses for decades, and perhaps the monster needed to reform the Dread Empire into a nation that wouldn't vomit its poison over the rest of Calernia every few decades, but that in no way made him a good man. It was not *unjustified*, to want to kill him. That didn't mean I'd allow it, or that it would not make things objectively worse if it happened, but I wouldn't delude myself into thinking that Amadeus of the Green Stretch was not a monster. He was other things, too, but that didn't expunge the first truth him. In the end, I didn't have a lot of axes to grind with the White Knight and he'd proved one of the more reasonable heroes I'd come across. Hanno had even gone north to fight the Dead King and only returned to prevent the Tyrant from having a continent-collapsing tantrum.

In all honesty, that put him pretty high up my list of people who hadn't severely fucked up in the last year. He had Black beat, for one.

"You don't take issue with mortal laws, then," I said.

"It would be absurd to," he noted. "Lest the Heavens themselves rule, what other way is there?"

"And if those laws applied to even Named?" I pressed.

"A law need not be just," Hanno of Arwad said. "It need only be a law. I would no more bend my neck to such a wrong than any other threat."

"I'm not talking about settling right and wrong for all of Calernia," I said. "That's doomed. Howling Hells, let's not even talk about Good and Evil – not even all of Good agrees on the same boundaries. No, I mean basics. You can't tell Named that regicide is over, neither heroes nor villains would obey that. But limiting the means by which it can be done? That might work. And it'd end the practice of burning down half a city to kill a tyrant or usurp a throne."

"Not laws, these," the White Knight said, eyes curious, "but rather rules of engagement."

My veins thrummed with excitement, because unlike Tariq he'd not needed to be led to that. He'd grasped it, quickly, and did not seem opposed in the slightest. The dark-eyed hero let out a little noise of understanding.

"Ah," he said. "I see now your cleverness in making such rules so basic. If the expectation placed is so low and Named still fail to clear it, none will desire to support them. Neither others who bear mantles nor the powerful without, for only the erratic would break such bare bones rules. The vast majority of Named will see their lives go untouched, with only the most radical being restricted."

He paused, looking at me with an expression I found difficult to place.

"This is more than rules of engagement," the White Knight said, "this is a blade swung at the most callous servants of Above and Below. Within a few generations of grand gestures being harshly answered by all other powers, you would excise that entire manner of thinking from the Named on Calernia."

Not even Black had caught that, I thought. Oh, he'd seen parts of the Accords as being meant to restrain the most destructive aspects of Praes, but he'd not really gotten it because at the end of the day he did not think of stories the way I did. He'd stayed alive as villain occupying my home, a hotbed of rebellion, by avoiding ever getting caught in a story or pattern that'd get him killed. Unlike me, unlike Akua even, he only rarely wielded like a weapon. It was the same with the Pilgrim, I though, in his own way. Tariq carried around on his back the weight of all his tragedies but at heart he was a guest in the stories of others. Sometimes a guest who ended that story before it could grow into something dangerous, others a wise old man who nudged it to something more acceptable, but the Peregrine as an entity remained... constant. Always playing the same few roles in different stories. He'd know a great many of those, but it would be his nature to think of them as a landscape he'd travelled far and wide. Not something that could shift and change.

"If the flying fortress crowd and the Contrition-ritual crowd always die, always fail? People will remember that," I quietly agreed. "Gods know it'll be public enough when the hammer's brought down. And when it's been happening for long enough, well, everyone will 'know' that sort of thing doesn't work. Same way heroes don't die when they're thrown down cliffs or villains don't get beaten on the first step of their plan."

"And with most Named having a stake in ensuring at least the barest of civility is maintained between their kind, the odds are strong that your rules will last long enough to make that mark," Hanno said. "It is a sound notion."

"Then you'd be in favour of such a set of rules?" I asked.

He half-smiled.

"They did warn me," the White Knight pensively said.

I almost cursed. Gods, let this not turn into a damned flop where by simple nature of having been proposed by a villain this entire concept was to be dismissed as a plot of Below. That would be bitterly disappointing after the rest of this conversation.

"I've not spoken a single lie," I said.

"Which makes you singularly dangerous," Hanno agreeably replied.

My fingers clenched until the knuckles went white under the gloves.

"Ah, you misunderstand me," the White Knight said. "That you are silver-tongued and perhaps one of the most dangerous people alive does not mean I am dismissing your proposal, Black Queen."

"Then what *does* it mean?" I asked.

"That I understand what the Grey Pilgrim meant, now," Hanno of Arwad said. "You have a pull, Catherine Foundling, that drags others into your wake: either as followers or as wreckage. I am glad to have seen it myself before we first met on formal terms. It would have been startling."

That last part he spoke ruefully, as if mocking himself.

"There doesn't need to be anything mystical about this," I insisted. "I don't have sole claim to the Accords, not in the slightest. I speak for them because I'm in a position to, not because they're solely my horse to ride. I don't know what you think-"

"I very nearly agreed," the White Knight amusedly said. "Just now. Without thinking twice. After speaking with you for not even an hour. Because you are reasonable, well-spoken and even charming in what I assume to be a rough Callowan way."

That last one was kind of insulting, I decide, but the rest pretty flattering. I cleared my throat.

"Still not too late to agree now," I gallantly tried.

"No, perhaps not," Hanno calmly replied, "but it is certainly too early."

He suddenly twitched, head turning to look at the far south. I couldn't hear or see anything, at this distance, and it might be a little gauche to call on Night to aid my senses next to the Sword of Judgement so I refrained out of politeness.

"My friend is returning," the White Knight said.

It took a moment for me to place it.

"The Witch of the Woods?" I asked.

He dipped his head in agreement.

"A great she-wolf walks with her," he said. "Neither are fond of cities."

"I'll take my leave, then," I said.

I could on occasion recognize a hint when it was sent my way. I dropped down onto the snow, softening the blow with my staff, and tightened my cloak around my shoulder. Wouldn't be too long a walk back to camp and I probably should head to bed – I had quite the day ahead of me tomorrow.

"Good night to you, White Knight," I said, dipping my head in salute.

"And to you, Black Queen," he replied, doing the same.

I cleared the path, though as I crossed back into the plains I was stopped by a call.

"I expect they will not grow fonder of cities overnight," Hanno said.

He wasn't speaking loudly, but his voice carried perfectly.

"Might be I go for a walk, then," I replied without glancing back.

The yew staff dug into the snow as I limped back home – thump, thump, thump – and I wondered if it truly should go. There might come a day where the coin went up spinning in judgement of me, after all. Not this winter, not this year, maybe not even this decade. But one day? Oh, there'd been a shiver of that going through the conversation. Violence coiled and controlled but never too far from the surface. As a younger woman that might have disturbed me, but these days it simply marked him to my eye as someone able to handle strength properly. Still, I now understood why many heroes deferred to that man: he was so utterly at peace with the power he wielded and what he wielded it for that looking on the surface of that placid pond you'd only ever see your own doubts reflected. I wondered if he'd hesitate, if on that day the coin showed swords. I wondered if I'd hesitate to kill him before the coin ever began spinning.

Neither yew nor snow held answers for me, save that when night came again I would return.

# Chapter 76

# Procession

> "Orphan am I, yet with many mothers and fathers. At once ruler and ruled, yet never only one."
>
> Famous Proceran riddle, referring to the city of Salia

I'd never been all that fond of the cloying amount of ceremony that accompanied rising up the ranks.

Oh, I understood the reasons for it. I'd argued the matter with Black back in the day, when we still had our lessons in Ater. Said that it was absurd to treat a king or a general as if they were gods, that the more you set distance between the people making decisions and the people about which those decisions were made the more you ran risks of losing perspective. I still believed that, truth be told, but after years in command of armies and a few wearing a crown I could better appreciate the points my teacher had made back then. When someone was invested with a great deal of power and authority, treating them like a stranger off the street meant treating all that power and authority just as casually. That tended to foster bad habits. In Praes the lie of Malicia and Black's invincibility had kept rebellions from flaring up because they'd just seemed *beyond* that: Black always ended up crushing his foes, Malicia always ended up having been three steps ahead of everyone else. It was the same principle for this, more or less: the more ceremony you surrounded someone with, the more they seemed different. Apart from the rest. And, since they were of a different breed from the common man on the street, their authority need not be fought and their power need not be questioned.

That was the reason while my morning had turned into a damned slog, when it came down to it. There were four delegations that the Principate of Procer was to welcome into Salia officially for the peace conference at the capital, and while I would have been happy with being ushered in through the city gates without first needing to bribe the guard that just wasn't the way diplomacy was conducted between great powers. No, this had to be a *show*. So everyone had come with their nicest banners and their armour freshly polished,

prepared a hundred empty courtesies and now Procer was going to parade us one after another through the large Griffon Gate and the broad avenue it led to. Callow had not been invited to proceed first, naturally. The Principate might be in dire need of my help but it wasn't going to own up to that before the eyes of gods and men: no, instead it was the Dominion of Levant that was invited in first. Levant was an ally, after all, and a member of the Grand Alliance too. Still, at least we were second. General Rumena was third in line, which I took to be a rather blunt slight to the League of Free Cities in general and likely the Tyrant in particular.

It'd been made clear to me that we would be signaled when the time came for my delegation to proceed, and I'd sent Adjutant ahead to make sure everything went smoothly. That left me with rather little to do, to my rising irritation as time went by. General Abigail was, as usual, finding work for herself so she would not have to remain in my immediate vicinity and while the Third Army was laden with old War College acquaintances of mine – it had, after all, initially been raised from Nauk's old command in the Fifteenth – there were none I could casually approach for conversation. With Archer still out there somewhere, having sent a single message through Robber's marauders that she was 'onto something', that left me rather light on choices. Moreso than usual since it'd been decided neither Black nor Akua would accompany the delegation on the first day, as that was when there'd be the most eyes on us, and sadly Vivienne was further ahead of our procession. I could go to her, but it'd disturb arrangements that'd taken the better part of an hour to put in place and it felt a little pitiful to do that out of mere boredom.

There were around three hundred of us, arrayed in our finest. A full cohort of legionaries in their parade grounds best made up the heart of it, veterans from a half a dozen fields most of which were old to my service. Thirty knights of the Order of the Broken Bells added a dash of Callowan flair to it, though their hymn-inscribed armour and long lances had been proved to be anything but decorative in conflict against foes of Creation and beyond. They brought with them tall streaming banners, numbering three. The Third Army's own golden numerals on blue, carrying with them the cognomen of *Dauntless* I'd granted them at Sarcella as well as the fresher addition of crow wings at the bottom corners. The broken bells of bronze set on black that were the heraldry of the sole chivalric order of Callow trailed in the wind besides it, and last of all of all my own. The laden silver balance on black, what Hakram had told me my people now called the *Crown and Sword*. And under it words I now longer called my own: *justifications matter only to the just*. I'd been considering having them struck for some time now, but it would draw questions I was not entirely ready to answer.

I'd been made just as gaudy as the rest of this procession, put up in full plate for the first time in ages though it was one without a helmet – my hair had been put up a long elaborate braid and I'd put on a crown for once. Silver set with emeralds, the practical crown I'd worn when actually moving around

in Laure instead of sitting on the fancy chair in full regalia and attempting to look wise. It was not a coincidence that Lady Vivienne Dartwick, herself sitting astride her mount in a beautiful blue dress, wore a crown as well. A slight circlet of silver, without jewels and much less ornate than mine, but a crown nonetheless. She was heiress-designate to the throne, after all, and though still a lady in title arguably she had higher status than any Proceran royalty save for Cordelia Hasenbach. I'd begun to consider the virtues of outright sending for General Abigail so I could entertain myself at her exp- to consult with the senior commander of my escort, I meant, when Adjutant finally dragged his carcass back to me instead. The Procerans had finally given the signal, so as soon as Hakram was standing by my side our procession began moving forward.

For all its fame, Salia had yet to impress me. This far west it was hardly rare for a great city to expand far beyond its walls, especially if it had seen little war as the capital of the Principate had. Even southern Callow had dabbled in that bad habit. Salia, though, seemed to have more territory outside the distant Yearning Walls than behind them. It wasn't slums, at least not near the road we were led through. But it was certainly a chaotic mess, since it seemed construction was only overseen by the sides of the large roads that led to the deeper city gates. The smell of mud and shit was staggeringly potent even in winter, and chimneys were belching smoke upwards seemingly endlessly. By the looks of it all the cattle and workers that would be out in the fields around the capital during fairer seasons had migrated to this riotous outer-city for the snows. Houses were wood and mud, rarely stone, and they'd been built in tight clusters like a thousand strange little islands separated from one another by muddy street-moats. The stone road that led towards the Griffon Gate was clean, though, and swept clear of snow. No house was every built less than forty feet away from either side though merchant carts of food or trade goods filled much of that empty room instead.

Small crowds had gathered by the side of the road, though they dared not approach soldiers. At least they seemed more in the mood to stare than throw stones. The deeper we went into Salia the more it began to resemble the Proceran towns and cities I'd seen, as if order was radiating from the centre of the capital and waned the further from it you stood. Streets began to have a semblance of order, shops with hanging signs and neat little houses raised in stone with tiled or thatched roofs. It all looked rather prosperous, though not the kind of wealthy the stories about the beating heart of Procer had led me to expect. Oh, I'd not deny the city was damned large but then so was Ater and the Wasteland's capital was a treasure trove of grand architecture. Mind you, large swaths of Ater were half-abandoned and only filled when famine drove the desperate to the Tower's shadow while it looked like every damned inch of the capital of Procer was crawling with a dozen people. Still, the looming cathedrals beyond the Yearning Walls in the distance were distinctly less impressive than the gargantuan horrors of the City of Gates. Procer was a younger nation than any on Calernia save for Levant, I thought, for all its great wealth and

power.

It was almost an hour all told until we stood before the Griffon Gate, the great panels of bronze on its wood listing every First Prince and Princess to have ever reigned. It opened to the sound of trumpets, and beyond it was revealed the sweeping Merovins avenue. Great statues of marble flanked on us on both sides, beginning on my right with the stern gaze of Clothor Merovins – the first to ever be elected to the office of First Prince. I suspected the man's actual furs had not been quite so rakishly cut, or offered glimpse of what was admittedly an impressively muscled chest, but that was the Alamans for you.

"They're not all royalty, did you know?" Hakram said.

I glanced at him and cocked an eyebrow.

"Famous generals and officials can earn one as well," he gravelled. "One of Rozala Malanza's ancestors is further up from the days before the Malanzas were royalty. He conquered most of northern Levant for the First Prince of the time."

"I don't suppose anyone's told the Blood about that?" I drily asked

"I believe it might be one of those inconvenient truths we must all politely ignore," Hakram replied, clicking his teeth in amusement.

The brassy call of trumpets jarred us out of the conversation. The Proceran welcome was laid out before us, a riot of silken banners under brightly armoured horsemen and even more colourful highborn. Every line with a seat in the Highest Assembly had sent a representative, by the looks of it, because that was a great many banners. And an infuriatingly large amount of very nice warhorses. They could have outfitted a good company of heavy horse with that, the wasteful fucks. Ugh, this was going to be as bad as the Tower wasn't it? All rubies the size of a fist used a bloody bench decorations and gold slapped onto things that had absolutely no need of being made of gold. Which, to be fair, was essentially everything except certain coinage and maybe crowns. A representative for the First Prince herself, an old man that carried the title of Master of Orders – one of the important officials in the Assembly, as I recalled, though he shouldn't be royalty himself – formally greeted us. I forced a smile through the greeting and let Vivienne answer it in my place. That drew attention from our hosts, but then it'd been meant to. The sooner it was made clear to people that Vivienne was truly meant to be my successor, the better.

Advance resumed with the additional escort, though still at an agonizingly slow crawl. Salia itself was worth a second look this deep in, though, I'd admit to that. The Yearning Walls were well-built and apt to weather a siege, I'd say that much, and their shockingly rose-gold stone shining like a mirror under the sun. Hakram continued to speak in a low voice as we passed through, his own research on the city far dwarfing the few books I'd opened in expectation of my visit. Salia itself was often said to be split in two parts, the City Yearned and the City Yearning – a reference to some ancient poem that'd established the name of its walls, with the city behind them being yearned and the city outside being yearning. Passing the gate had brought us into the City Yearned, and

into the portion of it known as the low districts. So named not for the poverty of their inhabitants but rather in contrast to the high districts to the west, which had been raised on high hills. The low districts covered nearly a third of the City Yearned, stretching across its south, and the knowledge that it wasn't even the wealthy Salians that lived in these parts had my stomach clenching in envy. The houses were all stone, often several stories high – Adjutant noted that renting was common practice in these parts, and very lucrative – it was not rare so see coloured glass windows. These were artisans, I thought, traders and officials. Yet their wealth clearly rivaled that of the minor nobility of Callow, if not outright surpassed it.

How much richer would the nobles be here? I'd read that Procer was arguably the wealthiest nation on Calernia, some of its princes surpassing even the famously rich High Seats of Praes, but I'd never really understood until now how far down that wealth went. When Vivienne had told me, before the Tenth Crusade, that'd it'd been brutally expensive to bribe even the servants in the holdings of the Prince of Iserre I'd assumed the Jacks were had, or that she was exaggerating some for effect. Now I could believe that even the servants in the capital of that principality had been well-off, by my people's standards. It was a bitter pill to swallow, that the Principate had been basking in all this while my ancestors were dying in droves just to keep Praes in its shore of the Wasaliti.

Merovins avenue led directly to the old palace and the Highest Assembly, but that was not our destination. We diverted northeast through another broad avenue, going through the districts known as *Les Vendeuses*. Great open-air markets, I'd been told, though we skirted the edges of them only. The route we took led through pleasant sights instead. Some streets seemed to be bordered entirely by great winter gardens artistically adorned with glasswork and sculptures, others filled with guild halls and mansions that competed for the most elegant manner of opulence. It was with some amusement I noted that not once we passed in front of a House of Light. The crowds were something of a surprise, having thickened the further in we went. I'd expected jeering and rocks, but while there certainly wasn't any jubilant cheering we were being treated as a show rather than, well, the Enemy incarnate. The knights probably helped, I decided, for they were a popular sight with children. Orcs were as well, though more in fascinated horror than positive appreciation.

They'd probably never seen orcs before today, I thought. Or goblins, or Taghreb and Soninke. Even Callowans were rare this far west, these days. *It's another world*, I thought. One that knew nothing of the blood-soaked Fields of Streges, of the eternal back and forth between knights of black and white and their grand armies that clashed every few decades. They did not understand the dread of seeing a city rise into the sky, heavy with death, or the way greenskins still flinched at the call of our knight's horns being sounded. All we had in common with these people was worn history, slights and boons long past, and how little did that really weigh? *I understand you less than I understand*

*Praesi*, I thought, watching the people of Salia. *I know their truths and their conceits, their mad ambitions and dark splendours. But you? I know so little of you it could be said I know nothing at all.* It was a humbling thing, to know that. A daunting one as well. The world was large and even this meagre sliver of it was vast. Could anyone really change something that... immense? A troubling thought, and not one I wanted to linger on.

It was a relief when the procession ended at last and we entered the restricted district where our provided lodgings stood. It was called the Lineal, for it'd once been the ancestral grounds of the Merovins chieftains-turned-royalty of Salia. They had kept large grounds to themselves, the seat of their power when another line claimed the title of First Prince or Princess. Now that the Merovins were long gone, the Lineal stood as almost a city within a city that was under the sole authority of the ruler of Salia. Its significant attached incomes were one of the great boons of the title, and as the old seat of power of royal line it was a beautiful place. I'd expected a manse and some attending barracks for my soldiers, something along the lines of the noble's houses you could see in Laure's Whitestone Quarter, but instead we were directed to what was effectively a small palace. The grounds surrounding the structure alone were larger than the palace in Laure, and I suspected this was a winter pleasure palace and not anything *official*.

I reined in my horse after passing through a pretty copper gate sculpted like a flock of chubby naked Cherubim playing laughingly, slowing Zombie's stride in the courtyard. There were servants swarming all over the place, which were most likely spies, and I almost bit the inside of my cheek. It was going to be a damned pain keeping track of all these people with my limited escort, so I'd probably have to cordon off a part of the palace and have it guarded and warded at all times.

"Any chance at least *one* of them isn't spying for Hasenbach?" I sighed and asked Hakram.

"Of course," Adjutant amusedly agreed. "There's probably a few working for other royals."

I accepted his offered hand to dismount, wincing at the impact, and when a stablehand hesitantly approached Zombie I suppressed a grin. I glanced appreciatively at the sandy-haired man, who while approaching a winged undead fae horse looked more like he was wondering if she'd fit in the stable than if this was in any way wise.

"Don't touch the reins, she'll bite you," I said. "Zombie, the man is going to show you where the stables are."

My mount huffed, displeased.

"You can't come in with me," I patiently replied, "this is a very nice palace. It'd be impolite."

I glanced at the stablehand, who was now seemingly wondering what he'd gotten himself into. I could sympathize.

"She'll follow you to the stables," I said. "Leave a stall open for her, but she'll wander around for a while still. If she gets anywhere she's not supposed to, send for me. But she'll be good, won't you Zombie?"

I scratched her mane and she whinnied.

"Liar," I muttered, not entirely without affection,

I flicked a glance at the stablehand one last time.

"Don't feed her anything," I instructed. "Even if she whines. She always fills her stomach, but she doesn't actually need to – you know what, just don't feed her anything. Let's leave it at that."

I'd hastily amended my approach when even implicit discussion of necromancy made the man look like he was about to faint. He bowed, looking like he was one stern talking to away from weeping.

"It will all be done exactly as you say, Your Majesty," he said.

It would have been polite to call what followed retreating, but I knew what it looked like when someone legged it.

"Don't you say a damn thing," I grunted without turning.

"I would never," Hakram lied, the filthy traitor.

"I can feel your mockery without even looking at you," I complained.

"Would it help your mood to terrify a gardener as well?" my *loyal right hand* said.

I turned just to flip him off, though the deepening amusement on his face – like the world's ugliest green cat had just caught a bird seasoning itself – warned me I'd just missed something. A young woman in Salian livery had been approaching, and was now looking like she'd had no idea queens could gesture obscenely and she wasn't sure whether she should pretend she'd never seen that or not. *Godsdamnit, Hakram,* I thought. *You know Hasenbach's going to read about that in a report, don't you?*

"Just say whatever it is you were sent for," I tiredly told the woman.

She bowed.

"I was sent with a message scroll, Your Majesty," she said.

As I recalled, in Proceran etiquette people weren't supposed to hand things directly to royalty. I glanced at Hakram, who stepped forward to accept the scroll. He broke the seal – featureless, a mere press of wax – and glanced at the contents.

"An invitation," Adjutant said.

"For?" I asked.

"Tea with the First Prince of Procer," Hakram said. "She awaits us in this palace's own parlour."

# Chapter 77

# Artless

> "Even the most skilled of liars are only ever wielding a lie. Truth is the superior artifice, for it will strike deeper than even the most perfect deception."
>
> Princess Beatriz of Salamans, later thirteenth First Princess of Procer

"I'm not going to lie," I muttered under my breath, "it pisses me off a little that anybody can be rich enough to have a room dedicated to *tea-drinking*."

Hakram was ahead of us, engaging our guide in what sounded like idle conversation about Salian cloths and their obvious superiority to that of the despicable yet superficially similar works from Lange, so I could vent my indignation without every sentence making it straight to the First Prince's ear.

"I expect they'll have one filled with only spices, should we look," Vivienne drily added. "You know, to make the one that's just a giant gold ingot stand out less."

"Right?" I grunted. "Hells, Vivs, you were born noble-"

"A baron line, short on land and incomes even before the Conquest," she reminded me.

I shot her an incredulous look. Those poor nobles, so very impoverished.

"Did your house have stables?" I asked.

"I'm not dignifying that with an answer," Lady Dartwick informed me.

"I bet your servants had matching livery too," I scathingly said.

"*You* have servants with matching livery, *Your Majesty*," she exasperatedly replied.

"Eh," I said. "More like I'm borrowing them for a few years. And I'd help if any of them wanted to find real decent honest work, like running a tavern-"

"Nests of criminal activity, aside from those in better quarters," Vivienne told me.

I almost gaped at the audacity of that.

"You're the Queen of Thieves for Callow," I indignantly said.

"Mere rumours," she smoothly said, "all I'm saying is that your notion of what good, honest work is tends to be rather skewed given your. . . "

"We're in Procer now, you know," I growled. "Lese-majesty's something they actually enforce here."

"Everything," Vivienne mused. "Your everything, really. Didn't you use to participate in an illegal fighting ring?"

"I was also a waitress," I defensively said. "That was lawful – wait why am I justifying myself to you, you used to be the bloody *Thief*. Have you actually ever had a job?"

"It's sad to see one so steeped in her criminal ways rising so high, but these are dark days," Vivienne sighed.

"That's a lot of backtalk, coming from someone who couldn't even murder Hakram," I muttered.

"Is no one ever going to let that go?" she complained. "Do you all want me to murder Hakram *now*, you niggling harpies? Don't you think I won't, you'll drive me to it.

There was a commotion in front of us, the attendant that'd been sent to guide us concernedly asking Adjutant if he was all right. He had, I grasped from context, stumbled and let out a choking sound. Merciless Gods he'd been eavesdropping with his Name the whole time, hadn't he? My cheeks burned a little, but I cleared my throat and put on a mask of queenly dignity. Vivienne looked mildly concerned about her dear friend Hakram Deadhand having stumbled, a degree of shamelessness that was positively royal of her. We were close now, the guide told us with an unnecessary amount of bowing.

"Do you think it still counts as a labyrinth if it's this full of tapestries and nice woodworks?" I asked.

It really was nice woodwork, too. In the same style as those in the royal palace in Laure, which I'd grimly admit to myself probably meant we'd imitated a Proceran style. They also had tapestries that weren't about hunting, nature and warring with Praes which I'd confess was a nice change of pace.

"It's the classic Alamans scheme, my queen," Vivienne drily said. "If you throw enough jewels at your enemy, they're bound slip and break something eventually."

"They'd be in a lot less shit if they'd put some of that tapestry coin on good walls instead," I grunted in agreement.

"Don't be silly Your Majesty," Lady Dartwick sardonically said. "This is the Principate, if there is need of a wall that's what stacking peasants is for."

I swallowed a laugh at that. I'd never heard that one before and serving drinks in a tavern that catered to both legionaries and Callowans meant I'd heard a *lot* of cheap jokes at the expense of Procer. Under the Empire's occupation it'd been safer to go after Procer than to take a shot at Praes. Since not even the most quiescent of my people had been entirely free of the urge take a verbal swing at the Wasteland on occasion, Procer had been getting rough treatment among my countrymen even before the Tenth Crusade so selflessly

provided them with fresh ammunition. Relentless mockery of our hosts had me in a rather pleasant mood by the time we arrived at the small hall where the First Prince of Procer was awaiting the three of us. The fair-haired woman who'd been chatting with Adjutant the whole way rapped her knuckles against the door to signal our arrival and bade us farewell, looking almost reluctant at ending her conversation with Hakram. A majordomo in tasteful silks emerged from the room and bowed, intimating he would be announcing us. As the guest of highest rank, etiquette dictated I enter first.

"Her Majesty Queen Catherine of Callow, first of her name, protector of Daoine and high priestess of the Everdark."

He had a pleasant, ringing voice, exactly the kind you'd want in someone charged with announcements. Queen *of* Callow, huh? Not so long ago Hasenbach had refused to even recognize me as Queen *in* Callow, much less the rightful liege lady of Duchess Kegan of Daoine. And someone had been talking to drow, though that might simply be the consequence of the Pilgrim feeling chatty. I entered, the polished plate on my frame making me regret having left my staff behind with every step I took. A bit of Night smoothed the pain quick enough, but when that ended I'd be left feeling the consequences of my pride tonight. I stepped into the hall, followed by the announcement of *Lady Vivienne Dartwick, heiress-designate to the Kingdom of Callow*. Much as I disliked the Proceran propensity for luxuries, I could not deny that the parlour before me was a beautiful piece of work. A tall plaster ceiling led into great arched windows of glass that let in the winter midday sun, the lighting coming to rest on a long low table of painted wood covered by a perfectly transparent pane of glass. The walls and draperies were in a pleasant pale green, and the seats prepared at the table looked sinfully comfortable with their matching cushions and broad armrests. The First Prince of Procer was seated at the centre of the table, two people standing behind her in respectful deference, and I advanced to the table as behind me the announcement of *Lord Hakram Deadhand of the Howling Wolves, the Adjutant* sounded.

One of those two people behind Hasenbach was long familiar to me. Princess Rozala Malanza's classic Arlesite good looks were only called into attention by the light mail and closely cut tabard she wore, but it was the sword at her hip worthy of a raised eyebrow. Few people were allowed to be armed in the presence of the First Prince: I'd worn no sword today and so divested myself of nothing, but Hakram had left behind his axe and Vivienne a surprisingly high quantity of knives before we were allowed into this wing of the palace. A point was being made by Hasenbach, one directed at me: *I trust Rozala Malanza to be armed and standing behind me. Procer is not so divided as you think.* The other one behind Hasenbach I did not know, though he was quite aged – if bearing that burden rather well, hair having gone a distinguished silver instead of white or falling – and wearing well-tailored but otherwise rather humble robes. On his right shoulder two pale hands intertwined had been embroidered, which struck me as priestly imagery, but I would not assume anything in a place like

Salia. I imagined introductions would come soon enough, regardless.

The First Prince waited to speak until Hakram had come to stand at my right, a towering pillar of steel and muscle, and Vivienne at my left – just as whip-slender and hard-eyed as in her thieving days, but grown steady in a way she'd never been while Named.

"Welcome to Salia, Queen Catherine," the First Prince of Procer greeted me.

It'd been about a year since I'd last seen Cordelia Hasenbach, though this would be our first meeting outside the unearthly domain of darkness and cold that I'd used as our bridge when I still stood Queen of Winter. As was often her habit she'd dressed in the dark blue that was from the heraldry of her native Rhenia, the cut of it conservative – her neckline ended an inch beneath her collarbones – but close on her frame. It was flattering, though there was no hiding that Hasenbach had been born with a warrior's build: tall and broad-shouldered, with a strong jaw and hale complexion. Her discreet touches of cosmetics, golden eye shadow that made the vivid blue of her eyes stand out even more and the painted nails at the end of the wrists revealed by sleeves ending in an undercut of puffy lace, worked to shape her appearance rather than to change it, which I thought clever of her. If she'd tried to hide her features it would have made her look comical, while as it stood her height and haleness only enhanced the palpable weight of her presence. Her crown was as a simple circlet of pale gold, holding back long golden curls I'd always considered to be the most appealing part of Cordelia Hasenbach – rich and full, they cascaded down her back in perfect ringlets.

"Your hospitality has been impeccable, Your Most Serene Highness," I replied.

She inclined her head in acknowledgement.

"Our honoured general Princess Rozala Malanza requires little introduction for you, I am told," Cordelia smiled, "but I expect my other attendant is not so well-known."

My elbow moved towards Vivienne, softly and as if by happenstance, and her own pushed back against mine. Good, so she did know.

"Lady Dartwick?" I said.

"Unless I am sorely mistaken we are in the presence of Brother Simon of Gorgeault, current head of the Holy Society," Vivienne smiled. "It is an honour to meet such a distinguished colleague, Brother Simon."

"As I am honoured to meet you, Lady Dartwick," the old man replied, lips quirking.

That smile had been almost roguish, I thought. Must have been a heartbreaker in his youth, that one. Regardless he was not in priest robes, so he should be a lay brother who'd taken no vows. Interesting Hasenbach would want him here for this, though. There were implications to that. The First Prince wordlessly invited me to sit and there was a discreet shuffle as the order of seating was seen to. Myself first, as reigning queen, then Vivienne as my designated successor, then Rozala as a ruling princess in her own right and then the broad equivalence in rank between Brother Simon and Adjutant –

who while Named was a villain and only actually owed lordly address under the Tower's law. A small swarm of servants brought trays of silver bearing a tea pot of Ashuran porcelain and matching cups, as well honey to sweeten the brew.

"They are Yan Tei leaves," Hasenbach pleasantly told me. "Bitterer than the Baalite imports and the plants of the Thalassocracy, though I find they have a richer taste."

My own passing familiarity with tea came largely through Aisha's stock – which was Baalite leaves mixed with cheaper Ashuran ones – and the few times Black had served some while we were in Ater. His were from another country across the Tyrian Sea, though, which I suspected to be where the Ranger's father was from. He didn't break out the cups often, which didn't surprise me given the astronomical cost of even a single pot's worth of brew. It was one of the few luxuries he indulged in, which I'd always found rather amusingly subdued of him given the sheer amount of power at his disposal. I'd brushed up on etiquette before beginning the journey to Salia and made sure all my closest companions did as well, so none of us touched the brew after it was poured for us save when Hakram sweetened his own with honey. Princess Rozala did the same, I noted with amusement, and looked somewhat discomfited that only the orc at the table shared her tastes.

"So what *is* this palace, if you don't mind my asking?" I said.

"It was the winter home of the Merovins, in the days where they still numbered many," the First Prince said. "After their line waned it became the favoured location for winter solstice balls instead, though it had not seen that use since the Great War."

"Not been in a feasting mood?" I idly said.

"There were better uses for our coin and hours," Hasenbach replied. "The latter is even harder to replace than the former, I have found."

Was that an invitation to stop wasting time? I wouldn't exactly mind. Every day spent dancing around what needed to be done was one more day tossed away as our truce with the Dead King came closer to ending. I understood the Principate had its pride and its ways, but the Principate was also on the brink of annihilation and more than slightly on fire. There was dignity and then there was idiocy.

"Ah," I said, drawl thickening, "are we to actually *talk*, then, or do we continued this pleasantly inane ritual of taking each other's measure? We were past that a year ago, as far as I'm concerned."

Malanza let out a choking sound, but my eyes were on Hasenbach. She had presence, as much as ever, but I wasn't feeling... weight off of her. The kind Name would bring to bear simply by being. Might be she was on the more discreet side of things, when it came to that, but that would be rather odd for a ruler. Temper tended to get ripples going, through, so it was worth a try. The Warden of the West studied me for a moment and then allowed for an amused half-smile. She seemed, I thought, tired. It only occurred to me then that the

golden eye shadow might not be artifice of beauty but meant instead to hide the dark circles of someone gone too long without sleep. Still, not a hint huh. I'd be unusual for a fresh Named to have that much control over their power, but then this Cordelia Hasenbach and not a farmboy with a grudge and an old sword. She'd held the reins of the greatest empire on the surface of Calernia for years before she'd even had a Name. If she had one.

"I have spent more then twelve hours preparing for this conversation, did you know?" Cordelia ruefully said. "Some of the finest minds in my service studied ever scrap of knowledge we have of you, from your favourite wine to the tactics of your earliest battles."

"And *this* is what you came up with?" I replied, brow raising as I cast a look around us.

"It all seems rather pointless, does it not?" the First Prince said. "Yet what can I possibly arrange that would bring to bear even the tenth of the wroth of an angel, or a fraction of the horrors of the Folly? We have nothing that can move if you if you do not wish to be moved, and more masterful hands than we have failed to use you. It is an unpleasant truth, this, and not one I find it easy to face."

"We have been at war almost as long as we've been speaking," I acknowledged. "And there are things about your country I despise, and likely always will. The grounds for alliance between us are not fondness or kinship."

"Yet my people are in dire need of your help," Hasenbach said. "And so as you have proposed let us *talk*."

That was as clear an offer as I'd get, I figured, so I took her up on it.

"You do not seem to be Named," I said.

Cordelia Hasenbach brought her porcelain cup to her mouth and inhaled from the brew before taking a cautious sip.

"I am not one of the Chosen, or the Damned," she confirmed, elegantly setting down her cup.

I hid my relief. It might be useful to have a heroic First Prince holding up the Accords from her side, but to be honest it wasn't worth the risks coming with the Intercessor being able to meddle with Cordelia directly. Rather less elegantly I reached for my own cup and took a sip. I didn't grimace, because I wasn't a damned savage, but it looked like Hakram had been showing wisdom in honeying his. Wasn't exactly an avid admirer of sweets, though, so even then it'd be rather like trying to put out a barn fire by throwing sharpers at it.

"Have your spies passed on recent news from the northern fronts?" Cordelia asked.

"We've only ever had rumours from Lycaonese lands," I frankly replied. "As for the rest, we know the general state of it – Cleves was reclaimed, Hainaut's last lines are on the edge of collapse – but little more."

"Prince Papenheim has used the truce to solidify the lines in Hainaut, though the Dead King has seemingly massed around six hundred thousand soldiers to break them open anew when the three months end," the First Prince

said. "Hannoven has fallen, as you likely know, and Rhenia has been scoured save for a handful of fortresses where my subjects suffer siege. Only one fortress remains standing in Twilight's Pass, and when it falls – and fall it will, given the great host waiting before it – the Principality of Bremen will follow in short order. Only Neustria will remain then, and I am told its lowlands will be effectively impossible to defend against an enemy with such overwhelming superiority in numbers."

A heartbeat of silence passed in the wake of the stark assessment the First Prince of Procer herself had just spoken of the war she was about to resume losing.

"Cleves has been reclaimed," Cordelia Hasenbach acknowledged. "But at great cost. Four Chosen died and more than twenty thousand trained soldiers. Meanwhile the Enemy's ranks swell equally with every dead, be they farmer of princess."

The fair-haired princess sat stiff-backed, but her voice was raw.

"My generals now believe that the battles for Cleves might in fact have been trap," she said. "The fighting was meant to bleed our number of professional soldiers, you see. To thin the number of Chosen and leave as much as a third of Procer's armies stranded behind enemy lines when Hainaut falls and the dead hordes close the circle behind them."

Cordelia Hasenbach raised her cup again, hand forcefully steady, and took a sip. The porcelain cup then returned to the plate with so small a sound it might as well have been silent. The reclamation of Cleves, I thought, was the closest thing the Principate had known to a victory since the Dead King had begun invading. Malanza had fought there. I looked at her now, and though her face as ashen the fact that she did not *disagree* spokes volumes. How much of a blow must it have been, to come to realize even that sole victory had been a greater defeat in the making?

"I will not lie to you, Queen Catherine," she said. "You would find out regardless, given your ties to the Eyes of the Empire and the surprising skill of your Jacks. When the truce ends, if hostilities resume the Principate will fall within five months at most."

Her frank assessment of the state of Procer's norther fronts had rung loud in the silence, but this? Coming from her, of all people? Even Hakram stilled in surprise.

"The last strongholds of Hainaut might hold for two months, perhaps," the First Prince evenly said. "After which the dead will tear into Brabant and the masses of refugees there, which will within another month make the numbers of the Dead King too large to successfully fight on the field. If the armies in Cleves intervene to prop up Hainaut we will lose Cleves, and Hainaut will then fall to a pincer regardless."

She paused.

"The Morgentor, the last fortress of Twilight's Pass, will likely hold until the other fronts have collapsed," Cordelia said, a hint of pride to her voice. "Yet

it will fall, and though the truce you bought us has allowed the southernmost of my people to flee into Alamans lands we…"

Her voice broke a little there.

"We do not retreat, Catherine Foundling," she said. "Even when we should. It is not in our nature. Some will go as ordered, but more will flock to walls and fortresses and they will die screaming defiance against the dark. It will be the end of us as a people."

I said nothing to that, for what was there to say?

"When those fronts collapse so will Procer," the blue-eyed woman told me. "Already the cracks have begun. I have stripped the western principalities bare of grain to feed the heartlands and bare of men to fill our ranks, but keeping the northern armies supplied has emptied our granaries and our treasury. Foreign trade has broken down and the principalities untouched by war grow weary of paying their taxes to Salia. Even if the Kingdom Under lifted its sanctions, we would not be able to afford their armaments. There will be starvation, and despite my best efforts shortages of steel ensure that we can hardly even keep our current armies in fighting fit."

She slowly breathed out.

"I expect that the moment Salia falls the Principate will end," she said. "Southern principalities will secede and form alliances with each other and abroad, throwing the rest of us to the dogs. To be frank, I'd expect Ariel of Arans to offer to pay you fealty for protection before it even came to that – and neither Bayeux nor Orne would be far behind."

Cordelia Hasenbach met my eye squarely.

"You must understand, now, that I do not have a single thing to threaten you with," she quietly said. "I have no armies to send forth, no coin to cajole or coerce with and my alliances are weaker than yours. Besides, those allies I do have would not war on you for my sake, for you have them bound by debt and respect. I have through steel and insult ended any inclination between us that could now be called on, much less between our respective peoples."

The thing was, there was a part of me that was savouring the words. The same part that remembered my every desperate plea to this same woman to call off her armies and rapacious princes. That remembered every spurned offer of peace, every sentence of scathing dismissal and barely-veiled contempt. She'd been so godsdamned *arrogant*, telling me she could choose the fate of Callow because she had the swords and the righteousness and that I should just go into exile like a good little thug after shutting my mouth and abdicating. And now she needed me. They all did, her entire alliance and the heroes behind them too. Even the Grey Pilgrim had good as admitted to it. They had sneered and spat and tried to kill me, and now I *fucking had them*. Cordelia Hasenbach had laid out before me the death of her nation and her people, and yet I could not help but think that they'd brought this all on themselves. That if they'd left Callow alone, that if they'd let me fix it instead of hounding me every step for their own hungry purposes, they wouldn't be tumbling down the cliff right now.

Then, to my surprise, she pushed back her seat and rose. Not well, in opposition to the understated elegance of her every other movement. It was clear her leg had been broken and not finished healing. The pain had her lips thinning as Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer and Warden of the West, knelt before me.

"I have a responsibility," Cordelia said, "to the people of the Principate. To rule, to guide and to protect. To ease their worst inclinations and spur their finest ones. I have failed them in this."

She was proud, Hasenbach. Not the kind of person something like this would come easily to. Not someone to do it unless she believed it to be necessary. Rozala was halfway to her feet, protesting her ruler kneeling before a foreign queen, but neither of us paid her attention.

"I have no right to ask grace of you now, and no might to compel it," the First Prince said. "So I can only beg that you act as I did not, and help those I cannot."

That I'd savoured this, for even a moment, tasted like ashes in my mouth. Because it wasn't her or her reign she was begging for. It was her people. And while I might not be leading a crusade into Procer, I could not deny it felt poisonous that I could be in this moment and begged at instead of begging. Not because I enjoyed the helplessness of it, but because I'd never liked to think of myself as someone who would need to be implored to save lives.

"Get up," I said, voice rough. "Enough. There was no need for this."

I pushed back my own chair, rising to my feet, and the eyes of both Malanza and Brother Simon went to me. Watching, weighing.

"Get up, Hasenbach," I said. "You and I are going for a walk."

# Chapter 78

# Trenchant

> "The great candour in ruling Praes is that, if you make a mistake, assassination attempts will follow. Unfortunately if you do not make a mistake assassination attempts will also follow, which admittedly makes it difficult to tell if a mistake was in fact made."
>
> Dread Emperor Pernicious, the Imperiled

There were protests, though only from Hasenbach's side as by now mine knew better, but those words might as well have been wind for the weight they carried. They were more out of principle than conviction anyway, I suspected: Princess Rozala dawn well knew that if I was moved to violence little short of a band of heroes could put me down. Spite and impulse would only carry me so far, though, so I did not enter the labyrinth of luxury that awaited outside the small hall. A knuckle rapped against the glass doors along with a sliver of Night slithering through the lock had them popping open without trouble, and beyond lay a pretty little balcony overlooking a winter garden. My boots sounded crisply against the thin layer of snow as I walked out into the cold, knowing the First Prince would not be far behind me. The coolness of the air was pleasant against my face, and as this little corner was windless the cold felt rather mild – more like a refreshing swim in the Silver Lake than winter's hard bite.

Hasenbach followed along, her limp barely noticeable on the move, and I noted she seemed rather unmoved by the cold. *Lycaonese*, I reminded myself. Compared to the brutal winters of her far northern home, this must hardly be noticeable at all. The railing was an elegant thing of stone, sculpted to seem like vines and the detail of the work was only made more pleasant to the eye by the touch of frost. Disdaining the stone benches set in little alcoves to the sides of the doors, I came to lean against it and cast a curious look down into the garden.

"I'm surprised you didn't get that leg fixed," I said.

"I did," Cordelia Hasenbach replied, slowly moving to stand by me.

She was too well-bred to lean against a snow-dusted railing while wearing a nice dress, apparently, or maybe just to do so in front of a foreign ruler. Regardless, standing that ramrod straight must be Hells on her leg.

"Not mage-healing, though that's hardly surprising," I said, eyeing the way she was standing. "Priest work, then. They'll have fixed the bone and flesh but it'll still feel raw for a few more days. Hasn't the Grey Pilgrim offered to see to it? He's a notch above what I've seen even the finest priest-healers do."

"I will not accept so much as the dust of a copper more from the Peregrine than I must," the blue-eyed woman said, tone frosty.

I almost asked to the source of that open enmity, given that Tariq might have been after my neck for a while but he'd been standing in Cordelia's corner for as long as I'd known him, but it didn't take much digging to put the finger on it by myself. In order to capture Black, the Pilgrim had seeded a plague in a town by the shores of Lake Artoise – it'd taken a full legion detachment, true, but that entire town too. Wiping out Proceran towns was one thing when a villain did it, but it must have cut to the bone coming from a servant of Above. Especially one it was essentially diplomatically impossible to touch at the moment.

"Fair enough," I conceded.

"I could ask the same of yours," the First Prince of Procer said. "I am told you are high in the council of dark powers. Such a boon would be but a small favour, no?"

"If I'd paid harsher prices for my first mistakes, I might have better learned from them," I said. "There's nothing free, not even for villains. Some costs are just subtler than others."

"Then I shudder to think what the likes of the Hidden Horror have paid," Cordelia said.

I breathed out, itching for the pipe I'd not thought to bring. Neither parade nor tea were well-matched to wakeleaf, at least not when paired with the presence of the First Prince of Procer.

"All of Sephirah, for one," I said. "And quiet things too, I'd imagine. After all a dead thing cannot heal, cannot grow. Every wound on his power forever remains."

The Lycaonese princess' face was cool as she studied me, though more distant than adverse.

"Sephirah?" she asked.

"What the Kingdom of the Dead was called, before ruin took it," I said. "Keter was the greatest of its cities and the Dead King himself its last king."

"There are legends among my people," Cordelia acknowledged, "though they speak not of this Sephirah but instead of the Thirteen Kings and the Time of Wolves. You are well-learned in the beginnings of the Enemy, it seems. Does the Tower share such dangerous lore freely?"

"I learned it in Arcadia," I replied, "walking the echoes of that dead realm. I learned much, during my march to Keter."

"Your Jacks have seeded rumours with skill as to the purpose of that journey," Cordelia said, and it was not a compliment. "Selfless of you, to seek to break the Tower's schemes even if you failed."

I drummed my fingers against the snowy railing, eyes trailing the winding circles of primroses and jasmines filled with purple pansies. The patterns were oddly soothing to look at.

"Hannoven," I said. "Cleves and Hainaut. That was my offer. I intended to warn you some months in advance, so that you could evacuate the principalities."

"And so the gathering armies of the Tenth Crusade hurried north instead of trying your borders again," she said, tone mild.

"The entire point of the exercise," I admitted. "I didn't quite grasp what it was I was dealing with, not yet. The entire journey was a trap anyway. Malicia had been in talks with Keter for months, I was being used to start a bidding war."

"With lives and lands in my charge as the currency," Hasenbach coldly said.

"The counter-offer was the entire northern third of Procer and Callow having to claim the eastern border principalities on its own," I said. "I had Malicia's host bodies assassinated – twice – but it wasn't enough."

"And do you expect that excuses the rest?" the First Prince said, eyes hard.

"Are you sure you want to start a conversation with *me* about lives and lands being used as currency, Cordelia Hasenbach?" I replied, lips quirking into a smile just as hard as her gaze.

"It was a monstrous thing, what you set out to do," Hasenbach replied, unmoved.

She wasn't mincing her words, and I could respect the honesty of it at least. Coming from the woman who'd put me in the corner where I'd begun to take hard measures, though, that only went so far.

"Monstrous?" I mused. "I suppose it was. But then so was your refusal to entertain peace even on egregiously favourable terms when I repeatedly offered it. Not even for moral reasons, but simply because it was *politically inconvenient* for you. Does my wearing a black cloak somehow make my atrocities worse than yours? As I recall, only one of us actually went through with it and it's not the villain."

Her body was tightly wound as a spring, though not as a warrior's would be – it was the mark of emotions mastered I was looking at, not violence in the making.

"I do not say this to create strife between us," Hasenbach said, voice forcefully calm. "Yet you must understand that the truth you tried to *barter away* part of the Principate nary a year ago is not to be taken lightly."

Probably shouldn't tell her I'd once tried to bribe Rumena into treachery with another chunk of it then, even if it'd been a jest.

"I didn't expect it would be," I frankly replied. "But I'd rather you hear it from me than have it revealed as some dark secret."

As for Praes' involvement in the coup that'd nearly unseated and killer her, what the Circle of Thorns had told her was factually correct: Scribe had helped shape the early plot but later set out to crush Malicia's continuation of it at the order of the Carrion Lord. I saw no need to tell her more than that, especially not while my own teacher was still being kept in the dark.

"So now that we're being all nice and honest," I said, "anything you'd care to tell me?"

We could have kept on arguing about this, I knew and so did she, but there was no gain in it for either of us. I very much doubted she'd forgive what I had admitted to anytime soon, much less forget, but then I wasn't interested in the *forgiveness* of Cordelia Hasenbach. That she was worthy of admiration in some ways did not mean I no longer remembered why it had come to this. Me with my hands ever redder, Procer dancing ever closer to annihilation. None of it was truly behind us, and perhaps never would be, but neither of us were inclined to chase the stag off the cliff. And so we moved on, however grudgingly. Now the boot was on the other foot, though, and it was time for her to unwrap her own dirty little secrets – some of which I knew, and more that I suspected.

"I funded the Truebloods, through intermediaries," Cordelia reluctantly said. "High Lady Tasia Sahelian in particular, as the Empress' foremost rival."

It'd been a long time since I'd been so utterly taken by surprise. It made sense, I thought. Procer was wealthy, Praes infamously prone to backstabbing its way into civil wars and there was harsh irony in giving Malicia a taste of her own medicine after the way she'd meddled in the Proceran civil war. My fingers clenched hard against the stone, though, not because of any of that. It was a smaller, slighter branch splitting from what I'd just been told.

"You bankrolled the Doom of Liesse," I said, tone perfectly mild.

"Not knowingly, or directly," she said. "Yet that is not untrue."

I could kill her in the blink of an eye, I thought. No need for anything elegant or skillful, I could just pour so much Night in her body that the skin sloughed off and the bones melted and *her head fucking popped off*. Akua Sahelian had been the architect of that folly, and she would even that ledger in time. So would Dread Empress Malicia, for having allowed the madness and even helped it along. But now it seemed that even the Warden of the West had put coin to the butchery of my people, *good Proceran silver* turned into a wound on the south that'd last century and a city so broken that not even being the heart of a newborn Court had mended its ruin. She'd not known. It did not absolve her, but she had not known. Hasenbach stirred, and I knew deep as I knew my own breath that if she opened her mouth to compared her funding the Folly to a pact I'd never made with Keter, Sve Noc bless my hand if she did I would rip out her fucking tongue and she could crawl on her knees to Tariq to have it put back on.

"You already know of my involvement in the Liesse Rebellion, I take it," she said.

I breathed out slowly and mastered myself. Rage I could allow myself to feel later, if I decided it was still warranted. But I'd come dangerously close to allowing my control to slip, just then. It genuinely might have, in other circumstances, which was why this conversation was needed in the first place. I would have been much, much worse to hear it after an insulting Proceran blunder and revealed by the Tyrant's cruelly taunting voice.

"I am," I said. "Your intentions in that I will not speak to, yet though that rebellion might have had your coin and your puppet-candidate to kingship it was not fought for you purposes. I'll call it a clean slate."

Duke Gaston of Liesse might have been the figurehead all gathered around, but it'd been the Countess of Marchford and the Lone Swordsman who'd done the bloody work of the uprising. Neither had been in the First Prince's service, or all that well inclined towards her. Gaston Caen had been a pretext, not a motive, and regardless none if it would have come to pass if I'd not spared William's life in Summerholm that fateful night. Still, for all I would not quibble over the Liesse Rebellion I was less pleased about what Cordelia *was* keeping silence over.

"Once silent is reluctance, or mistake," I said. "Twice is a lie of omission."

"I own an empire's worth of secrets, Black Queen," the First Prince said. "And so very few of them are fair to behold."

Which might just be true but was no more an answer for it.

"Lake Artoise," I flatly said.

"A weapon to wield against the Enemy," Hasenbach reluctantly. "Should all else fail."

My eyes narrowed. It'd been in the lake, what she was talking about, because even though Vivienne's people had failed to penetrate Proceran operations there they'd at least confirmed there'd been ships and dredging involved. The Order of the Red Lion as well, and in numbers too great for them to be a mere scrying relay. But if she had in her hands a weapon that could give the Dead King pause – which it actually wouldn't, from what I knew of the King of Death, but that was besides the point – then Procer was not in so dire a situation as she'd implied. *Unless it's not functional*, I thought. *Unless she needs to build something or arrange rituals.*

"There's consequences to using armaments like those," I said. "And I don't mean in a moral sense, either. High stakes and a single point of failure are to Named like honey to flies. Heroes moreso than villains, but even they get to have the wind in their sails sometimes."

"It is not something I would use lightly," the First Prince said. "Or at all, if I can avoid it."

"But you won't burn it until the Dead King's been driven back either," I grunted. "You've read the Accords, Hasenbach. Ensuring no one ever has their hands on a lever that opens a Greater Breach of brutalizes the souls of an entire city is exactly what they're *for*."

"And should the Liesse Accords be signed and enforced, I will gladly let you destroy every last trace of that weapon," the blonde princess replied. "Yet until Keter has been sealed or the Dead King destroyed, I cannot justify tossing away the sole tool at my disposal that could possibly turn the tide."

Frustration spiked in me, but she was not being unreasonable. I'd been raised in the shade of a royal palace built from stones taken from a flying fortress brought down, taught from the moment I'd had a Name that massive rituals and grand artefacts always failed in the end, and still I'd sided with Malicia near the end of the Folly. The dead were already dead, I'd thought, and if from that tragedy peace could be forged then I'd shoulder the hatred of my own people and do what I must. It would have been, I now recognize, a terrible mistake. My father's handling of the situation remained singularly botched but given the Intercessor's involvement that was perhaps not entirely his fault. Cordelia Hasenbach was not Named, did not come from a people who held them in high esteem or deeply studied their lore. And while she might have matched wits with Malicia for years with more than a few successes to her name, it had been a very different sort of game. I could not be angry at her making a mistake I had also made while laden with advantages she was not.

"Having a weapon like that carries risks in ways you have not been taught to understand," I said, forcing patience. "Especially in a situation thick with Named, like any war with Keter will be. This isn't won with a flying fortress, Hasenbach, it's won with a coalition binding the east and west."

"And I will do everything in my power to see that coalition assembled and bound by treaties," the First Prince said. "Yet I cannot disarm when those alliances are still wind, no ink has touched the parchment for treaties and the Dead mass to the north in numbers beyond reason."

"When Callow joins the Grand Alliance," I said, "and the Accords begin accruing signatories; will you then agree to torching whatever the Hells you dredged up?"

I'd be willing to cough up the goblinfire myself, if that was what it took. And still she hesitated.

"Merciless Gods," I said. "What is it that you even got your hands on? Tell me it's not a Hell Egg, Hasenbach. It'd be utter lunacy to send a demon after the great mage ever born to Calernia, dead or not."

"It is not," the blue-eyed royal stiffly replied. "I will speak no more to the nature of it, save that it holds no truck with Below."

It was probably an angel, then, I grimly thought. Some not-corpse like the one the Lone Swordsman had leaned on in Liesse to bring down Contrition, and later Diabolist to create her gate-maker. The Choirs were forever fixed, the way Masego told it, so there could be no such thing as an angel's corpse – or at least there'd been no real precedent for it, and not for lack of Praesi trying – but one's death would still leave marks. And something to use, if you knew how. It'd still need a hero though, I suspected, or at least a massive number of priests capable of using Light. One was easier for the First Prince of Procer to

get her hands on, especially now that the House of Light's leadership had been discredited and was likely undergoing a through purge. Who would dare argue with Hasenbach now, if she gave priests orders? *I need to speak with Masego*, I grimly thought. I wasn't even sure what such a weapon would do, practically speaking. Would the Choir it had belonged to change the effect? Contrition had been the writ of corpse and Named both, when the Hashmallim were called down at First Liesse.

So what would happen if the corpse was from one of the Ophanim or the Seraphim? Somehow I doubted it would be as simple as calling down a great storm of Light on the enemy. This was a mistake, no matter how I looked at it, but then if there was one thing that today had made very clear it was that Cordelia Hasenbach was afraid. She was afraid enough for the Principate that she'd knelt to a woman she considered a brutal murderous warlord to beg for help, and a few moments of private conversation on a balcony weren't going to magically fix this. It was frustrating as Hells, considering that not so long ago she'd been on her knees begging for my help, but throwing around ultimatums on the first day of talks wasn't going to accomplish anything – save maybe mark me as exactly the kind of tyrant they'd all feared I would be. And still part of me was quietly furious at the notion that I'd have to allow a mistake to keep going right under my eyes because it would be too heavy-handed of me to force the issue. It was not a coincidence, I'd admit, that so much of Black's teachings still resonated with me.

No matter what Vivienne said, Below was always going to be the banner I raised. There wasn't enough give in me for it to be any other way. If I couldn't push without blowing on the house of cards that the Accords still was, then I'd have to try pulling instead. Time to start showing the cards I'd been hiding up my sleeve.

"You don't believe we can win this war conventionally," I said. "Yet we can, Hasenbach. I have made pact with the Kingdom Under."

"The resumption of arms sales will help, though Procer will need to borrow heavily to afford them," the First Prince acknowledged.

"That's part of it," I said. "More practical is that I have oaths the Kingdom Under will launch offensives on every front to seize all underground territory of the Dead King if a sufficient force is gathered to war against him above."

Cordelia Hasenbach went still.

"In addition," I continued, "arrangements have been made as to the supply of armaments and foodstuffs. Any force engaged in warfare against Keter will see steel provided at two tenths of the usual price, and foodstuffs at cost. Loans offers will be extended to the Principate, though I'm afraid they refused to do the same for the Dominion. Too likely to be unable to repay, I'm told."

"You do not jest," the First Prince croaked, sounding dry-mouthed.

"I wouldn't take the loans, they offer pretty cutthroat terms," I said. "We might be able to strongarm Mercantis instead, if the entire coalition brings

pressure. They live and die on trade, and we have everybody but the League at the table."

"The dwarves would use us as their own fantassins," Cordelia realized, eyes narrowing. "Tying down the forces of the Hidden Horror above-ground as they strike below. Only we would emerge in their debt instead of owed."

I didn't deny it, as it was essentially true.

"If their advance is successful all the way to Keter, a siege of the city becomes feasible," I told her. "Our supply lines would be underground and untouchable, so long as we have the coin. I'd we willing to endorse the creation of a Grand Alliance treasury for the duration of the war against the Dead King, and to provide grain for your principalities from Callow granaries on loan – with interest on the value of the goods, I'm not a saint."

"The Kingdom Under would not make such offers without a prince, Black Queen," the blue-eyed princess said. "What did you offer in return?"

"The Everdark," I said.

The bluntness of the answer took her aback.

"I believed you to be allied with the drow," the First Prince said, grown wary.

"I am," I said. "This was done in the name of their goddesses, the bargain struck with the dwarf Named known as the Herald of the Deeps."

"They have submitted to the Kingdom Under?" Cordelia asked.

I almost laughed at that.

"No, they have not," I replied, smiling thinly. "The Everdark is *empty*."

Cordelia Hasenbach was not slow of wits, and so she understood the implication quick enough.

"They are marching against the Kingdom of the Dead," she said, almost breathlessly.

"All of them," I agreed. "The entire Empire Ever Dark is marching on the Dead King's back, led by Sve Noc themselves, and I believe he still has *no idea*."

# Chapter 79

# Hitch

> "The crocodiles in the pit ate the condemned too quickly when starved and only nibbled when well-fed, which is why we bespelled them to be always be hungry for a little more. Thankfully they do not wear clothes, and so can still be told apart from the rest of my court."
>
> Dread Emperor Perfidious

The conversation did not truly resume after we returned inside.

Hasenbach was burning with the need to reassess the situation, I caught, to summon her advisors and generals and reconsider where Procer stood after the several revelations I'd dropped onto her lap. It drastically changed her nation's situation going into the negotiations, I knew that very well. Though the First Prince still needed the Grand Alliance as a whole I'd likely gone from an important ally to the single most important foreign relation of the Principate. There was no point in further kicking the hornet's nest by trying to get anything out of her before she was certain of where she stood, not that I minded. Time was on my side as much as it was on any mortal's: what I brought to the table only became more valuable the closer to the end of truce we came. Naturally, before we left the balcony I'd made it clear to Hasenbach that the affairs of the Firstborn were not to be spoken of even with her closest advisors. Sve Noc kept me out of arcane eyes and ears, but loose lips were harder to ward against and there was no doubt that Procer was currently a barrel afflicted by an army's worth of leaks. That she did not argue the matter was a sign, to my eye, that she correctly understood the stakes involved.

I got dark looks from Malanza and Brother Simon as the talks effectively stalled after we limped back to warmth and excuses were soon made for the Procerans to depart. From their point of view, I'd gone outside with the Warden of the West after she humiliated herself at my feet and returned her both troubled and boiling with the urge to leave. They might be assuming threats had been involved, which admittedly given our respective positions would be child's play to hand out. Foolish in the long view, of course, but then my people

were not known to be fond of anything long save for prices. Cordelia had not willfully tugged at my conscience without reason: it was the closest thing she had to leverage on me at the moment. She'd snapped her pride over her knee to try to begin evening the scales between the two of us, which I supposed was laudable. It didn't, of course. Even the scales, or make me fonder of her on a personal level. She wasn't my friend, she'd not somehow ceased to be the same woman who'd thrown my people to the deeps out of convenience. But that did not change the necessity of fighting back the Dead King or the perils lurking in overplaying my hand while it was still the strongest at the table. They were separate matters, and I need not like the woman to work with her.

Besides, in some ways I genuinely respected her. Often that was better than liking someone, when it came to making bargains: fondness waxed and waned, character tended to be more stable a foundation for agreements. We stayed in the hall after the three Procerans departed, Hakram and Vivienne rising as Hasenbach departed the way etiquette dictated while I did not. I wasted no time in weaving a ward of Night after they left, as I had no intention of being eavesdropped upon by the inevitable spies that'd be waiting with their ear pressed against the door.

"Whatever Hasenbach has dredged up, she can't use it yet," I bluntly told them. "It's not a Hell Egg, unless she's a much better liar than I thought and surprisingly shirt-sighted to boot. I'm leaning towards the remains of an angel at the moment."

"William needed forty-nine hours to call Contrition, but little more than that," Vivienne noted. "Though the Choir whispered many secrets to him in his dreams he did not share, and I have only the shallowest knowledge of such matters."

It was nice to see that green Named on both sides of the fence ended up mostly fumbling their way through the dark. If the Heavens had handed out some sort of manual to their champions while Below ate dust it'd be deeply unfair. On the other hand, I grimly thought, I'd not be all that surprised in such a situation to hear that Below did hand out a manual but some villain had burned all the copies to hinder the competition. I had, after all, yet to encounter a single villain who put stock in the notion of fair play.

"The Lone Swordsman was a hero in Contrition's service, treading the remains of one of their own and bringing them forth," Hakram pointed out. "It was an alignment threefold, pouring out after years of heroes being suppressed by the Carrion Lord. It seems unlikely the Principate will benefit from such factors in its own attempts at mastery."

"Hero is the heart of the matter here," I said. "The First Prince either needs one of those taking orders from her or a legion's worth of priests to make anything out of those – still speculative, so let's not get ahead of ourselves – remains."

"Would it not be, in a sense, an angel's corpse?" Vivienne suddenly asked.

I cocked my head to the side, unsure of where she was headed with this. Hakram let out a rumbling noise.

"The Dead King is the greatest necromancer that ever lived," Adjutant reminded me.

I sucked in a lip, but after a moment shook my head.

"The water in Lake Henghest was blessed and that was just from *touching* the remains," I said. "Light tends to screw with magic, anyway, and this is about as consecrated as a corpse can get. Necromancy shouldn't be able to raise it."

A beat passed.

"We'll still ask Masego just in case," I added.

"Diabolist as well," Vivienne calmly suggested. "Her knowledge of such lore might be deeper than even Zeze's."

I shot her an assessing look. It'd always been a given I would talk with Akua about this – as Vivienne had intimated, if anyone would know about angel necromancy it would be Wolof's most terrible golden child – but I'd not wanted to rub it in her face. My successor's expression was hard to read, leaving me few hints as to her thoughts. Was this an oblique way to tell me I need not walk on eggshells when it came to Akua Sahelian, or simple blunt pragmatism? Something to mull over later.

"It's a liability even if it can't be raised," Hakram gravelled. "Bringing that into a battle with the Hidden Horror is like wading into a goblin feast-night with pockets full of munitions. It can only end one way."

Most Named would balk at being compared to goblins no matter whose banner they flew, but it was rather heartwarming to imagine the likes of the Pilgrim consigned to the fate of metaphorical goblinry.

"The Dead King's one looming trouble, but the Tyrant's another," Vivienne darkly said. "That man would strike the match to the whole world's pyre just for a laugh, Cat, and he's not nearly as neutered as you think."

"His armies really are headed south," I told her, "you told me as much yourself and the Eyes confirmed independently. The League's fallen behind the Hierarch and Kairos with him, but not the point of utter idiocy: they're not going to backstab a continent-wide alliance in the middle of throwing down with Keter. Not even for a few southern principalities. They'll know damn well that if we lose they're screwed too and if we win we'll return it all a hundredfold."

Frankly, if I were an utterly amoral monster with the intention to expand and in charge of the League's political decisions, I'd promptly sign the Accords to avoid falling on the wrong side of the mutual defence clause against non-signatories and then simply *wait*. Patience would mean the Grand Alliance's armies bleeding against Keter, and when those armies all went home *then* I'd strike at southern Procer. Riding to the Principate's defence again would be wildly unpopular with all its allies, after a brutal grind against the dead up north, which would limit the effectiveness of the treaties. If the League then

gobbled only limited territories, like Tenerife and Salamans, there might be heavy pressure on Procer to then accept a peace should offer be extended.

"That only means that the horse he's riding is not longer the League," Vivienne said, eyes sharp. "It might be the Hierarch, or the Dead King or a dozen other flavours of madness. We don't *know*, which is half the trouble with that one."

"His play here is to take a swing at the White Knight," I said. "Has to be, he had the man summoned by treaty just so he could stand trial. And Hierarch could make that troublesome, I suppose, but if he does then he's signing his own death warrant – decapitating a hero is breaking the truce, Vivs. Especially if it's the Sword of Judgement. They do that, neither Hierarch nor Tyrant walk out of Salia alive. Not with the kind of power that's gathered here."

"There'd be legal grounds for an execution, considering he's an Ashuran hero that fought in an internal League war and presumably took likves," Hakram said. "And even a public attempt would stir up trouble among the heroes when it's pointed out to be lawful under the Accords."

Which I did not doubt for a moment Kairos Theodosian would. By now full copies of the text had been made available to all delegations, even the League's, so there was no doubt he'd either read or had someone read them.

"More likely he wants to strike at Judgement through the White Knight, which I'll lose no sleep over," I said. "I'll give fair warning to all involved but besides that it's no trouble of mine. I owe no debt to any Choir, save that which would be paid in steel."

Hanno was personable enough and seemed to think well of the Seraphim, but I'd weep no tears for the Choir of Judgement getting a taste of its own medicine even if that lesson came by madman's hands. Either the angels would lose a few feathers or either of the two villains at the head the League would get a taste of smiting. I couldn't see a losing proposition in that for either Callow, the Accords or even myself.

"The Tyrant of Helike is nearing the end of his thread," Hakram said. "He's burned too many bridges, we all saw that much at the Graveyard. If not for the Dead King's more pressing threat, half of Calernia would already have banded together to crush him. His actions have isolated the Free Cities diplomatically as long as he lives and his defeats mean he's losing prestige within their ruling structure. Given the informality of his pre-eminence among the League, that could mean the waning of his influence."

I worried my lip.

"He's cornered, you're saying," I slowly said.

Which was not a good thing, in a villain of Kairos Theodosian's calibre. Best to kill him with a clean, quick stroke than let him scheme with desperation moving the hand.

"Or exactly where he intended to be from the beginning," Vivienne said. "When a skilled enemy makes an obvious mistake, it is no such thing."

That last part was a quote from the *Strategoi*, as I recalled, which was an amusing piece of irony considering it was believed to have been written by Theodosius the Unconquered.

"Either way we should share our concerns with the Grand Alliance and have some of our people look into whatever it is he's up to," I mused. "Fair enough. Best not to let him make a mess even if it's not in our backyard, strictly speaking."

I leaned back into my seat, glancing at the cup of cooled tea I'd barely touched. Yeah, I wasn't going to force myself to drink that even if it came across as rude and Hakram had somehow tricked himself into finishing his own. Still, while the Tyrant remained a threat he was no longer the most pressing of my concerns. The First Prince's ruinous little project weighed deeper on my mind, because it felt like a ready-made pivot in someone's story – and not one of my making, which was even more worrisome.

"Double down on efforts to unearth what it is the First Prince dredged, and where it's headed," I ordered Vivienne. "Have your people look for large concentrations of priests as well."

I paused.

"Concentrate your efforts on Lyonis and Brabant, for that last part," I added. "Maybe Brus as well, if you can spare the people."

As far as I was concerned Cordelia Hasenbach was acting foolishly by meddling with doomsday weapons, but that did not make her a fool. She'd know that gathering priests in great numbers close to the northern fronts would bring a lot less scrutiny than doing the same in the south. Especially in Brabant as it was, by all reports, drowning in a tide of desperate refugees who could certainly use some food and healing. If the weapon could be moved, and for it to be of practical use against the Dead King it would have be, then if we found where it was headed we could double back from there. Going at this from the other way might finally allow us a peek through the veil of secrecy that'd surrounded this entire affair. I sighed, then cracked my shoulders.

"Hakram, I don't suppose you could send for a change of clothes?" I asked.

I'd lost the habit of plate, and the weight of the metal did no favours to my leg even if I could not feel it at the moment. The sooner I was back in cloak and leathers the better. Might add a light coat of mail, though, because really there was never a reason *not* to wear armour if you were wearing clothes at all. I'd not deny that my preferences in clothing had been shaped some by the unfortunately high amount of times I'd been stabbed in my life.

"They are already on their way," Adjutant replied, because he was a prince among men and always would be.

"Good," I said. "Well, folks, the talks begin in earnest tomorrow. Let's see if we're ready for them."

—

I wasn't sneaking out of Salia, not exactly.

That would imply that a pack of spies wouldn't have noticed me saddling Zombie and leave the palace with the slight escort of three knights in dark cloaks, or that I would have hidden my departure from my companions. But I'd not made it clear where I was headed for either and pretty much let the assumption that I would be going back to our camp stick. Hakram could read me like a book, so he knew there was more to it than I'd said. He also trusted me same as I trusted him, though, so he didn't ask. I doubted that my having conversations with the White Knight would cause much of a scandal if it came out – even radicals under the Heavens would think twice before claiming I could corrupt the Sword of Judgement – but it'd certainly raise eyebrows, and very much attract attention. I'd rather not have to deal with the Pilgrim coincidentally coming by for a chat, or someone's admirably optimistic attempt to eavesdrop through arcane means, so it'd stay quiet for now. Though this was not casual, could not be given who we were, keeping such talks informal would allow the illusion of it to last a little longer. I'd set out early after dark, since I did genuinely intend to get some work done when I passed through camp and led out my escort at a brisk trot.

We were followed, to my utter lack of surprise. Riders kept pace at a respectful distance behind us maybe a dozen, most likely at the First Prince's behest. Though I was First Under the Night and the dark had already fallen, I was not unaware that my spilling blood in Salia would bring great complications. Even putting down some overly ambitious robber or some drunken rowdy fantassin would meant I'd killed a Proceran under truce, and for many reasons that was best avoided even if justified. No, Cordelia had likely sent those riders to serve mostly as diplomats. And maybe guides, given the gargantuan size of this damned city, but I could see to that with prayer truth be told. So long as I was willing so suffer Komena's rampant mockery of my sense of direction, anyway. *Easy not to get lost, when you fly over the streets*, I grumbled. South we rode, through the palatial streets and estates of the Lineal and then the large plazas and avenues of the markets known as *Les Vendeuses* – which were awake and swarming with people even at this hour, for the city never slept and the glow of torches and lanterns lent it all an air of the fantastical. Keeping to the broad avenues that'd been built to allow for carts, as many as four of them I'd wager, we made good time cutting through towards Merovins avenue.

From there it'd be an uncomplicated ride, straight south until we were through the low districts and the Griffon Gate. Out of curiosity I'd slowed down on my way through some of the marketplaces, taking a look at what was being peddled. The array of goods, even at the tail end of winter and while Procer was at war, was rather bewilderingly large. Ashuran silks, Levantine ceramics and even Taghreb silverworks were on display, not to mention what must have been goods from more than half of the principalities in Procer. It was no wonder I'd been taught that the Principate was near capable of sustaining itself through trade between its own princes: it was a large empire and one that lacked for little. Save perhaps for restraint, but was that not ever the way with empires?

My knights were gawking as well, which was no surprise. None of the three looked older than thirty under the hood, so none had known Callow save under either myself or Black – and under both reigns little had been traded with Procer save for arrows and insults. I'd be surprised if either had left the kingdom before this campaign. Still, it would not do to linger forever so I spurred on Zombie to a brisker pace.

It did not last long, as it happened. A smooth turn around a counting house brought us in front of an open shop from which no less than four signs had been hung, all painted with bright red letters. Unlike the rest of the signs I'd seen in this city, the words on this one were in Lower Miezan instead of Chantant or Tolesian. *Bundles Of Wakeleaf, So Cheap It's Almost Crime*. *Vale Summer Wine, So Many Bottles You Can't Drink Them All. We Did Not Steal The Wakeleaf, We Swear, That Would Be A Crime. I Guess You Could Drink Them All, If You Are A Drunk*. With morbid curiosity I led Zombie closer to have a better look, and to my mild surprise there did seem to be a genuine stock of neatly wakeleaf bundles. And a few crates of wine, one of which had been opened and revealed the impurities-riddled glass bottles that were typical of my homeland. I gesture for my knights to rein in their horses and approached one of the hanging signs, touching the K at the end of 'drunk'. Red wetness marred my gloves, the paint hadn't even had time to dry yet.

An indignant hissing sound came from the shopfront, as a surprisingly tall gargoyle in a too-large dress and a merchant's hat pointed a half-empty sleeve at me accusingly. The insides of the dress moved, so I drew it up with the tip of my staff and found another gargoyle down there, who looked at me with a scandalized gasp. Another one was standing on its shoulders, and I suspected another one on its own. I withdrew my staff with a sigh, letting the dress's hem drop. So the Tyrant wanted to have a talk, looked like.

"Stay here," I ordered my knights. "It shouldn't be long."

I dismounted, landing on the stone with a wince, and paused before entering. I grabbed a bottle from the crate, and then a few bundles of wakeleaf, and only then went to treat with Kairos Theodosian.

I had a feeling I'd need them.

# Chapter 80

# Descant

> "My dear High Lords, there is nothing to fear. We might be losing the war against Callow yet there is an obvious remedy to this: this morning, I declared war on Ashur. I will be surrendering unconditionally as soon as they acknowledge this, which ought to take care of our Callowan troubles."
>
> Dread Emperor Irritant I, the Oddly Successful

The scent was cloying, heavy against the roof of my mouth before I even stepped into the room.

The incense was the heaviest of the tastes, but there were subtler scents threaded along: sage and cedar, as well as the faint bloom of flowers. The burners from which it all came were spread around the room haphazardly, tended to by chittering gargoyles, and the glow cast by the glass lanterns hanging from the ceiling played shadows along the thick trails of scented smoke rising up. Kairos Theodosian lounged on a seat that was little more than a large bowl of bronze filled with thick red cushions, though as always he'd found a way to have it incrusted with jewels and covered with sculpted bas-reliefs. The Tyrant of Helike greeted me with an indolently raised hand, his brocaded robes of gold and scarlet folded with careful precision so that they would almost hide the length of his arm prone to trembling. Though he'd been thin and sickly for as long as I'd known him, Kairos' narrow face seemed to have shed the last of its softness: his brown curls hung low on a forehead whose skin looked pulled taut over bone. His good eye, the brown one, moved around lazily as if it could not quite focus on anything. The other one, the red of fresh blood and always wetly shining, almost seemed to have grown. As if the crimson had grown to devour more of the Tyrant's face as the rest of him pulled back.

"Welcome, friend," Kairos Theodosian cheerfully greeted me, throwing in an exaggerated wink. "Welcome to my humble shop. You'll not regret visiting, for our prices are princely and our merchandise most definitely acquired through at least partially legal means. Probably."

The cheerfulness was nothing new, from this one, but for once it did not entirely succeed at covering something had grown... feverish in the villain. I'd thought more than once that the Tyrant's position would collapse if he was dealt a grave enough defeat, but now I was wondering if perhaps defeat might not cause in him troubles rather more visceral. My staff rasped against the wooden floorboard as I limped in, and I found a seat awaiting me on my side side of the low table between us. Mine was less a nest of cushions and more along the lines of my favourite seat, the one I'd had creatively acquired from Arcadia. Padded, with heavy armrests. On the low table the sight of a strange game being toyed with caught my eye: three bowls filled with differing numbers of smooth pebbles had been put down, as well as a handful more on the surface of the table itself. Kairos had been moving a few around as I entered. The game did feel vaguely familiar to my eye, though it clearly wasn't mancala. Not enough seeds or pits for them to be sown in.

"Tired of shatranj?" I asked.

"I grew curious, after reading the treatise," Kairos mused. "It is a game meant for three, in truth, but trying my hand at the play was interesting regardless. He's a barren little thing, your Adjutant, but I'll not deny he is brilliant in his own way."

Ah, was that were that was from? I'd seen Hakram fiddling with the game once or twice, for it was of his own making, and Robber had once told me the orc had been doing so since before he first came to the War College. I mostly remembered being vaguely irritated that the pot of stones everybody could steal from was called 'Callow', accurate as it was to the game's implicit metaphor.

"Tower-raising, isn't it?" I frowned. "I didn't know he'd finished the treatise, much less made it public."

"It has become rather popular at your royal court, I am told," the Tyrant said. "And has even come somewhat in fashion as a curiosity in Ater."

I eased myself into my seat unceremoniously. Amusing as Kairos' petty schemes could be on occasion, passing amusements hardly made up for the nuisance he was in so many ways. I wouldn't pick a fight with him without a good reason, of course: so far he'd not aimed his plots at Callow itself, only at my soldiers in Iserre. Yet neither would I forget he'd made bargains with the Dead King and the Bard, in full knowledge of what they might lead to for this continent.

"What do you want, Tyrant?" I asked. "I haven't got all night."

"That's hardly a way to talk to a shopkeeper," the ruling king of Helike solemnly told me. "I'd be well within my rights to raise my prices for such disrespect."

I broke the wax over the bottle in my hand and took a sniff at the contents. It did smell like genuine Vale summer wine, to my surprise. A swallow confirmed as much.

"You just called my right hand a barren little thing," I said. "And likely meant it, given the curse of truth laid on your tongue. I have limited patience

for your games, and other business to see to tonight. Speak or I'll leave and wash my hands of this."

"You're free to go, if that is what you truly wish," the Tyrant shrugged, red eye pulsing.

It might be safer to do so, I thought. With no one to speak to and a continent of close doors facing him, there were not many ways for the Tyrant of Helike to slither his was back into a story that'd keep him from sinking into a swamp of his own making. Speaking with the people of most influence in Salia might do the trick, though, or at least allow him opportunity through talking to cajole the winds of fate back to his sail. From that perspective, the best decision here was to rise and leave without another word. On the other hand, that also left Kairos Theodosian with precious little to lose. Vivienne had warned me he was unlikely to have emptied his quiver quite yet, and it could be argued that villains were often at their most dangerous just before they were defeated. And he'd let slip some of what he was up to, I suspected. Not carelessly but instead carefully, like a fisherman baiting a hook. And to get his foot back in the game the Tyrant would not hesitate to toss me some secrets of worth coming at the expense of his many enemies. Some of which were also mine, as it happened.

I sighed and caught sight of a gargoyle carrying a tray with cups – only one which was empty – and gesture for it to approach. It did and I snatched the empty silver cup before holding it out, reaching into the Night to fashion a tendril of darkness that poured from the bottle into it. More discretely, as my theatrical gesture distracted those in the room, a very thin tendril of darkness crept into the filled cup and stole a single drop before withdrawing. It didn't look like water, instead like some sort of herbal potion, and though tasting it myself would tell me little I had people in my service who knew much of herbalism and alchemy.

"I'll buy the wine and the leaf," I said. "So long as it's not poisoned, and the price isn't ridiculous."

"I never found out how much any of it cost," Kairos admitted. "A hundred royals?"

That was Helike gold coinage, if I remembered correctly. There were several currencies floating around the Free Cities, and Helike's was not considered to be one of the more reliable.

"I'll offer you a whatever's in my tunic pockets right and now," I offered instead. "As well as one sentence that is more or less a compliment."

He leaned forward.

"*Intriguing*," the Tyrant enthused. "You have a bargain, Catherine Foundling."

I surrendered the treasures hidden away in my tunic: a handful of half-chewed oats I'd forced Zombie to spit out after catching her indulging, a few pinewood matches and a soiled tablecloth from the palace I'd used to wipe my mail clean earlier.

"Your tunic's colour matches the cushions, which makes you look significantly less scrawny from a distance," I added.

"It *does*, doesn't it?" Kairos replied, sounding deeply pleased. "That is what I was going for."

He gestured for one of the gargoyles to waddle forward and handed it my end of the bargain.

"Feed the oats to Hakram," he instructed.

My brow rose questioningly as the gargoyle whined in protest then scampered away after gathering everything up.

"Hakram is the name of my trusty war steed," the Tyrant revealed. "It was a most wonderful gift, Catherine, my thanks. I've taught her to bully the gargoyles and it has been most diverting."

Oh Gods, he was talking about the goat wasn't he? I'd not expected him to actually keep her.

"It was," I hesitated, then valiantly rallied, "my pleasure?"

He picked up the cup I'd stolen a drop from and sipped from it after dismissing the gargoyle, then leaned back more comfortably into his cushions.

"Would you like to talk about the Dead King?" Kairos Theodosian casually asked.

"Sure," I replied. "Heard he's up in Keter. Good manners, maybe a little heavy on the devouring of all living things. Keeps a good table, though."

"So I've heard," the Tyrant amiably said. "He also intends to send an envoy to the formal talks tomorrow, I'm told."

My fingers clenched, and I forced them to loosen before taking a sip of wine.

"He intimated as much in Liesse-Before-Twilight," I said. "Dare I ask where you heard it from?"

"The Dead King," Kairos smiled. "And his envoy, which he intends to send to the formal talks tomorrow."

"You're hosting the Hidden Horror's diplomats," I flatly said.

"Diplomat, singular," the Tyrant corrected. "Tough you are in essence correct. I was prevailed upon to bring the envoy to Salia and introduce them."

"You must realize that's twice now you've provided aid to Keter," I grimly said. "Your bridges are not so much burned as turned to smoke."

"I imagine our friend in Keter would have found a way regardless," the Tyrant mused, sipping at his cup. "This is hardly a deep collaboration."

"You've repeatedly made pacts with the Dead King, and now serve as facilitator for his diplomacy," I said. "Kairos, that has *consequences.* It's one thing to play princes against each other or to make a red ruin of the League for your schemes. Villainous, true, but it stays within certain boundaries. What's happening up north, though, is a higher order of war. The consequences of defeat there are... severe is too light a word, really."

"You seem certain there will be a war," Kairos said, sounding amused. "As if it were inevitable, written in the stars."

"At this late hour, it effectively is," I bluntly said. "There is no offer he can make that will change things. The Grand Alliance will gather and sweep him back into the Crown of the Dead."

"Or he'll leave when faced with such an unprecedented coalition," the Tyrant said. "For he is not an utter fool."

"Then we reclaim the Kingdom of the Dead without loss of life and begin to siege the Serenity," I shrugged. "It is not too disadvantageous an outcome."

"You misunderstand me," he said. "His armies retreat, and as they do several millennia of the worst rituals Calernia has ever seen are unleashed on the lot of you. And then your shaky alliance, stripped of its common foe, must face the brewing horrors you ignored as your eyes remained fixed on the north."

"So we should take his peace, should we?" I scathingly said. "Pass the torch to those yet to come and hope they take care of it for us? That's how we got into this mess in the first place. It'll be ugly work, closing the door on him, I'll not deny that. And costly in ways I suspect will resound for generations. But someone will have to pay that price, sooner or later, and it's cowardice of the worst sort to pass the duty down the line our of petty fear."

"And it is mere pleasant coincidence," Kairos mused, "that a great shared cataclysmic war would lay deep foundations for your Accords. Your own Archheretic of the North – the King of Death, the peerless Named that suffers the yoke of no laws even in death – crucified over a sea of corpses so that the story of your rules enforced becomes as whisper passed from mother to child across the lands."

The accusation rang true because he wasn't entirely wrong. The Liesse Accords being signed and then promptly yielding the end of the Kingdom of the Dead would be the strongest possible mortar to build with. Undeniable proof that even the greatest of monsters could not stand alone against the rest of us when heroes and villains kept to terms. The thought had lurked in the back of my mind for some time now, it was true. On the other hand, unlike what he was implying I was not *eager* for the horrors that war would bring. Marching on the Crown of the Dead and the creature that ruled it was not something to be lightly considered no matter what advantages it might bring.

"Mock as you will, you offer no other path," I said. "You never do, Kairos. And still I am a little disappointed, because I figured that no matter how deep in the old madness you went you'd at least grasp the consequences of Keter claiming victory in this."

"You speak as if the Dead King could truly win," he said, cocking his head to the side. "As if this confluence was not a carefully arranged affair, a trap laid by subtle hands."

"I'd be much more willing to listen to hard talk about the Intercessor from you if you'd not make a damned bargain with her yourself," I harshly said. "Your actions have not matched the distaste you profess."

"Of those that collaborated with the Bard on that night I am not the one that wounded your side deepest," Kairos mildly said, "though you know it not."

"You lie, Tyrant," I sighed. "Even speaking only truths, you lie. And if you had something that'd cut deep when plainly said you would have spoken it plainly."

That made it two secrets he'd dangled in front of me now. He'd implied there were disasters brewing elsewhere, earlier, and there were only so many places that could be the case. Ashur was still blockaded by Nicaean fleets, last I heard, and it was possible for it to be turned into a cradle of madness through desperation. Yet I knew Malicia to have schemes afoot, and she stood the more likely culprit: the Tower's arsenal of horrors had not been unleashed in many years, but it might yet be if she felt there was nothing left to lose. So someone had worked with the Bard on the night that saw Twilight's birth, then, and I'd been wounded by it. Probably Saint, I decided. It'd explain why the Tyrant had not outright given a name: she was dead by my hand, that account already settled. All he had left was suspicion to sow while speaking exact truths.

"We are pieces in an intricate game, Catherine," the Tyrant smiled. "One whose board was lain far before either of our births. Did you believe it coincidence, that the Principate would be so weak and isolated? Decades of civil war to bleed it dry, foes on all sides and then even a disastrous campaign to the east before the Dead King had first stirred. There have been but a few times in the history of Procer it has been so weak, and I'd wager none when the greatest heroes of the time were either far past their prime or far short of it."

"She's not a god, Kairos," I said. "And neither is he, despite all his boasting. Even a continent like Calernia has so many moving parts it's impossible to manipulate it so precisely. They may have seen it coming, helped it along even, but this is not an elegant game of flawless immortals: this is two old monsters riding a tiger and hoping the other one is bucked first. You know they're not unbeatable. Hells, you handed the Bard a defeat yourself."

"So I did," the Tyrant conceded. "Neither is invincible, Catherine, I agree. They are cleverer than that. Yet we approach the crescendo of their hatreds, the unmaking of the knot. And I suspect neither's lasting victory would be a pleasant ending."

"Help me, then," I said. "Help the Grand Alliance. You've been gathering everyone's secrets, Kairos. The Intercessor's, the Dead King's and everyone else's. You could be the finger on the scales."

"I find it most amusing that your good intentions will haunt this world for centuries to come, if you truly win," the Tyrant grinned. "Ah, the necessary villain. The hard woman making the hard decisions when trouble has come calling and all others are flinching from what simply *must be done*. I wonder how many atrocities will be poured out of that mould in years to come simply because you scratched that groove deep enough onto the fabric of Creation."

I'd gotten about as much out of him as I would, I decided. All he was doing now was spreading the poison of suspicion, and I had no reason to indulge him I continuing to lend an ear.

"Even as we speak," Kairos idly said, "thousands are dying in agony to the far south."

"End the blockade of Ashur and the starvation will end with it," I flatly replied.

"It already has ended," the Tyrant of Helike smiled, red eye burning like a red star. "Tomorrow, Catherine, the Tower reminds the world it is yet to be feared. Magon Hadast will withdraw the Thalassocracy from the Grand Alliance."

I frowned.

"She doesn't have the ships to scatter Nicae," I said. "Or the calibre of mages to not need the ships."

"No," the Tyrant agreed, "what she does have is many men who must drink water from barrels."

Poison? That seemed unlikely, even if it was one that took an absurdly long time to kill. It was possible to craft poisons that had no taste and would not visibly mar water but making one that also took months to kill – the only way slipping that much poison onto so many ships unnoticed was even remotely feasible – would be massively difficult and expensive. It'd also require the skills of the Empire's finest alchemists employed in concert, as well as exotic ingredients by the barge. Scribe would have noticed such movements, even if the Jacks were fooled. Kairos reached a shaking hand into his tunic and produced a small glass vial filled with a light gray powder, tossing it to me. I caught it, holding it up to the light. That was an alchemical powder, I'd bet rubies to piglets, but not one I recognized.

"Poison?" I asked.

"In a sense," Kairos said. "If inclined to poetry, I might call it the stillness of death."

Oh. *Oh*. *Oh shit.* Stillness, water? This was the same horror Akua had used to turn into wights the entire population of Liesse. One of the Warlock's old doomsday tricks, named *Still Water*. Mere alchemy, almost impossible to detect as it accumulated in bodies. Until it was triggered by sorcery and slew all it'd contaminated before raising them as undead. If the water barrels on the Nicaean fleet had been tainted, there was no telling how much of it Malicia had instantly turned to her service with a mere snap of the fingers. *She can't have done that before they even struck at Ashur*, I thought. *No one's that far-sighted, not even the Empress.* Yet if the barrels had been tainted in the months since, that meant...

"That can't have passed by you," I said.

"It did not," Kairos agreed.

"And you didn't stop it?" I frowned.

"Why," the Tyrant of Helike grinned, "that would rather defeat the purpose of helping her, wouldn't it?"

My mind raced. While I was less than surprised Kairos would betray even the League he was currently leading to war, I saw little advantage for him in this. If Ashur was willing to fold and leave the Grand Alliance at Malicia's behest, it might have done the same at the League's. This did hurt Nicae, which was arguably still his strongest rival for power within the League, but there would have been less costly ways to achieve that. And in truth a great defeat

might shake his own position even if it'd not been dealt to him, as the Hierarch's violent indifference towards such matters meant Tyrant was effectively setting the policy of the League of Free Cities at the moment. This... didn't fit, I thought. The Tyrant of Helike might have been a true partisan of Below, but however deeply it was buried there was always a method to his madness. The ripples from this would be a blow to the Grand Alliance but not a crippling one, and a victory for Dread Empress Malicia but hardly a substantial one. And it'd weaken the League going into this peace conference. Kairos might have used all this as a mere vessel to get his hands on the White Knight, but it was unlike him to so utterly spoil one game in favour of another.

"What do you *want*, Kairos?" I asked, honestly lost.

The odd-eyed boy leaned forward, trembling hand touching the bowls filled with stones he'd not touched this entire conversation.

"I'd like us to play a game, of course," Kairos Theodosian smiled. "Why else set out the stones?"

# Chapter 81

# Devotional

> "To have faith is to believe there is a plan greater than your own. And so the dreadful crowned are faithless one and all, for what plans could ever be greater than our own?"
>
> Dread Emperor Reprobate the First

"As I recall, the game requires three people," I said. "I've only had half a cup, Kairos, it's too early to start seeing double."

Which was as pointed a cue as he could hope for before unveiling whatever nasty surprise he'd been keeping up his sleeve. The wretched little bastard grinned at me appreciatively, recognizing the extended hand for what it was. It was never pleasant to be forced to look in the eye the truth that I understood Kairos better than I did more people – and that it came naturally, without effort.

"I believe you're familiar with the man," the Tyrant of Helike mused. "He goes by Beiakim."

In Ashkaran, that'd be Be-Iakim, which translated to 'Child of Iakim'. The name was not unknown to me, for though it had been millennia late and in another realm I had attended King Iakim's burial. It'd been in that echo that I had first heard the word *Intercessor* spoken by the lips of the man that would become the Dead King: Prince Neshamah, at one time the most obscure of King Iakim's many children. That was on the nose, even by villain standards, but I couldn't say as much without acknowledging Masego and I had stolen knowledge of the long-dead tongue from Arcadian echoes. Along with others things. Hierophant had plundered the thoughts of still-mortal Neshamah but I'd seen/

/. Still, this was a rather clear indication of our coming guest's identity. Chittering gargoyles scattered as someone left the back of the shop to join us, some of them hurrying to bring forward a skull-adorned chair and place it to the side between myself and the Tyrant. The Dead King's puppet, for I much doubted this to be the true body of the King of Death, made no pretence of

still living. Though dressed in long cloths of purple and silver – the colours of Keter's banner, as I recalled – it was a skeleton that I was looking upon. The bones were as polished ivory, much of them adorned with purple chalcedony and silver, and there was something lurking in the shadows of the empty eye sockets that was dreadfully vital.

"Catherine," the King of Death greeted me. "How pleasant to see you again."

"He is rarely so sweet to me, you know," Kairos complained. "Favoritism is a sin, Catherine."

"Might have something to do with all those betrayals you did," I noted.

I then cleared my throat, gaze turning to the Dead King. Wariness quickened my pulse, but I could not show weakness in this den of tigers. They would not strike at me with violence, not here and now. It would have been more reassuring if those two were not some of the finest masters of twisted words living and dead. The dead thing claimed the skull chair, leaving me to wonder if Kairos had ordered it made for this very occasion or if he'd campaigned across a third of Procer with a spare skull thorne stashed somewhere in Helike's baggage train.

"Beiakim, is it?" I said. "That's new. Surprised you didn't stick with the classics and go with Trismegistus."

"If I had, I would have been robbed of the pleasure of your pretended ignorance," Neshamah replied in Ashkaran.

"I don't speak that, you ought to know it by now," I replied without missing a beat.

"Dandelion mouse fishing," the Tyrant proudly added in Ashkaran.

More or less, anyway. He was accenting the wrong parts of the words and there were some syllables he was pronouncing in what I figured to be the tradertongue way which just... didn't work with Ashkaran. There was almost no commonality between the languages. He might have meant moue instead of mouse, now that I thought about it.

"Well said, Kairos," I agreed.

"I suppose that, bereft of anyone able to share my humour, Trismegistus will have to do," the Dead King said.

"King Trismegistus," the Tyrant mused. "It has a ring to it. Might I offer you refreshments, Your Highness?"

I eyed the clothed skeleton skeptically. It had no, well, throat. I assumed the fact that he could speak at all was the result of sorcery, maybe some sort of runic trick. Likely I was looking at a small sliver of the Dead King invested in a construct, not unlike the crows that Sve Noc has sent south with me – and which, physically speaking, had about as much business talking as a skeleton. I had to say I admired Kairos a little for the amount of sheer pointless pettiness it took to offer the Dead King drinks he couldn't drink. Say what you would about the Tyrant, but there was absolutely no one to which he would no offer at least one inconsequent slight.

"That will not be necessary, Tyrant," the Dead King said.

I willfully ignored the chittered disappointment of a few gargoyles, unwilling to entertain exactly what it was that Kairos Theodosian might have considered fitting refreshments for the Hidden Horror.

"Come to attend the peace conference, I take it?" I said.

"As I told you I would," Neshamah said. "I find I've lost taste for war, even in the defence of my ally."

Keter had made bargain with only the Tower – *officially, anyway*, I thought as I glanced at Kairos – which meant it was Dread Empress Malicia he was speaking of. Might have been more apt to call her a shield or an excuse than an ally, in my opinion, but it was true he'd not actually struck before being invited out of his lair by the Empress. I was not unaware that killing Malicia might actually forced him back into the Serenity, though actually achieving that would be difficult considering Ater would be murder to siege and against all odds the Empress still had a firm grip on most the Wasteland. Pulling away the kind of forces that would be required to take Praes from the Proceran fronts would almost certainly collapse them, which made the plan rather unattractive. It might still come to that, if everything went to shit, but it was not the first or finest arrow in anyone's quiver.

"It's more than a few corpses too late to be claiming a fondness for peace," I said.

"Mayhaps," the Dead King said, "it is a few corpses too early instead. It matters not: I am a patient man."

"How I love a pleasant evening with friends," the Tyrant enthused. "Yet I believe there was talk of indulging a foible of mine."

"Tower-raising, is it?" the Dead King said.

"Indeed," Kairos smiled. "'tis an interesting game, though I believe it would benefit from a greater number of competitors."

"Is there a single thing you *don't* believe that about?" I drily asked.

That actually surprised a laugh out of him, and it ripped out of his throat in too ungainly a manner – spit touched his lips, his side convulsed – to be entirely feigned. Though I wasn't all the inclined to play and the Dead King seemed largely indifferent, Kairos still adroitly pressed for us to indulge him. The rules were not all that complex, and I'd had vague memories of them. Each of the three of us would begin with a hidden amount of stones: either six, eight or ten. To win one of us must gather twenty stones, and those could be obtained both by taking from opponents as well as from the 'kingdom', a pile of fifteen stones all could see and take from. Acquiring stones had a tad more nuance to it, for taking from an opponent required the assent of the third while taking from the kingdom could be done without. One could destroy one's own stones, one at a time, also without assent. The game ended in common defeat should twenty full circles pass without anyone having raised their tower, as the kingdom being plundered 'rebelled'. The last detail was the 'pledges', bargain struck between opponents.

Anything could be agreed on, with the only forced detail being that a number of stones had to be 'pledged' as collateral by both sides. Should one of them then break the pledge, the stones would be obtained by the wounded party. The Tyrant covered the bowls with embroidered cloths after having a gargoyle move around the stones, and only then had them set on the table before us. I checked under mine, raising an eyebrow. Fortune had been a little too much on my side, these days: I began with six stones.

"As the most ancient king among us, I would invite honoured Trismegistus to begin," Kairos said.

The Dead King's eyeless gaze turned to me and I shrugged.

"If you're robbing him, I'll assent," I said.

The Tyrant of Helike pouted but handed over his stone, which the Hidden Horror deftly took and slid into the cloth-covered bowl before him.

"So Malicia twists the Thalassocracy's arm so it'll leave the Grand Alliance," I lightly said. "And now the two of you are here, thick as thieves. Now, if I were a suspicious sort, I'd suspect some sort of coalition was being assembled."

A counterweight to the Grand Alliance, in a way. The Dread Empire, the Kingdom of the Dead and the League of Free Cities bound by treaty. With that in mind, forcing Ashur on the fence made a great deal more sense. Malicia had been trying to make an alliance there for decades without successes, but the Thalassocracy lived and died on trade: when its ports were closed by blockade, it quite literally starved. It could not petition to re-enter the Grand Alliance the moment the wight fleet sailed away if doing so cost it closed ports across the entire League, the same of Praes and the displeasure of the Dead King. Trade with the League of Free Cities was Ashur's lifeblood, much more so than trade with Levant and Procer. Oh, I doubted the Thalassocracy would turn on the Alliance even then. But it would suddenly have a great interest in remaining neutral, one that'd be highly encouraged by how absurdly lucrative it would be for Ashuran trade to become the middleman between the two great alliances. This had Malicia's mark all over it, precise violence followed by the subtle chains of coin and politics.

Of course, there was one little detail in the way: such an alliance could not take place without the assent of the Hierarch of the League, and I suspected Anaxares of Bellerophon would rather eat his own sandals that bargain with the likes of Malicia or the Dead King. Not for the Evil involved, but rather the crowns. Sisters bless that highly inconvenient madman. I stole a stone from Kairos as well, with the Dead King's amused assent.

"Catherine," the Tyrant said, "if you would-"

"No," I said.

The Dead King refused as well when Kairos's gaze moved to him. The Tyrant took from the kingdom, still pouting.

"There would be advantages to endorsing peace with such a coalition," the Dead King said. "I'd think such a gesture would sway all its members into signing your Accords."

And there was the bribe they wanted to throw my way. Even if Praes and the League came out as allied with Keter – which I still figured at least somewhat unlikely – the Grand Alliance might still try its luck. The League's armies were marching south and depending on Procer to ward off hunger, Praes dealing with the loss of two major cities, one of them lost to goblin rebellion that'd birthed the Confederacy of the Grey Eyries and now threatened the Wasteland's south. It'd be damned risky to push through with war in such a situation, but it was a gamble that might be made. It couldn't be made without *me*, though. I brought to the table the Firstborn as well as the Army of Callow and the Legions-in-Exile, and if war came out the eastern front would be my kingdom. In effect, if I refused to press through with war then the Grand Alliance had little choice but to accept peace. My pulse quickened with excitement. Not because the offer was one that pleased me, for it did not, but because of what it implied.

The drow were marching on the Kingdom of the Dead with the intent of seizing it as their home on the surface. If the Dead King had known as much, he would have realized that his offer was not so tempting after all – it involved selling down the river my own patron goddesses and the nation that was arguably my steadiest ally, while they were all carrying out a plan I'd been the one to suggest in the first place. No, if the Dead King *knew* then this was a botched offer. Which meant he'd not yet found the Firstborn marching towards him, and they might yet launch their assault from the north with the benefit of surprise.

"A meaningless gesture," I hedged. "You could forge the kind of doomsday artefacts forbidden by them in the Serenity by the dozens and without access we'd have no way of knowing."

Silently, I assented to the Hidden Horror once more stealing a stone from Kairos then in quick succession did the same.

"Inspection might be considered, should the inspectors not bear Names," the Dead King said.

"Catherine-"

"No," I said without turning.

"No," the Dead King said, before Kairos could even ask.

The Tyrant took from the kingdom again.

"Gods," I muttered. "She really scares you, doesn't she?"

"You believe it is fear of the Intercessor that commands my interest in your Accords," the King of Death stated. "In a sense, you are not incorrect."

My brow rose. That was quite the admission, coming form the Hidden Horror himself.

"So long as the Liesse Accords stand, I have no need to war against Creation," the Dead King calmly said. "I lose nothing in observing such a peace, even on the terms of another."

An ivory finger pointed at Kairos questioningly and I absent-mindedly agreed. The Tyrant complained about the unfairness of being so brutally and repeat-

edly plundered, but neither of us leant much of an ear to it.

"No need," I repeated.

"What is it that you believe I gain from such ventures, Black Queen?" the Hidden Horror asked. "Wealth, bodies, fame?"

We both knew he had need of none. His wealth was beyond measure, he had a Hells' worth of human farms to harvest and the Dead King was the most storied being on Calernia bar none.

"You keep your story alive," I said. "And shape it in the cultures of those who live in your shadow. It's not about invasion, you know the risks in that. You were pruning Calernia so nothing that could strangle you would ever grow."

That was the conclusion I'd come to, after my latest chat with the Intercessor. The Wandering Bard might nakedly have tried to manipulate me, but she'd not necessarily been lying about everything. There was no denying it was unlikely to be a coincidence that the Principate had never had a Named ruler. *Someone* must have had a hand in that and given that the Intercessor worked best through Named she did not strike me as the obvious culprit there. The routine of tower-raising continued, Trismegistus assenting to another theft of Kairos and the both of us refusing the Tyrant's attempts to break out of encirclement.

"You miss the forest for the trees, Black Queen," the Dead King said. "*Why* is it that all that grows in this garden of Creation would so seek to destroy me?"

I frowned.

"You're saying you were warring on the Intercessor, not on Calernia," I said.

"I was denying tool to my opponent," the Hidden Horror said. "You would do this for me with your Accords. What need have I then of pursuing the matter further?"

I paused. Ghastly as what he was implying was it sounded terribly, well, believable. Neshamah as a mortal prince had already recognized the dangers in bearing a Name, for all the power they brought, and so carefully arranged his apotheosis through the work of years if not decades. He would not have forgotten those early lessons after touching the godhead, him least of all: undead did not change, at least no in the way that the living did. His only invasions had been under the shield of alliance or invitation, and it could not be denied that he'd been cautious about intervening on Creation. He'd been utterly monstrous when he did, but then it wasn't his soul I was putting on trial. That ship had long ago sunk at the bottom of a deep, black sea. It was the sense in what he said and horrified as I was to admit it rather *fit*. If he'd been using scorched earth tactics against the Intercessor instead of pursuing conquest of any sort, some pieces of the puzzle began to fit together. Cordelia Hasenbach had nearly gained a Name, hadn't she? Which meant the Principate had been growing into a nation where the ruler might be Named, which the Dead King would see as a direct threat.

Which explained him taking Malicia's offer over mine, among other things. He wasn't really interested in taking lands or helping the Tower: he wanted to

thoroughly dismantle everything about the current Principate that might grow into a danger to him, and there was no world in which I would have allowed him that loose of a leash. The Dread Empress, though? So long as Praes and its breadbasket stood, she hardly cared about what happened to the rest of the continent. I'd been invited to Keter to bag two birds with a stone: the Dead King could have a look at the latest fool to touch the outmost edges of apotheosis and simultaneously use my presence as a way to finally secure Malicia's agreement after months of negotiations. Now, though, large parts of Calernia had come together in a coalition, which as a story was poison to him. War, even if he had the advantage in strictly military affairs, carried other risks if pursued.

On the other hand, signing the Liesse Accords meant that so long as he did not provoke the living realms he wouldn't be up to his neck in crusades anymore. What was curtailing a few of his worst habits in the face of that? Shit. It fit together well enough I couldn't be sure if this was true or an exquisite lie – the only kind the likes of the Dead King would deign to employ. The Firstborn might be able to find a home among the tall grasses of the Chain of Hunger, I thought. It'd certainly give the Mighty something to do other thank killing each other. Another circle passed according to our habit, Kairos' stone slowly dwindling at our hands. No, I decided, that entire approach was mistaken. The Intercessor being an enemy did not mean her opponent was an ally, or indeed ceased being an opponent.

Leaving the Dead King to rule his realm and garden horrors in the Serenity was not the same thing as admitting that Stygia's slavery was not mine to curtail, or that Praesi blood magic would not end because I found the practice disgusting. On the other hand, was it really my place to make a decision that would see at least dozens of thousand die? No, even though I probably had the influence to force the outcome either way. It was something that Cordelia Hasenbach needed to be brought in on, and likely the Blood as well. Another circle passed, the Tyrant complaining at how dully uninspired our playing was. My eleven stones could not be in the lead, no matter who it was that'd begun at ten stones, but soon enough the rising threat would see the game beginning to have real conflict.

"This isn't a decision I can make in haste," I said, biting my lip.

It was a lie, I thought. Unless the rest of the Grand Alliance flinched, the decision was already made. And I remained skeptical that the League would fall on the side of this scheme, no matter what the Tyrant wanted. So long as the Hierarch lived it was unlikely and should be he slain I rather doubted Kairos Theodosian would be elected to the office instead, or anyone for that matter. Which would mean the end of unity between the city-states, every ruler able to bargain for their own people again. Malicia might have full coffers and the influence to sway some, but she wouldn't even get most the cities on her side. It'd turn into a quagmire that would effectively take the League out of the war, which was more than acceptable. That would leave Praes and Keter, and a fight that could be won.

"There is yet time," the Dead King said. "Consult your pawns if you must."

Another way around the table, leaving me at twelves stones – and Trismegistus at either fourteen or sixteen. One more, then, I'd assume he'd begun at ten.

"Lovely Catherine," Kairos tried.

"Flattering," I said, but shook my head.

The circle passed, and I now had thirteen stones in my bowl.

"Truce for seven turns," I offered the Tyrant. "Neither theft nor assent against either of us. I'll pledge six stones over it."

"Alas, I only have one stone," Kairos smiled.

I frowned, counting in my head, and that should mean he'd begun at eight stones. The Dead King was only three away from winning, then.

"What happens if you can't pay the full pledge?" I asked.

"One pays as much as one can," the Tyrant said.

"Offers stands, then," I said.

I glanced at the Dead King, whose gaze conveyed amusement and little else.

"Denied," Kairos grinned.

My brow rose. Interesting strategy. The moves continued in quick succession. I allowed Kairos to be robbed once more by the Dead King to turn up the pressure then myself took from the kingdom, as did the Tyrant. I reiterated essentially the same offer for fewer turns and a lesser pledge but was once more turned away. The Dead King took from the kingdom, bringing him to nineteen and I gazed at the Tyrant. Unless he wanted to throw the game, if I took from the kingdom he'd have to ask from my assent and take from the Dead King. It'd be better for me to take from the kingdom, there were only four stones left in it and they were the only way to gain stones without someone's assent. So I smiled back at Kairos, and from the kingdom's bounty rose up to fifteen stones in my own bowl.

"A pointless exercise," the Dead King suddenly said. "It is not a game that can be won save through the idiocy of another."

Hollow sockets gazed at Kairos.

"Should you require it for the settling of my boon I will continue until the end, but this can only lead to a common loss," the Hidden Horror said.

He wasn't wrong, I thought. Cannibalizing the rest of the kingdom with Trismegistus would bring me up to sixteen while he stayed stuck at eighteen, but after that Kairos would have no real incentive to do anything but assent to the Dead King and I robbing each other while he profited from the side. Our possessions would then slowly equalize until we all lost.

"I got all I bargained for, Trismegistus King," the Tyrant of Helike grinned. "The debt is settled in full."

"Then a pleasant evening to you both," the King of Death said, rising to his feet.

He did not bow, for haunted bones or not he was the Dead King, and left without further deigning to speak.

"Tell me a game of tower-raising isn't what you asked for in exchange for bringing him to Salia," I slowly said.

"That would be a lie," the Tyrant piously said. "Although I'll confess, this affair was not meant for my own benefit."

My eyes narrowed. Kairos Theodosian smiling took the last stone in his bowl and rolled it against his own palm, before tossing it behind him.

"You would have destroyed your last stone," I said.

"I have lived on no terms but my own," the Tyrant of Helike tranquilly replied. "And when the day comes, as it does for us all, it is on my terms I will perish. That is my nature, Catherine Foundling. That is the truth of me."

And with Hakram's game, he'd also tried to show me the nature of the Hidden Horror. Who'd not considered for a moment, I thought, that any of us could take any action in this save that which benefited us the most.

"He wouldn't keep to the Accords," I quietly said. "That's what you were trying to tell me. It's not in his nature to suffer his will to be leashed."

"Neither of them would tolerate your little orderly world, I don't think," the Tyrant mused. "And who could blame them? It's a dreadfully dull one you have painted. Yet for all your occasional snivelling self-righteousness, you've not been boring. And you've indulged me, so I shall return that favour with a boon of my own."

The odd-eyed boy leaned forward.

"Here is the first secret: angels cannot be seen by the Augur, save if they allow it," he said. "Neither can the Intercessor, the Dead King and yourself."

He smiled.

"Here is the second secret: one who has made treaties with the Queen of Callow will soon break them."

He grinned, red eye shining malevolently.

"Here is the third secret, and the last I offer this night: the Twilight Paths can lead to places not of Creation."

Kairos Theodosian dropped back into his cushioned seat, a grin like a knife still stretching his lips.

"Sweet dreams, Catherine Foundling."

# Chapter 82

# Delegations

> "Trouble reveals either true friends or a corpse."
>
> Arlesite saying

I'd charged Vivienne with handling the ceremonies from our end and come out pleased with the arrangements.

Mostly for the swiftness of them, truth be told, as instead of squabbling with the Procerans and the rest over pre-eminence and etiquette she'd cut through the waste and agreed the Callowan delegation would be the fourth to enter the hall. After the Proceran one – save for the First Prince herself, who would be the last person to enter – and the other two current members of the Grand Alliance, Levant and Ashur. Out of the twenty delegates I'd brought a share of five had been set aside for Black, who'd brought in Scribe as one of them as well as two translators and an officer from the Legions-in-Exile. My people were a little more varied in nature, though it couldn't be denied that we were thin on the ground when it came to actual diplomats. The Empress and the High Seats would have trained diplomats, usually highborn, truthfully not unlike the way the Old Kingdom had usually sent powerful and trusted nobles to talks with foreigners. I'd had precious few aristocrats I could call on even before I'd crushed their overly ambitious faction in my court, though, and the few I had a modicum of trust for were already in military or administrative positions. I couldn't exactly pull away Grandmaster Talbot from his knights simply to bolster my delegation's prestige, not when he was so much more useful at the Hellhound's side.

The presence of Lady Vivienne Dartwick, heiress-designate to Callow and arguably these days my main diplomat, had never been in doubt. Neither had been Lord Adjutant's – who was one of the only two orcs in the room and so stood out not unlike a bull surrounded by lambs – or General Abigail's, as my respective right hand and the ranking commander of the forces I'd brought to Salia. The dark-haired general had discreetly downed half flask of brandy before we set out in what I took to be an attempt at fortifying her spirits, and

ever since tired with admirable effort to attract the least attention possible even though her ceremonial armour clearly indicated her rank as one of the ten highest officers in the Army of Callow. I had two sapper officers with me chosen at Pickler's recommendation, one specialized in fortifications and the other in war engines, and beyond that mostly civilians. Scribes and translators from the personal staff Vivienne had brought across the Whitecaps, as well as the closest thing we had to a scholar of Proceran etiquette – Henrietta Morley, eldest daughter and heiress of Baroness Ainsley of Harrow. Vivienne had apparently set her to studying with the now-abdicated Prince Amadis to shore up what she'd been taught by tutors, the former Prince of Iserre apparently having been thoroughly amused he was being asked for etiquette lessons and not state secrets.

After us the Empire Ever Dark was to follow in, General Rumena having gathered a band of ten sigil-holders for prestige, accompanied by Ivah and three dzulu from the Losara because *someone* needed to take notes and few Mighty were all that likely to do so. Ivah had told me that the Losara Sigil's sworn duty of marking down the oaths made by sigil-holders had actually been drawing to its ranks Firstborn inclined towards scholarly pursuits. Though literacy was one of the more common Secrets, the Losara were beginning to stand out in that even dzulu were expected to know their full glyphs. Akua had once, after a few drinks, gotten into a heated debate with Indrani about whether the surprisingly high literacy rate of the Firstborn was because there had been more drow when the Night was formed and so literacy became more common along all lines when the population number reduced, or because it was one of the few things no one would bother to kill over and so a harmless skill to learn the old-fashioned way. I knew not the answers, and even the Sisters had given ambiguous reply, but whatever the truth of it I suspected the Firstborn could only benefit from the prominence of such knowledge deepening with every generation. Not that they'd ceased... acquiring through the old means. Of the ten sigil-holders, all familiar to me, all spoke Chantant and three Tolesian. One had even acquired Lunara from the Princes' Graveyard, which I was pretty sure Rumena had almost killed it for. Getting the drow to, uh, do that less often was admittedly something of a work in progress. I'd made sure to get oaths none of them would fight here, even against each other.

The delegation for the League of Free Cities would be the last to enter, and though I'd yet to see them with my own eyes Vivienne had made inquiries as to its composition. It was about what one would expect from an alliance as shaky as the League tended to be even when it had common enemies. The Tyrant and his favourite commander, General Basilia – who I'd met her once before, at Rochelant – were clearly the heart of it, but all cities seemed to have claimed seats as well. Basileus Leo Trakas of Nicae and his personal scribe, the two self-proclaimed Exarchs of Penthes, a senior member of the Secretariat with a lesser one carrying his ink and parchment, the Bellerophon's appointed general and his minder from the *kanenas*, one of the foremost Magisters of Stygia, Zoe

Ixioni, and two preachers from Atalante. These last two had for some reason been made to carry a copy of the Book of All Things nailed to a plank and were seemingly deeply offended by it, though the other delegates seemed to find it most amusing. Like everyone else they'd brought translators aplenty, and even a few scribes for what I assumed would be their common records. There was no trace of the Hierarch, which was cause for both relief and renewed wariness.

The Jacks had found no sign of the Dead King among the delegation but that meant little. He was not the kind of monster that would be found unless he wished to be.

"Queen Catherine Foundling of Callow, First of Her Name, Protector of Daoine and high priestess of the Empire Ever Dark."

We'd not waited long before the painted gates barring the hall, for we'd been fetched only when the Dominion's delegation was already moving, but it'd been long enough for my thoughts to drift. As the gates swung open and the major-domo's voice ran, I was jolted back to full attention and stepped forward. The Cloak of Woe trailed behind me as I limped forward, leaning on my staff of yew. No plate for me today, not if I was to be seated for hours while talking, though the dark embroidered tunic that'd been chosen for me was discreetly padded. Enough it could blunt a knife, if one found its way into my ribs. Hakram knew me well. Belted across my body under my breasts and at belly height, the tunic was almost uncomfortably high-collared and came down to my hips, where I'd prevailed when demanding trousers and comfortable leather boots. I'd had a look at the effect of it in the mirror that morning, and though it made it rather plain I was... less than curvy, when matched with my cloak it also leant a certain severe martial look I rather liked. The crown on my brow was the same I had worn at my coronation: a thing of jagged iron that dug into my scalp, though since my crowning a single pitch-black piece of onyx had been set at the front of it.

A murmur passed through assembly as I entered, and though I'd hardly expected a tavern's common room to serve as our place of gathering I was still faintly surprised as the sheer size of it. The tea hall where I'd met with Hasenbach yesterday had been beautiful but not overdone, but this? You could fit a garrison in here, if you piled them up. I'd never seen ceilings so tall save at the cathedral in Laure, and the dome there was not bordered by sculpted gold depicting passages from the Book of All Things. The dome's surface was a superb painting of the founding of Procer, beginning at the collapse of the Tower and ending with the election of Clothor Merovins as First Prince. The hall itself was a broad circle touched by painted doors at an interval that was pleasing to the eye, as were the ornate golden arcs filled with the Merovins heraldry above the doors. The marble of the square pillars holding up the dome was bare, though polished, in what was clearly a conscious choice to allow the brown tone to stand out and contrast with the white and gold that was otherwise prominent. The floor beneath my feet, itself also pure marble, was of the same tone and so perfectly polished it could serve as a mirror. The circle shape

of the hall had leant itself well to the arrangements, curved tables radiating out from the centre at increasingly longer length. There was a broad avenue between each set of tables, of which there was one for every delegation, which allowed servants and attendants to come and go with ease.

The announcements continued behind me as the rest of my delegation entered behind me, and I cast a look at those delegations already inside. That of the Dominion of Levant I recognized well, as I'd at one time or another fought most of them. Lord Yannu Marave of Alava, of the Champion's Blood, had been the leading Grand Alliance general for most of the Princes' Graveyard. Big man, muscled like an ox and with that unsettling calm that never seemed to thaw. Lady Itima Ifriqui of Vaccei, of the Brigand's Blood. Old but lean and whip-hard, before the Tenth Crusade she'd brutally raided Orense and nearly started a way with Procer. Juniper said she and her brood of sons were cunning as vipers and just as vicious, and she'd know: they'd fought running battles across half of the Principate. Lady Aquiline Osena of Tartessos, of the Slayer's Blood, who sadly was not wearing the tight leather vest and paints she'd on last I saw her. Slender and graceful with coiled muscles, she was said to be a fine killer and a more than passingly skilled intriguer. Mighty Jindrich had sung her praises after the Graveyard, boasting in her stead of having killed it once and suggesting she be offered the opportunity to be slain in single combat and harvested so her Night could toughen up one of our weaker Mighty.

The last was the most familiar of old, Razin Tanja of the Binder's Blood. Heir to Malaga, though as I understood it Levantine inheritance laws meant he could not be lord of Malaga until he returned there to be acclaimed by his kin. It spoke well of his influence that he sat at the same table as the ruling lord and ladies, though, and the way his eyes and Aquiline Osena's kept finding each other and lingering told me there might be some 'diplomacy' going on there. He looked older, I thought. Still sharp-boned and handsome, but where before his eyes had been raw emotion now there was a colder fire in them. Purpose, I decided. It tempered people like nothing else, that cold blaze. That one had gone through crucibles, at Sarcella and the Graveyard, and perhaps become the better for it. I winked at him and he replied with a scowl. To my amusement, I saw as my gaze moved on that Tariq was not seated at the Dominion's foremost table. He was only at the second, making a show of his lack of formal authority, and Gods but he must have insisted to be seated there. I'd bet the Blood would have preferred him to be the sole person on the first rung and the rest of them where he now sat. I inclined my head in a polite greeting, and he did the same.

Ashur's delegation was a bare bones affair. To the left of the Proceran one, as the Dominion was to its right, it counted a mere ten men and women in saffron-coloured robes. The important one was an official from the committee the Thalassocracy had formed to oversee its presence in the Grand Alliance. Sitter Ahirom Seneqart was a tanned young man of exquisite manners but whose role as the voice of the Ashuran bureaucracy on the continent had dipped into irrelevance with the annihilation of the greater part of Ashuran fleets at

Thalassina followed by an immediate sucker punch of the League's own fleets. With the Thalassocracy's star being rather dependant on its supremacy at sea, his influence would have waned and these days he was unlikely to be anything more than an official mouthpiece for the decisions of Magon Hadast, the ruler of Ashur. I'd just finished studying the Ashurans as much as I could without being rude when the last of my delegations' announcements came: *Lord Amadeus of Praes, the Carrion Lord.* Attendants ushered us to our slice of the hall, which was to the side of the Dominion. Our foremost table remained light: myself, between Vivienne and Hakram, and to Adjutant's side sat Black. Behind my father the Praesi 'delegation' radiated out, as behind me the Callowan one did.

It felt like half the damned room was looking at me, so as a distraction I looked up the Procerans. Theirs was by far the largest presence – there must have been at least sixty people at their tables – and they were certainly heavy on royalty. Princess Rozala Malanza met my eye and returned my polite nod. I was surprised to see Louis Rohanon behind her, the former Prince of Creusens apparently serving as an aide. Brother Simon of the Holy Society I recognized form yesterday, but few of the other faces. I leaned forward Vivienne, who helpfully provided names to match.

"To Simon de Gorgeault's left, the man who looks like the dried up remains of a man?" she murmured into my ear. "That's Louis de Satrons, the head of the Circle of Thorns."

Cordelia's spies abroad, and from Black had told me by far the most competent of her spymasters. Considering one had been a traitor and the other missed a conspiracy that involved half the upper priesthood of Procer when that priesthood was his very area of expertise, that might not have been a difficult crown to claim. Louis de Sartons had beady and watchful eyes, I thought, made even more prominent by his almost skeletal thinness.

"Tanned man with the mustache, middle-aged?" she continued. "Prince Renato of Salamans. His brother Alvaro died fighting the Stygians down south. He's fresh to the throne but he's been his brother's man in Salia for years, he's one of Hasenbach's most loyal backers. Fought for her during the coup, too, so he's bound to be in favour. The blond with the well-cut beard if Prince Ariel of Arans – not a Hasenbach supporter but not an enemy either, and he came out more or less on her side when the blades went bare."

Prince Ariel of Arans's lands would also be playing host to both the Army of Callow and the Legions-in-Exile soon enough, which I imagined had informed his lack of support for the coup. The Proceran delegation's arraignment was actually slightly different from the rest. A small and luxurious table had been set most forward, presumably for the First Prince, yet there were two seats awaiting there. Slightly back and to the left the table with the spymasters stood, though once more an empty seat awaited at the table, and on a mirroring table to the right the two princes and Rozala were seated. From there the tables radiated as everyone else's delegations, though the missing seats rather drew my eye.

"I would have expected Princess Rozala to have that seat at Hasenbach's side, if anyone," Hakram murmured.

"Coup's still too fresh," Vivienne disagreed.

"It is the first official event with foreigners since the coup," Black softly agreed. "Malanza has to be clearly shown as subordinate. Sitting her with two known princely supporters of Cordelia Hasenbach adroitly addressed the issue without slighting anyone. Note that of the three Rozala Malanza is seated closes to the high table, an acknowledgement of influence."

The Firstborn delegation was announced before the conversation could continued, beginning with *General Rumena of the Empire Ever Dark, the Tomb-Maker*. I'd actually made a note of the proper titles for all the Mighty before passing it on to the Procerans, and I was pleased to see they'd actually observed the courtesies. Ivah was even addressed as Lord of Silent Steps, though like everyone's attendants the dzulu accompanying it went unnamed. They made waves, the drow. Their procession as they entered Salia had drawn eyes as well, but today they had come in their full ceremonial glory instead of their war-making clothes, and it could not be denied they were a sight. Grey skin and silver-blue eyes were half-covered by the colourful paint of sigils, from Rumena's ochre and gold to my Losara's purple and silver. They wore strips of obsidian and exquisitely woven clothes, all dripping with jewels and gold, and though perhaps on a human it would have been mocked as vulgar on the drow it made them look like the exotic princes of a distant land. I even caught a few eyes lingering, though anyone trying to talk a drow into a night on the sheets should be prepared for disappointment. Firstborn had little interest in such affairs, save for the lowest among them – and even then, only for a certain part of their lives.

The Tomb-Maker sat alone at the leading table, and none even thought to contest this.

"That leaves the League seated next to the Ashurans," Vivienne murmured, sounding amused. "Hasenbach has a sense of humour, it seems."

She was right about the seating, at least: only one slice of the circle remained free, between the Firstborn and Ashur's delegation. I was less certain it'd been meant humorously, however. It would bring a pressure to bear, the two colluding parties being side by side in their corner and bearing the weight of everyone else's disapproval. The Thalassocracy's envoys had no real say in the decision they were to announce, but this could be a passingly clever ploy if aimed at the League. The Tyrant was a fearless madman, true enough, but not all of the Free Cities boasted such spirit. Some would see the writing on the wall, and weigh whether following their madman Hierarch and madder Tyrant was truly worth antagonizing every other nation in this hall so deeply.

"I would not venture to give you orders, Carrion Lord," Adjutant said, sounding pained, "but perhaps it would be wiser to cease smiling so at the Pilgrim."

I turned to a glare at Black, whose apparent calm was marred by a vicious little twist of the lips.

"I was merely greeting an old acquaintance," Black said.

Tariq's lips were pressed thin, and though obviously my teacher was the one being a shit there I was still a little miffed that it took so little to provoke the Peregrine. It was like Black's presence here was an insult already and the slightest addition to it was enough to tip the vase. I incline my head in implicit apology and after a moment he accepted it.

"You going to taunt Hasenbach too?" I muttered under my breath, casting a dark look at him.

He shook his head.

"I've nothing but respect for the First Prince," he calmly said. "A thoroughly competent woman. Had our interests not been so completely at odds for the entirety of our careers, I might even have been personally fond of her."

I frowned at him.

"Didn't she try to have you taken from the Pilgrim and decapitated?" I asked.

"As I said," he smiled, "a *thoroughly* competent woman."

Maybe that shouldn't have surprised me, coming from the same man whose response to learning thousands of knights had slipped his watch in the south had been mourning the likely death of whoever had first come up with the plan to achieve that. The League's delegation was announced moments later and I trusted Vivienne and Hakram to memorize the names while I was seeing to more important business: namely, watching raptly what was intended for the Book of All Things nailed to a plank. The League's front table ended up rather crowded, as few were willing to surrender a seat there even if the room was limited, and to my utter delight one of the two Atalante delegates was forced to relinquish his seat to the book – the plank was propped up against the chair, the book lulling open lazily. Mere moments after the League settled into their seats, the majordomo struck the floor with his staff of office and the entire Proceran delegation rose to its feet. None of the Blood did, save for the Pilgrim, nor the League's rulers. The Firstborn did not stir, and among my tables Black and I stayed seated. Cordelia Hasenbach entered the hall from the door at the back of the Proceran tables and strode forward flanked on both sides.

One of the two was a woman, blonde and short-haired and wearing a rather loose dress. I knew her not by sight, but the similarities with Hasenbach's face and her own hinted at the answer. Agnes Hasenbach, the Augur, was cousin to the First Prince. As to the other, there was no need to wonder: the White Knight was familiar enough a sight. Well now, I'd wondered in what capacity he would attend. Hanno split off before the Hasenbach, coming to stand by the empty seat with the two spymasters, and Agnes Hasenbach was eased into the seat to the First Prince's left at the high table. Finally, Cordelia Hasenbach smiled at the assembly and elegantly sat. All who had risen followed seat, and a moment later the First Prince of Procer broke the silence.

"And so I declare this conference to have begun, under auspices of truce," the First Prince said.

The Tyrant, in the heartbeat that followed, clear his throat.

"Your Most Serene Highness, if I might be allowed to address the point?"

I met Cordelia Hasenbach's eyes from my side of the room and smiled a hard smile. *All right, Hasenbach,* I thought. *Let's see what you and I can achieve, when we're on the same side.*

# Chapter 83

# A Mould Unbroken

> "Diplomacy is half lies and half courtesies, which is to say it is entirely lies."
>
> King Alistair Fairfax, the Fox

The Tyrant of Helike had seemingly decided to strike with his surprises hard and early, which I could appreciate. It'd save us time, since admittedly anything discussed before 'surprise, the Dead King is here!' was likely to fall by the wayside. I'd half-expected him to wait until we were halfway through a particularly complex discussion before dropping that into our laps, actually, since Kairos Theodosian was rarely one to avoid heaping insults upon injury. Murmurs spread through the room at the Tyrant daring to speak so boldly in the wake of the First Prince, though I'd seen to it that the people that mattered would already be in the know.

"Shut your cripple mouth and sit down, boy," Lady Itima of Vaccei snarled out. "It's a fucking outrage you even have a seat in this hall."

Hasenbach had implied to me that while Itima of the Brigand's Blood was – rather ironically, given the legendary hatred of her line for foreigners in general and Procerans in particular – her steadiest ally among the Blood she was also very much out to get the Tyrant's head on a plate for his actions during the adventure that birthed the Twilight Ways, as well as a handful of prior betrayals. The redeeming aspect of that was that unlike most Levantines the Lady of Vaccei was not insistent on having that head taken on a battlefield or by honour duel. A knife in the dark or poison in the cup would do just as well, for the Vengeful Brigand's brutal pragmatism in aging war against the Proceran occupation had trickled down to his descendants.

"The Dominion of Levant objects to this departure from the agreed-upon order of affairs," Lord Yannu Marave calmly translated in more polite terms.

"Look at the other two Blood," Vivienne murmured.

I followed her own gaze and found the faces of my old buddy Razin and Lady Aquiline utterly calm. I knew precious little about Aquiline Osena, but

I'd watched Razin Tanja come apart at the seams in the shadow of Sarcella. I liked to think I had a good grasp on the man, and he was not all that skilled a liar or dissembler – if anything he a rawness to him I found almost refreshing compared to the practiced masks of near every other aristocrat I knew. He would have been embarrassed by Lady Itima's outburst, if it had come as a surprise to him. Which meant it wasn't. I let out a small noise of approval at Vivs for that, I might not have caught if not for her sharp gaze. She was getting to be a fair hand at these games, which boded well for the years to come.

Itima Ifriqui's flare of temper had been planned, it seemed, though I could only wonder as to why. Reinforcing the knowledge that Kairos was hated abroad to the rest of the League? It might even be a simple matter of herding him towards a particular response, though that would mean the true hand behind this was the First Prince. This was her preferred battlefield, not mine.

"Friends, allies, companions," the Tyrant of Helike enthusiastically said. "How could I dare to defy such ironclad law as the order of affairs? No, I speak now so that an oversight might be corrected."

"Get on with it, Tyrant," I called out. "There's only so long of you orating at your own navel I'm willing to suffer."

"*Catherine*," the odd-eyed villain cried, sending me a wounded look.

From the corner of my eye I saw Princess Rozala's lips twitch in suppressed amusement. It would have been impolitic to wink, I supposed, and besides I had a policy.

"And what oversight might that be, Lord Tyrant?" Cordelia Hasenbach calmly asked.

"Why, there are yet delegates to arrive and be seated," Kairos Theodosian grinned.

The First Prince of Procer elegantly extended her arm, palm up, and a dark-haired attendant offered her a small ceremonial baton of sculpted alder. Though carved from one piece, it'd been made to look like it was a bundle of small twigs tied together by a string. One twig for each principality, symbolizing that each twig alone was fragile but the bundle was stronger than the sum of its parts. It'd been a common imagery in Procer until the Liturgical Wars, during which it fell out of favour, and had been around long enough for a few verses back home to have been written about it. Even as Cordelia Hasenbach knocked the baton against the surface of her table I hummed the tune to *Two Dozen Snakes A Knot Do Make*, Vivienne at my side going rigid to avoid showing reaction.

"And though Billy King did step on them," Black quietly hummed, lips twitching, "they hardly even-"

Of course Black would know the words, I amusedly thought. He'd ruled Callow for twenty years and unless he'd done so without ever setting foot in a tavern he probably knew most the old songs.

"-noooooticed," I could not help but finish, swallowing a grin.

Vivienne had joined her voice to the sound as well, though discreetly. Even in a Legion haunt like the Rat's Nest they'd sung that regularly, legionaries being rather fond of the imagery of anyone stepping hard on the proverbial knot of snakes west of the Whitecaps.

"Your people do have a singular talent for putting mockery to a tune," the Carrion Lord fondly said.

Our shared mirth had not gone unnoticed by the rest of the hall, a few other delegates eyeing us curiously. It was rather pitiful that between three former Named not a single one of us could properly hold a tune but aside from that I claimed no regrets. Yet Black's uncharacteristic levity, I suspected, might just be the result of seeking diversions to distract frim his worries about a matter I'd warned him of. While we whispered in our corner the First Prince had begun out first gambit of the day. At the knocking of the baton the attendants were set abuzz like a swarm of bees, the gates to the back of the League delegations' left and right opening. Down both avenues a small but beautiful desk was carried, and behind the desks a single seat each. Kairos's good eye narrowed for the fraction of a moment as he took in the second desk before his face eased into a delighted smile. It'd stayed long enough for me to catch his surprise, though.

*Come now, Kairos*, I thought. *You might as well have told me outright. I know how Malicia works, there's no way she'd ever trust one of her lords to negotiate with the likes of you. Even if they were not treacherous and courting you support to overthrow her, they'd be always a step behind you in any talks.* Which meant the old body-taking trick of Dread Emperor Nefarious would have been put to good use. It was a small leap from there to figuring out it was rather likely that Malicia's host body might have accompanied him in his campaign, or meant to be another surprise attendance at this conference – after all, Black's presence here meant that in principle the Dread Empire of Praes was allowed to attend. It'd been a risk to bring out the two desks from the start since this was speculation and not certainty, but the First Prince had argued we lost precious little from being wrong while inflicting sharper uncertainty should we be correct. I'd still been against it, but Cordelia's instincts had seemingly paid off if the Tyrant's surprise was not mere playacting.

Now he had to wonder how deeply we'd seen through him and if my alliance with the First Prince might not be closer knit than he'd assumed. The painted desks were set to the sides of the League's delegations, slightly behind their leading table. A subtle slight, that, implying inferior status. Cordelia was apparently not above venting her displeasure through small details, which I found rather endearing. It added a touch of humanity to the ice-cold and masterfully controlled princess I'd been treating with, a woman who'd use even her own grief and shame as tools to get her way without batting an eye.

"How very gracious of you, First Prince," the Tyrant laughed. "Without further ado, I then present-"

Black tensed. If I'd now known the man I might not have noticed, for he had not moved a hair, but his eyes gained an edge of razor-sharp attention that'd

not been there before.

"His Majesty Trismegistus of Keter, the Dead King!"

It was almost amusing the way the older of the Atalante preachers went white as a sheet when the other one rose to his feet. Sorcery coursed down the body of the impostor in thick rivulets, revealing beneath an illusion the same skeletal puppet of polished ivory bones and long purple cloths I had met with last night. I'd been wondering if it'd be the same, or if he had another host form to ride hidden away somewhere in the city. The tall dead thing stood before the desk set out for him, and the room erupted in whispers. Some scribes even cried out in fear, as if they'd been told the Gods Below had come up to see to them personally. It was a different sort of fear they had for the Hidden Horror, here in Procer. Even in the south he was not so much a legend as a sword hanging above everyone's head: after decades of it not falling down you could tell yourself it never would, and even forget about it.

But every time you happened to look up, you were made to remember that safety was just the tale your parents told you as a child so you'd sleep well. Callow knew the Tower's shadow like its own breath and blood, but it could not be denied that the Principate knew the Crown of the Dead's almost as intimately.

It was not all fear, though. Lady Aquiline looked like she was itching to draw a blade, and her fellow Blood all had measuring stares. I glanced at the princes' table, and my respect for them rose a notch when I saw only cold disdain on those faces. The luxuriantly mustachioed Renato of Salamans took in the Dead King's clothes with a look that could only be called scornful, and Ariel of Arans leaned to the side and idly spoke to Princess Rozala in a low voice. As for Rozala Malanza, her dark eyes stared at the Dead King unblinkingly. The burning intensity of the hatred I saw in there gave me pause, for I'd seen hatreds great and small in my time and that one was neither shallow nor passing. As for the First Prince herself, her face was a cold and regal mask framed by golden curls, offering only icy loathing.

Parts of the League's delegation – Atalante, Nicae – were dismayed by the sudden revelation, but others largely indifferent. Delos and Bellerophon's delegates were respectively keeping notes and looking rather lost, while the Penthesians seemed more cautious than alarmed. Yet it was the Firstborn whose reaction had me savagely grinning. General Rumena, silver-blue eyes staring straight at the King of Death, clenched its fingers into a fist and struck against the table once.

"Prav ruvan," the Tomb-Maker said.

*First claim*, it meant. A statement, but also the beginning of something more. Mighty Jindrich laughed, the sound scything through the room filled with murmurs, and struck at its table as well.

"First claim," Jindrich also said. "For this I offer three spears of finest obsidian, and the Secret of Shells."

Mighty Soln jeered.

"Cheapskate. First claim," it said. "A finely made *bureau* of wood, and the Secrets of Shaping and Sight."

The only word of that not in Crepuscular was in Chantant, *bureau*, for the drow were wildly appreciative of the Proceran style of elaborate wooden desks and in deference to that appreciation had been very particular about using the 'proper' term for it. And so, as the rest of the hall handled the surprise of the Dead King's presence, the proud Mighty of the Empire Ever Dark held their bidding war over which of them would have the privilege to first attempt to kill the Dead King on the field and take his Night. The Tyrant cleared his throat, and I felt Black tense again.

"And, naturally, Her Imperial Majesty, Dread Empress Malicia of Praes!"

He sounded, I thought, like a merchant hawking wares at the market. Murmurs bloomed anew as one of the translators from the League rose to her feet. I noted with faint amusement that Malicia's host-body had chosen to be seated close to the aisle. I supposed the revelation would have lost some of its gravitas if she'd had to politely ask the other League translators to pull forward their chairs so she could stride out with the right sort of presence. The illusion laid there was rather simpler than the one that'd revealed the Dead King: a young Soninke woman was revealed, but one of broadly similar height and body shape as the feigned translator. Bright runes were visible, carved directly into the skin and looking halfway between mutilation and tattoos. The Empress' puppet made way to her pulpit with a fluid grace that was all Malicia, impressively conveyed halfway across the continent and to a body not all that like her own save in the dark tone of the skin.

Whatever amusement I'd savoured while pondering the practicalities of that theatrical reveal went up in smoke when I turned my gaze to Black. He was looking at Malicia's puppet with the naked desperation of a drowning man, eyes roaming her form almost obsessively. It took me a moment to understand why. My father was looking for a hint, any hint at all, that this might not truly be Dread Empress Malicia. That it could be a trick or some sort of fake. My fingers clenched as I watched him watch her stand before her desk and he was forced to admit there was no such thing. Something died in those pale green eyes, at that moment, and I realized Scribe had been right. Even now, even after the betrayals and the lies and the mistakes, he'd still intended on finding a way for the Empress to live. And when Amadeus of the Green Stretch grasped the truth, truly came to look in the eye, that he was about to be robbed that recourse? A light went out in his gaze that I suspected none still living could bring back.

Something flickered across his pale face, a weighing of choices, and then something like disgust. In the heartbeat that followed, he pushed back his chair and rose to his feet.

"Alaya," Amadeus said in Kharsum, voice only barely clinging to calm, "this is a very grave mistake."

Sigil-marked and burning with hollow fire, the puppet that Malicia rode turned empty eyes to Black. Considering, until she spoke.

"Unless oaths were sworn to the crown of Callow, the correct placement for the Empire's delegation is behind me," the Empress replied in Lower Miezan.

"This is *madness*," Black hissed, still in Kharsum. "Dark Days protocols and alliances with Keter will not take us through the storm, Alaya. I have secured other means, if you would simply let me-"

The eyes of nearly the entire hall were on the two of them. I wondered how many people could even speak Kharsum, here. It was not even all that common in Praes, much less Callow, and so I doubted even the Procerans had a translator for the main orc dialect. I hid a wince at my teacher's mistake a moment before he bit his tongue over it, but it was too late.

"Let you?" the Empress softly replied. "Am I then to hide in your shade like a child and let the rules of power to be decided in this ostentatious scrap heap of a city? I think not."

Something like a twitch of pain marred the puppet's face.

"Stand behind me," the Empress ordered, asked, pleaded. "The game can still be won, Amadeus. I yet know how."

I bit my tongue, knowing from experience that my stepping between those two ancient monsters had ever only earned the disapproval of both, and followed across the face of the green-eyed man the war between the Carrion Lord and Amadeus of the Green Stretch. One had followed and trusted Dread Empress Malicia for most of his life, murdered and sacrificed and bled to see the order they'd built together stand. Yet of the two that creatures was the one that'd turn on the Empress. Not easily, or without cause, but turn on her it would. If the gears turned and the verdict churned out was that victory demanded the blood of his dearest friend, the steel would be whet red once more.

The other, though, was that part of Black that had seen a barren wasteland of empire and wanted to mend it. That'd made a family of a young mage hunted by the most powerful practitioner in the empire, offered friendship to a woman whose curse had devoured her life and charmed the likes of the Ranger and the Assassin through the strange mixture of devotion and black-hearted ruthlessness. The same boy who'd struck a friendship with a tavern girl long before either of them ever saw the Tower's hulking shape on the horizon.

It was the part of him I loved, if not the one I'd taken lessons from. And I thought it might just be the part of him that, right now, was murmuring in the back of his mind about one last leap of faith. Murmuring that by abandoning Malicia now all the darkest fears – and Gods, how could she not fear when it'd been armies led by Black and loyal to him above all else that saw her rise to the throne? – would be confirmed by his own hesitation, his own weakness. Guilt and love and the chains of a loyalty that had been well-worn long before my birth. I was my father's daughter, and so this I understood.

As he'd no doubt understood, when for the heraldry of the *noble* house of Foundling I chose not some glorious beast or some fearsome weapon. I did

not even choose to ape the dignity of the Fairfaxes and the Albans by stealing their arms so I might better suckle at the love they'd earned among my people. I'd chosen a silver balance, set on the stark bleak blackness of the man who'd taught me, and on it I'd weighed a crown and sword. Right and might. Principle and necessity.

The wants of the woman, as Akua had once told me, and the needs of the queen.

The thing was, that as much as we – Malicia, Black, myself – were pretending this was a war, it wasn't. It was the inexorable sound of a noose being pulled tight, the song of an arrow before it tore flesh. It was the march of the inevitable, because while I believed it was Amadeus of the Green Stretch that both the Empress and I cared for, that boy was just who he'd been born to be. The Carrion Lord, the Black Knight, the cold-eyed and stead-handed killer that broke armies and conquered nations? That was who he'd chosen to be. And so, inch by inch, the inevitable one. Those hungry, callous cogs of steel ground up the boy that'd been and the girl he'd loved.

And when the steel came free of the last parts with a wet squelch, the Carrion Lord breathed out shallowly.

"It was never a game, Alaya," he gently said. "It is a mould, and it will be *broken*."

They shared a long glance, in a hall where the great and powerful of an entire continent had gathered to speak and yet not a single whisper could be heard – only utter, oppressive silence. What he was going to say now, I'd predicted. I'd told Cordelia what he would say, what would drive him to it, with a degree of exactness that now chilled me. Dark hair flecked with grey, back straight as an arrow, the Carrion Lord turned to address the hall with eerie calm.

"I address now all who would lend ear, mighty of Calernia come to this hall," the green-eyed man said, in perfect Chantant.

Translators hurriedly whispered as he spoke, for those who did not speak the tongue.

"The so-called Dread Empress Malicia I hereby denounce as unfit to reign and having lost the favour of the Gods Below through carelessness and misrule," the Carrion Lord said. "I claim the Tower as Dread Emperor of Praes, and ask for the recognition of the delegates to speak in its name."

Sometimes, I thought, it was an ugly thing to be right.

# Bonus Chapter: Winter II

> "Good for a day, a man. For a year, a priest. For a decade, a Chosen. For a lifetime, a fable."
>
> Alamans saying

"The western shore has held," Princess Rozala Malanza announced.

There was a round of cheers, and even some of the royals among the crowd bent their pride enough to participate. Hanno found the customs of the Principate interesting, for much of the rules that bound their behaviour to each other were unwritten. This very assembly, for example. Though the city of Cleves was ruled by Prince Gaspard, who had commanded the defence of the principality for three months before the relieving armies arrived, when assembly was had in the prince's hall the man always deferred to Rozala Malanza. The Princess of Aequitan, while leading such assemblies, in turn always offered Prince Gaspard the courtesies due to a close friend even though as far as Hanno could tell they could hardly stand each other. The grey-haired man that ruled Cleves was said to stand opposed to much the younger princess' politics, for though he was only a lukewarm supporter of the First Prince he'd been hostile to the alliance led by Prince Amadis of Iserre – of which, Hanno had been informed, Rozala Malanza was part.

The almost bewildering amount of subtleties to every interaction between the princes and princesses in Cleves was difficult to understand, though often Hanno grasped the shape of what was taking place. Though what some had called his father's unfortunate marriage meant that even within his citizenship tier he'd never been seriously considered for any of the committees, the dark-haired man himself had once been scribe to the Outer Tribunal. He'd seen the ways the higher tiers heeded conventions of their own that no mere scribe could understand, and the unseen pull those could have on the exercise of all things. Still, some aspects of this remained clear to his eye. In matters of war, Princess Rozala Malanza stood first among equals in Cleves. Even orders from the Iron Prince, fighting fiercely to reclaim Hainaut from the dead, would only ever be taken as suggestions – though suggestions well-heeded, for no man was half so practiced at the war against the Dead King as Prince Klaus Papenheim.

The First Prince of Procer was the highest authority of all, in principle, but she had so far refrained from handing out orders through her Order of the Red Lion. She was said, though, to be moving stone and sea to ensure supplies arrived on time and aplenty on all three northern fronts while pursuing a campaign of her own against the Carrion Lord's army in the heartlands. Cordelia Hasenbach's readiness to support a political enemy – Rozala Malanza's hatred of the First Prince and her allies was an open secret – as well she could and without then meddling at every turn for the sake of the defence of Cleves had impressed the White Knight. Restraint and farsightedness were laudable traits, but especially encouraging when displayed by the ruler who was to be the backbone of the war against Keter.

"Princess Adeline's army held the beaches until the enemy retreated, and Cantal horse intercepted a flanking force that'd made shore unseen," Princess Rozala said. "Yet we would all have been days too late, if not for the intervention of the Chosen: we thank the Witch of the Woods and the Valiant Champion, who held the main force at Sengrin for three days and three nights."

Another cheer followed, even more enthusiastic than the first. The royalty and their attendants turned their gaze to the heroines of the day, which Princess Rozala had requested attend – Raphaella usually did not, and Antigone had confessed finding the proceedings enormously tedious. The Champion was grinning as she preened under their praise, though, and the Witch seeming rather taken aback. Antigone detested cities save for the towering and airy labyrinths of the Gigantes, and as a rule was less than fond of crowds. She'd been forced to suffer both for some time during the defence of Cleves, which was why she was always so eager to take the field against the dead far from the capital whenever opportunity arose. Which was why she'd no notion of how high in the esteem of the Procerans she had risen, the mystery of her mask and aversion to speaking with them only adding to her allure. Already three poems describing the heartbreaking beauty she was hiding under the clay were floating around the city, one even rumoured to have been written by the eldest son and heir of Prince Gaspard.

"It was a victory, and one worth celebrating, yet we must not lower our guard," Princess Rozala said. "The Dead still have a beachhead at Trifelin, and we've reason to believe the attacks on the western shore were meant to draw away some of our forces before an assault from the east."

The mere mention of the name of Trifelin cast a shroud over what had been a rambunctious assembly. After the siege of Cleves was first broken and the armies under Princess Rozala bolstered the defences, a general offensive had been undertaken to reclaim the shores that'd fallen to the Dead King's first wave of corpses. Along the shores of Lake Pavin, to the west, the campaign had largely been a success: Prince Alejandro of Segovia had ridden out with much of the Proceran horse and shattered the warbands that'd been ravaging the countryside. Even as a second wave of foot under the Princess of Orne had begun to march there to thoroughly sweep and then garrison the coast, near

two thirds of the living armies in the principality had marched in pursuit of the retreating undead army that'd besieged Cleves. The pursuit had led to a mining village by the name of Trifelin, perhaps a day's march from the northern coast and less than a week's march from the border with Hainaut. The White Knight still remembered the battle that'd raged there, the utter brutality of it. It'd been the harshest defeat the defenders had been inflicted so far.

The Dead, they later learned, had found a shepherd's trail leading to the shore of the Tomb that'd allowed them to quietly mass numbers. It'd been an ambush, the purported retreat of the undead a trap to bait the Proceran armies away from walls and defensible grounds. The undead had poured in from the sides when the army was still stretched out in a marching column, archers firing volleys one after another and undead leaping off slopes heedlessly. Often they were simply aiming to kill a soldier with their fall so that the dead man could be raised and turned against his comrades in the heartbeat that followed. It'd been bloody fighting, and Hanno's order to send the Fortunate Fool ahead of the column had seemingly not paid the dividends he'd expected. Yet the tide had begun to turn when the Mirror Knight struck at a cliff until it collapsed atop him, allowing for a countercharge by Rozala Malanza's cavalry that swept through the undead archers on one side. It was only moment later that the White Knight was found by the Fortunate Fool, who as it turned out had fallen down a crumbling mine shaft, and only then was the full horror of the trap revealed.

Trifelin was a mining village, and even as Cleves was besieged the dead had been expanding on the tunnels. The Hidden Horror had been laying this trap for months. The Fool's warning made the difference: Hanno found Antigone and told her of what was coming. When the Dead collapse the tunnels under the outstretched army, the Witch still held the grounds aloft for half an hour through sorcery before collapsing unconscious. And so only six thousand died, at the edges of where the Witch had stood and worked her magic, instead of what could easily have been twice that – if not thrice. All those that died in the collapse rose before the dust had even settled, and though the Vagrant Spear and the Valiant Champion led a furious counter-attack against the undead that was the moment where Keter first revealed its Revenants: a dozen dead heroes and villains had hit the lines and broken the last of the Proceran army's cohesion, routing it within moments. Hanno and Christophe found Arnaud Brogloise's still mostly untouched infantry and led it in a rearguard action until night fell, which allowed most the army to retreat, but in the dark thousands more were hunted and slain by prowling ghouls.

Casualties at Trifelin numbered over twelve thousand, at the last count, and given that those losses instantly bolstered the Keteran forces by that much there had not been a major offensive in the northeast of Cleves since. The Dead King's beachhead was being contained by a ring of fortresses, and Hanno had sent two of his own in the region to stiffen resistance, but those measures would not suffice. It was only a matter of time until the Dead resumed a general

offensive, and Trifelin was likely to be where the hammer came down from.

"Prince Gaspard," Princess Rozala said, "I would now invite you to share the latest news from Hainaut."

Raphaella, disappointed to no longer be the subject of cheering, cast a curious look at him and Hanno shook his head. She was free to leave if she so wished. The Champion wasted no time disappearing into the crowd of officers, many of them clapping her back and speaking to her on her way out. The Witch followed closely behind after watching Hanno for a moment. Back leaning forward, head moving to the right. Apology for abandoning him to such an assembly, even if she felt in her right to do so. He replied straight-backed, rolling his eyes with chin raised and slightly moving to the left. Haughty amusement, without sting. She was chuckling under her mask as she left, curtly refusing to speak with the officers brave enough to address her.

"Prince Klaus caught the dead flatfooted at the Prisoner's Mercy with his heavy horse and his spears, breaking ten thousand and the latest offensive against the capital," Prince Gaspard said. "Keter has not fielded a great army since, for fear of losing it as well!"

The cheers that followed were hardy and desperate, for all knew the defence of Hainaut had been a losing battle and should Cleves' eastern neighbour fall the principality would not be far behind.

"A great victory," Prince Gaspard said when the cheering died. "Yet to achieve it much of the garrisons in the northern crags had to be stripped empty, and once ceded that ground will not easily be regained. The Iron Prince cautions us that the Dead now hold the shores of Hainaut without contest, and that they may begin marching reinforcements towards our northeast along the shoreline."

It was an unsettling thought, and one that dimmed the enthusiasm that'd begun to bloom anew.

"An attempt was also made on the life of the Iron Prince and Princess Mathilda of Neustria, by some fresh manner of ghoul," the Prince of Cleves continued, tone grim. "They speak to the monsters being more cunning than the usual breed, and possessed of the ability to squeeze through very small spaces. Princess Mathilda was attacked in a holdfast as she slept and took a wound."

Uneasy murmurs passed.

"Mathilda Greensteel informs us that they die just as easily to steel as the rest, and shriek most satisfyingly when struck with fire," Prince Gaspard drily added.

Laughter and some surprisingly fond words about Lycaonese valour chased away the uneasiness, likely as the Prince of Cleves had meant to achieve.

"I will be sending the Painted Knife to Hainaut to guard against further attempts," the White Knight spoke into the silence. "The Repentant Magister will accompany her in scholarly capacity. It has been thrice now that undead still

unknown to Cleves have been revealed in Hainaut, and I want them studied for weaknesses before they are faced on our walls."

It would also prevent Christophe and Kallia from coming to blows again. The fury of their last argument had yet to leave them, and it was only a matter of time until it erupted once more. As for Nephele, a month or two proving the knowledge she had learned at the feet of the Magisterium could be used to fight the Enemy would do her a great good, and Hanno's understanding was that the situation at the capital of Hainaut was a great deal less perilous than at Cleves. At least for the moment. A rest away from the frontlines would help her find her strength again.

"Would the Forsworn Healer not suffice in such capacity?" Prince Arnaud of Cantal called out. "How many Chosen must we lend to the Iron Prince before he grows satisfied?

Several faces darkened in irritation, others betrayed faint embarrassment: the demarcation between those who were not allies of Arnaud Brogloise and those who were. Hanno watched the man mildly. The prince was prone to bluster, and hardly a popular man even with his allies, but he tended to keep his calm when doom came to call. It was the reason he remained tolerated to such extent. That and Rozala Malanza's deft handling of him, which was why so many eyes turned to the Princess of Aequitan in the wake of her ally's comment. Still, there was something about Arnaud Brogloise that had him itching for the coin. A sense of wrongness that only the judgement of the Tribunal would truly be able to settle in his mind. Yet that would have been... unwise. If given reason he would without hesitation, but he had not yet been given reason. In some ways it was a shame that Kallia would soon leave, for among the heroes in Cleves her skills at moving unseen were second to none.

"Surely you did not mean to imply that the Chosen are ours to command, Arnaud," Princess Rozala smilingly said.

The prince's already blotchy face reddened.

"Of course not," he said. "Only, perhaps, that in times of war royal wisdom is best heeded and-"

"Royal wisdom was heeded," Hanno evenly interrupted. "That of the First Prince of Procer, when she granted the heroes of the Tenth Crusade leave to deploy as they would in accompaniment of her armies."

"And surely one must not court even the shadow of Her Most Serene Highness' displeasure," Prince Alejandro of Segovia said, tone masterfully straddling the line between earnest and sardonic.

Prince Gaspard sneered at the handsome younger man in distaste, but all held their tongue. As Hanno understood it, hard words were still occasionally exchanged over the fact that all the reinforcing royals had voted and even agitated against the measures in the Highest Assembly that'd provided gold for the refurbishing of many of the fortress walls they now fought behind. Prince Alejandro was still on occasion heard to bitterly say that Cordelia Hasenbach's scheme to spruce up Lycaonese lands with Arlesite gold had paid rather un-

expected dividends at this late hour, though only in his cups and in carefully chosen company. When the reinforcing princes had first come, for all their help they'd still been remembered by the people of Cleves as the royalty that'd nearly tossed Cleves and Hainault to the dogs so that Iserre would not suffer Praesi raids. Their reputation had starkly improved since, but their offences were not yet forgot.

"As you say," Hanno agreed. "That aside, the Silent Guardian and the Silver Huntress have now been at the fortress ring for three months. I will be recalling them for rest and recuperation. As this will coincide with rotation of troops among you as well, I would hear of the designated commanders' preferences."

He made no promise to heed them, but he would at least listen. The amused look Princess Rozala cast him made it plain she'd noticed as much though the man meant to accompany her own forces, Prince Arnaud Brogloise, seemed blind to the subtlety.

"I'll want the Witch of the Woods," the Prince of Cantal said. "And call the fool anyone who'd choose otherwise."

"As was explained at previous councils, Antigone's ability to work great magics means she is best kept in reserve so she can blunt the Enemy's offensives," the White Knight patiently replied. "As she did so recently at Sengrin."

"Offence is the very essence of war, young man," Prince Arnaud asserted. "Why, if you were under my command we'd already-"

"I thank you for your contribution," Hanno serenely replied,

His gaze moved to Princess Rozala, ignoring Prince Arnaud's spluttering.

"I don't suppose I could talk you into shaking loose the Valiant Champion?" the Princess of Aequitan smiled.

"I had meant to send the Vagrant Spear to relieve the Silver Huntress," Hanno admitted. "And the two of them. . . "

The dark-haired princess sharply nodded, too polite to outright grimace. It was not that Raphaella and Sidonia were at odds, much to the contrary. After some stilted awkwardness due to the significance of Raphaella's Name to Levantines, they'd become fast friends. Which, for women who were bound to the Champion's line and the Slayer's line, meant hunting very dangerous monsters together, drinking every bottle of hard liquor at hand and finding people to either brawl or sleep with. Inherently there was nothing terrible about this, but it did tend to cause some degree of damage to their surroundings. Less than ideal, on the frontlines. It also tended to cause betting pools to form, which Hanno had been told Alamans disapproved of on grounds of impiety.

"Lady Spear has a talent for striding the wilds, I'm told," Rozala said. "A good fit to relieve the Lady Huntress at Hochelin fortress, given the heights. It is Sautefort I am wary of, for they've been seeing larger numbers try their walls lately. A steady sort will be needed."

"I had been considering the Myrmidon," the White Knight said. "Yet I can see your concern. She is not the most talkative among us."

She spoke none of the Proceran tongues, but if she stayed with heroes who could understand her native Aenian she'd likely never bother to learn any of them beyond a handful of words. It would have been good for her, the steady fighting and camaraderie slowly easing her into the learning. Hanno was not, however, beyond acceding to larger concerns.

"The Mirror Knight will ride to replace the Silent Guardian, then," he said.

There was a thrum of satisfaction in the room, as there always was whenever Christophe was mentioned. Though the Procerans had been duly thankful that heroes had come to help their support against the Dead King, it'd rankled some that so many of the Named they must rely on and occasionally obey were nearly all foreigners. The Mirror Knight, very clearly Alamans and of respectable birth, had been the darling of those since they first heard of him. He remained highly popular with Procerans as a whole, helped in that by the unusual strength of his Name. His growth had not been in wild spurts, as it was for some Named, but the steady regularity of it remained troubling to Hanno. What manner of Evil was Christophe meant to fight, that he would need such strength? Something to see to after the war. There were more pressing matters. It might be needed to send someone with the Mirror Knight, Hanno decided. When exposed to long to the admiration of his people without counterpoint, Christophe tended to lapse into regrettable arrogance. A steady presence at his side reminding him that his power was meant to serve and not be gloried in could only do him some good.

"Three cheers for the Mirror Knight, then," Prince Arnaud of Cantal loudly said.

"And all our other trusted comrades among the Chosen," Princess Rozala added, a tad more diplomatically.

Wine was promptly sent for. Hanno was not all that fond of the drink, truth be told, or even drinking spirits as a whole. Yet Procerans drank wine by the barrel whenever they had an excuse, toasting even their worst enemies without batting an eye for the right vintage. Attendants returned with glasses already filled – it would be different bottles for the royals and the officers, Hanno suspected – and a shyly smiling young woman in Cleves livery offered him his glass.

"Thank you," he replied, then paused.

Like an itch on the back of his neck, a hum in his bones. The attendant paled, thinking she'd given offence. Hanno calmly set down his glass on the table to his side.

"I'd suggest taking cover," he kindly said,

In the same moment he unsheathed his sword, feeling his Name roar in his veins.

"The Enemy comes," the White Knight roared along with it.

Bells began to ring outside, and a moment later claws the size of a horse tore the ceiling open. A sky-shaking scream erupted from the fanged mouth of the gargantuan winged beast half-revealed through the tears, and even as he

felt the Light well up in him the White Knight could not resist but to feel the slightest bit thankful.

The attack, after all, had come *before* he was forced to drink the wine out of politeness.

# Interlude: Rise, Rise

> "A treaty is fooling all the people at the right time, an alliance is fooling the right people all the time. A war is when all the people are fools all the time."
>
> Prokopia Lekapene, first Hierarch of the League of Free Cities

The Carrion Lord's spoken Chantant was flawless, the First Prince grudgingly admitted. Almost entirely without accent, too, and it was the tongue the most people in the hall would speak so it'd been the canniest choice. After such an incendiary claim it was no surprise that the hall fell into disarray, a hundred whispers filling the room as loudly as any ringing shout. There were many faces that Cordelia Hasenbach could have watched. The Dead King, the Enemy incarnate, was seated and still not a hundred feet from her. The 'Firstborn', whose unknown tongue and strange disposition married to the sudden strategic importance made increasingly important to understand. Even the Carrion Lord himself, who she *had* watched for some time as he had that terse, charged exchange with the Dread Empress in some eastern tongue. The pale man's face had turned corpse-like halfway through, like a mask made of wax.

Malicia's inhabited body was not so expressive, but she'd seemed shaken as well. Perhaps there truly was genuine sentiment between the two of them, Cordelia thought. It hardly mattered, with monsters like those. The First Prince's gaze had left them before the end, though, turning to the tanned woman leaning back into her seat at the same table. Catherine Foundling's face had not lost any of the sharp angles that meant no one would ever call her a beauty, but where before she'd seemed sullen there was now a certain... carefreeness. The Black Queen's eyes had always been what softened her mien to something short of severe, Cordelia considered, but now instead of wild swings of emotion or utter iciness there was an unsettling candidness to what could be glimpsed in them. The First Prince had found her personable, when spoken to face-to-face, which she had not expected.

Which made it all the more chilling that the sequence of events the Black Queen had so offhandedly predicted last night was coming to pass so unerringly.

Cordelia Hasenbach was not above admitting when she had made a mistake, and her early assessments of Queen Catherine had been very much mis-

taken. She'd taken the lapses in etiquettes, the strange asides and poorly-kept temper to mean that the Black Queen was mediocre diplomat, and in truth little more than a charismatic warlord whose grip on power was maintained by terror in blood. Considering the other woman had since wheedled support out of the Kingdom Under – the likes of which had not been seen since Triumphant's day! – and somehow become the foremost religious figure of the drow and then leveraged this into the Everdark's entry into the war, it would be absurd to keep believing as much. And so much of this was absurd already, Cordelia grimly thought. How could anyone have a pitched battle with the Dominion and somehow come out of the slaughter in good odour with the Blood?

No, Foundling was not a mediocre diplomat. She simply disdained the usual means of diplomacy, which had seemed the same when it was through these that Cordelia interacted with her. Her Liesse Accords, which admittedly she professed to be as much the work of Vivienne Dartwick and Hakram Deadhand, were also a diplomatic solution coming from a woman the First Prince had once considered a canny, dangerous thug with an army. It was necessary to reassess what she'd once thought of the Black Queen, for though she was now an ally only a fool kept both eyes on the stag when hunting with a wolf. Cordelia had known all of this, or at least thought she did. Yet looking at Catherine's Foundling calm face, the barely-veiled sympathy she looked at the Carrion Lord with, she could not help shiver. For all that the Black Queen had yet to even address the hall, every person here had so far danced to the tune of her choice. Cordelia set aside the thoughts and the wariness, striking at the table as her majordomo loudly called for order. The noise withdrew, leaving a palpable sensation of absence in its wake.

"We recognize the words of the Carrion Lord," the First Prince said. "Yet let it be said, and known, that this conference claims not the authority to install or depose rulers."

Enthusiastic approval from the Dominion's tables at that, as they'd been understandably wary of the precedents that might be set today. For all that Levant now stood strong compared to a weakened Procer and bloodied Callow, it would not last forever. None of the Blood wanted foreigners to us this conference as pretext to meddle in Dominion affairs a decade from now, when their power waned and Procer's waxed. Cordelia waited a beat, for her partner in this intricate dance to step in. The Black Queen rose to her feet, demanding the floor, and a nod from the First Prince to her majordomo had it granted.

"The Wasteland's affairs are its own," Catherine Foundling said, then offered the Empress a hard smile, "at least for now. Yet it cannot be denied that the Carrion Lord speaks for the Legion-in-Exiles, and others among the Dread Empire. We may not have the right to crown him, but let us not shy from practical realities for politeness' sake."

And there it was. The line that would allow them to hamstring Dread Empress Malicia and bring the Carrion Lord to the table without granting her the wellspring of Praesi support that 'foreigners attempting to place their chosen

candidate atop the Tower' might otherwise garner. Lord Yannu Marave rose and was passed the right to speak.

"The Dominion backs the right of the Carrion Lord to speak for the Legions-in-Exile and any other who come under his banner," the Lord of Alava said, his Chantant polished and practiced.

He had been the right choice, the First Prince decided. Razin Tanja was emerging as a rival power among the Blood, and one the Grey Pilgrim was taking an interest in, but he was young and not as skilled a speaker.

"The Kingdom of Callow seconds this," Vivienne Dartwick said, tone brisk.

A moment passed as the Black Queen raised an eyebrow at the drow.

"The Empire Ever Dark recognizes the Lord of Carrion and his rights," General Rumena said, sounding amused.

It – Cordelia had learned that the drow eschewed sexes, and found insult in their use – was smiling most unsettlingly, the pale blue eyes that seemed universal to its kind never blinking. It was ancient, the First Prince tell that much by a simple glance. Yet it also *looked* ancient. Given that the Black Queen had once casually mentioned her attendant, the one they called the Lord of Silent Steps, had been alive before the Conquest and yet looked near boyish the princess had to wonder how long it would take for age to become so visible among one of their kind. Centuries? A thousand years?

"Why don't you take this one, Leo," the Tyrant of Helike said, grinning as he winked. "Did I not say that I would allow other voices than my own to be heard?"

The Basileus of Nicae, Leo Trakas, looked hesitant at the sudden offer. The young man was unfortunately not a well-known quantity to her. Until recently his ancient office had been the lesser of the powers in the city-state, largely concerned with stewardship and ceremony while the ruling Strategos truly held the reins. Strategos Nereida Silantis had been an ally of hers, and one cultivated by half a decade of gifts and correspondence as well as fair mediation between Ashur and Nicae. She'd also died when the Tyrant took Nicae and in the chaos Leo Trakas had seized great authority, preventing the nomination of another Strategos. His victories against the Thalassocracy had since ensured he was highly popular in Nicae, though his hold on rule was a great deal more fragile than one would assume at first glance.

He'd be deposed within the month, should he blunder badly enough the people turned against him. The Basileus mastered himself, after a moment, and as Kairos Theodosian had no doubt expected him to do he chose the safe path.

"The League of Free Cities abstains," Leo Trakas said.

Which left only one vote, until Procer delivered its own.

"The Thalassocracy abstains," Sitter Ahirom said.

The man had kept his composure, but it was visibly fraying at the seams. As it would be, Cordelia thought. Magon Hadast might have been forced to break alliances to repay a debt of gratitude and prevent the starvation of his people

that might follow *ingratitude*, but keeping company with Keter and Ater was nothing to be proud of. Much less when it was becoming increasingly clear that neither the Crown nor the Tower were quite as masterful as they'd no doubt pretended to be.

"The Principate of Procer supports the motion," Cordelia Hasenbach crisply spoke into the silence. "Four in favour and two abstentions, the motion passes. The Carrion Lord's right to speak for the designated peoples is accepted by this hall."

In the silence that followed, the First Prince of Procer mused, one could almost hear the first spark of civil war in the Wasteland.

—

It had all been going smoothly, which in Vivienne Dartwick's experience meant the other shoe was due to drop.

The Black Knight – she knew he held the Name no longer, but how could that man ever be anything but the Black Knight in her eyes? – had a seat at the table without this conference and its heart, the Grand Alliance, overreaching by attempting to enthrone him. Most importantly, the careful wording the First Prince had convinced Lord Yannu to employ had deep implications down the line. *And any who come under his banner*, the large Levantine had said, and the wording had been upheld even if Hasenbach had been careful not to repeat it. It meant that the Black Knight could be offered terms now, lenient ones, and that those terms could then be made to apply to all of Praes should he become Dread Emperor. As Dread Empress Malicia had earned little but hate from those in this hall, any terms she might receive would be decidedly inferior. It was leverage that might tip the scales win favour of supporting the Carrion Lord among certain Praesi, though unless the Empress outright abdicated it was good as certain there'd be a civil war between their supporters.

Not necessarily a long one, given that the loyalties of the Legions of Terror might just swing in his favour hard and early, but Wasteland wars were always nasty stuff.

Another two rounds of the tables saw confirmed the recognition of Dread Empress Malicia – even the Carrion Lord voted in favour, amusingly enough, which made the vote unanimous in favour with Magister Zoe Ixioni's assent in the name of the League – and another for the Dead King. Ashur abstained on that one, as did the Black Knight, and Nestor Ikaroi of the Secretariat voted *against* in the name of the League. Malicia was his sworn ally, however, and the Grand Alliance delegations had all been forewarned and agreed on common action, which meant that the majority in favour carried the vote. The King of Death had his seat and his vote, at least for now. Not that the motions had much power outside the strictures of the peace conference: they were a tool to manipulate the rules of this game through formality, not something that could be used to truly produce diplomatic results.

Vivienne had voiced the votes for the Kingdom of Callow both times, Catherine remaining silent. She knew well what it was Cat was doing, giving her the

duty to speak for their shared home in front of every great power on Calernia. It was as tacit an endorsement of her as a successor there could be without Vivienne being named a princess, which would be... complicated to accomplish, and likely require her adoption into House Foundling. Setting aside the thoughts, Vivienne forced herself to sharpen her focus on the proceedings. Though the Dead King had yet to speak a word, little more than a grim sculpture of bones, the Empress had no shared such compulsions. With a pleasant, sonorous voice – Vivienne wondered if the body had been picked for it – she opened her part of the dance. The Carrion Lord, a mere landless rebel, had been allowed to address the hall while the rightful ruler of Praes had been denied the same right, she said, which was miscarriage of procedure.

It was not an unexpected assault. Hasenbach had named it a likely avenue, since refusing the Empress would taint the appearance of fair proceedings and accepting would allow her to go on the offensive while bypassing the agreed-on order of affairs. Which would otherwise keep her contained until hours into the talks simply by speaking of very little Praes could weigh in on.

"We recognize the words of Dread Empress Malicia of Praes," the First Prince said.

Malicia's mangled puppet smoothly rose to her feet.

"The Dread Empire cedes its speaking right to the Thalassocracy of Ashur," she smoothly said.

*Ah*, Vivienne thought, almost grimacing. And there went the first stumble in the plan. Tightening the vise on the opposition by hammering home how isolated the League and the Empire were one motion after another wouldn't work if Ashur withdrew from the Grand Alliance formally before the talks had even begun. Sitter Ahirom rose to his feet, acknowledging the First Prince's evenly spoken recognition of his right to speak with a nod.

"I speak now the words of Magon Hadast, citizen of the second tier of the Baalite Hegemony, Sitter of the Eminent Committee," the man said.

A heartbeat of silence passed.

"As of this day, the Thalassocracy of Ashur declares its withdrawal from the Grand Alliance and all attendant treaties," Sitter Ahirom said.

Few across the room were surprised, and those that were told much to Vivienne. The Dominion had been brought into this early and the Firstborn had only middling interest in matters unrelated to the war against the Dead King, but the lack of surprise did come as a surprise to Sitter Ahirom himself. It was as the First Prince had speculated, then: Ashur was good as blind on the continent, and clutching at any offered driftwood that would prevent it from drowning. More interestingly, there was a great deal of surprise among the League's delegation. *Not Magister Ixioni, though*, Vivienne thought. Helike and Stygia were traditionally kept close alliance when the League was at war, as they fielded its finest armies and typically both benefited greatly from strife. A Tyrant's rule also meant that Below held the reins in both city-states, buoying Evil in the Free Cities for a span.

Delos and Atalante had both had no idea. The general from Bellerophon still looked lost and afraid of asking questions, but the two Penthesians were calm. Better at hiding their thoughts, or in the know?

"Penthes?" Vivienne murmured.

"Theodosian owns and informs them, I'd wager," the Black Knight softly said. "Prodocius has an emperor's ambition and the wits of a well-bred trout while Honorion is afflicted by that peculiar condition where one comes to believe that gold makes up for any and all shortcomings. Scribe has theorized the Tyrant ensured they'd be the last two claimants because they are singularly inept at anything but banquets and squabbling."

"If he leans towards one we could back the other," Hakram suggested.

"Tyrant's too canny for that," Cat grunted. "He'll have them both convinced he's secretly helping them against the other."

"The Empire has influence there as well, through trade," the Black Knight said. "Penthes is a dead end. Nicae might not be."

Basileus Leo Trakas looked like someone had slapped him across the face. He was a handsome one, Vivienne thought, though less so when his eyes were narrowed in surprised anger.

"He doesn't know about the ships yet," Vivienne quietly said. "Otherwise he'd be storming out. Trakas only thinks he's about to get strong-armed into backing off Ashur by his own side."

"Agreed," Catherine said. "He's not smooth enough to keep it in the pot if he gets knifed that hard and deep in the back."

"Then we approach him during the recess," Hakram said. "We lack proof beyond the Tyrant's own words, which only a fool would take, but the groundwork can be laid."

"Hasenbach tried to use Nicae as a counterweight for Kairos and that went over about as well as pepper in a kennel," Cat reminded them.

"If enough of the League's armies keep withdrawing to their territory, it no longer matters that Theodosian is dominant," the Black Knight noted. "He'll no longer have the strength to collapse Procer or invade Callow, which effectively muzzles him."

Which would be ideal, as far as she was concerned, since acting against the madman outright was likely to see them burned. If he could instead be dragged back into the lesser squabbles of the League of Free Cities until the war against Keter was brought to an end it should be significantly less risky of a proposition. Which meant bending the individual city-states, and that would require significantly more pressure than the coalition had brought to bear so far.

"We need to strike while they're still uncertain," Vivienne said.

Catherine looked at her curiously.

"We out it now, Cat," Vivienne said. "It's out of the order, but then so was this. It ought to put them on the back foot again."

The Queen of Callow considered it for a moment, then nodded.

"Hakram," she said, "find me an in."

The orc's brow creased as he put his superb memory to work.

"This isn't a motion, it's an address," the Adjutant said. "Which means we can ask for right of reply on if what we speak of is associated. If the First Prince grant it, which I'd venture to assume."

Catherine's lips quirked into half a smile and she turned.

"Do it."

Vivienne started in surprise, looking at the woman that was both her ruler and her friend.

"This isn't a vote, Cat," she said. "It's-"

"I know what it is," Catherine said. "It was your notion, and a good one. Besides, you're the one who'll reign under it. Speak the words."

Vivienne breathed out shallowly. But it was too late to flinch, to fear. It'd been too late since that night in Laure where she'd chosen to bet on the Squire. She rose to her feet.

"The Kingdom of Callow request right of reply," Vivienne Dartwick said.

Cordelia Hasenbach, tall and fair and with eyes like chips of ice, considered her for a moment.

"We recognize the words of Lady Dartwick, heiress-designate to Callow," the First Prince said.

"Pertaining the Grand Alliance, as addressed by Sitter Ahirom," Vivienne said, "we declare now before Gods and men that the Kingdom of Callow is a member and signatory."

# Interlude: All Ye Villains

> "In studying our histories I have cast aside old mistakes, instead embracing fresh and interesting ones."
>
> Dread Empress Atrocious, later devoured by man-eating tapirs

The games being played on this marble floor, Hakram thought, were no less deadly than any played axe in hand. Perhaps even deadlier, for an axe took one life at a time while here a streak of ink and a sharp phrase could kindle the death of thousands. Most of his kind despised the ways of the Tower's court: the poisons drunk and spoken, the colourful clothes worth a manse and the alliances that came and went faster than the tides. It was not that orcs knew nothing of treachery or cunning ways, for though the Adjutant had long left behind the Steppes he still remembered the spoken histories and there were betrayals aplenty in the tales. Some were spoken of as reverently as great deeds unsullied, for though the treachery was not in question neither was the greatness.

Aslog Ironfoot's warbands turning on Warlord Gorm at the Battle of the Lights, bringing bloody end to Eldest Horde. Dagmar Hardteeth allying with the Queen of Okoro to murder their rivals by sorcery and surprise at the gathering of the thaw. And lesser betrayals, too were spoken of, not worthy of legend. Not even a century ago the Blackspear Clan had broken alliance with the Howling Wolves at the incitement of the Painted Dogs, allowing warbands through their territory, and then ambushed the returning Dogs to take the spoils of the cattle-raids. No legend had come of this, no tale save that Blackspear blood flowed without honour. No, Hakram Deadhand did not believe the Clans to be made of finer stuff than the rest of Creation, for their history spoke otherwise time and time again.

Yet his people disdained those who made sport of their own word, those who pretended to valour and honour while acting otherwise. And there was a sense of that, hanging around this great hall. Vivienne's words were ringing still, yet the harvest of surprise they reaped was meagre indeed. A few of the Tyrant's playthings, the Thalassocracy's man – who like the nation he stood for was this day isolated and out of his depths, ship bound to currents unknown – and those few scribes and translators too low in status to have warranted

warning. The Dread Empress of Praes, wearing a mutilated and marked body like a coat, betrayed no surprise. Neither did the grinning devil known as Kairos Theodosian, or the utterly still corpse inhabited by the Dead King.

It was the first of these that Hakram was most wary of. Malicia had lost the reins of much she once commanded, but the most dangerous part of the Empress had ever been her boldness and clever mind, neither of which had been taken from her. Catherine thought her half-spent a force, with jackals circling the Tower and her realm deeply wounded, and dangerous mostly in that way a desperate villain tended to be. The Adjutant was not so certain. The Empress had not even attempted to bring the Carrion Lord to her side, by scrying or sent agent, this he knew for a fact: as the Eyes had people in the Army of Callow, so did the Jacks have people among the Legions-in-Exile. And the Scribe would have forewarned them, if those eyes were fooled, for the Adjutant understood her in a way most frightful.

He would act in similar manner, if Catherine was preparing to throw away her life and life's work.

And so while the hall twisted and turned, twining around the already half-known revelation that the Grand Alliance had known of Ashur's unfaithfulness and behind the Thalassocracy's own back prepared answer of its own, Hakram Deadhand watched the Empress. Malicia was not beloved of his people as her right hand had been, still was, for unlike the Carrion Lord she had neither been warlord nor tireless defender. Yet she was respected, by the wise among the Clans, for having enacted the Reforms without needing to cram them down the throat of the High Lords by civil war as the Black Knight's iron-handed ways might well have required. She had been good the orcs in a way few of her predecessors could boast, and never given slight without reason nor meddled in the affairs of the Clans beyond the old rights of the Tower.

Malicia had been a fair ruler to his people in most regards, Hakram thought, and looking upon the puppet-thing she now wore he could not bring himself to believe her to have gone the way of the Old Tyrants. The Empress had bought and paid for the Doom of Liesse, it could not be denied, yet meant to use is to serve the principles she had once writ in her treatise *'The Death of the Age of Wonders'*. She'd since used only the blades of assassins, sharp intrigue and the sole doomsday weapon of the Warlock that was already known to Calernia. Still Water was a thing of terror, true, but it should not be forgot that in the eyes of most in this room that terror had already been laid at the Empress' feet.

She lost little by using it, and gained form the use a great fleet as well as means to influence Ashur into leaving the Grand Alliance. It had not been a careless or desperate act, he thought. Which meant Malicia's keen edge had not faded, and nothing of the play taking place in this hall was a coincidence. Not even that raw thing that the Carrion Lord's voice had carried, when he good as begged for a reason not to turn on her. It'd be a damned cold thing, making that cut on purpose.

But cold was oft the winner, in Wasteland games.

"Catherine," the Adjutant whispered in Kharsum, leaning closer to her. "I think we are being had."

Tanned face set into a calm look as she studied the hall, his warlord slowly nodded.

"There's no swing in them," the Black Queen murmured. "This isn't their game. We misread them, Hakram."

As was often the case whenever Catherine's eyes narrowed and her twisty mind wandered down paths the rest of them could only dimly glimpse, Hakram was forced to take a moment to parse what she'd said. *Not enough swing*. As in the opposition was not putting up a fight, and so without pause she had decided it meant they saw what was happening as not worth fighting over. It might be argued instead, Hakram knew, that Callow's entering of the Grand Alliance was good as certain, and so the opposition had not considered it something that could be fought. Yet the Adjutant's instincts sung in accord with his queen's, for one did not face the longest-reigning Dread Empress in the history of the Wasteland and the King of Death himself and received so little 'swing', as his warlord had said.

Vivienne sat down even as a clarification was requested by the current speaker for the League of Free Cities – Basileus Leo Trakas once more – as to the veracity of the statement made by Lady Dartwick. Confirmation from the First Prince and Lord Yannu Marave followed.

"If they have no stake in this, then their victory lies not in a contested field," the Carrion Lord quietly said.

"That would mean they're not looking to get anything out of this conference," Vivienne said, her Kharsum still a little ragged even though they regularly practiced together. "So why are they even here?"

Catherine's hand half-reached to the pockets sown within her cloak, before she remembered it would be unseemly for her to light her pipe before so many eminent rulers. She forced it back down and let out an annoyed hiss through her teeth. Odds were, Hakram fondly thought, that she did not even realize how around greenskins she tended to mimic their manners. That particular manner of hissing couldn't properly be done without goblin teeth, for unlike theirs human teeth had no gaps when put together, but more than once Adjutant had seen goblins shoot her almost awestruck looks when she did it before them. There was a reason half the goblins in the Army of Callow considered her to be a Matron in human flesh, and contrary to what Indrani kept insinuating it wasn't the height. Well, not only the height.

"Where else are they going to get a gathering like this?" Catherine said. "What happens in the conference is as dust to them, I bet. But they've got an audience with the powerful of most Calernia here, don't they? They're hear for the ears, not the tongues."

Utter silence seized the room, sudden and oppressive. Half the hall was watching the same thing, and Adjutant followed their gaze. The Dead King he saw, had moved for the very first time since his body sat. His skull had turned

to gaze at Catherine, hollow sockets empty and unblinking. The slightest of tremors was going through the skeletal thing, Adjutant saw, and for a moment he did not understand. Then he did, and his blood went cold.

The Dead King was looking at Catherine Foundling, and shaking as he *laughed*.

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The Enemy was laughing.

Cordelia Hasenbach was not one to boast of bravery, for hers were not the gifts of courage on the field, yet neither did she consider herself to be faint of heart. And yet the sight of the Hidden Horror's silent tremors of amusement sent a shiver up her spine. That the monster was gazing unerringly at the Black Queen as he did only made it eerier. The blonde princess did not allow it to reach her face, or seep in her eyes, instead thinking of Hannoven. Of the city broken once more, walls torn down and her kinsmen slaughtered to the last. Cordelia thought of the brave men and women who'd died on those walls, keeping dawn from failing just a little while longer, and when cold wroth roared through her veins she fed it the fear. Composure returned to her, for that anger was an old friend, and finally she gestured for the page standing behind her table to step forward. At her side, Agnes suddenly stirred.

"Magon Hadast was killed," the Augur said.

Agnes, she saw, was staring at the Carrion Lord. The page passed Cordelia a sealed scroll, bearing scarlet wax stamped with the heraldry of the Order of the Red Lion. She set it down and turned a sharp gaze on her cousin.

"Is he dead now," Cordelia whispered, "or is he going to die?"

Agnes blinked sleepily, a look of utter frustration flickering across her face. It took her a moment to speak again, as if she had to piece together once more when and where she was.

"Soon," the Augur said. "Many branches but always he dies. The spider waited until he was too deep in the web to turn back. There is nothing anyone can do. Too quick. All the paths are dead ends."

She hesitated, scowling.

"They are learning," she admitted.

The spider, Cordelia thought. There were some who called the Scribe the Webweaver, in the Wasteland, yet the Augur had used the word before to mean another. The Assassin, who more than once had tried to take her own life and that of people dear to her. Had this been the order of the Carrion Lord, then? The other villain was said to answer to him alone. Ashur had made bargain with Malicia, and so Magon Hadast was to die? It would sow chaos, Cordelia admitted to herself, until the old man's successor consolidated power. The heir that'd been groomed before had died at Thalassina and now only distant relatives remained, none of which would be a deft hand a navigating the Thalassocracy's labyrinth of committees and bureaucracy. It was still unacceptable, if it was truly the Carrion Lord's order.

Magon Hadast had long been her ally, and for his defection now she blamed him not as the Grand Alliance had failed him before he it. He might yet return, besides, given time enough for it. To have him so casually ordered slain was a foul thing, though no less than should be expected form a rabid animal like the Carrion Lord.

"Darkness looms, Cordelia," Agnes murmured. "Tarry not in opening the scroll."

Lips tightening in sudden wariness, the First Prince reached for the parchment and broke the seal. She unfurled the scroll and her eyes moved carefully across the contents. This was not a direct report but instead the welding of several, from across broad swaths of Procer. Three names in particular caught her eye: Prince Otto Reitzenberg, Prince Gaspard Langevin and Princess Beatrice Volignac. The ranking commanders on the three northern fronts of the Principate, at least in principle. Prince Otto's words were coming from the Morgentor, the last fortress held in Twilight's Pass, and though he cautioned of the Enemy possibly laying a trap Gaspard of Cleves and Beatrice of Hainaut were both seeing the same thing. And like Prince Otto they'd followed the dead carefully. Cordelia turned to the awaiting page.

"One whose authority was the scroll sent?" she curtly asked.

"Anselme of Beaudry, Your Highness," the man quietly replied.

A telling detail. Anselme of Beaudry was the ranking officer of the Order of the Red Lion in Salia, and Cordelia had chosen him for that office in large part because his cautious and meticulous nature. He would not have sent such a scroll without first making certain there had been no misunderstanding or sudden change. The First Prince quietly thanked and dismissed the page, mind racing, before glancing meaningfully at one her closest attendant. The young woman approached discreetly.

"Have word passed to the Callowan and Levantine delegations that I will put forward an extraordinary motion for immediate recess and I would request they support it," Cordelia said. "There is urgent need for a private discussion between us."

Cordelia allowed time for the messages to be passed, through Razin Tanja for the Dominion and the heiress to the Barony of Harrow for Callow. When the First Prince of Procer asked for immediate recess soon after, the vote in favour was unanimous. The Enemy's gazed moved towards her as it deigned to vote for the first time that day, silently raising a hand in approval.

The Dead King had yet to speak even once, and some part of Cordelia Hasenbach felt blind dread at that realization.

—

Half an hour of recess had been voted on, and Hakram found himself part of the handful of guests invited into a nearby parlour by the First Prince. The Blood were likely to be brought in as well, he guessed, for whatever it was that Cordelia Hasenbach had learned it seemed to concern all signatories of the Grand Alliance. The Carrion Lord's presence along with Catherine, Vivienne

and himself was a reality all involved politely refrained from looking in the eye, as the man was deeply despised in Procer and might well have been excluded from such talks if not for the Queen of Callow's influence. It was an almost amusing turn, that after early years of relying of the Black Knight's power and influence it was not the same man who was relying on his former pupil's instead.

There was an almost feverish energy to Cordelia Hasenbach, Adjutant saw when they entered the parlour. Though she was composed as ever, she was standing instead of seated and looking at her gave the sense she had a burning urge to pace that only manners were keeping at bay. Catherine limped in ahead, eyes considering as she took in the sight of the full roster of the Blood as well Princess Rozala. Liveried servants offered refreshments that all refused, and Hakram noted with exasperated amusement that his warlord's eyes were lingering a little longer than necessary on Rozala Malanza. Half the Blood too, though he was surprised that among the men she seemed to prefer the almost orcish frame of Yannu Marave to Razin Tanja's, who was much closer in age.

As she was less than discreet he wondered if offence might accidentally been given, but if he was reading the expression correctly Lady Aquiline Osena looked more flattered than anything else by the roving eye. He met Vivienne's eyes in shared aggravation behind Catherine's back, though he figured at least they should be pleased she'd not been undressing the First Prince of Procer with her eyes. That might go over poorly, he thought. As the others advanced and went to stand with the other nobles Hakram remained at the back near the threshold, where he could watch from a distance. A set of eyes removed from the thick of it was often more useful than another wagging tongue, he'd found, and he'd always disliked wandering into arguments without first taking the measure of all that was being said.

"Thank you all for coming," Cordelia Hasenbach gravely said. "And for your trust in aiding my motion."

"You seem to have received news," Lady Itima Ifriqui said, rather bluntly.

"I have," the First Prince agreed. "I have received reports from all three northern fronts against Keter, and they all speak to the same truth: the dead are retreating."

Exclamations of surprise from many here followed, though not Hakram Deadhand or the queen that had chosen him as much as he had chosen her. Catherine Foundling's hand went inside her cloak and Adjutant, Name tugging at his feet, was moving before she could even begin stuffing the pipe with a satchel of wakeleaf. He struck a match a heartbeat before she extended her pipe, lighting it neatly, and was offered a thankful flash of pearly teeth before stepping back. The nerve of the Lord of Silent Steps, that it'd think itself fit to step in between the ordained cogs of fate with its little moving tricks. You didn't need to move swift as an arrow to see too things, just leave at the right time moving to the right pace.

"Does the Hidden Horror seek to hold the northern shores against us?" Lady Aquiline frowned. "It hardly seems necessary, given his advantages."

"It will allow us time to bring our armies to bear, regardless," Lady Itima said. "A blunder, this."

Catherine blew out an acrid stream of smoke that had Lord Yannu wrinkling his nose in distaste at the smell.

"No," the Black Queen said, "it wasn't. We just got knifed in broad daylight, make no mistake about that."

It amused Hakram a great deal that though several of the great nobles here suppressed distasted as the spoken 'us', not a single one of them denied it. It seemed that his warlord's usefulness had at last outstripped the distaste these *righteous* folks had for the colour of her cloak.

"You believe this to be a scheme," Cordelia Hasenbach said, then sharply nodded. "I agree. This is a poor decision by the eye of a general, which means it was made by another."

"They're going to offer us a truce out there," Catherine said, jabbing a thumb towards the wall.

The wrong one, Hakram drily noted, if she meant to point towards the hall.

"They?" Lord Yannu calmly asked.

"This is, if not outright the plan of Dread Empress Malicia, at least in part her notion," the Carrion Lord tiredly said. "This sort of manoeuvre is her very signature: weakening the opposition then posing great incentive to keep a truce that allows her to further work on dismantling her enemies without the direct use of force."

First Prince Cordelia would not doubt be the first of that western lot to grasp what exactly it had meant, when the Hidden Horror had extended Catherine an offer to sign the Liesse Accords last night. The implications of it, in the long term.

"We have no reason to accept this truce even if it offered," Razin Tanja flatly said. "We war against Keter to the end, and Dread Empress Malicia makes herself enemy to all that live through alliance with it."

Vivienne Dartwick had spent years in the shade of one of the great villains of their age and yet more in the service of another, so it was no surprise she caught on quick.

"If the decision was made solely in this room, you would be right," Vivienne grimly said.

"They will be seeding rumours of the offer of truce even as we speak," Cordelia Hasenbach told them all. "In Salia and everywhere they can, which given the reach of the Dread Empire and the Tyrant of Helike is far and wide."

Her lips thinned.

"There will be riots if we push for prosecuting a war against the Dead King in the face of offered peace while the north is months away from collapse," the First Prince said. "Mayhaps even rebellion."

"The odds are strong that the Empress will declare a treaty of mutual protection with Keter," Lord Amadeus calmly said. "The Dead King ought to agree, as otherwise there would be free hand to settle his sole reliable ally."

"Why should we pursue if the Hidden Horror retreats to his lands?" Lord Yannu Marave bluntly asked. "Is that not the victory we sought to achieve?"

The King of Death had not even yet spoken, Adjutant darkly thought, and already he was drawing blood among the Grand Alliance's ranks.

"You would call *this* victory?" Razin Tanja scathingly replied. "Keter coming and going as it pleases, massacring any who oppose it?"

"Are we then to send armies to die in the Kingdom of the Dead for the sake of your boyish swagger?" Lord Yannu harshly retorted.

"Better honourable death than a coward's disgrace," Lady Aquiline sneered.

"This is what he wants," Princess Rozala said, voice cutting through the rising noise. "Chaos among our ranks. It is why he is marching north instead of south, because if he does not we are a *threat*."

"Well said," First Prince Cordelia calmly added. "Make no mistake, my friends, the Enemy cares nothing for peace. He has only ever known truce, and ever broken it when suited him."

"We have yet to speak of the League," Lady Itima said. "The Tyrant offers aid to their wicked lot and sows chaos in his own ranks. It is madness, and I would not let a hound gone sick lounge at my threshold for long."

"That is the nature of Kairos Theodosian," Catherine said. "He will set fires until either the world is ash or he is."

She had not spoken loudly, but it commanded the attention of all in the parlour. She blew out another stream of smoke, visibly savouring the leaf.

"Can't set fires if there's nothing left, though," she idly continued. "And that's what happens if the Dead King wins. So I'd suggest we all save ourselves some trouble and invite the Tyrant of Helike in here."

She grinned.

"I'm rather curious how long it'll take him to sell out the King of Death, this time."

# Interlude: So Smile, Tyrants

> "And so as night fell over the Blessed Isle, his Dread Majesty sent across the river the corpse of Prince Robert and the captured Princess Juliana, still bound in chains, for when released she had bit off the ear of the High Lord of Okoro. King Selwyn Fairfax rode halfway across the bridge, where he thus addressed His Dread Majesty: 'You have fought this war grimly on the field and gallantly beyond. Would that you had been born west of the river, under a virtuous star.' And so His Dread Majesty replied: 'For having been born east of the river I became instead a man to pluck stars from the sky. Is that not a higher virtue?' "
>
> Extract from 'Commentaries on the Campaigns of Dread Emperor Terribilis the Second'

To match the coming Damned, Chosen had been sent for.

Because Creation was a strange and ironic thing, Rozala Malanza thought, this had been the suggestion of Catherine Foundling and opposed largely by Cordelia Hasenbach. Not that the First Prince would be so uncouth as to risk offending the Dominion by implying its favourite son was anything other than a treasured ally. There'd been talk instead that the Peregrine's presence might incite the Tyrant to misbehave, that surely the White Knight himself would be enough. Princess Rozala suspected that the First Prince had known it would fail, and it had, but had allowed herself to vent a sliver of personal dislike in as harmless a manner she could. That Hasenbach despised the Peregrine was no surprise to her, not since she'd heard the full story of what had taken place at Saudant. The sleepy little fishing village by the shores of Lake Artoise that had been butchered to bring the Carrion Lord to heel, leaving not a single survivor. Not even children.

It had shaken Rozala's high esteem of the Chosen, to hear this. A greater good had been achieved by the act, that much could not be denied. How many more dozens of thousands would have died if the Legions of Terror slipped the noose in Iserre to ravage the western principalities as well? Yet it'd been a grave evil, that too could not be denied, and one dealt unto a sworn ally. The First Prince's view of the matter was without nuance, but the Princess of Aequitan could not quite bring herself to share it in full. She remembered still

the Grey Pilgrim saving thousands of lives during the Battle of the Camps, and almost as many after when he went from wounded to wounded and worked his healing to exhaustion. It had been an ugly choice the old hero made, and one he had no right to make. But did they not breathe a little *easier* for it? Were they not, behind the outrage at the lives taken and the brutality of the act, all a little grateful for what had come of it?

The dark-haired princess could not embrace the choice he had made, the deaths it had meant, but neither would she condemn it outright. It would be hypocrisy of the worst sort to let Peregrine undertake the bloody work of capturing the Carrion Lord for them and then in the same breath to complain of his murderous meddling.

"Princess Rozala?"

The Arlesite general turned a pleasant smile upon the woman who had approached her, for this was a relationship that must be cultivated for years to come should they all survive these dark times. Lady Vivienne Dartwick cut rather more regal a figure when out of the thief's leathers she'd worn at the truce talks in northern Callow, though Rozala decided that the milkmaid braid crowned by a tasteful silver circlet rather helped the effect. It was said she'd once been a Chosen, before the Black Queen turned her to villainy. Though few believed the Black Queen's handpicked successor to be anything close to 'redeemed' from such damnation, she was still considered rather less incendiary an interlocutor in diplomatic talks. Nobly born as well, for House Dartwick was on the Callowan lists of nobility, which was a balm on the pride of those who still balked at negotiating with a no-name orphan like Catherine Foundling. A foolish thing, that, when the shadow of that orphan's displeasure had half of Calernia shaking in its boots, but pride could oft be a foolish thing.

"Lady Dartwick," Rozala replied. "How may I be of service?"

"The Lord Adjutant is being sent out by my queen and will require a guide," Lady Vivienne said. "If I might trouble you to provide one?"

A matter of too little importance to speak to the First Prince over, Rozala idly thought, yet requiring the assistance and assent of a high-ranked Proceran. The Callowan noble had correctly navigated etiquette in approaching her, which was a refreshing change compared to her mistress – who largely behaved as if she were above such things. Rather more gallingly, she was not wrong to believe so.

"My personal secretary Louis Rohanon will see to it," the Princess of Aequitan said.

She discreetly gestured for one of the attendants to approach her, so Louis could be informed of her request. It was insulting that her dear friend's abdication of his crown for the sake of the Principate meant he no longer qualified to attend councils such as this, but given the recent... agitation in Salia the princess knew it was not the time to test the First Prince's tolerance.

"Will the Lord Adjutant be leaving us, then?" Rozala asked.

She would not mind that, for the quiet watchfulness in the orc's eyes spoke of little missed. Yet it would not do to loose a Damned without first learning where he would head, and for what purpose.

"Queen Catherine intends to sound out the loyalties and interests of Nicae," Lady Vivienne said.

And she'd sent out an *orc* to do so? The Princess of Aequitan was no village bumpkin, to believe orcs men turned to corrupted forms by some ancient sin and the hand of Below, but it could not be denied that the Deadhand's large fangs and leathery skin fed into his looming presence to unsettling result. Though the Lord Adjutant had struck her a clever-minded and methodical, he hardly made for a pleasant envoy. Unless, of course, a reminder of force was what the Black Queen meant to send. Who could truly know, with that one?

"Then allow me to offer my secretary's services as scholar and translator," Princess Rozala suggested.

The heiress-designate eyed her pensively. It would mean anything spoken would later be reported to her, true, but it would also lend the weight of Procer's tacit approval to whatever was spoken. Besides, Louis truly was fluent in tradertalk and of scholarly inclination besides. He would be of practical use, regardless of all the rest.

"I thank you for the boon," Lady Vivienne said, tone formal. "I am certain Lord Adjutant will delight in the use of such an able aide."

Secrecy was not paramount to whatever the Black Queen had planned for the League, then, or perhaps even Nicae in particular. The arrangements were made swiftly, and all was in motion before the latest arrivals stirred the room. The Grey Pilgrim's stride was greeted enthusiastically by the highborn of the Blood, though rather more coolly by the Callowans and the Carrion Lord. First Prince Cordelia herself offered the due courtesies and not an inch more, for even in utter scorn the Lycaonese princess was rarely anything but flawlessly polite. The White Knight's entrance was, by contrast, was more warmly received. The Chosen's willingness to work with the Highest Assembly – though never under, for Hanno of Arward answered to the Tribunal alone – and the strictures of Proceran law had endeared him to Hasenbach and even Rozala herself, she would admit. Never before had she heard of a Chosen who would list and explain every kill he'd made in a rioting city before scholars of law so that the actions might be assessed.

At least not without hinting it was mere humouring of mortal crowns, while the White Knight had instead seemed serious and even *earnest*.

The White Knight and his companion the Witch of the Woods were also notably strong Chosen who had come to safeguard Salia and the peace talks, which had been reassuring considering who would be attending. The Black Queen, the Hierophant, the Tyrant of Helike – and now it seemed even the Hidden Horror himself. In truth Princess Rozala had been surprised at Queen Catherine's suggestion that the White Knight attend this council, for the Sword of Judgement was blatant enough a ward against her that the dark-haired gen-

eral had believed she might take offence. Apparently, Rozala Malanza faintly thought, someone had forgot to inform Catherine Foundling of this: she met the White Knight's arrival with a smile and a respectful nod, which the Chosen casually returned. Rozala was not the only one to take notice, the eyes of half the room coming to rest on the pair in silent surprise.

"Kairos Theodosian nears," the Black Queen suddenly said.

—

It had been more than a year now since the Tyrant of Helike had sworn eternal friendship to Cordelia Hasenbach. Not that she had ever believe him. Nor would she now put too much stock in anything he said, not even if Chosen insisted he had been bound by a curse of truth. If a madman believed the sky to be green, did that make it so? No, the Tyrant had been a thorn in her side for too long to be taken as anything but a peril.

The First Prince had considered the young king a diplomatic and military headache from more or less the first breath after he'd taken the throne, for he'd proven to be both cunning and very much inclined to turn that cunning against Procer. The blonde princess had once believed that Helike and its boy-king could be restrained by fetters of ink, treaties binding the League to a ten-year truce with the Principate until other affairs were settled, but that had arguably been the second-most serious diplomatic blunder of her reign. She could not be certain that the Tyrant's rise could truly be laid at her feet, for he might well have struck out for power regardless of anything she did. Yet the League's vote for truce with Procer had undeniably been the trigger of the civil war that propelled the Tyrant of Helike to greater heights. And saw Anaxares of Bellerophon elected to the office of Hierarch of the Free Cities, though in some ways that seat was still good as empty.

Still, for all that Cordelia had maneuvered and plotted against Kairos Theodosian she had never seen the man with her own eyes until he came to Salia. Much of what she had read of him proved true, the First Prince pondered once more as the Tyrant swaggered into the parlour, but it did not quite do the man justice. The thin sickliness, the loose robes that did not quite hide erratic convulsions and trembling, or even the blood-red eye under wispy brown curls: Theodosian almost seemed more notion than man, as if some godly hand had painted grinning malevolence on the canvas of Creation and crowned it king of Helike. Most of those here loathed him, the First Prince considered. Some loathed him so deeply it was like a poison in their veins. Yet looking at the young king and the two waddling gargoyles flanking him, one would think he was among friends.

"Oh my," Kairos Theodosian drawled. "Such a gathering of great and mighty names. My heart is made all aflutter."

"Lord Tyrant," Cordelia Hasenbach calmly said. "Welcome. You are thanked for accepting our invitation."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," the odd-eyed villain grinned.

"Gods, you really are such a prick," the Black Queen of Callow said, sounding almost admiring. "If I didn't know better, I'd call it an aspect."

The fair-haired Lycaonese bit down on her initial wave of fear and irritation. Much as she disliked the manners of the other ruler, it could not be denied that no one in this room had even half the understanding of the Tyrant she could boast of having. As if to prove correct her thought, instead of storming out at the casual slight and informality the other villain instead let out a cackling laugh.

"Catherine," he replied cheerfully. "A pleasure to see you, as always. Is that my old friend Amadeus I see cowering in your shadow?"

The Carrion Lord, who had kept his peace and spoken only sparingly since his declaration of war on the Tower, never lost his air of cold indifference.

"It is a rather broad shadow, these days," the Carrion Lord casually replied. "It makes for comfortable cowering."

The choking sound from her side was, Cordelia realized, most of the Blood supressing laughter.

"An empire's worth of room, eh?" the Tyrant sneered. "I wonder, did the broken spine take the Name or was it the other way around?"

She must step in now else the villain would needle everyone here 'til Last Dusk. Satisfying as it was to hear the Carrion Lord pricked, it did nothing to endear the one pricking him to her heart. Or advance the cause of Procer's survival to let it devour time from the recess, for that matter.

"The Dread Empire of Praes," the First Prince said, "is not why it was asked you attend this council."

"Then by all means," Kairos Theodosian drawled, "reveal this revelation to me, Warden of the West."

Cordelia stepped forward, back straight. Closer to a villain whose suspected body count was in the hundreds, who had once router an entire host by wielding a storm and not so long ago ripped out thousands in cavalry from Arcadia and smashed them down onto the earth. She stepped forward with utter calm, for these were *her* chosen grounds and her favoured manner of strife.

"Circumstances have ensured there is an alignment in our interests, Lord Tyrant," Cordelia said.

A heartbeat passed; the blood-red eye blinked.

"Boring," the boy-king said, solemn as a judge passing a sentence.

"Yet here you are, standing among us," the First Prince said, unruffled. "Itching to turn on the Crown and Tower who have used you better than you used them."

"Slightly less boring," the Tyrant conceded. "Still I've yet to hear a single reason I should break such deep trust or sunder a precious bond of fellowship."

"You require assurances, understandably," Cordelia said. "This can be arranged. You stand, as you said, among an assembly of great and mighty names."

"And what would be required of me in exchange for these assurances?" the Tyrant grinned. "Go on now, Warden of the West. Do not disappoint."

"You have been deep in the Enemy's councils, Lord Tyrant," Cordelia said. "Reveal their plans to us and-"

"Nononon*o*," the Tyrant of Helike interrupted, growing increasingly shrill. "That was not the right thing to ask. You're doing it *wrong*."

The villain seemed genuinely agitated, his arm slipping out of the folded sleeve hiding it in a spasm. His brown eye had grown watery, as if he were in pain or sorrow. The First Prince was taken aback, and for once uncertain as to how she should respond. A limping gait whispered across the floor, the Black Queen hobbling behind the Tyrant's back and slowing only to offer her the most *insolent* wink Cordelia had ever seen. She flushed.

"Sometimes they need us devils to speak the ugly things, Kairos, you ought to know that by now," Queen Catherine said, tone teasing.

Tension in the Tyrant's shoulders loosened by a fraction at the words, and Cordelia grasped the game. Silk and the steel, then. She was more used to standing as the former than the latter, but not unskilled at the exercise.

"*Say it*," Kairos Theodosian demanded.

"Give us a good reason to keep warring on Keter," the Black Queen said.

As she often did, the Queen of Callow was cutting to the bone of it for that was the truth exact of what they needed. A great banner of fear and outrage that would bind Principate – and beyond – to pursuit of the war against the Dead King, and if there was one man who might give them that at this very moment it was the Tyrant of Helike.

"Ah," the odd-eyed king said, savouring the sound. "There it is. Now, let the mangled relic in the corner attest to my words – not you Amadeus, at least this time – and pronounce truth where it is. I have such a reason and can reveal it to you."

All eyes in the parlour turned to the Grey Pilgrim, whose eyes were narrowed.

"Truth," the Peregrine slowly said. "In word and intent."

"Then let us speak of price, Theodosian," Cordelia said. "Some offences may yet be forgiven, should you bargain in good faith. Wealth and honours could be laid on your brow."

Cordelia was much taller than the Tyrant and made certain to loom over him as he spoke. A tilt of the neck lent her the appearance of looking down on him as she spoke, and she added a faint hint of sneer to her lip. Dislike was as distracting a feeling as any other, and if she must wield the reputation of the Alamans abroad to best achieve it she would not balk at the indignity.

"He's not the coin kind of king, Hasenbach," the Black Queen drawled. "No, he's an old-fashioned sort. He wants his seat at the table back. Don't you, Kairos?"

Which Queen Catherine wanted no more than Cordelia herself, though with the amused glint to her eye she was doing a fair impression of desiring otherwise.

"Catherine, how distressing," the Tyrant grinned. "That would imply that I currently no longer have a seat. Am I not a participant in good standing of this peace conference?"

"Helike can be spared retribution for its reckless war-making and treachery," Cordelia said, phrasing it as a great concession. "Your abdication, however, might be required for the sake of peace."

"Now there's a familiar tune," the Black Queen smiled.

It was, the fair-haired princess thought, a little *too* sharp a smile for that sharpness to be entirely feigned.

"Ladies," the Tyrant intervened, sounding utterly delighted, "come now, is there truly need for such language? Now, unless I am mistaken there was some talk of dues."

Queen Catherine began circling again, and Cordelia breathed in. Time to see what the two of them could bargain him down to.

"You are due quite a few things," the First Prince pleasantly agreed.

"Mostly the one, as far as I am concerned," Kairos Theodosian grinned. "And dear Catherine knows what I want, she does. She even brought it for me."

The trial, Cordelia thought. It was all coming to hinge on the trial of the White Knight, as promised at the crossroad of the Princes' Graveyard. She had been warned by every Chosen and Damned she was on speaking terms with that to allow such a thing to unfold would be highly dangerous and acted accordingly.

"Your demand for a trial of the White Knight is on the official order of affairs, Lord Tyrant," the First Prince mildly said.

"Very far down the list," the Tyrant replied, just as mildly. "And I could not help to notice some details of procedures related to its positioning. Now, were I a suspicious man, I might suspect they'd allow a clever sort to put off that discussion for weeks, if not months."

Which had been the very intent. The League of Free Cities as it currently stood was a derelict taking water, and the situation would only worsen unless the Hierarch himself intervened. It was unlikely he would, meaning that waiting for a span might very well see the Tyrant's power among the League and perhaps the League itself collapse – and so make any demands of his utterly irrelevant, for he would no longer have the knife at the throats to see through his extortion.

"Then we move it up the list," the Black Queen shrugged.

"I would not wish to be unseemly in my demands," the Tyrant smiled. "And so, I've a suggestion to offer that could be considered less of an imposition."

The smile widened, until all that Cordelia could see was a thin, sharp slice of teeth and a pulsing red eye.

"Let us hold the trial *now*."

# Interlude: And So Let Us Be

> "The source of might in an army is unity, not numbers. Therefore, the mightiest of all armies numbers a single soldier."
>
> Isabella the Mad, Proceran general

Hakram was smelling a rat. Adjutant had always enjoyed using that particular human idiom, as it happened, mostly because it was patently untrue by face value. Humans had all the nose of a sparrow, stumbled around like drunks in the dark and were terribly fragile in most ways that mattered. The last had little to do with rodents, but it was always worth mentioning. As a rule, humans would not be able to smell a rat if it was nesting under their own pillow. Unlike goblins, who entirely coincidentally tended to have very full cookpots when Legions were garrisoned in cities. Goblin stew was always an enjoyable meal, Hakram thought, if not necessarily for the taste then always for the surprise.

"The Magisterium is pleased by your understanding, Lord Adjutant," Magister Zoe Ixioni smiled. "It is always a delight to speak with a professional like yourself."

The slaver – he would not forget for a moment what she was, even if she offered an empire's worth of smiles and compliments – offered Louis Rohanon a more restrained look.

"And we honour the Principate as well, of course," Magister Zoe added. "It is deplored by the enlightened members of our assembly that war was waged between our nations."

"First Prince Cordelia is a fervent adherent of peace and diplomatic resolution," Louis Rohanon replied without batting an eye, lips quirking enough to imply a smile without ever delivering it.

Princess Rozala's 'secretary', who regardless of what he was now titled had been until recently the Prince of Creusens, had proved to be fairly adept at navigating the meetings Hakram had found himself dragged into one after another. Adjutant rumbled out a breath, feeling the rhythm of Bittertongue's old song sound against his bones. *No peace can there be, between lash and orc.* It was an affront to the history of his kind that he must now speak otherwise, pretending the ways of the sorcerer-lords of Stygia did not sicken him as he watched the

magister slip away. Rohanon let out a noise of distaste, when it was only the two of them left in the room.

"I always end up feeling like I need a wash after entertaining someone from the Magisterium," Louis Rohanon admitted.

"Would that someone had laid to waste that city and its slaver-lords with it," Hakram gravelled. "Yet they have tread with care to avoid this, over the years, and it seems still."

The man nodded, slowly. He was a skinny, scholarly sort this one. Yet not without spine or cleverness, and for a Proceran seemed a surprisingly decent man. That might explain why the Jacks had found out he was so badly in debt to Iserre. Decency was unlikely to see one thrive in a place like the Highest Assembly.

"If I might speak frankly, Lord Deadhand?" Rohanon hesitatingly said.

"I would prefer it," Adjutant said. "Mine are a simple folk, and the sly ways of humans confuse me."

It was almost appalling, the orc thought, how eager people this far west were to believe that. Not so appalling he would not use it, however. The former Prince of Creusens choked.

"That would have been more believable a lie before I saw two envoys fall for it, my lord," Rohanon delicately said. "It no longer holds water in the slightest. Not that listening to Basileus Leo explain to you the office and powers of the Hierarch was not most entertaining, but I would spare myself the indignity if you'll allow it."

"Leo Trakas was a most helpful young man," Hakram drily said, neither admitting nor denying anything. "You offered frankness, Louis Rohanon, and I accepted. Speak accordingly."

"I would not dare to presume as to the Black Queen's intent in sending you out," the former prince said, "yet if you were meant to assess divisions and seek weaknesses in the League, you should have come to the same conclusion as I."

The orc studied the man, considering if this was a conversation he should be having, then lightly inclined his head I agreement.

"The League of Free Cities is on the verge of collapse," Hakram acknowledged. "Nicae has yet to hear of the disastrous fate of its fleets but already the Basileus seeks to displace Helike as the leading power. Atalante chafes under a villain's lead, and at the frequent slights it is offered."

"Bellerophon is out of its depth," Louis Rohanon noted. "I would hazard a guess its general-delegate has not received instructions from the People in weeks, if not months, and is entirely unwilling to do anything that might result in execution by the kanenas."

Which was, as far as Hakram could tell, essentially any action at all. The Republic of Bellerophon's legal system struck him as what might come to be if a dutiful scribe set down every single shout from an angry mob and made them all into law, then repeated the process half a hundred times.

"Delos remains aloof, but it appears both Stygia and Penthes are readying to leave the sinking boat," Hakram added. "Else Magister Zoe would not have been so eager to assure me theoretical alignment with the Tower would not result in military support of any kind."

"The Tower has been digging at the Tyrant's position in the Free Cities," Louis Rohanon openly aknowledged, "and the Empress has lived up to her reputation in achieving such broad success. Unless the Hierarch takes the League in hand this day it will not survive this conference as a united entity. Should he die, nearly half the League will seek the Empire's protection against coming retribution before the corpse is cold."

Which was inconvenient as without allies in either the League and the Thalassocracy the sole avenue to bring the Empire to heel was a land war of the old way, Callow and Praes entwined in the ancient dance of steel once again. Yet as much as Hakram's mind was inclined to tumble down the slope of logistics and strategy, it would be a mistake to do so. The Tyrant of Helike was the devil of the day, and what they had now discovered the Named must have already known. The ship that had carried him to the peace conference of Salia, the large and largely untouched army of a united League of Free Cities, was on the verge of collapse. As things stood, even if the Tyrant ordered these armies to ravage southern Procer most of them would ignore him and continue the retreat south. And with Catherine having crippled the famous *kataphraktoi*, Helike's own army was crippled in turn.

The Tyrant of Helike no longer had the clout to make demands. More worryingly the boy-king must have known it would come to this for weeks if not months, and he had still come. And so, Hakram was smelling a rat.

"I fear," Hakram Deadhand said, "that Lady Dartwick's instincts have proved true."

"In what way?" Louis Rohanon asked, eyes cautious.

"Kairos Theodosian is exactly where he meant to be," Adjutant said, "and cares little for the fate of the horse he rode after he ceases riding it."

—

Indrani had never been one to shy from admitting to herself when she was enjoying something, and so she wasn't going to start now: this was hilarious, and she in no way regretted striking the first spark of that debate.

"Soon you'll be telling me magic is an art and not a discipline," Masego scathingly said. "*Divine approval?* You might as well start praying for spell formulas."

"There is recorded precedent for certain workings functioning better when aligned with the words of the Book of All Things," Roland said. "While I would not-"

The Rogue Sorcerer was trying to keep things civil and academic, which naturally meant he was doomed to fail just as all voices of reason had been since First Dawn.

"Spoken like a Trismegistan coinpurse," the Witch of the Woods snorted contemptuously. "Praying would work swifter than your *method* and involve rather less scribbling of numbers. And Gods forbid you forget to carry a one: you'll melt your face instead of lighting a candle, if anything happens at all."

"While Trismegistan sorcery is known to require significantly more study than most, it has also been proven to produce more reliable-" Roland tried.

"You defend ignorance as creativity and methodology as shackles," Masego retorted, deeply appalled. "I should expect nothing more from someone who apes Ligurian magic without-"

"Dogs of Trismegistus bark not –"

"Perhaps," the Rogue Sorcerer desperately said, "we should lower our voices. At this rate illusion or not they'll *hear* us arriving."

A moment of silence followed, the two mages who'd been arguing looking away in embarrassment at how heated the conversation had grown.

"I hear Jaquinite sorcery can do stuff neither yours can do," Indrani idly said.

"That would matter, I imagine, if Jaquinite sorcery could reliably do anything in particular," Masego said.

"Teach an apprentice Proceran magic for a year and they will crush one taught Wasteland posturing for the same," the Witch of the Woods retorted without missing a beat.

*Ah*, Archer thought. *Much better*. Roland shot her a betrayed look she answered by prettily batting her eyes, and the giant wolf the Witch was riding on glared at her woefully. Indrani sniggered. 'Woeful', which worked as *two* puns because Archer was one of the Woe but it was also close to wolf and... eh, just wasn't the same when Cat wasn't there to be offended to her core by the puns. She'd keep it in mind for when she ended up giving her report, though. The four of them were getting close to Lyonceau, the small town they'd been headed towards for the better part of an hour now, so perhaps it was time to pretend she'd been on Roland's side this whole time.

Zeze and the Witch were in a full blow argument again, voices progressively rising along with the general pettiness of what was being said, so she cleared her throat loud enough it'd cut through.

"Shame on both of you," Indrani piously said, "ignoring poor Roland, when he's trying to warn you about dangers."

The Rogue Sorcerer eyed her pensively.

"I believe," he said, "that you might just be the worst person I know."

"That was unkind," Masego seriously said.

"Rogue," the Witch said, "comport yourself cordially. They are our allies for now."

There was a pause.

"You have fought the Dead King, besides," the Witch reminded him.

"I know what I said," the Rogue Sorcerer muttered.

"I forgive you, as mine is a forgiving nature," Indrani lied.

Roland met her eyes discreetly, lips moving to silently mouth *'the worst person I know'* in Chantant, and she grinned back. Indrani had grown to like the Rogue Sorcerer: he was a delight to toy with and halfway decent in a fight. Not too hard on the eyes, either, which was always nice in a boon companion. He'd also proved more useful when they'd run into the Witch of the Wilds and accusations had flown about how they were plotting to murder the entire Grand Alliance. Which Indrani was reasonably sure was not the case, since she would have had a seat at the council where that'd be decided and she'd not been *that* drunk in a while. Roland had more or less vouched for them not being up to no good – at that moment in time, anyway – and that'd led to the question of *why* the Witch would think they were up to some skulking murderousness.

The answer was, in a word, Lyonceau.

Archer herself had found there was something odd with the League's camp when she first went out on a walk thereabout, in essence because there was nothing at all odd with the League's camp. The Tyrant might be able to keep his lunacy in check for a few days, Indrani had mused, but the *Hierarch*? Unlikely. She still remembered the frightful madness that'd fallen over Rochelant like a veil, the red-handed tribunals that'd spread out like tendrils of sickness from where the Hierarch sat. It was the sort of thing you could tuck away in Arcadia or some other neat little pocket, on occasion contain behind the right sort of wards and sometimes even something you could lull into sleep. For a time. But there were always, *always* signs. So Indrani had told herself, maybe there were wards. None she could find, true, but it wasn't her specialty by any means.

Zeze had been raised by a man who'd turned warding into weapon to shatter fortresses, though, and losing his sorcery had done nothing to curb his sight. The Rogue Sorcerer had been with him then, the two of them discussing the Twilight Ways and the making of gates for it, and it'd been easy to bully – convince! *Convince* him to come along. No wards of the calibre that'd keep the Hierarch quiet in the League camp, they'd confirmed for her. Might have been a good time to go to the Crows, then, but Zeze still kind of wanted them on a vivisection table and the Sisters tended to ask payment up front for miracles from anyone but Cat. Who had half a dozen other cats to skin, about then, and a limited amount of additional hands in Hakram and Vivienne. So instead Indrani had called on the finest band of useless busybodies she knew, namely Robber and his cohort of miscreants.

Her Majestic Catherinery had helpfully turned them loose on the countryside with even looser instructions, so it'd been child's play to commandeer their little goblin legs and watchful eyes. The Hierarch had to be close, because there was no way to the Tyrant was wandering too far away from him, and it wasn't like the man was going to feed himself – so find the food, find the man. Or so had been the thought. And Robber had put his cohort to passable work, keeping a watch on the League's camp through the day and night. Unfortunately Kairos Theodosian was, as usual, a twisty little fucker. The food wagon had gone out under illusion veils, then passed through some wards carved into stones. Twice

they'd followed a wagon and lost it, which none of them had taken well pride-wise, and some Magisterium prick had caught the goblins lurking so Archer was forced to send them away.

They'd gone hunting for the ward stones instead, since those would be the key, which was when they'd run into a masked woman on a giant wolf and some very hurtful accusations. The Witch had come to it form the other way entirely, as it happened: she'd found an abandoned town a few hours out of Salia that was entirely hidden by wards and followed the wagon line from the other direction until she ran into them sniffing around a ward stone. Conclusions were leap to, though Indrani would admit that a pair of villains around a disappeared town was usually pretty damning stuff. The place was, according to the maps Roland had gotten his hands on, called Lyonceau. It was one of those small Proceran towns that emptied during winter, and according to the locals pretty much the only thing of note bout it was that it had a large House of Light: several towns and villages around used it for the festivals instead of their own small altar, since it was cheaper than building and maintaining one of their own.

It was suspicious nonetheless, all had agreed, and they'd gone to trespass – by which Indrani meant *investigate*, naturally, since you got to call it that when you were on the side of the angels. Though in theory the Witch was the one guiding them, in practice since she'd spent most the way arguing with Zeze it had been the helpful giant wolf that led them.

"This isn't right," Masego suddenly said.

All four of them were Named, and none fresh to the mantle, so the moment the Hierophant spoke the other three ceased moving forward. Indrani could see nothing but a snowy plain above, and apparently neither could Roland, but even with the mask she could see Masego and the Witch were looking at the same place.

"We've arrived?" she asked.

Leaning on her aspect might allow her to peer through an illusion or a ward, but she'd rather not begin using those too early in the day – not when there might yet be a fight ahead of them.

"We are at the outermost boundary of the wards," the Witch of the Woods said. "I grasp your meaning, Hierophant. This is... unusual work."

Roland muttered under his breath in the mage-tongue, gesturing sharply with one hand as he reached within his coat with the other. The silvery sorcery that gathered around the tip of his fingers he laid against the small wooden box he'd produced and it sank within. He opened it deftly, revealing some sort of oily ointment.

"Around the eyes," the Rogue Sorcerer told her, "and over the eyelids."

Indrani's brow rose and she dipped a finger, handling one eye and then the other. The smell was unfamiliar to her, save for what she suspected to be apple tree bark, and it tingled pleasantly against her skin. One she'd applied it as the hero had instructed, she found she could now glimpse colours where before

there had been only air. It was a vast tapestry of many-coloured threads, she thought, yet she could only ever see the threads she was directly looking at.

"It is not merely unusual work," Masego said, sounding troubled. "It, in part mine. Akua Sahelian's also, and a myriad others, but some of those patterns were first laid down by my hand."

"There are other influences in there," the Witch of the Wilds said. "Callowan wards, Aenian cants and that odd Jaquinite escapement."

"No sorcerer could make such a thing," the Hierophant said. "No living one, anyway."

"The Tyrant's bargained with the Dead King before, we know that," Indrani said. "What's so troubling about these wards anyway?"

"The Doom of Liesse was meant to bring forth devils, to forge Greater Breaches," Masego hesitantly said. "This is..."

"Angels," the Witch of the Wilds said. "They are not as easily summoned as devils, but this is meant to command the attention of angels."

Well, Archer thought, *shit*.

—

Vivienne found Adjutant waiting in the hallway, along with a worried-looking Louis Rohanon. She was not the only one to notice this, Princess Rozala excusing herself from her conversation with Lady Itima to silently join her as she sought out Hakram.

"Lord Adjutant," she greeted him, "Secretary Rohanon."

Rozala Malanza went through the same round of courtesies, receiving the same nods for it.

"The situation in the League is considerably more unstable than we'd believed," Hakram quietly said.

"We believe the Tyrant no longer holds sway," Louis Rohanon added just as quietly. "And that he was undermined by the Tower. Both Stygia and Penthes seem to be leaning towards Praes."

Which went some way in explaining why the Tyrant had willingly served as the Dead King's herald once more, Vivienne thought. She'd believed until now it was simply a matter of letting loose a wild lion in the pen so he would not seem as dangerous, but this... fit. Though a raging lunatic, the boy-king of Helike was brilliant in his own way. He must have known that the Princes' Graveyard would be the beginning of the end for his influence in the League, and with it his right to make demands of the Grand Alliance, so he had helped forge another calamity so that he could bargain away the key to beating it back in exchange for the promises being made to him being kept. The vicious wretch had yet to miss a single step, though Vivienne had a hard time believing the outcome of the Graveyard had been his intent. Most likely Catherine's victory had forced him to improvise in the wake of the defeat, leading to this fresh madness.

"It no longer matters he's lost the League," Vivienne admitted.

Surprise, from both men.

"He swore before the Peregrine he has a way out of our current predicament," Princess Rozala elaborated. "His bargaining chip has changed, though the bargain has not. He still requires the White Knight to stand trial for his actions in the League."

"When?" Hakram asked, hairless brow creasing.

"Today," Vivienne said. "The recess will be extended into a dismissal of today's session. We will be heading out to the trial's grounds presently."

Catherine and Hasenbach had returned to the hall along with Yannu Marave and the Carrion Lord to swiftly pass the motion, though given that the Grand Alliance commanded a comfortable majority in such votes that was largely a formality.

"It cannot be held in Salia, surely?" Louis Rohanon said, looking alarmed. "I know not the consequences of attempting to pass sentence onto the Sword of Judgement himself, but surely we cannot risk the people of the capital so recklessly."

"The First Prince agreed," Princess Rozala said, smiling approvingly. "The trial will be held outside the city. Haggling was had over the exact grounds, until we settled on a town in the countryside three hours' ride from here by the name of Lyonceau."

"It is a trap," Hakram bluntly said.

"It's Kairos," an amused voice drawled. "Of course it's a fucking trap."

Vivienne turned and saw her friend – her queen – limping forward, leaning on her strange yet oddly soothing staff. She did not hide her surprise at the swift return, or at the way that the drow called the 'Lord of Silent Steps' stood at her side. Hakram was just as surprised, by the looks of it.

"Your Majesty," Princess Rozala greeted her. "Was your right to vote passed to a delegate?"

"We're already done," Catherine replied. "First Prince Cordelia wasted no time on ceremonies, and most votes were know before they were cast."

"The League?" Vivienne asked.

"Couldn't even agree on a delegate without the Tyrant herding them," the Queen of Callow said. "The wheels are coming off that cart, mark my words."

"And the Dead King, Your Majesty?" Princess Rozala probed.

"I hesitate to ascribe surprise to a bare skull," Catherine mused. "But this was not his work, I'd bet rubies to piglets over it. This stage belongs to Kairos Theodosian alone."

"We believe the Tower to be actively courting cities among the League, Queen Catherine," Louis Rohanon said. "Dread Empress Malicia would have greatly undermined the standing of the Tyrant for this to succeed."

The Queen of Callow frowned.

"Then after riding his last horse to the grave, he has saddled a fresh one," Catherine said. "You saw it true, Vivienne."

Even now, the former thief was surprised by the flush of pleasure she felt at the freely offered praise. It was not entirely warranted, in her eyes, for while

she'd brought up the notion first but she doubted they would not have seen it themselves in time. Still, it was not unpleasant to hear. She smoothed away the emotion, for there were higher callings than indulgence at hand. A drow painted in the colours of the 'Losara', the tribe among their kind that Catherine had unsurprisingly ended up forging when none at hand suited her purposes, stepped forward to murmur in Lord Ivah's ears before retreating. The Lord of Silent Steps addressed the queen in Crepuscular, and she closed her eyes in thought. A few moments passed, and she opened them.

"No, doesn't mean anything to me," she told the drow. "Adjutant, I need you to find me someone who knows something. An herbal brew made of foxglove, nightshade and powdered graveborn mushrooms – what is it for?"

Vivienne was looking for it, so she caught it: the faint tremor, the pulse that shuddered through the fabric of Creation as Adjutant called on one of his aspects. The tall orc's head snapped to the side, cheeks creasing in amusement as his eyes came to rest on the approaching form of Lady Aquiline Osena.

"Providence, warlord," he gravelled in Kharsum. "The wind is in our sails for once."

"Don't rejoice," Catherine replied in the same. "Think on how bad the opposition must be, that *we* are smiled upon."

The Lady of Tartessos was approached, and Princess Rozala was prevailed upon to make introductions. Few courtesies were had, as Levantine ways tended to be pleasantly brisk. The question was asked, though nightshade was a term unfamiliar to the Levantine. Belladonna, however, she recognized.

"That is champion's brew, though I have never heard of graveborn mushrooms being used in the recipe," Lady Aquiline said, though she looked bemused at the question. "Only one without character would use it in an honour duel, but it can be a worthy thing when drunk in the deeps of the Brocelian."

"What does it do?" Catherine pressed.

"It lends strength to the dying," Lady Aquiline said. "It calms limbs, eases the flow of blood and lends vigour – for a time, and at a price. It is false strength, and when it fades often kills the drinker."

"Let me guess," Catherine Foundling grimly smiled, "graveborn mushrooms would add a little more to the vigour, right?"

"I am not certain," the Lady of Tartessos admitted. "It would be better to ask Razin, as one of the Binder's Blood would be learned in such lore. Yet what you say seems likely, for barrow-born things often lend poisonous strength before they kill."

"Catherine?" Vivienne asked, looking at her cautiously.

Something almost like fear had flickered across the Black Queen's face for a moment.

"The Tyrant of Helike was drinking this by the cup last night," Catherine said, "and it was brewed potently enough it would have outright poisoned someone without a Name."

A moment of silence passed.

"Steel yourselves, my friends," the Black Queen gravely said, "for when the likes of Kairos Theodosian comes to sing his swan song it is not a thing to be taken lightly."

# Interlude: Wicked

> "Inexorable is the end of the journey; choose wisely how you spend your steps."
>
> Ashuran saying

"Look, I'm not saying half a hell won't come howling out if you disappear instead of attending like a good Choir boy," Queen Catherine said. "But this whole serene thing you've got going on? That's the look on the face of someone about to have it slapped right off."

Hanno was not certain what was more surreally amusing: that the most prominent villain of their age was expressing sincere worry for his well-being, in her own rough way, or that the First Prince of Procer was seemingly unable to decide what part of this she found the most appalling. The three of them were riding ahead of the rest of the column and at brisk a pace, though Lyonceau would not be in sight for some time.

"I have fought the Tyrant before, Your Majesty," the White Knight replied. "I am not unaware of the danger he represents."

"You fought Kairos when he was sowing the seeds of a hundred enmities," the Black Queen flatly replied. "Now he's reaping his harvest, Hanno. He's going to burn every favour and story he's got up his sleeves so he can snap Judgement over his knee."

"Damned or not, he remains a single man," Cordelia Hasenbach carefully said. "Surely you do not mean Kairos Theodosian could face a single angel alone, much less an entire Choir."

"I've been in brawls with two Choirs, Your Highness," Queen Catherine reminded the other woman. "It can be done, and without losing a finger if you're quick and careful enough."

From the look on the First Prince's face, Hanno mused, she had finally happened upon the part she could find the most appalling. The White Knight was less offended, for though the touch of Contrition always served a purpose it was not often gentle in pursuing it. As for Endurance... Hanno cleared his throat.

"Fuck off, you bottom feeders. This one's been claimed fair and square," he quoted, drily amused.

Some of the last words the Stalwart Paladin had ever heard. That life had perhaps been the most useful to call on, when studying the Black Queen. The Lone Swordsman had been the rival of her youth, and her struggles there too far removed from the woman she'd become, and none of those who'd died at the Battle of the Camps had seen much of her aside from the terrifying foe that'd been the Sovereign of Moonless Nights. The Stalwart Paladin, though, had walked among the people of the Callowan city of Dormer and then spoken with the Black Queen for some time. It had been fascinating, hearing through him the offer she'd extended. *Go home*, Catherine Foundling had offered, looking so very exhausted. She'd offered peaceful means, and bared steel only when pushed.

It was not his place to judge, yet it had troubled Hanno that he could not easily decide what his answer would have been, had he truly stood in the other hero's boots.

"Shit," Queen Catherine said, cheeks darkening. "Went fishing for that, did you? In my defence, they tried to snatch the man after I'd already put him down hard. It was unsporting, is what I mean."

"You cursed at angels," Cordelia Hasenbach slowly grasped. "You called them *bottom-feeders*?"

"It wasn't about the bird wing thing," the Queen of Callow assured the other royalty. "I can't stand puns. It was about the kill-snatching."

"Perhaps," the First Prince said, voice choked, "we might return to the matter at hand."

"As I was saying, Your Majesty," the White Knight calmly continued, "your worry is appreciated yet I speak not in arrogance. I understand what it is that the Tyrant of Helike seeks to achieve through this purported trial."

"He's going for Judgement," the Black Queen agreed. "And any other day I'd say the Seraphim lose a feather before they eat him, but *today*? We get a curse on the way out, White Knight, and it *sticks*. Even when it has no right to."

For once, the memories that set his mind astray were not another's. *Gods of my ancestors, grant me due*, his mother has once snarled. And as the blood-soaked tile through which she had honoured Below for many years shattered, the heavy weight of a curse had filled the air. All it had taken for it to seize men by the throat was for a knife to kiss a throat, and Hanno of Arwad to become entirely an orphan. The White Knight knew a thing or two of curses spoken with one's last breath.

"I speak not in ignorance either, Your Majesty," he softly said. "I understand that Kairos Theodosian is perhaps the closest thing to a high priest of Below that draws breath on Calernia, and his passing will not be a gentle thing. Yet it is your own past, that drags your eye away from the truth of this."

She considered him with those clever, serious eyes that ever belied the casual manner of speaking she wielded as club and scalpel both. Honestly exam-

ining herself for where she might have made a mistake, a misstep. A refreshing thing, this. The willingness to entertain she might have erred.

"You think it doesn't matter what he comes at you with," she slowly said. "All he's accomplishing is giving the Seraphim a good, clear shot at him."

Judgement had already been passed on Kairos Theodosian, on a floating tower in sight of the walls of Delos. That verdict had not waned or weakened for the passing of months, and still resounded like a whisper in the back of Hanno's mind. The Tyrant of Helike had ran across half the continent hiding in the shadow of great hosts and great needs, yet now he was delivering himself to the Tribunal of his own free will. There was no escaping that judgement, once it had been passed.

"Even as Queen of Winter, you did not wield your full might," Hanno said. "You understood, then and now, that strength without restraint in a villain is a call to the grave. Yet I am not a villain, Catherine Foundling."

He met her gaze, serenity untroubled.

"I am the Sword of Judgement," the White Knight said. "If Evil seeks to end me, I will break it. Should the Enemy seek to struggle against the Tribunal instead, then what heeds not justice will be put down with overwhelming might."

"Using strength on Kairos Theodosian is like trying to strangle a stone," the Black Queen warned.

"Yes," the White Knight agreed. "And crow he might, that he will not lack for air. Yet it will not matter when the grip shatters rock."

He watched her watching him, saw the eyebrows narrow and the thoughts adjust. She had understood, without him speaking a word of it, that there was more to his certainty than she knew. From he could almost see her passing through a list of possible allies, now as nimble in her thinking as William of Greensbury had found her to be on her feet. Her eyes almost flicked behind them, to look where the other guests were riding, and Hanno nodded in assent. Yes, she'd understood correctly. It would be not one but two Choirs the Tyrant of Helike would face, should he bare his fang against the Tribunal. The Black Queen clicked her tongue against the roof her mouth.

"I've given you warning," she finally said. "I have nothing more to say on the matter."

Her gaze moved to the First Prince, whose face had remained inscrutable for some time as she followed the conversation closely.

"Your Highness, I extend offer from Sve Noc to weave... containment over Lyonceau, in case the Tyrant's last surprise is meant to spread."

Cordelia Hasenbach smiled pleasantly.

"A kind offer," the Warden of the West – though only the shadow of what that might have been, to his sorrow – replied. "Yet I wonder at the price of it."

The Black Queen grinned.

"No cost," she said. "Call it a gesture of goodwill between allies against Keter."

The First Prince seemed even less pleased, which took Hanno some time to grasp. Ah, it had been horse-trading. Cordelia Hasenbach would have preferred this to be a transaction, bought and paid for. The Black Queen offered instead a favour, to be repaid in kind one day. It was a bargain that demanded little of Procer yet would benefit the drow in the currency they would need the most after the Tenth Crusade came to an end. The blue-eyed princess turned to him, and already he could hear the question on the tip of her tongue: how likely would it be that such protection would be needed? Yet she never spoke the words and looked faintly ashamed for a flickering moment.

"Procer will be grateful for the aid, First Under the Night," the First Prince of Procer said.

Hanno's esteem for the woman, which had already been set high by the laurels branded onto her palm, rose a notch. She'd preferred owing a favour than to gamble with lives in her charge, even on the finest of odds. The Black Queen nodded in acknowledgement, then flicked him a glance.

"Mind you, they're not coming any closer even if things go south on your angels," Catherine Foundling said. "I'm not risking their feathers on the Tyrant of Helike's chosen grounds."

"The grounds were our choice, Queen Catherine, not his," the First Prince reminded her.

"That doesn't mean they're not his chosen grounds," the Black Queen grimly replied.

Both she and the White Knight moved in unison when there was a tremble of sorcery ahead, though when the silhouettes revealed became clearer the tension went out. Antigone could hardly be taken for anyone else, riding Lykaia's broad back as she was, and Roland's eternal leather longcoat was almost as familiar a sight. The other two he recognized only by description. The tall woman in mail with a long green coat and a half-hidden face must be the Archer, a guess that the massive longbow on her back seemed to support. The blind man with dark skin and long trinket-woven braids must be the Hierophant, a warlock who when enthralled by the Dead King had very nearly killed every single living thing in Iserre. Hanno cocked his head quizzically at Antigone, who replied in the same Gigantes stance-speak.

*Respect, dislike, danger.* The dislike had implication of arrogance, not offence, which was interesting. So was the danger, for the corresponding tilt spoke not of 'past danger' or 'potential danger'. Antigone's opinion was that the Hierophant, even stripped of his sorcery as he currently was, might be able to kill either of them in a fight. That spoke to the respect, for the Gigantes prized not a single virtue should it be accompanied by weakness.

"You both seem untroubled by those approaching," the First Prince of Procer mildly said.

Unlike them, her eyes could only discern details so far.

"Archer, the Rogue Sorcerer and Hierophant," the Black Queen said. "And if I'm not mistaken?"

"The Witch of the Woods," Hanno agreed. "I expect they will have word of Lyonceau for us."

Simply because the Tyrant of Helike had kept his cards hidden until the last moment did not mean they would enter the trap blind. The White Knight had learned much from his own defeats, from studying the dooms and triumphs of his heroic predecessors. And this particular method, which he had once discussed with the Peregrine, often served: sending a companion out with only vague mandate when the enemy was afoot. It was creating an opportunity for providence to smile upon them, for as all other things providence must be helped along lest if fail. That Roland had been chosen as an instrument along with Antigone was no great surprise, and neither was the Archer's presence. Like her storied teacher the Lady of the Lake, she was likely cast in Roles either heroic or villainous by circumstance.

Her allegiance to the Black Queen put a hand on the scales towards Below, it was true, but then Catherine Foundling had often sailed dark ships to pale shores – terrible shores, it was true, but pale nonetheless. The Hierophant's presence was more surprising, and ill-omen. For providence to have offered a stirrup to his foot, his particular knowledge must have been needed. The four approached, and though the First Prince's armed escort neared they were not so uncouth as to take defensive positions. Cordelia Hasenbach's horse was shaken but not put aflight by the massive shape of Lykaia, which he noted approvingly. It was a well-trained beast.

"I don't suppose you just happened onto Lyonceau by accident," the Black Queen tried.

"Warded up to the Heavens," the Archer said. "Literally, even!"

The Hierophant stirred.

"Inaccurate," he said, voice mildly irritated. "For the third time-"

"Greetings, Your Majesty, Your Highness," the Rogue Sorcerer said, bowing. "What my companions are attempting to convey is that the town is heavily warded with an eye as to the angelic."

*Accurate*, Antigone silently told him. *Secrets, Dead King.*

"Are any of the wards harmful in nature?" the White Knight asked.

"No," the Hierophant said. "Not in the slightest. They command and retain attention, and so in function have similarities with the initial part of a ritual Breach-"

"As in devil summoning," the Black Queen flatly interrupted.

"The first segment of such a ritual, yes," the Hierophant peevishly replied. "As I was saying, Catherine, if you had let me finish."

"Surely that must be harmful in some manner," the First Prince said, looking sickened.

"Not unless you want to argue that attracting angelic attention is harmful," Queen Catherine drily noted. "Which I'm guessing might be less than popular a stance with some of your subjects."

"Simply the act of warding makes such a meeting place suspect," the blonde princess insisted.

"Salia's warded," the Archer said.

"What Lady Archer means, Your Highness, is that making such an argument given the nature of the wards might be considered by some a breaking of faith," Roland delicately said.

Which was a peril that Hanno would not lightly risk, as it would expose all those that had broken faith with the Tyrant of Helike to the vengeance that would follow. In a stroke, the heads of all signatories Grand Alliance would be in the villain's reach. There was no understanding of this situation that was acceptable, for even if the White Knight was certain to die in such a trial his life would weigh less on the scales than that of Catherine Foundling and Cordelia Hasenbach: without those two, the war on Keter was lost. The cause would be weakened by his own death, but hardly irreparably.

"We must proceed," the White Knight said. "Though given the circumstances, I believe the presence of great mages among our number could not easily be made into a slight."

"I don't care if the Tyrant gets snippy about," the Black Queen snorted, "Hierophant is coming. Archer, I need you in Salia."

"You can't be serious," the Archer replied, tone hardening.

A swift exchange in Kharsum followed, neither of them apparently aware he'd used Recall to learn some of the tongue months ago. Queen Catherine was insisting that should they all die in Lyonceau then Vivienne Dartwick would need both the Archer and the Adjutant at her side to keeps things from collapsing, while the Archer argued not untruly that if the Black Queen died the talks were dead anyway. The discussion ended when the Archer informed her queen that she'd stick around 'Zeze' to watch his back and stay out of trouble, if that was what it took, and Queen Catherine angrily conceded. Neither of them paid any attention to the Hierophant's protest he had no need of a bodyguard.

Antigone inclined her head in question, but he dismissed it. Best for all if she started with them, as far as Hanno was concerned, and Roland as well. He was not as powerful a spellcaster, but he was cunning and his knowledge broad in scope. And so they resumed the ride forward to Lyonceau, into the jaws of the beast waiting to gobble them up.

It was, for a hero, one of the most practical places to be.

—

It had made for a serviceable temple, if to admittedly asinine Gods and the occasional feckless Choir, but it made for a rather dignified courtroom.

Kairos Theodosian had seen to it, assigning his most trustworthy servants to the task. Sadly most of the gargoyles that could tell colours apart with their beady little stones eyes had been merrily massacred by Catherine when they'd had their little tiff at twilit Liesse, which had made for a charmingly eclectic selection of paints and cloths. Even as the latest of his esteemed guests passed the threshold of the wards encircling Lyonceau, the Tyrant of Helike leaned

back against his throne and cast a critical eye on the stained glass before him, which was depicting the first elected First Prince being crowned by what appeared to be a flock of naked giggling cherubs. One of his trusted servants had painted over the face of Clothor Merovins a bright red beaked nose and touched up his hair with bright blue spikes, which one might venture to say was a fetchingly clashing addition, yet it was lacking a certain *je ne sais quoi*, as the Alamans said.

"Naked angels?" the Tyrant of Helike said. "'tis most obscene, my loyal minions. Possibly blasphemous as well, I'd have to inquire with a priest."

Inquisitive chittering was his answer, his last gaggle of gargoyles gathering to hear his regal proclamations.

"You shall have to clothe them," Kairos decided, touching his lip with his scepter. "In undergarments, naturally."

More chatter, increasingly inquisitive.

"The colour will be of your choice, I would not lightly infringe upon your artistic integrity," the king of Helike assured them. "Yet if I might venture a suggestion as to the appearance? *Lacy*."

The chittering turned rather enthusiastic, matching his mood perfectly. Even as he ordered his porters to move him away, his heart already warmed in anticipation of the fresh abomination those incompetent little mongrels would create in trying to paint something as delicate as lace. The House of Light was coming along nicely, in his opinion, and all it'd taken was knocking off the roof. And large swaths of the walls, and rearranging most the insides. Also desecrating the consecrated grounds, as the delightful outrage from Above at his presence thundering in his ears sadly hadn't been worth the constant migraines. Yet now the temple was a lovely piece of work, raised platforms with benches and seats surrounding what he liked to think of as an *arena*: the altar to Above turned into the defendant's stand, and the splendidly shoddy table and chair the Hierarch of the Free Cities had spent several days making with his own hands, as Anaxares despised the notion of using *tyrannica*l Proceran tables and chairs instead.

Gods Below, Kairos had not regretted having the man elected even once.

The sole standing walls that remained were those encasing the tall panels of stained glass, casting colours lights on the ground that mixed with that which the afternoon sun carelessly shone through the gaping swaths. The Hierarch of the Free Cities was already seated on his rickety three-legged stool chair, methodically scraping any ink off the parchment that'd been used to send messages to him, avoiding the need of in fact using any such scroll not given unto him by the People – which was perhaps for the best, as to Kairos' understanding of Bellerophan law he would then have to report anyone having gifted him such parchment to the *kanenas* for having paid tribute to a Foreign Despot, namely the Hierarch himself. The laws of the Republic were as a splendid maze made entirely of trapdoors, to the Tyrant, most of which led to a pit of spikes but some instead to a mob of angry crocodiles. That there would be a dead body

at the end of the journey was perhaps the only part of it not in doubt. Truly, the people of the Free Cities could all learn a lesson or two from the Republic.

They were significantly better than anyone else at spontaneous lapidation, for example.

"It's all the practice, I think," Kairos told his trusted attendants.

"It is fascinating," the Dead King said. "Even now, I cannot tell if you are mad or feigning."

The Tyrant's good eye found the skeleton-thing that claimed kingship of death and Keter, and to his continued distaste found nothing at all. Oh, the body was there. A shell, pretty enough if a little too pretentious for his tastes, but he couldn't see *in* it. Even if he leaned into the aspect, in that way that allowed him to glimpse past that first burning wish at the heart of everyone into that myriad of lesser ones, all that there was to be found in the Dead King was a darkness. If he saw the first body, the true one, Kairos believed his sight would not fail him so. It had not failed him with the Wandering Bard, after all. Yet Trismegistus was ever a cautious one, a creature of brokers and emissaries and intermediaries. All of them the same old horror, but as the name went it was intent on remaining hidden. How unsporting of it, really. How was he to break what the Dead King wanted most in the world, if he knew not what it was?

"How boring life would be, if there were only ever two choices to be had," Kairos lightly said. "Our guests have come, dear friend."

"Yes," the Dead King said. "I can feel the Hierophant. Soon, now."

"It is a shame the Empress could not attend," the Tyrant sighed.

The old thing laughed, for the both knew Kairos would have betrayed her as eagerly as he intended to betray Ol' Bones himself. Sadly, Malicia had decided that after wringing him dry of every use she had of him and cutting the grass under his feet among his beloved allies she no longer had a need to humour him. The Dead King himself was here because the old thing was under the impression the only one that could make him bleed was the Intercessor, and that these games in Salia were a passable amusement until he retired to his domain. What splendid arrogance, this, what sumptuous hubris! Truly, was the King of Death not among the greatest of their ilk?

"I shall have refreshments brought to you," Kairos smiled, for he was an impeccable host.

It should be interesting to see if the Dead King would in fact drink from a cup of human blood, even though he had no throat or stomach or any real need to. Still, with the guests so soon to arrive the Tyrant of Helike had his porters bring him to the highest point in the old temple, atop the platform in the back. A more discreet snap of the wrist had another cup of Valiant Passing brought to his hand, and he drank the brew fully though the taste was horrid. It was a necessity, sadly. Without it the fits came every half hour and he was blind in one eye, though the old recipe was only a temporary reprieve. Soon, Named or not there would be enough of the poison in his bones that no purging

trick would see him through it unharmed. Ah, but the harm had been done long before the drink and there'd never been any purging of *that*. Tossing away the cup in a corner, Kairos allowed his loyal attendants to drape him in the formal regalia of the kings and queens of Helike: the cloths of purple and gold, the heavy bejewelled crown that Theodosius has adorned with the jewels of defeated royalty, the pearl-incrusted slippers.

He was ready before the first of his guests arrived, passing through the open and unhinged gates of the former temple. Catherine, bold as ever strolled in first. The Queen of Callow still bore one of the strongest wishes he had ever seen, pulsing with her heartbeat: **peace, peace, peace**. It was like watching a flower bloom anew with every beat. Even now it was all he could do not to laugh until his throat bled, for what an exquisite jest it was that one of Below's finest servants in the long history of Calernia was at heart one of Above's! At her side that boring little thing the White Knight tread, all desires his own faded while that horrid thing intertwined with the Seraphim – **I wish to be just** – tainted everything. Most of the others that followed behind were tedious to behold, Cordelia's implacable **duty** and ugh, the Blood was all **honour and glory** as always and oh, wasn't that Itima Ifriqui craving **revenge**? Ah, what a proper villain that one would have made with a little prodding.

Neither Rozala Malanza nor Vivienne Dartwick were attending, which was amusingly cautious of Catherine and Cordelia, though it seemed the Witch of the Wilds and the Hierophant had been dragged along. Reading the latter was always amusing for the splitting headache it gave him, the Hierophant's path to **apotheosis** being so deeply steeped in High Arcana that trying to understand the concept was like driving nails through his own forehead. The Witch was intriguing, for a hero, her wish for **completion** too complex and driven in notions he did not understand to properly grasp, but she was still a passing fancy compared to the Archer and that delightfully strange and nuanced **horizon**. The wonder of discovery, of the fresh and new, of doing things no one had done before. It was not all-consuming like Catherine's craving for a peace that would justify all the horrors or the White Knight's childish need to have his hand felt, but it was deeper in some ways.

It was not always the wish that commanded her, but it was so deeply ingrained abandoning it would kill her sure as dawn.

The Tyrant of Helike gestured for his porters to take flight, though until more of the flock joined in to even the sides his throne was slightly askew in the air and Theodosius' crown, always too large for his brow, went askew with it. His rise caught the eye of everyone in the room, even the Hierarch.

"Greetings, friends," Kairos Theodosian grinned, "and welcome. Now that all are in attendance, it seems we can at last begin the trial."

*At last*, he yearningly thought. *At long last*.

# Interlude: Suffer No Compromise In This

"Fifth of all Choirs, sternest Judgement
They who cannot abide the repugnant;
None more farsighted than the Tribunal,
And none as even-handed or as brutal."

Extract from the 'Hymn of Hymns', Atalantian sacred text (declared heresy in Procer and Callow)

Anaxares had been a boy when he'd first heard the song of rage.

He'd been seven when thousands boiled through the streets of Bellerophon in wroth, for the lot-drawn *iakas* had mismanaged the People's wheat and rationing was announced. He'd heard myriad voices howling out the same displeasure, like a great beast made up of an entire city, and it had been a thing of awe. So many voices, all telling of the same belief: *this may be, yet this is not how it should be*. The *iakas* were dragged out one and all, and before the citizens they had failed were made to answer for that failure. Tribunals were called by the People, held by the People, and the People handed down their bloody verdict. As a boy he'd watched the fear on the faces of the *iakas* with curiosity, but it had felt distant. Like a glimpse of another world entirely. His own was easier grasped for it was made up of the pounding of a thousand feet, the shouts of a thousand throats. The people, he'd dimly grasped then, were the river that carried them all. No single man nor woman could command the current, and like any capricious river-god it could bathe or drown as its whims demanded. What purpose was there to fear, when naught of this could be changed? And so Anaxares the Diplomat had let the river take him where it would, beyond care or worry.

Yet the river had brought him to a shore where none of the people should ever know.

What a terrible thing it had been, to watch the sole thing he truly believed in turn against itself. *Your services to the people have made you a Person of Value*, the kanenas had told him. And in that blasphemous betrayal the seed of a greater folly was planted, for the People cast their vote for Anaxares the

Diplomat and that worst of treasons saw him elected the Hierarch of the Free Cities. Long had he wondered of this, of the purpose to it. Could there even be one? Forbidden to take his own life through action or inaction by the decree of the People, he had been left to wallow in the absurdity of his continued breath. And with every moment the world had hounded him for further treasons, flies swarming to him like they would to carrion. Named and kings and queens, princes high and low, a buzzing flock of foreign despots that wanted him to sit at their table and pretend they were anything more than ticks sucking the blood out of those they claimed to be *ruling*. And all the while Kairos Theodosian, Helike's bloody son, had taken the spurs to his flanks until this day came. This hour, this moment, this reckoning for all the many balances left uneven.

Anaxares was not blind. He knew well the Tyrant had paved the road to this for his own foul reasons. It did not matter to him, for the destination was of his own choice, and no part save that one weighed on the scales. It'd been a choice forged in that terrible, lucid moment where the creature that called itself the Wandering Bard had tried to clap him in chains, but he had not grown to regret it since. Anaxares had been a boy, when he'd first heard the song of rage, but he heard it still as a man grown. It had stayed with him, seeped into his bones, and as the great despots of the east and the west entered under his watchful gaze the tune was so loud he grew deaf to all that was being spoken. The Tyrant flew above on his gargoyle-carried throne – a familiar twitch of revulsion went through him at the sight, the clenching muscle of *Thrones Are An Unforgiveable Abomination Unto The People, To Be Met With Scorn And Thrown Rocks* – and addressed the lot of them, weaving his exact truths into the finest of lies. The song ebbed low, though it did not leave, and the Hierarch cut in through the chatter.

"Be seated or you will be expelled," Anaxares stated.

"Lord Hierarch," a fair-haired woman said. "I greet you-"

The diplomat twitched.

"There are no lords in a court of the People," Anaxares of Bellerophon coldly said. "Neither crowns nor the petty tyrannies of those claiming them are of any weight here. Be seated presently or you *will* be expelled-"

He did not know her name, unfortunately, and so glanced at the Tyrant in question. The mad boy grinned back.

"Cordelia Hasenbach," the king of Helike helpfully provided.

Was she? It would explain why she might be under the mistaken impression her words carried authority here.

"Yes," Anaxares said, "that."

His eyes swept the crowd, recognizing only a single face: Catherine Foundling, the so-called Queen of Callow. The Black Knight of Praes was not here, which was displeasing. The man had also committed crimes under the laws of the League and would not have been unfit to stand trial today, were he present. A woman at the back of the pack, bearing a large unstrung bow, raised her hand.

"Speak," Anaxares said.

"Is that the Dead King?" she asked, pointing behind him.

There did indeed seem to be some sort of crowned skeleton there, the Hierarch noted. It was holding a cup full of blood, which after a long moment he was forced to concede was not against any law he knew of. The diplomat once more cast a glance at the Tyrant, who equivocated with a wiggled palm.

"More or less," Anaxares replied.

She raised her hand again, to his irritation.

"Speak," he repeated.

"I see the Dead King got refreshments," the woman said. "Which is most terribly unfair, as we have not."

"That is not a question," the Hierarch peevishly told her.

It was, however, true. And damning. Anaxares turned to glare at the Tyrant.

"My staff are on it," the boy assured him.

It would suffice. He was not concerned with the matter beyond the perception of willingly allowed imbalance.

"I will not repeat myself a third time," Anaxares bluntly said. "All attending must take their seats or depart."

There was offended shuffling from the band of Avaricious Foreign Oligarchs, but they heeded the reminder. Not that the diplomat spared them much attention, not when the accused himself was stepping forward. The White Knight, Hanno of Arwad. No longer a citizen of Ashur by their own laws, inquiries to the Thalassocracy had established, and seemingly claimed by no one in particular. No one mortal, that was. The White Knight was a tall and solid man, plain of face but of calm bearing, and he strode to the stand reserved for the accused without need for prompting. Anaxares approved. He waited until the man stood amidst the gutted altar to Above before speaking up.

"I am Anaxares of Bellerophon," he informed the Named. "The elected Hierarch of the Free Cities."

"I know who you are, Anaxares the Diplomat," the White Knight replied.

The afternoon sun filtered in though the stained glass and the gaping walls, casting the court in mixed and coloured light. It made the White Knight seem as if he had been painted on, as if this entire court of law was some delirious stretch of Arcadia. Anaxares remained seated at his table, facing the accused with a quill in hand and the parchments he had prepared for this day ready.

"Then you know why you stand now before me," the Hierarch said. "A grievance was lodged by a member of the League concerning crimes you committed, and my judgement was sought over the matter."

"I am not a citizen of any nation of the League," the White Knight said.

That was true, and to be entered in the record, though of no repercussion on the proceedings.

"That is irrelevant," Anaxares flatly replied. "Crimes committed against citizens of the League on the grounds of the League fall under its jurisdiction nonetheless."

He paused.

"I am told," the Hierarch said, "that you willingly agreed to submit yourself to judgement."

If so, that was a principled action. Not one that mattered in the slightest when it came to culpability, but the principle was laudable regardless.

"I agreed to stand trial," the White Knight corrected.

"Then as is allowed the laws of the League of Free Cities, you are allowed to request someone to advocate in your name," Anaxares said. "So long as they are a citizen of a member-nation, that is."

"I have volunteered to serve as your defender, should you desire it," the Tyrant called out. "Otherwise a band of seven candidates was arranged."

Those had already been refused, which the boy knew even if he now implied otherwise, and so Anaxares made note of the Tyrant's petty obstruction.

"Your candidates were judged unlawful," the Hierarch reminded the Tyrant. "Gargoyles are not citizens, even when words indicating otherwise are painted on them."

His gaze turned to the former Ashuran.

"While remaining here in containment, you have an hour to send for such an advocate should you so wish," Anaxares informed him. "Or you may accept the offer of the Tyrant of Helike."

"It was my understanding," the White Knight said, "that it was the grievance of the Lord Tyrant that led to this trial."

A moment passed.

"That is correct," Anaxares conceded.

"I would seek to be impartial in both offices, naturally," Kairos Theodosian cheerfully assured the accused, "You have my solemn vow in this."

"A kind offer," the White Knight drily said. "I will be serving as my own advocate, Hierarch. Who is to be my accuser?"

The song stirred at the man's mellow manner, the way he seemed to take none of this seriously. Anger, anger the white-clad killer who had walked the Free Cities and killed as he pleased and never once thought there might *consequence* to this. That a Name and the blessing of angels set him beyond such petty matters.

"There is no accuser," the Hierarch harshly stated. "Your crimes are not in dispute, they are a matter of known record as certified by sworn witnesses from Delos, Stygia, Helike and Nicae."

"Then the actions you deem as crimes should be listed, should they not?" the White Knight said. "Unless you intend to simply pass sentence."

"I deem or dismiss nothing," the Hierarch said, grinding his teeth. "The law is writ, and known to any who care to know it."

He brought forward the first parchment, his own familiar writing providing the list that the Named was asking for.

"Murder of citizens of Helike and Stygia is the first charge," Anaxares said. "On one hundred and seventy-three counts assured, forty-two alleged with proof in only the second degree."

Which was to say, less than two witnesses and no writ evidence.

"You speak of soldiers," the White Knight said, "fought in time of war."

"In time of war between members of the League of Free Cities," the Hierarch said. "You are not a citizen, and so not legally part of such a war, unless you took coin as mercenary in the service of a lawful government. Do you here claim to have done so?"

"I do not," the White Knight said, "though I worked in lawful accord with the Secretariat in the defence of Delos and with the permission of Strategos Nereida Silantis in the defence of Nicae."

"The Secretariat has provided records that put truth to your words," Anaxares acknowledged. "Basileus Leo Trakas, who speaks for Nicae, has declined to do so. Yet in the absence of payment from Delos that would qualify you as a mercenary in the employ of the Secretariat, the point is irrelevant. The askretis cannot absolve a crime, only abet it."

Anaxares reached for his papers, where he had put to ink the names he could not all remember. There were many, some he had known when he was still entirely a diplomat.

"You also murdered sitting members of the Magisterium, the exact list of your victims being-"

"Has the Magisterium then made complaint to the League?" the White Knight interrupted.

The song rose in pitch at the interruption, not for the words themselves but at the disrespect for the trial they implied.

"It has not," the Hierarch replied, brow creasing in displeasure. "It has, however, granted rights to another party to seek redress in its name."

"That would be me," the Tyrant gleefully said.

"That is correct," the Hierarch agreed. "You have also attempted to murder the ruling king of Helike-"

"Also me," the Tyrant added, still with unseemly glee.

"- and in the attempt claimed to hold the authority to pass judgement over King Kairos Theodosian of Helike," Anaxares continued unflinchingly.

"That is incorrect," the White Knight said.

Someone in the benches loudly cursed, but the Hierarch paid it no mind.

"Speak now, if you would amend the record," Anaxares said. "It has until now been understood that in your role as the White Knight you spoke for the Choir to which you are sworn and passed judgement in their stead."

Was the man now renouncing the authority bestowed upon him by the Choir, in an attempt to exempt it from consequence? If so, it was a cowardly thing.

"I do not judge," Hanno of Arwad said, "and passed no judgement over the Tyrant of Helike. The judgement was passed by the Tribunal, and I sought to execute the sentence it as is my duty."

The song, oh the song swelled. This was, Anaxares understood, so much worse than he had believed. Had the Tyrant known? No, that did not matter. Law was law, no matter what capering gargoyle brought it to the fore. Yet mistakes here could not be allowed.

"Clarify what you mean by 'the Tribunal'," the Hierarch ordered.

"The Choir of Judgement," the White Knight replied.

"You then allege," Anaxares slowly said so there could be no mistake, "that the Seraphim of the Choir of Judgement have claimed the right to pass judgement over citizens of the League?"

"It is not a subtle thing, what you attempt," the White Knight told him. "Do you understand this? That you have not tricked or fooled any in this hall. That your intent is clear as day."

"What I *attempt*," Anaxares of Bellerophon softly repeated. "As if this were some sort of plot, a scheme against you or your masters. Is that what you believe, Hanno of Arwad? That the Seraphim and your service of them are owed abeyance? That the world entire is to twist and bend to your verdicts, *unasked for and unsought*?"

*We are all of us free*, the song whispered in his ear, *or we are none of us free.*

"Madness," the White Knight said, "is no excuse for baring steel at the Heavens."

"If the Heavens would have part in this trial," the Hierarch coldly said, "they may be seated and silent, like the rest of the gallery. Speak not otherwise of those that cannot be called to account."

"This will not end as you wish, Hierarch," the White Knight calmly said. "Yet if you cannot be turned aside so be it: the Choir of Judgement acknowledges none to be beyond its jurisdiction, save for the Gods Above."

The song filled him, up to brim, but that wroth was as much his own as the tune's.

"There is no law, writ or known, that grants this right to the Choir of Judgement," Anaxares of Bellerophon said with excruciating calm.

"And yet it is theirs nonetheless," the White Knight said.

*We are all of us free*, the song hissed in his ear, *or we are none of us free.*

"No," the Hierarch coldly said. "It is not. And if it would pretend otherwise, let it stand before this court and defend that crude arrogance."

"I warned you," the White Knight sadly said.

Power coursed around the court, first the distant weavings the Tyrant had laid around this place and then the blooming protections the tyrants high and low garbed themselves in out of fear. And then it came, the answer he had asked for. There was no ceiling above them, nothing save the cloudless blue sky, and through it the wroth of Judgement came down on him.

The Hierarch burned.

The Tribunal gazed down upon him, and its fury broke his bones and scoured his flesh. All around him shattered, even the very ground, and even as his body tore apart claws dug into his mind. Force him to look where they would, to see what they wished him to see. Before his eyes unfolded and endless shifting tapestry, made from all the decisions that were made and could be. The depth was... too much to grasp. The threads of every action and consequence, of the reasons and the endings. This was, the Hierarch grasped, what the Seraphim saw. The truth of their judgement. And as he tried to parse it, he felt his mind begin to unravel. He could have looked away. It would have spared him the horrendous pain going through every fiber of who he was. But that would be admitting that their judgement was right. That it was correct, for they knew things mortals could not. And so as he stared unblinking Anaxares of Bellerophon found oblivion snaking her arms around him. Oblivion, and with it would come rest. Would that not be a relief? And yet there was one thing he could not help but see.

It was a woman, carving words into a stele of stone that somehow reminded him of a great bird's corpse. Around her was a sea of people in rags, thin and sickly and hungry. Yet there was something in their eyes, as they looked at the stele and the woman, that made him want to weep. And the words, oh the words he knew them. Every child born of Bellerophon knew them. *All are free, or none. Ye of this land, suffer no compromise in this.* The woman was wounded, bleeding within, and with the last letter she died. But the words, the words stayed. And as the city rose around them, around the stele, blood splashed stone. *Suffer no compromise in this*, the stele had told them, and so they did not. And they bled and they bled and they bled, and they bled but they never bowed. Not once did they look at the world, even at the very bottom of the pit, and bend their neck. It would have been easy, light as a feather. And perhaps they would have been better for it. And from mother to son, father to daughter, the words on the stele had carried down. Until they ended up told to a small boy, who one day would be a diplomat. *Suffer no compromise in this*, Anaxares thought, and the world sang it with him.

His body was a ruin yet there was a need for it, and so the Hierarch decided it would have to **Mend**.

Bones set back in place, soldered by will, and flesh knit itself anew. Teeth made by heat into black and broken stones flew back into his mouth as the table and the chair snapped back into place. The Hierarch of the Free Cities dipped his quill into the inkwell, tongue lolling out of his half-broken mouth as it reformed.

"This will be added to the record as evidence of guilt," he informed the Choir.

*Attempted murder of a sitting judge of the court*, he penned. The Seraphim had expressed their displeasure yet not bothered to attend, but that would not be enough to spare them judgement earned. Mind clear and still as a pond, the Hierarch closed his eyes and allowed himself to **Receive** what he required. Silhouettes stood before his gaze, bearing each six wings of bronze and a con-

viction like a fire that nothing could put out. They gazed back, and in their fury struck again. The world broke, and Anaxares with it, but without pause it was mended anew.

"Petulance," the Hierarch said. "I address now the Seraphim of the Choir of Judgement, also known as the Tribunal, and **Indict** you for the following crimes-"

They smote him again, and he mended. It did not matter, for now his Name sang and filled the world. As it had in Rochelant, a blank slate on which all could write their accusations and have them known by all.

"- despotism high and low, arrant and illegal intervention in League affairs, attempted regicide –"

The Tyrant of Helike was laughing, he realized as he mended anew.

"- disturbance of the court, three –"

It was desperate now, the burning that consumed him tinted with dismay.

"- four times," the Hierarch adjusted. "And repeated attempted murder. Given the overwhelming evidence-"

It no longer hurt, the Hierarch mused as he mended, as if the ability to feel pain had been scoured out of him.

"- the verdict cannot be in doubt," he continued. "I pronounce you guilty and sentence you to-"

The words choked in his mouth, for something has seized his throat. Not the Tribunal, no. It was a great presence but not that, and as the grip tightened around his throat the Seraphim prepared to strike again.

"I win," Kairos Theodosian laughed.

And the grip was *gone*.

# Interlude: A Hundred Battles

"Under pale moon,
Across the snow
As the dead croon
And flies the crow
Did we not lose,
A hundred times?
Did we not win,
A hundred times?
Our iron wrought,
Saw use earnest
It rusted not
Left unburnished
Did we not lose,
A hundred times?
Did we not win,
A hundred times?
We came and went,
Unconquered few
We Tyrant's get,
The tried and true
Did we not lose,
A hundred times?
Did we not win,
A hundred times?
Weep not for us,
For in the annals
Our stele reads thus:
A hundred battles
For we did lose,
A hundred times
And we will win,
A hundred times
'till falls the age,
And end the times!"

---

"Dead In A Hundred Battles", Helikean soldier's song

"I win," Kairos Theodosian laughed.

"- death," the Hierarch of the Free Cities said.

The Tyrant wished and the candle was lit.

No heartbeat passed before the wroth of the Choir of Mercy descended upon him: it was immediate and unflinching. Even as his lie echoed across the hall the curse laid upon him by the Grey Pilgrim tightened its grip, seeking to smother him. Ah, it was worth every irksome moment where he'd been denied the pleasure of blatant lies to now have the Peregrine's little mistake smash the Ophanim in the back of the knee just before they could tidy up all the loose ends. Mercy's cold purpose forced against him, an immeasurable sea of pressure against his soul, and the Tyrant of Helike was going to lose this. But he knew, even as his last good eye shrivelled in its socket, that he had bought a candlespan of life before that loss occurred. And that made all the difference in the world, didn't it?

"I have vexed you, I see," the Tyrant gregariously said, addressing Mercy. "Well, if you would allow me a-"

They did not, in fact, allow him a rebuttal. The full weight of the Choir's attention descended upon him and he tasted blood in his mouth, as the Ophanim finally grasped that they would not be allowed to murder the Hierarch before they'd dealt with him. Stories were such a funny thing, weren't they? Like, say, 'wicked villain is sentenced never to lie again by the champion of a Choir, then in a moment of delightful hubris speaks such a lie'. It was the kind of story that'd need a thundering, righteous Choir to smite that uppity servant of Below. Not the sort of thing you could do while simultaneously serving as the hidden knife of the Heavens in someone else's tale. It wouldn't matter that the Choir had the *capacity* to serve in both roles concurrently. Fate would punish such lackluster commitment with failure on both fronts.

His left knee pulped. The Tyrant was not certain whether that was his own doing or that of the angels, which rather amused him.

Kairos has once been told he would not make it to his thirteen nameday, a prophecy croaked by the dry lips of the ancient thing that laid in the crypt deep beneath Helike. And it'd told it true, it had. A hero might have thought, perhaps, that their kind and benevolent Gods had cured them of their many miseries. Kairos Theodosian knew very well what manner of deity he served, though, and so never once deluded himself into believing this – indeed it was a relief, when he first came into his favourite of his aspects. Wish. What a pretty bauble it had been, seeing the wish of others. Even more so when he learned it could be used to *do* things, to bridge the gap between the possible and the not. For a price, of course. It was then the he understood the prophecy, forged anew by darker hands.

Twelve times the Tyrant of Helike would be allowed to see come and go the day of the year where he had been Named and die on the dawn of the last. The Gods Below, magnificent monsters that they were, had presented him with a beautiful dilemma: would he spend his thirteen years of reprieve in mediocre

obscurity, or would he *spend* the years to reach for glory? For that was the nature of wishing: all could be had, for a span of the life he might have lived.

"I always was a spendthrift at heart," Kairos confessed. "It is the nature of princes, my friends, to waste the treasuries of their fathers."

Alas, the Choir of Mercy was growing no fonder of him. It must have been quite cross, he mused, that its greatest strength was hamstrung by its own champion. For Mercy was not the mightiest of the Choirs, the most farsighted or the most beloved: it was the most flexile, befitting of its purpose as the tier of loose ends for the Heavens. Yet now it must pass its thread through on very particular needle's head before it could attend to greater purposes, namely the continued existence of Kairos Theodosian. Anaxares, glorious mad son of Bellerophon that he was, was attempting for force his verdict upon the dealers of verdicts, and though he was not succeeding neither was he *failing*. The Seraphim's crushing strength slid over the Hierarch like water off a duck's back, though his own burning indictment found bite but no flesh: even with Bellerophon's fury at his back, the Choir of Judgement remained the Choir of Judgement.

It was like watching a man attempting to wrestle the sea, and every bit as gloriously absurd as that sounded.

The Ophanim, sadly, did not seem to agree. And in their impatience as finishing to choke out the Hierarch – oh, that one detail must have burned Tariq like acid when he'd emerged at the crucial moment and unleashed his patrons like a dagger in the side – they decided the time for subtlety was past. If a tight grip would not suffice, then a fist would have to serve. The Tyrant, Gods take him if he lied, had no parry against such a stroke. Even simply receiving it would burn through the last of his life in the bat of an eye. Of course he didn't *need* to have such a parry, not strictly speaking. The Ophanim smiting this entire temple into barren ash would mean...

Darkness flooded the broken House of Light, the cold night soothing Kairos like a cold press as it cooled the blood seeping out of his pores. His head lolled back, the bone of his neck feeling like they were made of wobbling pastry, and he grinned malevolently as a match was struck a mere foot away from him. It was the sole light to be had, and it cast Catherine Foundling's face into sharp relief as she lighted her pipe. She puffed, glowing red embers burning as she did, and spat out long stream of wakeleaf.

"You want to burn Kairos, burn Kairos," his beloved enemy shrugged. "But you don't get to burn the rulers of half the continent with him. Archer's escorting them out, under protection of the Hierophant. Until they're out of the way, hold your hand."

It was a superb thing, the way the Black Queen could so address a Choir and expect to be *obeyed*. She'd survived so many close calls with angels she'd somehow come to believe she could match them, and through that utterly crazed belief become something that could genuinely give a Choir pause. And so Mercy found itself peering into the Night, wondering if the battle laid out there to be

fought would truly result in its victory – and hesitating, for the consequences if it didn't would be utterly *disastrous*. Against any other foe it would have struck regardless, but Sve Noc? The blood-soaked goddess of theft in victory? Losing might just have *consequences*. And even the villainess was preventing the full exercise of their power, she was letting through the wroth still shattering him bit by bit. Their hand held, and convulsive laughter escaped his throat until he choked on it. How long would it take for them to grasp that every time she got away with that, she came harder into the story of *someone who could get away with that*?

"You're about to die," the Black Queen told him.

"Well spotted," Kairos cheerfully replied.

He spat out a thick glob of smoking blood afterwards, but it was well worth the trade.

"Now would be a good time to pay up what you yet owe," the Queen of Callow said.

"Indeed," the Tyrant of Helike mused. "Allow me then to grant you the greatest gift of all."

The red burn of her pipe was the sole light in the dark, and what allowed him to be certain he was addressing *her* instead of an endless void. It also revealed her sigh.

"It's a monologue, isn't it?" she said, sounding resigned.

His fingers clenched, not out of surprise or dismay but because a swath of flesh and muscle on his arm had gone dead and dried up in the span of a breath, contracting the rest. Yet the rebellions of his own body were nothing new to him and did not truly distract from the great pleasure of having someone who *understood*. Not someone who agreed or sympathized, for indeed either of those things would have spoiled the broth, but someone who... followed the cast of his dice. It was such a rare, precious thing.

"Gods Below, Catherine," he grinned, "why would it be anything else?"

His throne was half-sunken into he ground now, his attendant gargoyles made rubble, but still he clasped his scepter and his head loosely kept Theodosius' crown. All was as it should be.

"It is said among my people that the hour of death is also the hour of revelation," Kairos said, "for when the distance between life and death grows thin so do the veils that keep our eyes from hidden truths. My own father, for example, called me as *grotesque imp* as he died. Which was remarkably perceptive for the old drunk, I assure you. Still, I'll admit stabbing him those seventeen times might have served as something of a hint."

Talking should have, by all earthly laws, precipitated his death. Taken him tumbling down the cliff of annihilation, an already strained body and soul snapping like a twig under the added strain. Instead, the Tyrant of Helike found the trembling of his hand slowing, the blood in his throat drying. He was, after all, villain speaking his death-words: earthly laws were the lesser set of those now applying to him.

"I stabbed my father too," the Black Queen mused. "Twice. And it wasn't even the same person both times."

Well, now she was just showing off. And by amusing him doing almost as much to kill him as the angels were, which was quite inconvenient.

"Don't interrupt," Kairos chided. "This is a monologue, not *repartee*. As I was saying, in the spirit of my rapidly approaching annihilation, I would therefore offer revelations."

And did he not have a great trove of these to spill over the ground, painstakingly gathered one betrayal at a time?

"We begin with the corpse of an angel," the Tyrant of Helike said, "though of course there can be no such thing."

It was months ago he had first dangled that truth in front of her and knew she had been digging after it ever since. As well she should, for it was the very devil in the details – in a manner of speaking.

"In glorious old days," Kairos Theodosian wistfully said, "there was once a woman who broke in Evil as one would break in a stallion. From triumph to triumph did she march, west and ever pursuing, until by the shores of a great lake she met in strife a hundred priests-elect of the Hallowed. And these holy souls did scour themselves to bring forth the great spirit they worshipped, one that cast judgement upon all it beheld, and behold her it did."

Ah, what he would not have done for a glimpse of that grand moment. Truly, there never had been nor ever would be a match to Dread Empress Triumphant.

"For that presumption she slew it," The Tyrant ferally grinned, sharp teeth bared, "bearing tall banner, and wrote her rage in blood across a hundred trembling tribes. That which was not a corpse sunk into deep waters, turning into bones that dreamt, and there was left to slumber. Some across the years learned of this, and of the great works that might wrought from such a thing, but none were so bold as to attempt to make a sword out hallowing petrified."

Ah, but heroes lacked for such beautiful ambitions. The living kin of that dreaming thing came too easily to their help, he'd always thought, and so there was no need for ingenuity unleashed.

"That hoped-for boldness still escapes our kind," he mourned, "but a lesser manner of soul did grow *desperate* enough."

How could Cordelia Hasenbach not be, when doom covered her home and kin as the south tore itself apart in a war with no end nor meaning? There had been so little left to lose, and in the end the First Prince answered first to *duty*.

"This is no coincidence," Kairos reminded his peer, "for indeed there are no coincidences. This one least of all, however, for it is a harsh sword long in the swinging. There is a thing out there that delights in intercession –"

He paused, allowing for dramatic arrival should it be in the cards. Only silence answered.

"No?" he mused. "No, I suppose not. Not while the Hierarch still breathes."

Even should she wear a different face when she arrived, Kairos amusedly thought, all that would change would be that the crime of *personation with intent to confuse the court* would be added to her tally. If it was as he suspected, her very name would prevent her from putting herself in such a situation even should she desire it. Setting aside the thoughts, he returned to the thrust of his speaking, though he did not there was not anger in the Black Queen's eyes. Ah, noticed his little trick had she? That the wards around Lyonceau made escape more difficult when the fabric of Creation was troubled. Which, given the presence of two Choirs in wroth and the high priestess of Night wielding the very stuff, was very much the case. It ought to keep the hostages close long enough for his purposes.

"And that thing, Catherine," he drawled, "it has been waiting a very long time to kill another: one who claims rulership over dust and bones. But is a cautious crown that lairs to the north, one that does not often leave its shell. It took cornering and opportunity, to bait it out. Defeat on the horizon and victory at hand, how could even such a leery thing not be tempted? It scuttled out and lost a finger or two but got to witness the truth of its foe in exchange."

One of his kidneys had just melted, the Tyrant dimly noticed. Oh dear, that was quicker than anticipated. Mercy was refining its technique.

"A fair trade, as these things go," he rasped out.

He mastered his voice a moment later, with great effort.

"It would not have mattered," the Tyrant said, "if not for the hidden sting of augury. You see, there was a plan. A warden for the west, besieged. Her ears open to whispers. And as the sky darkened, inch by inch the finger would tighten until the trigger was pulled."

His only functioning arm snapped up, for the other was a desiccated waste, and he snapped his fingers.

"Death, dead," Kairos said with relish, for it had been a pretty plan indeed. "That was the trick, you see: letting it eat someone's whole world before they mattered, and then make them *matter*. Too late, then, to shake free of that story and the chains it brings. Quite a bit more would die along with it, of course, but then victory is not without costs. The clever crown caught on early, now, and it flees back to its lair. It would shed the chains binding it for a set more pleasing, if you let it."

He met the Black Queen's gaze, with his bloody red eye.

"Don't let it, Catherine," he said. "It does not *deserve* this."

He hacked out a wet laugh, for deserving hardly ever mattered.

"And so here we are now, at the crossroads of it all," Kairos Theodosian said. "The crossbow has been forged, and aimed, but the hand that wields it is closed to intercession. Its quarry is a lion rampant, and forewarned, but there are a great many hunters gathering to hunt it. It would lair again, let the danger pass, but it cannot simply vanish – lest it be followed, crossbow in hand. To survive now it must either cow the hunters or break the crossbow."

And even then, the Dead King would not ever truly trust the first of those two. Even cowed, the great Names of Calernia might still be nudged into rolling the dice. It had made striking fresh bargain with it after the Graveyard disappointingly easy. He'd been looking forward to the challenge of convincing Keter to ally again after betraying it so often and cheerfully.

"And so back it went to its old friend Kairos," the Tyrant drawled, "who happened to have a grain of sand on hand that fit that hallowed mechanism quite nicely. There was a need for some expertise to see it through, which was helpfully provided, and now we arrive at the moment of truth.

He grinned, his teeth gone red for the bleeding of his gums.

"Yes, Catherine, I see the question is on the tip of your tongue. Say it."

She studied him, unblinking.

"What happens when a Judgement-corpse is wielded, if Judgement is dead?"

The right question, as he had expected. She had yet to disappoint.

"Truth of truths, my friend," he chortled, "I already gave you the only answer to that question worthy of being spoken."

A Rochelant, when they had first begun this dance of theirs.

"That's the entire point," she softly quoted, "finding out."

He'd be dead long before that riddle was answered, naturally, but what did that matter?

"Now," the Tyrant cheerfully said, "you two distressing damsels stuck bargain with me in Salia, and I promised you a good reason to keep warring on Keter. I am a tyrant of my word, and so here it is: *Keter will keep warring on you.*"

Surprise, for though she was clever and ruthless and dangerous, she did have an inflated sense of the threat she truly represented to an entity like the Dead King.

"Your coalition does not scare the King of Death," Kairos told her, not unkindly, "your petty assembly of armies and treaties which you so wastefully wring your hands over. He fears only one thing in all the world, and I have torn through the perilous nets she wove against him."

The darkness thinned, and the Ophanim wasted no breath in stepping harder on his existence. Kairos spat out blood that looked like boiling pitch, burning a streak down his own chin. The hostages must be close to out of danger, then. Yet it was as had been ordained, for now that he had spoken in pride through the lessened gloom he was allowed to see if his pride was to be deemed arrogance after all. Was the net truly broken? Would a thousand years of fury and madness poured into a single man be enough to humble a Choir? For all his scheming and deals, the truth was that the Tyrant had no idea.

No longer was Anaxares the Diplomat flattened into the ground by angelic verdict, he saw, mended only by stubborn will. Yet that did not mean the Hierarch was winning. It was, to his eye, a shattering deadlock. The will of Judgement was hammering down from the Heavens, to no avail, yet Anaxares' scathing dismissal of that authority was not resulting into his own judgement

biting into the Choir's flesh. It was a tight embrace between entities that could not bend and a man that would not. It would not be enough, Kairos saw. In time the Tyrant would be slain, and when that moment came Mercy would choke the life out of the Hierarch.

Too strong. Even after all the schemes and the lies and the hundred petty victories, the servants of the Heavens were simply too strong. Like a rat biting a lion's tail, their rage had been a splendid but doomed gesture. Yet there was glory in that too, the Tyrant of Helike thought. In firing an arrow at the moon and coming close before it fell back down and took you in the throat. Even in defeat he would have no regrets, for –

"If you will not come to me," the Hierarch said, rising to his feet, "then I will come to *you*."

Anaxares of Bellerophon rose while under angel's wroth, and for that insolence the flesh was peeled from his bones by fervent fire.

"Oh," Kairos breathed out, genuinely moved. "Oh, you splendid madman."

The Hierarch of the Free Cities was swallowed whole by shimmering heat that for a moment chased out of even the darkness of Night. And when it went out, he was gone. The White Knight dropped to the ground living, but unconscious, and the Tyrant of Helike felt a laugh bubble out of his throat. Not a rat biting a lion's tail, how wrong he had been. This was a king swallowing poison. He was with them, now. Standing among them, obstructing like only the sons and daughters of Bellerophon could.

"Gods keep you, Hierarch," Kairos said, and for the first time spoke the title with respect.

*Gods Below keep you, Anaxares of Bellerophon, and it is a pride to call you Hierarch of the Free Cities,* he thought. *Die as you lived, my friend, without peer in your madness.*

"And now we have a war, Catherine," the Tyrant of Helike said. "The war that will bring this age to an end, one way or another."

The Black Queen looked at him through the dying gloom, her face a cool mask.

"On your feet, Kairos Theodosian," she said. "That much you are owed, and not a single thing more."

It would have been a lovely thing, he thought, to dance with that one until one of them died of it. A lovely thing indeed. Matted in sweat and blood, one knee a ruin and both legs half-gone, the Tyrant of Helike pushed himself up. He stumbled forward, legs failing him, and knew he would die before he touched the ground. And it came, it came as he knew it would. Like a whisper across his skin, soothing the pain like a kind hand flicking dust away from his shoulder.

Below was watching.

The attention itself was as a question, for what man or woman alive had paid finer dues than the Tyrant of Helike? And so, at this later hour, he was asked for his wish. So many tantalizing possibilities flickered in the back of his mind. Curses that would rend the continent asunder, the strength to wound

even the Choir that was about to take his life or even a loop in the hole – a few years more, if he could talk his way into keeping them. *O Wicked Gods of mine, do you not know me better than this? All I have ever wanted of you was the answer to a single question, and only in this moment could it be asked.* One staggering step forward, and he wet his lips as he spoke.

"lo," he croaked out, "and behold. . . "

Another step, his knee giving out. If he could only prick his hear, he thought he might. . .

"I have. . . slain-" he whispered.

Ahead of him the veil lifted, and terrible light was revealed. And in that moment he finally heard it.

"-the Age of Wonders," the Tyrant finished, smiling with pure childish joy.

And to the sound of applause only he could hear, a moment before light engulfed him, Kairos Theodosian died.

# Chapter 84

# Declaration

> "To concern yourself with wickedness and virtue is to raise partitions within your mind, expecting the world to heed them thereafter. There can be no sin, save for fettering."
>
> Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King

Kairos Theodosian died before the light engulfed him. I couldn't know that for sure, for the Tyrant of Helike had already been a half-mangled corpse by the time he rose, but some part of me just... *knew*. Night wrapped around me like a cloak, for without its cold embrace I would have been blinded, I watched as the brightness burned and consumed and finally ended. Of the boy-king who'd played half the crowns of Calernia, not so much as a speck of dust remained. The fury of the Choir of Mercy had swallowed him whole, though too late. Not long, truly, in the greater scheme of things, but in affairs like this a single beat could make all the difference in the world – and he'd clawed to him a great deal more than that. The fading light of his absence left me feeling disordered, for though Kairos Theodosian had been an appalling monster in some ways in others he had been almost admirable. I would not miss him or fall into the snare of remembering him as more than he had been: mad, treacherous and like poison to all he touched. Yet neither would I pretend he had not been brilliant, in his own wicked way.

The world was better for his passing, but in some terrible way perhaps lesser as well.

In the gutted temple that'd been the seat of this lunacy of a trial, the dust settled and the darkness I had called down thinned until nothing of it was left. The Grey Pilgrim laid in a bed of shattered wood and ground, made unconscious by the heavy grip of the Choir that'd reached out through him. The White Knight's hand still clutched the side of the broken altar where he'd stood as the living channel to Judgement, or perhaps the anchor around its neck. It was hard to tell if the Tyrant would have been able to bait – although could it really

be called that, when all he'd needed to do was shine a light and let nature take its course? – the Tribunal into this disaster of a situation without the White Knight at hand to work through. And a disaster it had been, no two ways about that. Mercy would walk away from this with little singed save perhaps its pride, should even have such a thing, but Judgement? I could still feel in the air the weight of the power it'd thrown around, smiting the Hierarch into the ground again and again as he refused to bow to their authority.

I could still feel his power, too, the same heavy lingering furor that'd swallowed Rochelant whole. It had been more sharply wielded here, turned against the Seraphim instead of allowed to run rampant, and perhaps been stronger for it. It'd glimpsed things at the heart of the storm, images I hardly understood – a stele in stone, a woman dying – but one thing was clear: there had been power behind the Hierarch, and it was not simply the power of a Named. The weight had come from elsewhere, and it had been... oppressive. In every sense of the term. And though it had failed to cow Judgement, neither had it been willing to be cowed by it. More worryingly, when that stalemate had grown beyond what either side would tolerate the Hierarch had, for a lack of better term, pursued. I'd not felt a speck of power from either him or the Choir since.

Still, my eyes looked beyond as I waited. To the other thing that yet waited.

"And?" I quietly said.

"He was still alive," the Hierophant said.

Masego's feet tread across the scorched earth unerringly, his stride as sure and certain it had been even as Choirs raged and darkness swelled. What would the works of godlings matter, to one like him?

"That last strike by the Seraphim burned him clean through," I said. "Not even bone left, Hierophant. What business does even the likes of the Hierarch have surviving that?"

"You mistake life for the wearing of flesh," Masego replied. "I know not if it was willingly or by chance, yet the Hierarch sacrificed his own as skillfully as any Old Tyrant: the loss of flesh was taken as victory by the Choir of Judgement, and so they withdrew."

Above us the afternoon sky grew darkened, and slowly the sky began to weep ash. It felt, looking up, like the dusk heralding the end of the worlds. Gods forgive us all, it might yet be.

"And he withdrew with them," I softly said. "Hooked into the hallowed flesh by the ironclad belief he had the right to judge it."

My old friend's steps slowed and finally ceased as he came to stand by my side, shoulder-to-shoulder. Masego, wearing cloth over eyes of glass and the ragged dark robes like a doomsday prophet, seemed more the man of the moment than I. The truth, though, was that he had been spectator while I'd had my hands all over this blunder.

"I am uncertain what will come of it," Hierophant admitted, tone displeased. "It may be that the man becomes an obstruction in all things, as a seal ever judged and judging."

"Or he could be a poison," I murmured. "Taint in the blood, changing what stood incapable of such until now."

The latter, I thought, felt more like the parting arrow of Kairos Theodosian. Something wounded but not slain, a crippling rendered back unto the Creation that had so carelessly wounded him since his first breath.

"Let us hope it is that," Hierophant said, and my brow rose.

He dipped his head to the side, conceding to the need for elaboration.

"A poison will be purged, whether it takes an hour, a decade or a millennium," Masego said. "A seal, however, might just last until the convictions of either side falter. And before that moment, would sever Judgement from the rest of Creation."

That would be... dangerous, I suspected. A Choir was no small thing, to have one removed from the machinery of Creation could not possibly be without consequence. And that was without even considering the matter of Cordelia Hasenbach's angelic corpse-weapon: Gods only knew what might come of using it, now. Ash fell like rain onto the open-sky temple at the heart of Lyonceau, and I was forced to wonder if in my need to forge a better world I might not have doomed the world as it now stood. The Tyrant had been cryptic, as was his wont, but not beyond interpretation: the Bard had truly had a scheme afoot to slay the Dead King, and I'd taken an axe to it. I was not alone in this, it seemed, for *the hidden sting of augury* was undoubtedly a reference to the Augur, but it could not be said that a great deal of the blame to be laid did not belong at my feet. If I'd not tried to fix it, to make it better, the Intercessor's scheme might have gone through and the Dead King would either be dead or marching towards death. *He implied using the weapon would have had... costs*, I reminded myself. It must have been the sight of those to come that'd led the Augur to turn on the Wandering Bard, however she'd done it.

Gods Everburning, how harsh must that price must have been that a hero would have shied from paying it to slay the *Dead King*.

"I can't tell," I softly admitted, "if I've made everything better or worse."

A chuckle, deeply amused.

"Neither can anyone else, Catherine," Masego told me. "Why would you be any different?"

I looked up at the sky, at the trails of ash left by the wrath of angels, and did not answer. It was not untrue, what he'd said. Perhaps not the answer I'd wanted, but when had they ever been?

"Too late to turn back now," I said, letting out a long breath. "We'll have to see it through to the end."

A hand came to rest on my shoulder, lightly.

"I would have been disappointed if we did not," Hierophant said.

The danger had passed, as much as it would ever pass in a place marked by the indignation of two Choirs, and so it was not long before the others began to trickle back in. The Rogue Sorcerer headed first to the Pilgrim – the right

choice, I thought, both tactically and politically – and with visible relief pronounced him in fine health, save for deep exhaustion and a few bruises. Lord Yannu and Lady Aquiline lifted him up, with reverent care, and brought him out. The Witch of the Woods saw to her partner hesitantly, and I suspected she knew precious little of healing. She seemed pleased when Roland came to lend a hand, though less so when admitted that Hanno's slumber was not natural, but otherwise beyond his ability to see to.

"Bring him out," I said. "And if the Peregrine cannot see to him when he wakes, then the Crows will."

The heroine rose to her feet, tall and shrouded in a cloak that covered a long tunic. The painted mask of clay on her face hid her expression, but not so much I could not feel the hostility wafting off her like smoke.

"As they did when the Choirs struggled against your kin under Below?" the Witch harshly said.

There was, I thought, something strange about her voice. I heard her speaking in Lower Miezan, but there were almost other meanings woven in – and with the Sisters warding my mind, I could almost discern what language she was *actually* speaking in. It didn't sound like any I'd ever heard before, and I was a more than passing polyglot nowadays.

"I warned him," I said. "Sve Noc would see to containment and nothing else. Be glad they did, or this entire town would be drowning in fire and angelic anger."

"You brought down darkness after the Tyrant struck," the Witch accused.

"And saved the lives of everyone on those grounds by doing so," I flatly said.

"I could have warded us from the anger of the Ophanim," the Witch said. "Had you not-"

"If you could have handled it better, you should have," I mildly said. "You didn't, so I stepped in. Whining afterwards is an exercise in pointlessness."

"Every hero that speaks well of you ends up *crippled*, Catherine Foundling," the Witch of the Woods snarled. "While you grow ever stronger. I wonder why that is?"

"Antigone," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "This serves no purpose."

"Neither does pretending she is our ally," the Witch said.

"In the face of some foes, all those that breathe are allies," the Sorcerer flatly said. "Pretending otherwise is how the day grew so dark in the first place."

"Hear hear," Archer drawled.

She'd sauntered in at some point and done so quietly enough I'd barely heard the sound of her boots biting into the ash. Throwing arms around the necks of both Masego and I – that could hardly be comfortable, given the height difference – she leaned forward grinning.

"We get you're all pissed your boy Hanno got had, but maybe if you whiteclads better kept your eye on the bird you wouldn't have to keep eating dirt," Indrani said, tone was deceptively cheerful.

Her arms were tense, and I knew well how quickly she could draw her blades when it was time for killing.

"You offer insolence and nothing more," the Witch said.

"Really?" Archer drawled, drawing out the word obnoxiously. "'cause look at how we're standing right now, my sweet. Who are, again, the only ones keeping an eye on the bird?"

And like a cold sheet of rain falling on everyone, we were all reminded of the presence in the back that had yet to move or speak a single word. The Dead King's vessel watched us all with his eyeless gaze, and it was true that while the Witch of the Woods was facing me, all this time Hierophant and I had been facing him. Indrani had spoken the observation lightly, but it had unpleasant aftertaste for much of the room – enough that the Witch briskly and oddly moved her head in a manner I assumed to mean the conversation was over. The King of Death said nothing, all the while. Now that they'd all been warned of his presence again, the others in the temple felt the same thing I had since the beginning: weight. The old monster was waiting, and as he did his looming presence grew oppressive without need of a single act on his part. If he'd incited quarrels between us, I thought, or even mocked and scorned us, it would have been different. It would have felt like he was part of this, a villain far more dangerous than most of our kind but not *other*. His silence, though, drew a line between him and us.

The Dead King was not involving himself in this because he was above us. Because he had no need of resorting to petty tactics when we were, to him, little more than children stumbling in the dark.

It flowed, after that, like a river settling into a riverbed. Like Creation wanted the pieces to fall into place. The White Knight was carried out by Roland and the Witch, carefully, and in the place of heroes came in the mortal crowns. Cordelia Hasenbach stood at the centre, the First Prince of Procer of regal bearing even in her riding dress but not quite successfully hiding how unnerved she'd been by the last hour. The Blood come to war north: Lady Aquiline and Razin Tanja, elbow to elbow and fitting there like a shield wall of two. The young ones, those, two, and rising. The old guard stood at their left, grizzled Lady Itima and grim Lord Yannu, both killers as fine as the Dominion had forged in my lifetime. And to the Warden of the West's right, more than half of the Woe. Hierophant, ragged and of glimmering eye, foe and student both to the Hidden Horror. Archer, smile sharp as the blades at her hip, having walked through death and come out of it without fear. And I, last of all, leaning on the long staff of yew I had chosen over the sword of a Fairfax and all it would mean. All this assembly, and on the other side only the King of Death. Seated, silent, still.

Ash drifted down through the open-sky ceiling, coating us all in grey.

"There is a place," the last king of Sephirah said, "in the heart of Levant, where the first pilgrim of grey slew many men."

Red embers lit the hollow sockets, as the Dead King finally spoke.

"In that place lies a secret that Tariq Isbili will know," Neshamah continued, "and it will tell you, should you be clever enough, of the doom you all so narrowly escaped by the grace of Kairos Theodosian."

The malevolent redness lingered on Masego's face, and he met that gaze with glass forged in Summer's flame.

"Follow the truth, Hierophant," the Dead King said, sounding almost amused.

Always more secrets, I tiredly thought. Always more schemes. Would there ever be an end, before either he was broken or we were?

"Enough," the First Prince of Procer said. "You came to these lands, Trismegistus King, to this conference, and yet held your peace. Speak now to your intent, or begone."

She must be afraid, I thought. Brave as she was, she was without power. Not even a trained warrior, as I understood it, and she was looking at the oldest and most powerful monster ever spawned by Calernia. Yet Cordelia Hasenbach stood tall and proud, eyes hard and bearing icy. I caught her fingers brushing against what looked like a necklace made of little fangs, under the sleeve of her dress.

"I have been considering peace," the Hidden Horror said, tone nonchalant. "More than truce, peace. One enforced by treaties that you all seem so eager to embrace."

*I would not brook you signing the Accords*, I thought. *Else how could you be the sacrifice binding them together?*

"But you are blind," the King of Death said. "Even the finest of you, so very *blind*. And so I wonder now what purpose would there be to such a peace. None. Not when the Intercessor would still use you as tools whenever she so wishes."

"You speak in riddles, of strangers," Lord Yannu Marave of the Champion's Blood said. "Your babble means less than dust."

"It seems like the path of recklessness, at first glance," the King of Death pensively said. "Yet it is more calculated a risk than waiting. Some chances never come again, no matter how long the wait."

"Has age caught up to you, dead thing?" Lady Itimi Ifriqui sneered. "You speak senselessly."

"No," I quietly said. "He doesn't."

Red embers moved to me, the patient and inhuman mind behind them gracing me with its attention.

"That was a declaration of war," I announced.

There was a thundering silence in the wake of the words I'd spoken.

"There is still time to the truce," Cordelia Hasenbach sharply said. "Will you now break your word, Dead King?"

The Hidden Horror considered her in turned, before he let out what I could only call a fond bit of laughter.

"Hasenbach," the Dead King said. "Yes, that is fitting. One of the old blood should be here, at the beginning of the end. Your line is a respectable one,

Cordelia Hasenbach. Never once did the city of Rhenia fall to my armies, when one of your blood held it. None other can make the same boast."

"Dawn has not yet failed," the First Prince of Procer said. "Nor will it, so long as I breathe."

The old monster shook with laughter.

"Let us do this properly, then," Neshamah said.

The corpse rose, tall and robed and resplendent, and from the heights he had not left since we first came to this temple he looked down on us – with ember-like burning in the hollow sockets of his skull, red glimmering on the jewels set in the bones.

"There is no peace," the Dead King said. "There is no truce. There is only the shiver before the blade claims your neck. You will fight and you will rage and you will weep, but in the end there can only ever be one end to this."

The red burned, burned like red star that would swallow the world whole.

"I am the King of Death," the last king of Sephirah said. "I come."

Beginning with the crown of the head, the bones cracked and splintered and shattered. From the fractures the pale ivory-like bones turned to dust. The jewels broke and dimmed, the metals rusted and curled, until there was nothing left of the vessel at all.

Ash fell down from the sky, silent and soft.

*And so it begins*, I thought. *Gods save us all, and so it begins.*

# Chapter 85

# When It Rains

"Kill an enemy,
Make another
How dreadfully
We do usher!
Killed; enemy
To another."

Extract from 'And So I Dreamt I Was Awake' by Sherehazad the Seer, Taghreb poet

"You're certain?" I asked.

"As can be," Vivienne replied. "Our own people have intercepted reports and the Scribe's agents confirm it."

"Then send for Pickler," I said. "We'll need someone navigate the implications of that."

I paused, and the other Callowan caught my eye with understanding.

"Robber as well, then," the dark-haired woman said.

She dipped out of the room long enough to send out messengers and returned as I poured us cups of wine. She took it when offered, and we both sipped in silence. Lost in our thoughts. It'd be better with the two of them, and I was glad she'd realized it. While it could not be denied that Senior Sapper Pickler's upbringing as the daughter of a Matron leant her insights into the ways of goblinkind that a nobody like Robber wouldn't have, neither should it be ignored that she was, well... horribly unsociable. Even with other goblins. Special Tribune Robber, on the other hand? He somehow seemed to know every other greenskin we came across, and though goblins were clannish in the extreme amongst themselves they gossiped with relish. Robber would have his finger on the pulse of things in a way Pickler would not. Gods, and to think I'd believed it would be quiet after the disaster in Lyonceau. Showed what I knew.

Midnight had come and passed, though it would be more than a bell still until dawn came, and no part of that span had been calm. I'd not returned to Salia, after the Dead King's chilling farewell, for it would have been unwise.

Riots were beginning again, though this time not as a tool of conspiracy: word had spread that the war against Keter was resuming, and in terror and impotent anger the people had taken to the streets. Given that there'd been killing of foreigners last time, it'd been judged cautious for the delegations not to return to the capital at least until the day after. If not longer. The First Prince had admitted that she'd rather not soldiers – even solely her own – to put down the turbulence but that she might not have a choice. Should it come to that, though, no other member of the Grand Alliance could be seen intervening even if only to help. It would feed the rumours from the coup attempt that'd not entirely died down, that the First Prince was in league with foreign powers that wanted to destroy Procer.

As Salia roiled and the rest of us kept to our camps, surrounded by soldiers, the last stretch of day into the night had been filled with fervent activity. For one, the two Named that'd been effectively keeping the League of Free Cities together were gone. The Hierarch perhaps not yet dead, as Masego had insisted, but undeniably he was in no place to rule. Not that he'd ever done that even when he was actually meant to. There'd been accusations of assassination from some cities, Penthes leading the charge, but it was hard to argue with a town covered in ash and two heroes stuck in bedrest. The League delegations had hastily withdrawn to their camp under a heavy escort of Proceran soldiers, howling mobs of Salians tossing everything they could get their hands on at them. I had Archer out and keeping an eye on them, though with strict instructions not the kick the hornet's nest. That Penthes had been so aggressive earlier was a good indication that Hakram was right about Malicia having sunk in her hooks there, but there was no telling where much of the League would fall. Helike, in particular, promised to be a mess. Kairos Theodosian had no formal successor, and rumour was he'd pruned minor branches of the Theodosians quite enthusiastically after usurping his nephew. It was not impossible that the royal house of Helike was dead, and there was no telling if some other nobles would make a play for the throne or some distant relation was about to be produced so they could 'rule'.

And now, like we didn't have our plates full enough with the south, north and west trouble was coming from the east as well. The affairs of the Confederation of the Grey Eyries, the fledgling goblin state that'd risen in rebellion against the Tower and declared independence before going a step further and taking Foramen, had always been opaque to outsiders. The Council of Matrons had ruled the goblin tribes under the Empire and it still did under the Confederation, but to my understanding the alliance between the tribes was a loose thing even at the best of times. The Matrons were nominally an ally to Callow, for Hakram and Vivienne had backed their bid for independence with dwarven gold and foodstuffs, to be repaid in goods we needed: goblin steel and munitions. A blockade of the Hungering Sands by the loyalist Legions of Terror had made deliveries of these highly sporadic, though they'd not entirely ceased, but the Matrons were making visible efforts to keep their word.

I'd believed that to be a promising sign, and though the goblins were said to have committed atrocities against Taghrebi nobility when they took Foramen, the loss of the Imperial Forges and yet another great city of Praes had been a hard blow to Malicia. The Confederation was riddled with practices I despised, and the Matrons were generally speaking about as trustworthy as a nest of vipers, but as a counterweight to the Tower in the southeast they'd been an invaluable asset. Just the fact that they'd tied up the loyalist legions down south had been worth its weight in gold, since it meant I didn't have to worry about those same troops securing the Empire for Malicia – or marching on Summerholm, for that matter. There was the promise of a long-term partnership there as well, with the Snake Eater Tribe having settled in my lands near Marchford. It'd allowed Juniper to recruit goblins to fill the ranks of the Army of Callow's sappers and scouts, and more abstract benefits as well. The relative harmony with the locals had been both a proof that Callow might be able to handle greenskin settlers and a tie to the Council of Matrons themselves.

The generous income that rent of their tribal lands brought didn't hurt either, given the until recently dreadful state of my coffers.

Some parts of it in particular: Pickler's mother, Matron Wither of the High Ridge Tribe. Who'd been trying to push Pickler into retiring and becoming Matron of the Snake Eater Tribe since the moment it was settled on Callowan grounds. I'd been more amused than anything when I'd first heard, for trying to get Pickler interested in anything that wasn't engineering was like pulling teeth, but given the fractious nature of goblin politics I'd found it shockingly impressive that Matron Wither has succeeded at ensuring no other matron was appointed in the wake of her daughter's refusal to retire and take up matronship of the tribe. Guards knocked on the door and jolted me out of my thoughts, Vivienne calling out to allow entry as I took a sip from my now near-empty cup. The two goblins came in together, for a moment allowing a glimpse of the difference between them – Pickler was, I realized, growing significantly larger than Robber. Half a head more now, and where the male's skin was beginning to wrinkle in some places as he approached his kind's middle age her own was the same as when I'd first met her. Matron lines, it was said, were as a breed apart from the rest of their kind.

That did not strike me as the kind of thing that came about naturally.

"Boss, Princess," Robber greeted us, scuttling in and sliding into a seat.

My brow rose as I glanced at Vivienne.

"Since I was designated your heiress," she admitted. "It's exactly as annoying as you'd think."

Oh, Vivienne, why would you ever admit that out loud? There was no way he was ever going to stop, now.

"Catherine, Dartwick," Pickler greeted us, slightly more deferentially.

She waited for me to invite her with a gesture before taking a seat, at least.

"I've need of your insights into the Confederation," I admitted. "There's been news."

Amber eyes wary, Pickler watched me without blinking.

"I'm not corresponding with my mother, Catherine," she said. "And even if I was, she would not share secrets with me. Nor I with her, if that is your-"

"Not in the slightest," I interrupted. "But you were raised about as high as can be, by my understanding, and you know your mother better than anybody else we've got."

"And I am here to speak for the common goblin, I assume," Robber grinned, pearly needle-like teeth gleaming. "Allow me then to present our demands: first, we would like larger cookpots. The ones we have can't fit a full Proceran child. Second-"

"Robber's here because he hears gossip even Hakram doesn't," I said, pretending to have heard none of that.

"His ears are too high up," Robber agreed without missing a beat, "it's like someone carved an ugly mug onto a tree, Boss."

"Matron Wither has seized control of the city of Foramen and, along with what seems to be another few tribes, evicted the Confederation from the region," Vivienne calmly said.

It was like someone had dropped a sheet of ice-cold water on the two goblins. Genuine surprise, from the two of them.

"Was blood spilled?" Robber sharply asked.

Vivienne handed me the scroll carrying the latest summary report and I tossed it across the table. He caught it and passed it to Pickler without hesitating, eyes remaining on me.

"As far as we can tell, all forces within the city that didn't belong to the High Ridge or their allies were taken by surprised and killed," I said. "There were a series of skirmishes afterwards that droved back Confederation warriors into the Grey Eyries. Maybe four to five thousand dead, all in all."

"The Legions haven't moved," Pickler slowly said.

"They have not," I grimly said. "Even our allies in the Eyes are certain. I'm not all that familiar with Marshal Nim, but I'm told she's the most aggressive commander among the marshals. She would not miss an opportunity like that without a good reason, I think."

"The Tribes have always turned on each other when rebellions turn sour," Robber said, "but this is... wrong. Too early. They're winning, too."

He did not, I thought, sound even slightly disapproving of the goblin tribes beginning to sell each other out to the Tower at the first hint of defeat. There was something in me that was disgusted by the notion – Gods, what kind of Callowan would sell out their own just because the going got rough? – but I forcefully reminded myself that goblins did not see the world as most humans did.

"No rebellion against the Tower ever lasted more than five years," Pickler quietly said. "My mother told me this, once, when I was a child."

"The Long War did," Robber argued. "It took fifteen years for them to put down Matron Trifler up in her hidden fortress."

"Trifler led one tribe and the castoffs of the rest," Pickler said. "After three years the rest of the Council had submitted to Sulphurous, and for the twelve years that follow it was a war of raiders against raiders."

Much as the Wasteland's history could be interesting – and I was pretty sure Dread Empress Sulphurous had actually died to the first known Shining Prince after cornering him out in the Fields of Streges – and the parts of it involving the goblin rebellions as bloody as they were fascinating, I'd not brought them here to speak of it.

"Why bring this up, Pickler?" I said. "The Grey Eyries haven't fallen."

Nor were they likely to, in my opinion. The reports of the Eyes made it clear that Matron Wither and her allies comprised less than a third of the tribes of the Confederation and that surprise had been the deciding element in her victory against her former allies. She might even be able to hold Foramen, given the wards and walls on the city, but if she tried to take the Eyries she was in for the same bloody slog Praesi armies went through every time they put down rebellion there. And unlike the Empire, she didn't have the numbers to simply take the casualties inflicted by constant vicious ambushes and keep advancing. Her people would know the grounds, sure, but so would the enemy.

"Because I do not believe my mother intends to go back to the Grey Eyries," Pickler said.

"She doesn't have the strength to fend off both the Confederation and the Empire," I slowly said. "To be honest, I'm not sure she has the strength to fend off either if they put their back into it."

"Malicia cannot tolerate losing the forges of her war machine to an independent power, from a practical perspective," Vivienne noted. "Not even one at war with her enemies. And it would see her overthrown by the High Lords, besides."

"Which she's gathering in Ater," I pointed out. "Where she has the Sentinels, the one force of soldiers that she can be assured the loyalty of."

They were hardly an army, mind you, and more like the personal guard of the reigning tyrant. But within Ater they were undeniably the largest stick around, even if I wouldn't bet on them against the household troops of most High Seats beyond those walls.

"It seems highly unlikely for her to attempt so risky a purge," my successor said. "Especially when the aristocracy is bound to come down firmly in her favour when the Carrion Lord comes for the Tower."

"You're missing the point, Boss," Robber quietly said. "Pickler's saying her mother doesn't think this can be won. So all she did was get her hands on goods to bargain with."

I blinked in surprise. This was, on the surface, madness. The Dread Empire was largely without allies at the moment. Sure, the Empress had probably made pacts in the eastern Free Cities, but none of them would be willing to march to war for her. And the Dead King had most the continent arrayed against him. Crusades with lesser forces than those gathered in Salia had

driven him back into Keter, so why would Wither choose *now* to change sides? The Matrons were a cautious bunch: they'd waited until Thalassina was dust, half the legions were in effective exile and Callowan support was secured before finally striking. Why would Wither not wait a few more months before making her decision, at least to see how the Grand Alliance did against Keter?

"And what might she trade the return of Foramen for?" Vivienne asked.

"Rule over the rest of the Tribes," Robber suggested.

"That wouldn't hold," I said. "It solidifies goblins around a single ruler, even if it's a hated one."

And once the Tribes began to unify, a thousand years of Praesi work would begin to unravel. A coalition of tribes nudged into constant feuding by breeding restrictions and strictly limited trade was something the Tower could comfortably believe itself to be able to put down if it rose in rebellion, even with the difficulties inherent in campaigning in the Grey Eyries. An effective goblin *queendom*, though? That was a whole other kettle of fish. Even if the throne changed dynasties with every season, a common army and the ability to mobilize workforce from all tribes would make even a fledgling goblin state an utter nightmare to put down should it rebel. It would be much unlike Malicia to trade a short-term gain for a long-term disaster, considering she likely intended to reign until the long term came to pass. Especially when she could simply have waited until the goblin armies had bloodied each other then forcefully taken Foramen from whoever came out the victor.

I wished Akua was here, for her insights into Praes would have been welcome, but she had duties just as pressing. Someone needed to get in touch with our armies before they came out of the Twilight Ways, and though Masego still had the know-how he no longer had the sorcery. I'd told him to double down on exploring his theory, besides, with the help of the Rogue Sorcerer whenever he could be spared. If the Dead King was truly about to start flinging around a few millennia's worth of accumulated nastiness, we needed anything that might truly be able to make a difference.

"Agreed," Pickler said. "Nor is my mother a fool. If such an offer was made she would not have trusted it."

"Then what did she bargain for?" Vivienne asked. "The current situation is untenable, Senior Sapper. Her seizure of Foramen has been the death knell of our supply routes for steel and munitions. We've enough in Callow to fill the Army's stocks once more, but after that the well is dry."

And that was without even speaking of the Legions-in-Exile, who after a year of campaigning had expended the vast majority of their own stocks. Marshals Juniper and Grem had combined their stores while they were fighting together in Iserre, but fought they had. There wasn't much left in those common stores, now. Much of the Army of Callow's war doctrine came from the Legions of Terror, straight from the Reforms, and that meant the sappers had a major role as both combat units and siege engineers. Losing one of those for lack of munitions to furnish them with would be a blow, and an ill-timed one if

we were to fight Keter in the coming months. Against the hordes of the dead, goblin munitions would make a massive difference. One we badly needed if we were to have a prayer of holding the northern fronts.

"Poison Tooth," Pickler said, quoting the scroll I'd handed her. "Bitter Stride, Clay Sun, every single tribe listed here – they are all face-tribes."

"*Pickler*," Robber hissed.

"That is not preserved knowledge, Robber," she dismissed. "The Taghreb figured out that much centuries ago. And even if it was, what would the Preservers *do*?"

"The Preservers," I slowly said.

"There are some among our kind that are tasked with the preservation of secrecy," Pickler said.

Robber, never one to miss an occasion to be grisly, slit his throat with a finger.

"Loose tongues lead to open throats," Robber said. "Even a child knows that."

"And the Legions allow this?" I frowned.

"Not openly," Pickler conceded. "Yet Marshal Ranker did not join her entire tribe to the Carrion Lord's cause without requiring *concessions,* in the days before the Conquest. As for the days before the Reforms, well…"

What did your average Dread Emperor care for goblins killing each other, she meant. Not a lot, most likely, and they'd have to know that trying too hard to get at goblin secrets would mean a rebellion. I doubted that the common assertions that only goblins spoke the goblin tongues was true, but then Black had taught me they regularly changed their spoken language so that it could not ever truly be grasped.

"I made no such concessions," I flatly said.

"They would have sought them form you, in time," Pickler said, hissing through her teeth. "Made sale of steel and munitions contingent on them."

"Allow me to be perfectly clear," I said, tone clipped. "In choosing to serve in the Army of Callow, you have become citizens of Callow. With all rights and protections so afforded."

"We do not make exceptions to this," Vivienne said, voice as offended as I felt. "And if the old crones think they can twist our arms over such a matter with *trade*, then they will be taught otherwise harshly."

Robber looked, to my deep unease, almost helpless.

"You don't understand," he said. "It is… you, we… We just don't spill secrets, Boss. It's not what we do. It's not what a goblin does."

"Matrons talk," Pickler said, tone embittered. "All else hold their tongue. That is our way."

We had, it seemed, tumbled into a deeper pit than I'd thought. It would not be bridged tonight, I thought, and there were prior callings. Best move on.

"Face-tribes," I said. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Tribes who represent us with outsiders," Pickler said. "The High Ridge learn and speak with the Taghreb, by custom, but under my mother the Banu of Foramen were the humans cultivated. No doubt the secrets she stole and traded helped the Confederation take the city from the Banu and helped her take it from the Confederation."

"And all the other tribes she allied with have similar purposes?" I pressed.

"The Bitter Strides are a dark hand by custom – they hurt in concert with another tribe that speaks sweetly – but they too know well the peoples of the Hungering Sands," Pickler said.

Suddenly Pickler's assertion that her mother did not intend to return to the Grey Eyries sounded more believable. Matron Wither had assembled allies that could navigate the Wasteland and only that kind, which implied those were the people she had a *use* for.

"Fuck," I said. "She's trying for nobility, isn't she? With so many nobles dead the Empress can find her a holding somewhere, and she'll take in her allied tribes as retainers."

"Thalassina was obliterated with sorcery, but it has a strategic location and great prestige as a holding," Vivienne said. "A worthy reward, perhaps, for one returning Foramen to the Tower."

The knock on the door saw my irritation rise sharply, but I mastered it. A young Callowan soldier – fair-haired, likely southern of birth – entered, face anxious. He was bringing, he said, word from Lord Hierophant and Royal Advisor Kivule as well Lord Adjutant. Contact had been made with the Army of Callow. My brow rose, since Akua had told me it was unlikely to work until we were much closer to dawn. Hierophant's presence must have helped more than anticipated.

"Noted," I said. "You may leave."

He looked like he wanted to twist his hands anxiously, but he spoke up again.

"Your Majesty," he said, "your presence has been required."

I frowned.

"I left Lord Adjutant with them to see to anything that might require my presence in the first place," I said.

"And it is he that sent me to you, Your Majesty," the boy said. "I am to tell you that the Army of Callow has left the Twilight Ways, and is now encamped in northern Bayeux."

It took me a moment to place the principality in my mind – it was south of Arans, where my army was meant to march, and had commanded one of the two paths into the Red Flower Vales before the passes were collapsed. Well short of where they should be.

"Are the Legions-in-Exile with them?" Vivienne asked.

The boy shook his head.

"My lady, they *left*," he got out. "And Marshal Juniper has placed herself under arrest, along with almost third of the officers in the army."

# Chapter 86

# It Pours

> "The cruelty of a dilemma is not only in the choice itself; it lies also in the truth it reveals to you about yourself through the making of that choice."
>
> King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

Akua Sahelian and Masego the Hierophant were, undeniably, two of the finest mages ever produced by the Wasteland. One had been taught the old sorceries of Wolof since she could remember and taken to them with dreadful skill, the other had been apprenticed since he could speak to a warlock who'd dissected the corpses of gods. Their deeds were many and renowned, and their reputations were such as to make men shiver in the dark of night. They'd also used a godsdamned *bathtub* as the vessel of water for their scrying ritual. I'd excuse Masego in this, since he was usually more concerned with practicalities than appearance, but Akua would earn no such mercy from me. The same woman who'd campaigned with multiple enchanted ceremonial armours was now trying to pretend it'd never occurred to him there might be some slight indignity to this, an innocent look on her face. Yeah, I wasn't buying that. I spared some of my glare for Hakram, the filthy traitor who must have been willingly complicit in this, and at least he had the good grace to look abashed.

I didn't have nearly as much time to spend on designing petty vengeances as I used to, but they weren't getting away with this unpunished. And I wasn't above delegating my pettiness these days, anyway. A council consisting of Robber, Indrani and Vivienne ought to be capable of coming up with a suitably vindictive reprisal.

I limped up to the side of the copper bathtub, discretely surrounded by carved and inscribed wardstones stabilizing it against the strenuous effects of long-distance scrying, and the faint amusement I'd felt at the absurdity of having to speak with my officers through a bathing implement died. On the surface of the waters I saw Juniper, and what I read there was not promising. She looked exhausted, the thick skin around her eyes touched with muted grey,

and beyond that she looked *angry*. The kind of low festering anger that stayed in your belly, kept simmering there by your own impotence to do anything about its cause.

"Juniper," I said. "I'd say it's a pleasure to see you, but it seems that would be premature. Report, Marshal."

"Warlord," she gravely replied, dipping her head to the side.

It bared her neck, if only slightly, which implied much greater deference by orc standards than inclining your head in agreement. I'd noticed Juniper tended to fall back into orc mannerisms when she was unsettled, abandoning the more human affectations that she'd picked up in the War College. That was not a promising sign, not that any part of this had been hinting at my night getting any better.

"Time is difficult to gauge accurately in the Twilight Ways," she began, "but around what we believe to be fifteen hours ago the Legions-in-Exile under Marshal Grem abandoned the march towards Arans and changed direction."

*Fifteen hours*, I considered with a frown. Aligning the timelines, and allowing for a degree of imprecision, that around the time the conference's first formal session had been held. Hakram stirred, having approached my side without my realizing. Consciously, anyway. It wasn't like he'd been silent, more that his presence at my side hardly warranted particular notice. I glanced at him and nodded, tacitly allowing him to ask the question he wanted to.

"And was reason given for that decision, or even the destination itself?" Adjutant asked.

Juniper grimaced.

"That is complicated to answer," she admitted. "Both the Army and the Legions were breaking camp, when it happened, and it was not immediately clear what was happening. The messengers I sent were given the answer that this changed march was at the order of the Carrion Lord, which I did not believe."

My eyes narrowed. All other things aside, Black shouldn't have a way to contact his people while they were out in the Ways: I'd not put Akua *and* Masego on the ritual so they could reminisce together about the bad old days. Here in Salia he shouldn't have the calibre of mages to accomplish something like that, much less without the Observatory to use. Which meant he would have had to give secret orders before coming with me to Salia, which was... dubious. I wasn't going to blindly trust the man, even if I loved him, but it would be ludicrous for him to turn on me at this juncture. The moment I ceased extending my protection to him the Procerans would slip a noose around his neck, if they were feeling *kind*, and while maybe I could see him taking calculated risks if he were still partnered with Malicia he'd just burned that bridge in front of the rulers of most the continent. No, Juniper had been right to be skeptical.

"I sough to speak personally with Marshal Grem," Juniper gravelled, "but was turned away. The rank and file of the exiles were taken by surprise, my queen, but not worried. Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara approached officers she

worked closely with during the campaigns and learned that the Legions were returning to Praes."

*Fuck*, I thought. That wouldn't be a secret order from Black, he had to know that his soldiers were exhausted and undersupplied. Beginning a campaign to take Praes before rest and refit would be madness, the Legions-in-Exile had been out in enemy territory for almost a year now.

"Someone got to One-Eye," I said. "Either he's dead and being impersonated, or someone has hooks in him."

"Marshal Grem has a great deal of prestige among the troops," Hakram quietly said, "but not so much that such a decision would be uncontested. Marshal Ranker might be dead, but there are still Conquest generals. General Mok for the Fifth and Yawa Foehammer for the Twelfth."

Both were decorated veterans of the invasion of Callow, from what I knew, though General Yawa had been a lesser officer then – she'd been raised to general after Afolabi Magoro died at the Doom and rebuilt the Twelfth from the wreckage of that legions. Neither were anywhere as famous or beloved as the One-Eye, but among their own soldiers their word would carry a lot of weight. If both accused the Marshal of being compromised, people would listen. Juniper grunted in agreement.

"That was my thought as well, and so I pushed again for a face-to-face meeting," the orc said. "Which is when it was made clear to me that the entire upper echelon of the exiles knew of this order."

My brow rose.

"All of them?" Hakram slowly said.

"Marshal Grem, all generals and most the legates," Juniper said. "There was no arguing with that, my queen. The only way I could feasibly prevent them from leaving was putting the top officers of the exiles under arrest."

"That would have led to a pitched battle," I grimly said.

While bonds were tight between Black's army and mine, given the common wars fought and the common descendance from the Reforms and the College, the Legions-in-Exile were not mine. They'd not sworn to me, nor ever intended to. My marshal ordering their highest commanders all imprisoned would have been seen as an attempt to bring them into the fold by force, which would have gone... poorly, to say the least. The Army of Callow would probably have won that fight, between superior numbers and whatever was affecting the Legion officers, but it would have been a bloody business all around and there was no guarantee my barebones mage lines would have been able to fix whatever had been done to the generals afterwards. Juniper wouldn't have had much of a choice, when it came down to it.

"It was the right call to let them leave," I said.

"Thank you," Juniper said, dipping her head forward.

Been worried about my reaction to that, then. Fair enough.

"Hellhounds, remind me," Adjutant said. "General Birne, Ranker's replacement. He's got a golden stripe, doesn't he?"

The honour granted those who'd fought with distinction at the Fields of Streges, as I recalled.

"And a silver cord from the Siege of Summerholm," Juniper said, tone approving. "You caught on quick. It wasn't me that noticed, Deadhand. General Bagram's got a stripe too, and they're old friends."

My eyes flicked between the two of them questioningly, for clearly I'd missed something along the way.

"The golden stripes are considered the highest of the personal honours granted during the Conquest," Hakram said. "Because only forty-three were granted, and-"

"All by Dread Empress Malicia's own hand," Akua finished from behind us.

I glanced at her, and the implication sunk in. She'd once told me that her family considered any spy left alone with the Empress to be compromised. Yet Malicia had outmanoeuvred High Lady Tasia Sahelian, in the end, destroyed her completely. Even that stark a warning might have been underestimating what the Empress was capable of.

"Marshal Grem is certain to have spoken with the Empress in person at least once," I said. "And I imagine the same would hold true for any general and quite a few of the high-ranking officers that participated in the Conquest."

And whatever it was she'd done, it was possible for it to affect every single one of those individuals. Shit. That was a fucking disaster. There was no such thing as flawless mind control, especially not from a distance, but even simple planted orders could do a lot of damage. Especially if they were sown generously across the entire old guard of the Legions, which tended to be both the finest commanders we had and my father's most ardent supporters. *I'd believe it too, if I was a legionary and the One-Eye told me his orders came from Black*, I thought. After all those years of friendship and loyalty, why doubt it?

"Within an hour of realizing this, I removed the army from the Twilight Ways," Juniper said. "And ordered every officer who has ever set foot in the Tower or been in the presence of the Empress to be placed under arrest."

And Gods, both of those decisions had been the right call once more but looking at the scope of the mess I felt like smashing the fucking bathtub in front of me. Not all our College-taught officers would fall under those conditions, but most our Praesi highborn and distinguished veterans would. Which meant all my best and seasoned commanders. We wouldn't be without officers, since so much of the army was Callowan now, but essentially all the veteran officers we'd taken from the legions cannibalized after the Folly and kicked up the ranks would have to be removed from the chain of command. Without knowing exactly what it was the Empress had done, how it worked and what it could do, we just couldn't take the risk of leaving them in place. Including Juniper herself, for all that she was still the one giving me a report. Everything she'd just told me would have to be confirmed second-hand by someone not in doubt, for a start, and it'd be a mess to manage that considering most of her general staff was likely to be on the compromised list as well.

Dread Empress Malicia had not so much as swung as sword and she'd effectively crippled the Army of Callow. That, more than anything else, told me I was not wrong to believe this to be her work. How many people alive would be capable of a blow that vicious?

"Who's in command, at the moment?" I asked.

"Grandmaster Talbot has legate-equivalent rank and technical seniority," Juniper said. "Yet most Praesi soldiery balks at his command. Legate Tendai is the other candidate, but while she has years under her belt as a frontline officer she is fresh to higher command. For now the two are keeping the peace in accord but tensions are rising."

*Thank the Gods for the Reforms*, I feelingly thought. How many other armies on the continent would be able to weather so much of the upper ranks being put under arrest this well? That measures meant to prevent decapitation of leadership by heroes were working almost as well against a villain's work was a nice touch of irony.

"Has there been any sign of enthrallment in any of our people?" I asked.

"None that I know of," Juniper said. "Though I am no longer being kept informed, my queen."

"There won't be," Akua said.

I turned to face her, sharply gesturing for elaboration.

"Unlike with the Legions-in-Exile, the Empress cannot suborn the Army of Callow outright," the shade elaborated. "Which means the greatest gain she can derive of any enthrallment sown in your ranks is delay, keeping your soldiers out of action for as long as she can."

"Making a third of my officer corps commit suicide would achieve that," I pointed out.

"It would cripple your army, it is true, but also flush out her hidden hands," Akua said, shaking her head. "Better to leave the ship infested, and you aware of that. Then either you must send valuable assets to investigate the trouble or go yourself. Either way, a great deal of your might is tied down for weeks. Possibly even months. And should it look like you have a solution, well, it is not too late then to order the killings you described."

My lips thinned. Yeah, that sounded about right. Either I went myself with Sve Noc at my back, which given the distance and what needed to be done in Salia still would complicate everything, or I sent both Akua and Masego together to be safe – which lost me a great deal of knowledge and power at hand I might need for other tasks. And the moment it looked like I might turn things around, I had no doubt that just like Akua had said the Empress would twist the knife once more. If not earlier, the moment she learned through her spies that whoever went had entered the Twilight Ways. *Fuck*.

"Thank you for your report, Marshal," I crisply said, then grimaced. "You acted correctly in every regard, Juniper. This isn't on you, we were just had by the Empress. We'll dig our way back to daylight."

"We always do, Catherine," the Hellhound said, but she sounded so very tired.

I gestured for Masego to end the ritual, not willing to look at her in this state any longer, then breathed out as Juniper's image on the water vanished.

"Akua," I said. "How high are the odds that the Empress can just snap her fingers and have them all commit suicide?"

"I am not certain," she admitted. "This is not mere sorcery, dearest. A Name is involved, and so there are deeper considerations. In principle, such mastery of others can either be fine or numerous – as it is with Speaking, where one may have an entire crowd kneel once or enchant an individual intricately."

"Even at the peak of my Name, I wouldn't have been able to order that many people to kill themselves," I said. "Maybe two, three at most? For simpler stuff fear and thunder carries it through, but. . . "

"If we could Speak entire hosts to death, what need would we have of hosts at all?" Akua smiled. "Yes. In truth you were only the Squire, while Malicia is Dread Empress and a great one besides, but I took doubt that even should this be borne of an aspect she could so easily take lives. Especially if the commands were seeded. Having such a decree lying in one's mind for years would lead to severe disorders of the mind, besides."

"Unless that mind is prepared for that particular purpose, and accordingly conditioned with enchantments and alchemy," Masego cut in. "As the Sentinels are said to be."

Akua conceded with a nod.

"Without a story at her back, I do not believe it is within the power of the Empress to order deaths," she said. "Though lesser beguilements would be well within her grasp, and in their own way just as dangerous. I am greatly surprised by the skill displayed in the manipulation of the commanders of the Legions-in-Exile, I confess."

"I'm not," Vivienne said. "Not considering what you said about stories. It was around fifteen hours ago this all started, the Hellhound said. Give or take a bit, that's when the Carrion Lord declared rebellion against the Tower."

I closed my eyes and let out a soft curse.

"And that makes an empress calling her subjects to heel," I said. "Considering most who climb the Tower have an aspect related to authority, she would have had the wind at her back when she pulled that trigger."

"It would be more complex a matter when it comes to those among the Army of Callow," Akua noted. "Though some of them were once sworn to her, they are now sworn to you instead."

"Creation likes clarity," I agreed. "But that'll serve to weaken, not protect or prevent."

Neither of which I was all that sure I could do, when it came down to it. Distance was the element of dismay here, the more I thought about it. Those under my charge that needed help were far, and there was no guarantee that

by the time they were reached they would still be in a state to be helped. Possibly I could leave behind someone under an illusion to impersonate me and hope that Malicia didn't catch on, but given the way it'd be impossible to keep that deception going for too long it'd be rolling the dice to try that. Assuming them Empress didn't catch on immediately, which give how deeply the Eyes had apparently infiltrated Salia I could hardly be sure of. Sending Masego and Akua would hardly be any subtler, even if I made an effort to suppress knowledge of it, and at the end of the day I had to admit that whatever my decision was there was nothing I could do. Save perhaps doing nothing, which I expected was exactly what the Empress would prefer of me: days passing in indecision, paralyzed by the risks in committing to anything.

For the first time since I'd returned from the Everdark I'd been caught entirely flatfooted, and the impotent anger I'd earlier glimpsed in Juniper was finding a mirror in me. I'd forgotten how much I hated this. How much I hated her. There were reasons to kill the Empress that were personal to me, like the death of people I had cared for, and practical ones as well. And then there was this, the ugly sinking feeling in my stomach and how much I despised that she could do that to me. Still even now, after all I had learned and wrought. Because she was patient and cold-blooded and everything I was not. Gods, the Dead King could still scare me in a way few things could but the only foe who had ever made feel like an arrogant child was the Dread Empress of Praes. The woman atop the tower who had, again and again, made me bleed without my ever landing a blow on her in return.

"Fuck," I cursed. "All right. I'll see if I can find a way out of this mess. Meanwhile, Hakram, speak with Talbot and this Legate Tendai. I want Juniper's report confirmed point by point, and word of everything that's happened since."

"As you say," Adjutant replied. "The Army will still need a commanding officer, Catherine. The Hellhound made it clear the current situation is untenable."

I'd be able to take care of it, if I went, but if I wasn't sure I could afford to leave Vivienne here to finish the negotiations without me. She had the judgement to see it through, sure, but cleverness was not what had brought the opposition to the table. They'd taken a seat because they were desperate and scared of me, and though the former still held they simply would not be afraid of Vivs the way they were of me. Which would mean squabbles I wouldn't have to deal with, heroes not being as leery of meddling and a hundred other little messes we could ill-afford. On the other hand, if it was not I who went then there was only one high-ranking officer who could fill the shoes.

"It will have to be General Abigail," I said. "At least until the hooks can be dug out of our people's heads. I'll speak to her myself. Vivienne, I need you to prepare an escort for her when she's sent out. At least two full cohorts. I'll need to consult with-"

Black, I realized in this moment still likely knew nothing of this. Shit. I

was not looking forward to that conversation at all.

"- with Black," I grimaced. "And soon. Akua, Zeze, can the scrying ritual be done again without the both of you?"

"It can be done by our mage lines, Catherine," Masego reminded me. "They are on Creation again, all this ritual commotion was unnecessary."

"Right," I said, mildly embarrassed at having forgot. "Good, then I have jobs for you. Hierophant, I need options to purge the mind of my officers from the Empress' influence."

He opened his mouth, but I raised a hand to interrupt.

"I have a dozen things I need to be doing right now, and I'd not remember all the details if you simply told me anyway," I said. "Write it down for me, Zeze. Prepare all you can, so I can put it to council when everyone is there."

"I suppose I have nothing more pressing at the moment," he said.

"Thanks," I honestly replied. "I appreciate it."

"And I, my heart?" Akua smiled.

"You're with me," I said. "Black will get snippy about you being there, but when it comes to Praesi politics you're my expert. We'll head there now, I don't doubt that with the agitation in our camp Scribe already woke him up."

I clapped Hakram's shoulder, nodded at Masego and managed to take exactly one step towards the door before it was thrown open.

"There you are," Archer said, face serious. "We have a situation, Cat. Chunks of the League's people are moving."

"Moving where?" I frowned.

"By the looks of it? Here," she flatly said.

It was a good thing I knew my way around more than a few languages, these days, because loudly cursing in only one would not have been *nearly* enough.

# Chapter 87

# Connive

> "An enemy will remember you long after your dearest friends forget your face. Consider this, when you choose yours."
>
> Argea Theodosian, Sacker of Cities, Tyrant of Helike

Under the moon's light the outskirts of Salia were still a pale field of snow, but I almost started in surprise at the warmth of the breeze. Winter was dying, at last. At my right, Archer nonchalantly strolled forward as she strung her overlarge bow. I spared a moment to admire the deftness of her fingers as she did, and the strength of the arms hidden by mail and coat. At my left it was Akua Sahelian that tread the snow without leaving footsteps, so ethereally graceful she might as well have been gliding. Under the guise of Advisor Kivule she wore long black veils hiding her face, though the splendid black velour ballroom dress she'd decided to wear for out little walk provided insisted reminders she was one of the most attractive people I'd ever seen.

"It's called a Segovian cut," Indrani idly provided.

I tore away my gaze from the small slits in the dress' skirts that'd allowed glimpse of the smooth legs beneath. I did not reply, knowing from long experience that if I engaged it would be the verbal equivalent of leaping headfirst into quicksand. Akua had several veils over her face, and yet somehow I could still feel her smirking.

"They wear those for dances they have, where the women spin and-"

"We'll need to pass by my rooms so I can take my cloak," I interrupted, pretending I had no interest in her finishing that story.

Segovian cut, was it? I'd have someone look into that, there might be one that'd fit Indrani lying around Salia. Although, I couldn't ask it of Adjutant. That would be... uh. No, definitely not Hakram. And Hells, now that I thought about it, if I sent for anything like there'd be a report about it on the desk of the First Prince, the Empress and Gods forbid maybe even my father before the day was out. That made the whole notion a lot less enticing, although there might be other ways. Still, if it ended up that I had to call on the smugglers

among the Jacks to get Indrani into a revealing dress without half the crowns on Calernia knowing of it I was going to find a tall cliff to leap down it. Even as Archer continued to heckle me I began to hobble towards my quarters, but quiet undercurrents in the Night warned me company was coming.

My Lord of Silent Steps emerged of the darkness between two crowded houses, the purple and silver paint of the Losara Sigil so intrinsically part of Ivah nowadays that I could hardly recall what it looked like without. Ivah's presence was ever welcome, and once more it was bringing to me what I required before I even thought to ask. Arm extended, it offered me the Cloak of Woe.

"Losara Queen," it greeted me.

"Lord Ivah," I replied. "My thanks."

I wrapped it around me, fingers rising to fasten the broach binding it closed under my throat, and the familiar weight of old mistakes and victories on my back was a reassuring thing. My hand had been filled by a sword, once. First of goblin steel, then of ice and shade, and after that of obsidian only once unsheathed. The dead yew staff that felt cool against my palm, somehow fitting it perfectly, was still a fresh choice: not one I had not fully embraced, for the consequences of it were not all known. The mantle on my back, though? It was like an old friend, and even just wearing it made me feel sharper in thought and deed.

"Should I rouse the Mighty to war, First Under the Night?" Ivah asked. "Steel-clad soldiers march on your camp."

"No," I easily replied. "It will not come to that. The Mighty will have may wars to wage, in the coming nights. This need not be one of them."

Or even a war at all, if I could finagle that. I wasn't sure why the League of Free Cities would choose to lash out against me of all the rulers in Salia – even if Malicia was the one pulling the strings, it hardly seemed a winning venture for her – but I had no intention of allowing what was coming to develop into yet another front for Callow to fight a war on. I did not invite Ivah to accompany us out in the snows, and it did not presume to invite itself. The League's people were much further out than we were, since they'd left long before I even began to set out, but as I reached for the Night and let it empower my sight I saw they were hardly a single unified band. Out of the four thousand soldiers that the League of Free Cities had been allowed to bring, maybe two thousand were on the march. One thousand yet remained in their camp, across the distant field, and the rest was marching *away*. South, although they were split into two groups and one must have left recently to still be so close to the League's town-camp.

"Archer," I said. "You followed their movements from the start, yes?"

"You're wondering about the stagger," she said, sounding amused.

"The two packs of deserters, yeah," I frowned. "If the second wave was deserters who hesitated I'd not think of it twice, but they're moving in an orderly manner. Ranks, supply wagons."

"First group to walk out was Atalante," Indrani told me. "Packed up their affairs, assembled their soldiers and diplomats and left without looking back."

Which was not entirely surprising, I thought. Atalante had no real allies in the League, at the moment. It'd been at odds with Delos before the Tyrant upended the apple cart and started a round of civil war, and from what I understood the closest city it'd had to an ally, Penthes, had only been interested in using the chaos to grab some of the eastern Delosi holdings. Now that there was no Hierarch to compel the city to war against the Grand Alliance, they were likely to head home to lick their wounds instead of linger on foreign fields. If I had to guess, I'd put coin on the second band being the Bellerophon soldiery, and the old-fashioned tight formations I could glimpse in the distance held up to that perspective. It made no sense they'd waited for so long to leave, though.

"What happened with the Bellerophon delegation?" I asked.

"Mind you, I only saw from a distance," Indrani cautioned.

"You can put an arrow in a wasp from a mile away, Indrani," Akua amusedly said.

"Sure, but I could exactly hear what they were saying," Archer reminded us. "Still, as far as I could tell the *kanenas* tried to execute the general."

I saw no point in asking why, given that Bellerophon's laws had been written not even by a single raving lunatic but by a whole assembly of them, many of them violently opposed to each other in their ravings but every single one rabidly incensed by even the hint of foreign meddling in their common lunatic affairs. For all I knew, they'd wanted to executed him because he'd combed his hair the wrong way on the third day of the month. *Tried*, though, was something worth asking about.

"They defied the authority of their mage-inquisitor?" I said. "I'd never heard about one of them doing that before."

"The kanenas dropped dead all of a sudden," Archer replied, shaking her head. "And then they spent a while arguing about that."

I shiver went up my spine, and against my will I glanced up at the night sky. At what might lay behind it, waiting. What had become of the Hierarch was not yet clear, I thought, but surely all that he was must be tied up in his struggle against Judgement? The mere notion of Anaxares the Diplomat having become some sort of watchful angel to the Republic of Bellerophon was enough to make me sick in the stomach. I shook my head and focused anew.

"That doesn't explain why they're so far beyond Atalante," I finally said. "Unless they argue for nearly ten hours."

"Funny story," Indrani grinned, mouth half-hidden by her scarf, "they actually headed north first. Then they saw a road marker that said they were headed towards Salia and argued for an hour before turning south."

"And what's so funny about that?" I said, brow rising.

It was incompetence, but honestly a fairly mild one in nature. It wasn't unheard of for professional armies to need to catch their bearings, that this particular half-trained mob would have to as well wasn't anything unusual.

Especially since we'd all come here through the Twilight Ways, which would be highly disorienting for those unfamiliar with Arcadian journeys. An embarrassing mistake, maybe, but nothing worth a grin.

"Well, the general," Indrani said. "You know, the one that didn't die? I think he must have been the one who chose the directions, because-"

"They executed him," I sighed.

She chuckled at that, and to my utter lack of surprise even Akua's body language hinted a smile under the veils. Yeah, well, between Wolof's golden child and the favourite pupil of the Lady of the Lake I supposed the general sense of humour for this company tended towards the dark.

"Bellerophon and Atalante flee the field, then," Akua calmly said. "We face numbers diminished and disunited. Who was it that lingered in the League's lodgings?"

"The people in the camp are mostly Mercantis mercenaries and the Delosi," Indrani said. "Everyone else is headed here, but not together."

"Should I guess?" I grunted. "Stygia and Penthes together. Nicae will have made room for a few members of the Secretariat with their own people, their Basileus needs all the friends he can make right now. Helike will come alone."

"Penthes came with Nicae," Archer corrected, "though you're right about the Secretariat. Stygia and Helike march without allies, even each other."

I worried my lip.

"Penthes is Malicia's hook in the League," I said. "And Malicia just broke Nicae's naval power in a single stroke, so why is Basileus Leo Trakas tolerating them at his side?"

"There were only two cities among the League that might feasibly be able to scry on par with *Procer*, much less Callow or Praes," Akua pointed out. "Stygia and Helike, and even the latter held true mostly on the back of the many deals made by Kairos Theodosian. Neither of these have an interest in passing such news along to Leo Trakas."

"Hakram assessed he still didn't know during the conference, but even *now*?" I frowned.

It'd been at least two days since the disaster, by my reckoning.

"Dearest heart," Akua said, sounding amused, "not all realms are so blessed as yours, to have inherited the scrying rituals of Praes and then been graced with the work of one of the most brilliant practitioners in living memory, the Observatory of Laure. Though your nets are not as wide and your spies nowhere as deeply planted as the Empire's, Callowan long-distance scrying is likely the most swift and reliable on the continent."

I grimaced as I considered that. It was true that even when I'd begun as the Squire I'd had access to the reports and assessments of the Eyes of the Empire as well as Legion scrying, and then spent near every campaign that followed with *Masego* at hand. My standards for the swiftness information was transmitted at were probably askew from most people's, as Akua was so gently implying. Besides, scrying was largely Trismegistan as far as rituals went –

though the Principate's Order of the Red Lion used a formula Masego had noted as being raw, 'primitive' and influenced by Jaquinite methods – and the Free Cities weren't exactly practitioners of that. There were some local magics, from what I remembered reading, but no dominant school or unified tradition. The Stygian Magisterium were the finest sorcerers in the region, but they weren't sharing their secrets and it was a point of pride for them they'd been practicing sorcery for longer than the Praesi. Which the Praesi denied, of course, but that sort of historical pride pissing match tended to continue because no one could really be sure either way.

"All right," I said. "So Basileus Leo sees the League is falling apart. Stygia's the traditional rival of his city among the League as well unpalatable for the slavery besides, and Helike's the power he's trying to dislodge from the place of first among equals. Everyone knew Bellerophon couldn't be kept in the fold from the start, I'm guessing, so doubtless they didn't even try."

"That Atalante walked away implies he is failing to consolidate the League," Akua noted. "He would have attempted to keep the preachers from walking, if only for their coffers and healers."

Indrani laughed.

"So in Leo's hour of need, his buddies from Penthes come to offer support," she said. "And he's got no idea's that Malicia's hand is up the ass of the Exarchs, moving the lips so they'll say all the right things."

Colourfully put, but not inaccurate.

"You think she wants to prop up Leo Trakas and make a puppet of him?" I guessed. "I don't see how it can hold all that long. As soon as he hears about Still Water being used on his fleets, he turns on them in fury. He *has* to, his own people will stone him in the streets if he doesn't."

"Agreed," Akua said. "I would wager his usefulness is purely temporary, and the man himself disposable."

"Yeah, Sahelian's got that one pegged. He's an arrow loosed, not a lasting catspaw," Indrani said. "Ain't like the Tower's ever been shy about using people and then tossing them away."

"We are in agreement this is a ploy of the Empress, then?" I said.

"It seems likely," Akua agreed.

"We'd already be hip-deep in corpses if this was the Dead King's work," Archer frankly replied.

"Good," I grunted, eyes fixed on the shapes approaching in the distance. "Then we tread carefully. I'm not willing to hand her yet another fucking victory tonight."

We slowed and stopped without ever needing to speak a word, my limp carrying me atop a slight hill on the plains and the two of them coming to stand by my side as we waited for the League to walk the last stretch separating us. We could have met them halfway and gotten to speaking more quickly, but that would have been sending the wrong message: it was them coming to me, not us meeting as equals. The Tyrant had not made granted the same

quantity of soldiers to all members of the League when making the delegation, that much was made clear by those advancing towards us. The two Exarch-claimants of Penthes had maybe three hundred foot with them, with the looks of professional soldiers about them: long mail shirts of good quality, crested helms with full cheek guards and oval shields. Their spears were unlike the long beasts the Stygians used in their phalanx, only about the height of a man, and they bore not swords but long-shafted axes at their hips.

The forces of Nicae, themselves numbering closer to five hundred, steady sword and board men in chainmail and cuirasses though they used small round steel shields and straight-edged sabers instead what I'd equip a shield wall in in their place. They had about a hundred riders as well, though it was only light horse. Long lances and javelins as well as what looked like armour of leather and *cloth* had me almost rolling my eyes. Aside from riding down conscripts, I hardly saw what good that kind of cavalry could ever do in a proper battle. They'd shatter under Legion crossbows in a hurry, and Gods wouldn't that be a horrible waste of good warhorses? The Stygians had brought a mere two hundred, their Spears of Stygian with their long spears raised high advancing at brisk pace as the few mounted people ahead I assumed to be magisters keeping an eye on the slave-soldiers. Kairos Theodosian had not been a man afraid to stack the deck in his favour, so it was the Helikean force of nearly nine hundred that was by far the largest of the approaching contingents.

Men-at-arms with their scale armour and sharp blades, the steady foot that was the foundation of Helikean warfare, counted six hundred. They moved in formation and good order. The last three hundred, however, were a sight that half-surprised me: *kataphraktoi*. I'd confiscated the equipment of the four thousand cataphracts that'd warred on my army in Iserre and sent them back to Kairos with a broken finger each, but it seemed at least part of that force had been raised anew. The broken finger I'd not expected to keep them down for too long, not with so many priests among the League army, but the horses and armaments were surprise. Mind you, I was looking at three hundred when my soldiers had once fought four *thousand*. I doubted even the deeper schemer like the Tyrant had anticipated needing to rearm all four thousand of the most elite force in his army. The last presence from the League was the Delosi Secretariat, and it evidently had not brought soldiers at all. A handful of *askretis* were walking with Nicaeans, carrying small scribing desks for what I assumed to be a senior member of the Secretariat.

"This is pretty nostalgic," Archer said, silver flask in hand. "The three of us, more enemies than we practically know what to do with."

"They're not necessarily enemies," I said.

"Cat insisting we're not necessarily going to kill them," Archer airily continued. "All we need is caves full of corpses and it'll be like we never left the Everdark."

"Any moment now, we'll declare war on an entire civilization," Akua suggested.

"We did pretty well last time," Indrani mused. "I'd say we rank at least a draw, don't you?"

She passed the flask to the shade, who drank a deep sip.

"Generous, that," Akua said afterwards. "Although, for an invasion force three women strong I'll concede there was a surprising amount of invading achieved."

"I need a better quality of minions," I complained. "Mine are too mouthy. I bet the White Knight never has to deal with anything like this."

Heroes must be all sweetness and light, to the Sword of Judgement. All I got were crows that got mouthy about giving me directions and underlings who couldn't ever let anything go. Akua handed me the flask and I took a sip myself – then spat it out, coughing.

"Indrani, you horrid wench," I gasped out. "This is senna."

Drow liquor, made from mushrooms and tasting like godsdamned mud. It'd been tolerable underground, where there was little else even remotely drinkable, but up here? After months of wine? It was like licking a muddy lake shore.

"You slipped me a flask when I left before the Graveyard," Indrani beatifically smiled. "How does the saying go again? For small slights, long prices. Wench."

I glanced at Akua who had brazenly betrayed me by pretending this was halfway decent liquor when she'd drunk of it herself, and she languidly shrugged.

"How could I stand in the way of righteous revenge, my heart?" the shade said. "It would have been most uncharitable of me."

"This is why Hakram is my favourite," I muttered under my breath.

At the very least, the indignation had me less tense as the soldiers approached.

"And now," Indrani narrated, "as foes stream forward like a mighty river, atop the hill stand a peerless beauty, a regal queen, a mysterious seductress – and also you two, I guess."

I could not flip off Archer in front of the League, I reminded myself. No matter how much she deserved it. Indrani shifted slightly to the side, eyes narrowing, and her tone went serious without warning.

"Mages with the Basileus," she warned. "At least three."

I followed her gaze and found Leo Trakas atop his white stallion, as well as the two Exarch-claimants, but the mages took me a while longer to figure out. Some of Basileus Leo's escorting horseman wore ill-fitting armour, I realized. The sleeves were too long, as if made for larger and taller men, and they seemed uncomfortable with the weapons they were carrying.

"You sure?" I quietly said.

"Their horses move like they've been drugged," Archer murmured. "Those are war horses, willful, and they're not good riders. Either those mounts were spelled to be docile, or they were fed something."

"Akua?" I said.

"Enchanted," she said. "Though sloppily. I'd wager they are either Nicaean mages – no great wonders, those – or hired practitioners from Mercantis."

"Lovely," I growled.

If Leos Trakas had tight reins on his 'allies' I'd call this a precaution and let it go, but given that Penthes was likely playing him at Malicia's behalf there were risks involved. The larger party, consisting of the Penthesians, Nicaeans and the Secretariat observers, halted its march maybe a hundred feet ahead of our hill. A smaller party advanced, though it wasn't that small: the Exarchs brought thirty men, Leo Trakas thirty men of his own – including the mages, now dismounted – and with four scribes and the Secretariat official it was sixty eight people who strode towards the three of us. In the distance, the forces of Helike and Stygia halted on either side of the large force. Two riders peeled out of the band for Helike, one for Stygia. Bundled up in furs, Basileus Leo was at the head of the delegation and it was him that addressed us first.

"Hail, Black Queen," the young man said.

"Hail, Basileus," I calmly replied. "Your visit is an unexpected pleasure."

"Is it a visit to walk Proceran soil, now?" one of the Exarchs mocked. "How quickly your dominion extends, Queen of Callow."

I glanced at Akua.

"Advisor," I said. "Do remind me – is that one Prodocius or Honorion?"

"Prodocius, my queen," Akua replied.

I glanced at the dark-haired man, his cheeks gone red from anger as much as the cold, and my eyebrows rose.

"Did you know that the Eyes of the Empire have you officially marked as 'having the wits of a well-bred trout'?" I asked.

The man snarled.

"You coat your insults in lies, you-"

"I assure you," I amicably smiled, "it is a verbatim quote."

"Prodocius," Basileus Leo sharply said. "We did not come to trade barbs."

"That is pleasing to know," I said.

"So why did you come?" Archer drawled. "I'm assuming it's not to visit the nice Proceran countryside. Snow's not measurably any nice close to our camp."

Knowing her, she might actually have checked.

"Accusations were made against you, Queen Catherine," an old man spoke in lightly accented Lower Miezan.

Long hair white as snow and bound in a ponytail, the man who'd spoken was wrinkled like old leather and nearly as dark of skin. This was, if I remembered my briefings correctly, Nestor Ikaroi of the Secretariat. On each of his cheeks could be found a blue stripe and a black one, tattooed. The marks of someone who had climbed the ranks of their bureaucracy until there was nothing left to climb.

"Secretary Ikaroi, isn't it?" I said.

The old man, to my surprise, gallantly bowed.

"It is a great pleasure to formally meet you, Your Majesty," he said.

"And I you," I replied, dipping my head in thanks. "I've long had an interest in the ways of the Secretariat."

Which was true enough, since back in the first days of my reign I'd been desperate to find a working bureaucratic model that wasn't an imitation of the Praesi one. There'd never really be time or resources to spend on a venture in the Free Cities though, not with Procer mobilizing.

"Then perhaps in the days to come you might be willing to speak with formal chroniclers," Nestor Ikaroi offered. "We have a troubling lack of direct sources concerning the beginning of the Uncivil Wars."

I blinked, taken aback at the continued civility. Usually people were only this polite after they'd lost a few battles or I'd put a blade at their neck.

"Time allowing, I've not objection," I slowly said. "The Marshal of Callow is already writing a history of her own, and I would not object to your speaking with her either."

"It pleases us all you are willing to interact peacefully with the League, Your Majesty," Basileus Leo said, reclaiming the lead on the League side. "Yet it would benefit us all if you would answer the accusations that were posed."

"It is interesting that the Basileus of Nicae considers himself to have authority over the Queen of Callow," Akua mildly said. "I wonder which precedent is so in use."

The younger man looked like he'd swallowed a lemon.

"Should I take this as refusal to speak with the League?" he asked me.

"Do you speak for the League now?" Indrani drily said. "You seem to be missing parts, 'Hierarch'."

I raised a hand.

"We have further guests, Archer," I said. "Let us not jump to hasty conclusions."

The riders from Helike and Stygia had finally arrived. The Stygian was no surprise: Magister Zoe Ixiani had been the voice of the Magisterium through the League civil war and the Proceran campaign, and it seemed she was still to be the same tonight. The fact that she was a slaver rather spoiled her good looks, sadly. As for the two Helikeans, I was familiar with both. General Basilia, who had I once met in Rochelant and later learned was the Tyrant's favourite general, rode well and high in the saddle. Dark-eyed and dark-haired, she had sharp cheekbones and the well-built shoulders of a warrior. The other I knew almost intimately: the pale eyes straddling the line of blue and grey, the surprisingly young tanned face I had once seen kneeling before me. General Pallas, who had led the *kataphractoi* who killed my men.

"Generals," I said. "Magister Ixioni."

The two commanders offered brisk salutes.

"Magister Zoe would suffice," the sorceress smiled.

I did not smile back and flicked a glance at the Helikeans.

"Quite the gathering," I said. "Dare I ask why?"

"We are here as observers," General Basilia said.

"You are here as an usurper, *general*," the other Exarch-claimant said.

That one wasn't Prodocius, which made him Honorion. Plump where the other was thin, he was middle-aged and his curly hair luxuriant. From what Black had told me, he was prodigiously wealthy and had no particular talent aside form this. Considering a great source of wealth for Penthes was trade with the Empire, I'd wager he was even more Malicia's creature than the other one.

"I will uphold the last will of the Tyrant of Helike, Penthesian swine," General Basilia coldly said. "Steel in hand, if I must."

I was detecting the slightest hint of tension there.

"Accusations, you said," I mused. "Am I to hear them, or will they remain a mystery?"

"Are you willing to submit to the judgement of the League?" Basileus Leo eagerly said.

I met his eyes, unamused.

"Look at my back, Leo Trakas," I said. "What do you see there?"

The young man's lips thinned.

"The Mantle of Woe, it is called," he said.

"It's a list of people who asked me to *submit* to things," I said. "I would not be so eager to be number among them, were I you."

"Then we are at an impasse," Basileus Leo said.

"Secretary Nestor," Akua said. "What does the record indicate the accusations are?"

Leo Trakas paled, either in anger or fear.

"Claimant to the title of Exarch Prodocius Lesor alleges that Queen Catherine Foundling murdered the Tyrant of Helike," Nestor Ikaroi calmly said. "Claimant to the title of Exarch Honorion Kapenos alleges that Queen Catherine Foundling was accessory to the murder of Anaxares of Bellerophon, Hierarch of the Free Cities."

A heartbeat of silence passed, then Archer burst out laughing. It was not, I decided, the most diplomatic we'd ever been. I glanced at the Helikean generals, who seemed untroubled.

"And what does Helike say of this?" I asked.

"We cast no such accusation," General Pallas bluntly said.

"Our sire would have disdained such a measure, even were the accusation true," General Basilia added with open contempt.

I glanced at Basileus Leo, wondering in what possible world he might have thought that my 'submission' to 'League judgement' might have resulted in anything the wholesale slaughter of everyone trying to execute me on such thin pretence. Gods Below, I'd sent running larger forces than the entire League escort, much less his little coalition. No, he was young but he wasn't an idiot – he wouldn't have been able to prevent a Strategos from being chosen in Nicae if that were the case. Ah. Had he been presenting himself as the speaker for the League so that he could then declare me innocent in that capacity, avoiding a

fight with me while binding Penthes to him? On parchment that was a halfway decent plan, but he had to realize I had no damned incentive to indulge him and the precedent of the League having authority over a Queen of Callow was unacceptable. *If he is not stupid, which I know him not to be*, I thought, *then he must be desperate.*

"Gods, do you have a semblance of evidence at least?" I asked. "Tell me you didn't march near two thousand soldiers for… *this*."

The Basileus flushed and gestured towards his attendants. Archer, I saw, was carefully watching the mages. Good. One of the soldiers came forward with two sheaths of parchment, but Exarch Prodocius sneered and elbowed him, snatching the scrolls. He strolled up the hill, staring me down with surprising aplomb for a man who as far as I could tell had no power and no military training – he wasn't even in particularly good shape. Except, I realized as he approached, he *wasn't* staring me down. His eyes were wide and showing white, like a terrified horse's. He was, I grasped as he hurried towards me, frightened nearly out of his wits. And still he threw the parchments towards my face. Akua slapped them down, even as Exarch Prodocius stepped up to me with a rictus of bared teeth that straddled fury and terror.

"There," Prodocius snarled, "you murdering tyrant, you-"

At the Basileus' barked order two Nicaean soldiers stepped forward, one grabbing him by the shoulder and dragging him back and the other offering me an apologetic bow before picking up the parchments – they'd fallen short, as open scrolls were want to do – and bowed again before pressing them into my hand.

Or at least tried to, before Archer caught his wrist and rammed a blade through the side of his neck.

# Chapter 88

# Testament

> "Reputation is as rope: it can be either a lifeline or a noose."
>
> Eudokia the Oft-Abducted, Basilea of Nicae

Asking Archer why the Hells she'd just killed that soldier that would have implied in front of all those people I had at best partial control over her actions. Which, while true, wasn't something I wanted to remind the League of right now. So instead of looking surprised or angry I allowed my face to slip into a cool mask, flicking a seemingly disinterested glance at the dying man. Indrani, eyes cold, left the blade in his neck and plucked at the hand still holding the parchments: a long, thin needle was brought into the moonlight by careful fingers.

"See," Exarch Prodocius frothed, "her thugs murder our attendants without-"

The Nicaean soldier that'd been dragging him back slugged him in the belly. He wheezed out in pain, looking like he was about to vomit.

"Poisoned," Archer idly said, sniffing at the needle's tip.

She casually ripped her longknife clean of the soldier's neck, snuffing out his life with the casual flick of the wrist.

"Merciful Gods," Basileus Leo Trakas croaked. "Queen Catherine, I swear on the Heavens that I had nothing to do with this. I would never-"

I looked at the young man in fair pristine armour, his hair perfectly coiffed and his eyebrows impeccably plucked. What I saw beneath the façade was fear. The ugly kind that clawed desperately at your insides trying to get out. It'd been there before we ever began speaking, I thought, perhaps even before he'd set out with this procession. But where it had been mastered before, now it had slipped the leash. No, that one did not have the stomach to try to kill me.

"A personal guard of the Basileus of Nicae just attempted to murder the Queen of Callow," Akua calmly replied. "Your guilt can be debated, Leo Trakas, but your responsibility is beyond doubt."

Would the needle have pricked me, if Archer hadn't intervened? Possibly. I wasn't sure it would have killed me, though. I was hardly immune to poison, but Akua ought to have been able to keep me alive long enough for Sve Noc to come to my side and purge the blight. Was this Malicia's doing? It was a sloppy attempt by Wasteland standards, though I'd been cavalier enough it'd nearly succeeded anyway. If there was someone who'd notice I had a habit of going ahead to negotiate with others with only slight escort, though it would be the Empress. If it'd been Masego and Vivienne with me instead, would the needle have broken my skin?

It sent a shiver up my spine I could not be certain as to the answer.

"No doubt this was the work of one of your many enemies," Exarch Honorion dismissed, cutting through my musings. "Pay reparations, Trakas, and let us return to the matter at hand."

The smug look on the man's face had me itching for a blade in my hand. Someone had just tried to kill me and he thought throwing a few coins at me like I was a beggar with a bowl would end the matter? My fingers clenched. If he could not curb his tongue, perhaps a curse that silenced it would remind him of – no, no I *could not*. I breathed out, tamping down on the heat in my blood. I was being provoked and it was not an accident. Prodocius might be terrified, but this one was not. Did he know something the other Exarch-claimant did not, as the likely favourite of Malicia among the pair? Black had been scathing in his opinion of the man's intellect, it might just be foolishness and arrogance.

"Secretary Nestor," I said, tone calm. "The weapon that was used, does the Secretariat have record of precedents for its use?"

The white-haired man, who'd been looking at the work of one of his scribes over the young woman's shoulder, turned his gaze to me and dipped it before turning to Indrani.

"Lady Archer," the askretis said, "has the tip of the needle been dipped in a substance that is green and viscous, yet dry as leather?"

"That's about right," Archer frowned, then sniffed again. "Smells like rotten meat, too, but with something flowery mixed in."

Her senses had rivalled some of mine even when I'd been Sovereign of Moonless Nights, nowadays even with Night lending me the occasional edge it wasn't even a contest.

"Wyvern venom made into a paste with periwinkle blossoms," Nestor Ikaroi said. "Known as the 'Taste of Redress', brought to our records by the Magisterium's profligate use of it during the latter years of the Stygian Spring."

"A wild assertion, this, and without proof," Magister Zoe said. "It is known, however that, a substance like the one you describe can be readily obtained through Mercantis. It would have no current ties to Stygia even should it truly have roots there."

"The Secretariat's records are without fault," Secretary Nestor coldly retorted. "And the use of the Taste and needle is the signature of the Manifold Laments. Killers for hire alleged to be based in the League."

"My own grandfather was slain by the Laments, Queen Catherine," Basileus Leo told me. "I would never bargain with them."

"You spineless cowards," Exarch Prodocius snarled. "How can you even know this wasn't her doing from the start? How *eager* you all are to lick Callowan boots."

"Catherine," Akua murmured, low enough only Archer and I might hear. "This is a noose. I know not how or why, but this is a noose. A situation like this does not fall into place by happenstance."

Yeah, I was starting to agree. Something was wrong here. Leo Trakas still didn't know about his fleets being broken and stolen, yet he was strangely desperate to get Penthes on his side. I understood he needed allies, but why would he need them badly enough to risk provoking me? He could hardly afford any more enemies, much less one that was a member of the Grand Alliance. And the two Exarch-claimants had to know they were playing with fire by coming after me this hard. Especially in the wake of an attempt on my life, when it'd be damnably easy to accuse them of having a hand in it. I was missing something.

"Mind your tongue, Prodocius," Magister Zoe Ixioni warned. "It is the mark of a weak stomach, to grow drunk from the scant power you wield."

The Helikean generals, still mounted, watched all this unfold in stony silence. Unconcerned or indifferent, not that it made much of a difference. I could see, stepping out of myself for a moment, how this was going to unfold. The young Basileus had too many enemies, and just given me slight, so though it was plain to all that Penthes was a stone around his neck he'd have no choice but to try to salvage the Exarchs. If he lost a metaphorical finger bringing them out of this untouched, they'd owe him badly enough they should be halfway-reliable allies. Especially if they were without other allies of their own and antagonizing most everyone else in the League. Bellerophon was a beast most prone to devour itself, and likely to fall into that old habit in the wake of this mess. Atalante had quite literally walked away from this coalition and Delos was positioning itself as aloof. Helike was, well, it was hard to tell what Helike was at the moment.

Exarch Honorion had earlier accused General Basilia of being an usurper of some sort, but then he was hardly the most trustworthy of sources. On the other hand, if Kairos Theodosian had truly massacred most his kin and there was no true claimant left to the throne of Helike it would not be surprising that whoever consolidated control over the army became the ruling authority of the city-state. Theodosius had risen to kingship in such a manner himself, and if I recalled correctly General Basilia was highborn. Either way, for now it looked like she was the one speaking for Helike and she seemed utterly disinclined to step in and stabilize the situation. If Basileus Leo was trying to emerge as the saviour and leading light of the League in the face of chaos, then Helike would be at best uninvolved and at worst likely to spike any of his efforts simply to ensure Nicae didn't emerge as the preeminent power among the League. Stygia, I thought. I'd not accounted for Stygia.

Magister Zoe was here for the Magisterium. Given that yesterday she'd made assurances to Hakram that even if Stygia made treaties of assistance with the Tower it had no intention of ever lending military support, I'd bet they were planning to use Malicia's 'protection' as a deterrent against the rest of the League while offering only token compensation for it. *For that protection to be worth anything, though, they'll have to make it public*, I thought, then hesitated. Had they already? Bellerophon and Atalante holing up, Helike looming and Nicae's old Stygian foes promised assistance by the Tower. Leo Trakas was seeing the League fall apart around him after his fleets had ravaged Ashur, and realizing that in the wake of the glories promised by the Tyrant he'd been left out in the cold. Penthes alone was offering a hand, and though there were fools they were fools with coin, a largely intact army. The kind of ally that would give an adventurous Stygia or Helike pause. I stepped out of myself and looked at the world the way Leo Trakas would.

Retribution was coming, that could not be denied. Ashur would neither forget nor forgive, had deep ties to the Grand Alliance even after withdrawing from it, and the ancient shield that was the League of the Free Cities was falling apart. The League's treaties to resist outsiders together must be shored up and the foundations of the arrangement made firm again after the debacles abroad – all under the leadership of Nicae, preferably, since no one else seemed willing to take up the mantle. If this could not be done, though? Then Basileus Leo was in desperate need of allies that would keep the wolves away from his door while he figured out a way to avoid losing his throne to a Strategos and keep retaliation from laying waste to Nicae when the balance swung back the other way. Either way, to him, Penthes was the key. And Penthes was owned by Malicia, who had carefully been setting her schemes in place even as I fought my way through Iserre. Now she was bringing them to bear one by one. *So how do you want to use them to hurt me, Malicia?*

"Though Exarch Honorion misspoke, he is yet a leader of his people," Leo Trakas intervened. "Threats help none of us, Magister Ixioni."

"The Magisterium seeks no help from Nicae," Magister Zoe disdainfully said.

"Already found yourself a backer, have you?" Archer said.

Indrani was, with her usual nonchalance, putting her foot in a dispute that might have been best left to the League itself. Without knowing what Malicia had planned, any step taken here might be a blunder.

"What right does a vagrant from Refuge have to ask questions of of us?" Exarch Prodocius scornfully laughed. "Still your wagging tongue, girl."

*Merciless Gods*, I thought, half-awed. She was going to kill him.

"Archer," I got out.

Halfway through drawing her blade, Indrani reluctantly stilled.

"Your choice of allies speaks poorly of you, Basileus," Akua said.

A swing in the dark from her, as it seemed she'd come to the same conclusions as me through reasonings of her own. Both of us were watching the

younger man, and both of us saw the same thing: the twitch of a repressed grimaced, followed by a resounding absence of denial. *So he's pursuing these idiot accusations because Penthes – meaning Malicia – put him up to it*, I thought. *They're backing him so long as he pushes me tonight, most likely.*

"Another chattering peon for the Black Queen," Exarch Prodocius snorted. "Are you to threaten violence as well, when reminded of your place?"

Here I had no worries. Archer, for all her keen perceptiveness, was not meant for affairs like this. I'd not hesitate before sending her along with heroes for something, or soldiers, but restraint in the face of provocation was simply not the way she'd been raised. If someone slighted the Lady of the Lake, she killed them. If someone took offence to that, *she killed them too*. Indrani might not have the age or reputation to be able to get away with that the way the Ranger did, but she'd been raised to think that way regardless. Akua, though? Prodocius could spend all day tossing the worst insults he could think of at her and she'd hardly blink. Akua Sahelian had been playing more dangerous games with more dangerous men since before she'd had her first moon's blood. Still, the way Prodocius and Honorion were constantly antagonizing my two obviously dangerous companions was genuinely surprising me. Prodocius in particular, as the terrified white of his eyes still showed.

"Gods Below," I slowly said. "What can the Empress *possibly* have on you that'd put you this deep in her grasp?"

Akua, at my side, went still.

"And now you accuse us of being in the service of your foes," Exarch Honorion mocked. "As if you were not merely seeking an excuse to-"

"Still Water," Akua spoke in Kharsum. "The Tyrant helped Malicia, you said, but Helike does not border the Empire. Where did the alchemical compounds come through? It would not have been small quantities, Catherine. The Empress would have needed assistance to keep it quiet."

And it fell into place. Penthes, who had grown rich from trade with the Empire. Penthes who controlled one of the branches of the Wasaliti river. Penthes, whose last Exarch-claimants were two venal and corrupt men who'd been chosen to survive from all the many there once were by two people: the Tyrant and the Empress. They'd been accomplices to Still Water being used on the Nicean fleets, I realized. And now, too late, they were realizing that with Kairos dead and Malicia untouchable in the Tower they might end up taking the blame for that. For murdering thousands of Nicaeans, yes, and breaking that city's naval power. Worse yet, for betraying a member of the League to a foreign power while the Free Cities were at war and under the rule of a Hierarch. If it came out, they'd have no allies. Even if Penthes itself did not turn on them most the League would end up coming after them.

If Malicia said nothing, she owned them. If Malicia said something she *still* owned them, because who else could possibly protect them? Mind control was not needed when you had that kind of leverage on people. It would be redundant.

"Why is she having them come after me so hard, though?" I replied in the same. "It makes no sense, Akua. She gains nothing out of those two getting on my bad side, by virtue of being her creatures they were already there. I might as well not-"

I swallowed my tongue. I might as well not be there. Because it wasn't about me, not really. None of this had been from the start. I'd been thinking of these people as the tool Malicia was using against me, when in fact *I* was the tool Malicia was using against *them*. A Nicaean soldier had just tried to kill me not because the Empress had believed it would work – although I doubted she would have complained if it had – but because it burned a bridge between Callow and Nicae. And the Penthesians were going after me because the Basileus needed them, and the more he defended them the more at odds he and I became. Fuck me, she was trying to flip the League wasn't she? Leo Trakas would go home and find his fleets were gone and his reign going to the dogs, and so to avoid losing his throne and possibly his head he'd need to rely on his friends. His *Penthesian* friends, who unlike Stygia had not openly declared for Praes. The Tower had seeded the sickness, then offered the remedy.

Penthes, Stygia, Nicae. Bellerophon and Atalante were removing themselves from the flow, Delos wouldn't got at it alone and how difficult could it possibly be for Malicia to spark a civil war in Helike if the Tyrant had left no clear successor? She'd run the southeast of Calernia, more or less, and with the fleet that'd been broken by Still Water she'd have leverage over Ashur as well. And all she needed to get this all started was for a Catherine Foundling, a woman with a known temper, to get angry after someone tried to murder her in the middle of diplomatic talks. Gods, but I hated dealing with Malicia. Even now I couldn't even fucking be sure there wasn't another layer to this plan that I'd missed. And I still wasn't sure how to step back from the ledge even now that I might have caught the scheme. Walking away was giving her the win, but my word alone wouldn't convince the Basileus that his Exarch allies were playing him.

It was exactly the kind of thing I *would* say if I was trying to collapse the League so it couldn't be a sword at my back anymore.

"If I may be so bold, Your Majesty," Secretary Nestor said, "might I ask for a summary of the words that were shared with your advisor? None of the attending scribes speak the language."

I flicked a glance at the old scrivener with the tattooed cheeks. It was a genuine request, not a hint of any sort, but it still had me thinking. Could it be that simple? I'd spent all this time trying match Malicia at her chosen field and gotten dirt in my face for it again and again. But that was fighting this war the way she wanted it to be fought. Hanno had warned me, hadn't he, that I was still thinking like I was a villain needing to threaten and fight everyone into doing what needed to be done. The latter part of that, where he'd said the might of Judgement would carry the day, had been wrong. But he was right that in some ways I still thought, first and foremost, like a warlord under siege

from all directions. But I wasn't that anymore, was I?

"It is called Still Water," I said. "It is a sort of alchemical poison developed by the Wekesa the Warlock that lingers in the body of those who imbibe it and, afterwards, requires only a ritual trigger to kill and turn into undead all those poisoned. Those undead in fact resist healing by Light, though they remain mindlessly violent without guiding by necromancers."

"The First Prince of Procer sent word of such a weapon, before the Tenth Crusade was declared," Nestor Ikaroi acknowledged. "Do you then confirm its existence?"

"I do," I flatly said. "It was used on the city of Liesse by the Diabolist. And once more since by Dread Empress Malicia on the war fleets of Nicae."

In the wake of that there was only silence, and the scratching of Secretariat quills. My gaze found the two silent generals of Helike, who were both unsurprised and watching me closely. Had the known? I couldn't be sure, but General Basilia was said to have been Kairos' favourite. And if nothing else, his will might have contained such secrets. So now I had a choice to make. Either I dragged Helike into this by revealing the Tyrant had a in this, or I kept my silence on that. The Exarchs might try to drag Helike into this anyway, but who'd believed them at that point? Might be enough to stir Helike to war if they tried, too, which was not ideal but still better than Malicia sinking her claws deep into the southeast. It would not be just, to spare them the consequences of helping such a great and traitorous massacre. But if kept the Dead King from devouring Calernia, I could live with having abetted that injustice.

"That is the leash the Tower has on these two," I said. "They helped smuggle the alchemical brews into the League's territory. Advisor Kivule was reminding me, Secretary Nestor, that the Empress would have needed local collaborators, individuals of authority hiding her tracks to achieve such a thing. It allowed for an explanation for the continued hostility of these 'Exarchs' to Callow, for it is no secret that their mistress is my enemy."

"Advisor Kivule, is it? She would know of Still Water, no doubt," Exarch Honorion sneered. "I had not intended to speak to this, but this filthy mudfoot intriguer leaves me no choice. Prodocius and I entertained envoys from the Tower, is true. I'll not deny it. For Dread Empress Malicia meant to warn us of a plot to destroy the League and incite war with Praes: this advisor that masquerade before us is no fae nor drow, she is the Diabolist herself. Akua Sahelian, the Doom of Liesse."

Malicia had caught on? No, of course she'd caught on. Black had too, it would have been fairly obvious for anyone in the know as those two were. And from there it was information that could be passed to her agents, like those two. But why did she think it would – oh, *fuck*.

"It is not the Empire that struck at the fleets of Nicae, Basileus Leo," Exarch Honorion said. "It was the Black Queen using the foul alchemies of the foe she enslaved. What a neat scheme she planned, is it not? The League sundered

and at war with the Empire, her enemies clawing at each other even as she bent Ashur to her will."

*Malicia*, I seethed. Hellgods, I had not wanted to kill someone that much in a *very* long time. Could I deny Akua? No, that'd be a mistake. Too many people knew, or at least suspected, and when it came out she truly was Akua Sahelian it'd lead people to believe I was lying about not being behind Still Water's second deployment as well.

"Are you seriously accusing Catherine Foundling of using something like Still Water?" Archer said, sounding somewhere between amused and offended. "She fought a war over the last use."

*Mistake*, I grimly thought.

"You would have us believe it was the Dread Empress who has possessed such means for decades and never once used them?" Exarch Prodocius said. "We've all read the reports from the Battle of the Camps. Thousands dead from reckless sorceries! All of Iserre was almost destroyed because of a weapon that once lay in Callow, and we are to believe the Black Queen would *balk* as such a ploy?"

Leo Trakas was the key to this, I decided. Delos was unlikely to lift a finger either way, and Stygia would back the winning horse. And the Basileus did not look like he knew who or what to believe, right now.

"You then make the accusation that Callow was able to brew such alchemies, then seed them unseen in the fleets of Nicae?" Akua said. "How mighty you believe us to be, Exarch."

She knew he'd have an answer to that, he wouldn't have risked this otherwise – and his words were likely Malicia's, anyway, who would not make this elementary a mistake. Akua was baiting out the last part of their tale, so that we might see if there were holes to poke in it.

"An animal like you has no place in this conversation," Prodocius harshly replied.

The Basileus of Nicae raised a hand to end this before it could escalate.

"As part of the evidence for the accusations laid against the Black Queen was the secret meeting she had with King Kairos in the city of Rochelant," Basileus Leo said, tone cool.

He was start to lean towards believing Penthes, I realized. Because he wanted to, because it'd be easier, because Malicia was brilliant woman and it was a skillful lie.

"And to hide evidence of your malice, you then sold the Tyrant of Helike to his enemies among the Grand Alliance," Exarch Honorion said. "I will not pretend the man was anything but a bad seed, but your treacheries are worthy of contempt."

Gods, but she was good. It did not make me hate her any less, but she was good at this. Even through as feeble a tool as those Exarchs, Malicia was still hitting all the right notes for the Basileus. I could see it in his eyes. I breathed out. I was not only a warlord, now. I had allies.

"Are you willing to repeat your accusations before a truthteller?" I flatly said. "The most skillful of our age is in Salia. I am more than willing to do the same."

Akua almost began to move before she ceased, and in the Night I read her uneasiness. I had made a mistake of my own, it seemed.

"A transparent attempt," Exarch Prodocius sneered. "You've sunk your hooks in the Grand Alliance, corrupted even rulers as respected as the First Prince. The Grey Pilgrim will say whatever you want him to say, lest you turn on Procer."

I almost laughed at the notion that I could force Tariq to do anything, much less bend the rest of the Grand Alliance to my will, until I caught the look on their faces. Not Akua or Indrani, but the delegates of the League. Over half a hundred people were here, some of the most influential people in the League, and after the lunacy Prodocius had just spoken not a single one of their faces expressed *disbelief*. Fear and hesitation, anger and doubt, but none of them believed it to be absurd. Because they weren't looking uphill and seeing me, I realized as my stomach sunk. They were looking at the victor of the Camps and the Graveyard, who'd strung along heroes and villains and dealt death to thousands. My reputation, these days, was enough to cow thousands of charging horsemen. I knew this, I'd *relied* on it.

Malicia was relying on it too.

My grip tightened around the yew staff. I'd fought wars, struck deals with the Everdark and the Kingdom Under, compromised and warned and did everything I could to keep this continent from falling apart. And still the Empress, who hadn't left the Tower in a year, was strangling me with my own fucking achievements. Malicia, though, would be Malicia – a praise and insult both. What had my blood boiling was how eager these people were to be manipulated. To believe the worse of me and in the same breath decide that the *Dread Empress of Praes* was looking out for them. And they had their reasons, and it was one of the finest liars alive who was making a game of them, but still it... stung. That I always had to be patient and careful and let things go, while the rest of them could just fucking blunder along and let the rest of us pick up the pieces.

I could kill them, I knew.

The Night was but a thought away. They had mages, but I had Archer and Akua Sahelian at my side. It wouldn't even be difficult or need to be a slaughter. Honorion and Prodocius were owned by the Tower, but Penthes itself wasn't – the Empress would have influence, but hardly rule. I could snuff them out like candles and there went this ploy. Gods, there was so much I could do if I simply took off the gloves. All these soldiers heading south, all this insistence on backstabbing and bickering when the Dead King was seeking to kill us all, it could end. It'd be as simple as telling the people here, over the smoking corpses of Malicia's tools, that they could march north to fight Keter either living or as corpses in my service. If their armies objected? They had no Named left to

match me. I'd open portal over a battalion aligned with a large lake or a sea, then repeat the process every half-hour until I got an unconditional surrender. The Grand Alliance would whine, but the whining would end when I ensured our back was secure and brought a fresh army to the table.

Gods, it would be so *satisfying*. To order something instead of barter and beg, to just order something and see it get done. And even if Malicia had laid some kind of clever trap behind it all, well, cleverness only got you so far in the face of overwhelming strength. What exactly *could* she do, if it was Praes and Keter against the rest of Calernia? And all I needed to do was just... reach out. Sve Noc would approve, if anything. And the thing was, hadn't I done it all the right way? I'd let the heroes take their swings, taken the whipping without complaint. I'd helped the same Procerans who had meant to carve up my home for a meal, sacrificed and bargained to keep the Dead King from killing hundreds of thousands. I'd done it all right, and at the end of the day Malicia could still just upend it all with a snap of her fingers. And if it was this... weak, this fragile to do things the *right* way, then what was the point? If it didn't work better than being a bloody-handed tyrant, if it was *objectively worse*, then why was I putting myself through all this? I was not going to let Calernia die because I needed to clutch to the delusion that I was a decent woman. I would not.

I took a step forward, Night coiling, and my leg throbbed with pain. *Do not forget*, it whispered. *That this was never a game. That you make mistakes*. And most of all, and my fingers clenched white to hear it, the pain whispered one last thing: *do not forget, that there must be more than ruin*. I paled, leaning against my staff. Gods, the pain was agonizing.

"Cat," Archer whispered, looking at me with worry.

I gestured harshly. *Do not forget*, my leg throbbed.

"You'd really do it, wouldn't you?" I said.

The two men that would be Exarch of Penthes milled about uncertainly.

"Let thousands of your own people die," I said. "Birth civil war in the League. Gods, you'd gamble with the fate of Calernia itself – all because you were foolish and greedy and you're afraid to die."

I looked at the two of them and saw something that it was not in my power to mend. In anyone's power to mend.

"Go," I said. "Leave. I have nothing left to say to you."

It emboldened them, I saw. The resignation in my voice. They'd poured poison into the ear of anyone who would listen and not been chastised for it.

"How petulant you are when unmasked," Exarch Honorion mocked.

"We'll survive without you," I said, gaze sweeping across the entire lot of them. "*Despite* you, if we must. So let your records state this, Nestor Ikaroi: when Death came for Calernia, men and women rose to meet it. From the Blessed Isle to Segovia, from Levante to Rhenia, they came when the call sounded."

I spat into the snow.

"Death came for Calernia, and when steel was bared to turn it back the League of Free Cities was nowhere in sight," I said.

Quills moved against parchment, the scribes of the Secretariat recording the words spoken. Cloak of Woe tight on my shoulder, I let out a misty breath and looked at the sky. I was done here, wasn't I? If diplomacy could mend any of this, let Cordelia Hasenbach take care of it.

"And?" General Basilia said.

The other Helikean, pale-eyed and straight-backed, let out a hissing breath.

"Yes," General Pallas. "*Yes*. The blood quickened."

"Then we part ways here," General Basilia said, saddened.

I would have left, had Archer not put a hand on my shoulder. Indrani was smiling.

"Will you not flee back to your barracks, Helikeans?" Exarch Prodocius called out. "Your little intrigues are of no import to us, and the cripple no longer-"

General Basilia unsheathed her sword, which had the man flinching.

"I speak now the will and testament of King Kairos Theodosian, Lord Tyrant of Helike, the Unbroken," General Basilia said, voice echoing across the plains.

Prodocius flicked a glance at the sword and swallowed whatever he'd been about to say.

"With me dies the line of Theodosius, at last conquered by death. I name no successor and offer no legacy, save for the following words," General Basilia said, and her eyes were wetly shining, "*Ye of Helike, do as you will*."

"Oh, would you shut up with the-" Exarch Honorion began.

He did not finish, for General Basilia rammed her sword through his throat. Half the soldiers on the hill had swords in hand before a heartbeat has passed, but the dark-eyed woman only laughed. She ripped the sword out and flicked blood onto the snow. Penthesian soldiers crowded around the other Exarch protectively, shields raised.

"*Murderer*," Exarch Prodocius screamed, voice gone shrill with fear. "How dare you, you-"

"Tyrant?" General Basilia said. "I suppose we shall see. You may consider this a declaration of war, Prodocius. Penthes can hang you as a traitor to the League and servant of the Empress, or it can burn. It makes no difference to me."

"Are you mad?" Basileus Leo yelled. "Do you not understand the consequences of-"

"Tell me, you pathetic worm," Basilia nonchalantly said. "What will you do, if I ignore your petty threats? What have you ever done that I should fear you?"

"I'll not allow you to run rampant, Helikean," the young man snarled.

"Then beat me, Nicaean," General Basilia grinned.

And she had, I thought, so very little in common with Kairos in body. She was well-formed and made like a soldier, not striking save perhaps those sharp cheekbones but not in the least ungainly to look at. Yet when she grinned that

grin, all pearly white teeth and daring, for a moment I would have thought... She reined in her mount, offered us a salute of her sword, and rode back to her soldiers. The young Basileus let out a shout of anger but did not pursue. He barked out orders in tradertongue and his soldiers clustered with the Penthesians once more, beginning a quick march back to the rest of his force. He offered no farewells, and I had said all I intended to say. Secretary Nestor Ikaroi, however, remained. Along with his scribes. They stood in silence, watching. Waiting. General Pallas dismounted. Under the pale moonlight she came to stand before me, tanned and grey-eyed and inscrutable.

"My name," she said, "is Pallas Messene. I am a general of Helike, raised to the rank by the Tyrant himself, for a score I have been a soldier and leader of soldiers."

"You know," I replied, "how I am."

"I have seen it," General Pallas agreed. "I tonight I saw it again. Once you called me and those under my command a *worm in the flesh*, Black Queen. You deemed us servants of Keter, and stripped us of all the strappings of *kataphraktoi*."

"And of a bone as well," I calmly said, "for the lives in my service you took."

"Bones mend," General Pallas said. "Armaments, horses, they can be had again. Pride is not to easily bartered back."

"That is not in my power to return," I said.

"It is," the grey-eyed woman disagreed. "In keeping to my oath, I spilled blood to the benefit of the King of Death. I weep not for this, for I swore to a Theodosian and there can be no higher calling. And yet I would even the balance, with oath given anew."

She knelt, dark-haired and stone-faced, in the snow.

"Every wound I dealt, I deal anew," Pallas Messene spoke. "Every battle I fought, I fight anew. Let spears shatter and swords break, for my oath will not. Let there be no rest nor relief until the war is won, and should death take me let me rise in indignation, for I am a daughter of Helike and we were borne unconquered. I swear to this, Black Queen of Callow: until the King of Death knows oblivion or I do, my sword is pledged to your war."

Behind her, three hundred cataphracts dismounted under moonlight.

"How many?" I asked.

"Half," she said.

"Half the *kataphraktoi*?" I said, surprised.

That was near two thousand soldiers.

"We do as we will, now," General Pallas smiled, looking up at the night sky. "He gifted us this."

After a long moment, she met my gaze.

"Half the army of Helike, Black Queen," she said. "If Death comes, let it learn the same lesson as every other army under the sun: there is Helike, and there is *the rest*."

# Chapter 89

# Sing We Of Ruin

> "Fifty-five: if your powers are lost, they will nearly always return greater than before so long as the appropriate moral lesson is learned. With kindness and humility comes overwhelming martial might."
>
> "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

It was over.

The League's soldiers withdrew, the hostility between the different forces open but reason prevailing just enough for battle not to erupt less than a day's march from the capital of Procer. Considering the people involved, I'd not considered that a given. Secretary Nestor and his attending scribes withdrew for the night but requested permission to send an embassy under daylight. The clear intention was to request the presence of Secretariat scribes and chroniclers up north, and I accepted tonight as I fully intended to accept tomorrow. There'd be restrictions and conditions, but in principle I had not objection to their work. If I got lucky, maybe a report making its was south would even stir some Delosi to shed neutrality long enough to cease recording the end times and actively try to turn them back. A girl could dream. General Pallas and her *kataphraktoi* swore oaths and sent back half their number to claim their equipment and supplies still in the League camp, the rest returning with me.

Adjutant had finished speaking with Talbot and the remaining senior legate when I arrived – Tendai, wasn't it? Sounded Soninke – though he opened his report by passing a dry comment on my 'dragging yet another army home'. Like it was a bad thing, the wretch. As it turned out Juniper's report had been essentially confirmed, with the sole fresh developments a few accusations of 'Praesi treachery' and 'Callowan purges' tossed around by soldiers that'd ended in brawls. One dead, from an unlucky broken neck, and both Tendai and Talbot had come together to hang those involved as per Callowan regulations. Adjutant argued for the growing urgency of intervention there, even if risking dire consequences to the compelled, but I had no order to give him. I hesitated still

to speak when those words might just kill Juniper and Aisha, among others. I presented General Pallas to him instead and dropped onto his 'drily humorous' lap the work of getting the cataphracts settled.

There'd be talk later of how many soldiers Pallas was proposing to bring north, though it shouldn't be more than ten thousand. Less, probably, though there likely to be the most finely drilled and commanded troops among the coalition's armies. At least one good thing had come out of this otherwise ruinous night.

Archer wandered off, likely to check in on Masego though given the work I'd asked of him he was like as not to ignore her presence beyond what basic courtesy required. If even that much. Vivienne was speaking with General Abigail's staff tribune to pick out what soldiers would be sent out as her escort, and I made a mental note of having the general formally granted the authority of a Marshal of Callow until Juniper could be declared fit to resume it. I'd no intention of promoting her to the rank, not for many years yet if ever, but to get affairs in order with the Army she'd need to have the weight of that authority behind her. Both the inherited structure of the Legions of Terror and the Hellhound's preference for strict lines of command had resulted in formal authority being needed to get anything moving in the Army of Callow. Akua remained with me, a shadow shadowing mine, and though I could guess she wanted to address the fact that she'd been outed I did not approach the subject. It'd be out and about before long, I knew. If Malicia felt comfortable enough handing out that information to the likes of Prodocius and Honorion, it meant she was comfortable putting it out there.

I was still uncertain how my people would take it, on the Callowan side at least. If Akua had still been stuck in my collar save when I let her out I suspected it would have been taken as a long price, but 'Advisor Kivule' was not a prisoner or entirely unknown to the men. Like as not it'd cost me a few feathers in the eyes of the heroes in the Grand Alliance, too, though I'd not hesitate to call Cordelia a damned hypocrite if she spoke so much as a word in condemnation. She didn't get to play that card when she had people lugging a Seraphim's corpse around Procer. Truth be told, given the hour I probably ought to head to bed. The immediate necessities were seen to, and the rest was probably best approached with a well-rested mind and a clear head. Black was awake, there could be now that about that, because Scribe would have missed little of what had unfolded or left him to sleep during it. I was still not looking forward to that conversation, and arguably waiting until daylight for it would not be a bad idea. It'd allow Scribe's people in the Eyes to learn more, and that when we held council we'd both have a clear idea of what was happening before decisions were made.

It was over, the succession of twists and turns that'd swallowed up my night. Or at least it ought to be over. If it was, though, why would my shoulders not loosen? Like I was awaiting a blow I was clenching onto myself, my instincts screaming there was something yet to come. And there were not, I thought, a

thousand directions from which further trouble could come. So grimly I sent Akua away for the night and, cloak trailing behind me, limped towards empty smithy the Carrion Lord had claimed as his home for the duration of the conference. There were no legionaries at the door, or near either of the two windows, which was... unusual. Black had been the one to teach me that a Name was a useful thing but that it was no substitute for people watching your back. His Blackguards might not have been able to do much against a Named assassin, but there weren't a lot of those and there were *lot* of the regular kind. Especially when you crossed Praesi nobles. The heavy wooden door was not locked and did not resist when I pushed it open. The burning glare of the lit furnace within blinded me for a half a beat, flames roaring tall and proud.

The shadows they cast on the walls of the smithy, which had been stripped bare of much it would contain during warmer seasons, were long and shivering. Amadeus of the Green Stretch sat alone by a blackened iron anvil, his drab grey tunic and worn boots making him look like an aging shopkeeper instead of the Black Knight of Praes. On the anvil was a bottle, and not of wine. An empty one had been set on the ground by the anvil.

"Catherine," the green-eyed man greeted me. "An eventful night for you, I am told."

It was so genuinely taken aback by the slight slur to his voice I didn't manage to entire hide my surprise. I could not remember, in all the time I'd known him, seeing my teacher even half as drunk as he clearly was right now. Not even once.

"You too, looks like," I said, flicking a glance at the bottle.

"Salian brandy," Black replied, tone amiable. "It struck me as fitting."

Shit. I wasn't familiar with the Salian kind in particular, but brandy was hard liquor. Not necessarily the hardest-hitting stuff, but if he'd really drunk more than a bottle of the stuff I could only be reluctantly impressed he wasn't falling down his Legion-issue folding chair. *This isn't like you*, I almost said, but bit down on it. I'd never seen him like this before, true, but then when I'd been young he'd still had the Calamities with him. People he could unwind with, as I myself did with the Woe. Who was left of that for him now, save for Scribe? So instead I snatched a cup from his table and braced my staff against the side of it, freeing my other hand to claim the other folding chair. I bit down on a hiss of pain as I limped forward to the other side of the anvil, dropping my seat there as pale green eyes followed me. I let out a sigh when I sat down, glad for the rest, and set down my cup atop the iron by the side of his. Without a word he filled it with brandy, and his own again.

"What are we drinking to?" I asked.

"Epiphany," my teacher said. "Harsh mistress that she is."

That was not a promising start, I thought, and drank deep of my cup. The brandy burned on the way down and if I'd had swallow of that at sixteen I suspected my eyes would have watered. It was smooth on the tongue, so clearly good stuff, but it couldn't be called anything but heavy.

"It's been a day," I agreed. "And a night, even."

"Yes, it has," he mildly said. "Eventful enough I'll confess the tumult blinded me, at first. Time to think set that weakness to rest."

"Kairos took us all for a ride," I said. "Our enemies a little more than us, which is the saving grace of this, but everyone took a few bruises. It'll be months if not years before we can really glimpse the scale of what he wrought."

"Kairos Theodosian's schemes are of only passing interest to me," Black said, pausing to knock back a quarter of his cup without batting an eye. "No, it is the moments that led to his swan song I have been dissecting."

The conference. Malicia. *It won't matter*, Scribe had warned me. *He always forgives.* I might not love the woman, or even like her, but I that did not mean she had been wrong in this.

"Scribe told you about the Legions-in-Exile," I guessed.

"I knew within an hour of your knowing," Black agreed. "And now I ponder how it all came to be."

"It must have been a contingency the Empress had in place for years," I said.

Another quarter of his cup went down his throat. The breathy slip of laughter he let out after that had my fingers clenching in dismay. It was... unpleasant, seeing him like this. So close to losing control, when control had always been at the heart of him.

"Decades," my teacher corrected. "The sheer breadth of possibly compromised individuals is simply staggering, viewed in retrospective. I assume it is the consequence an aspect. Wekesa would have noticed such a contingency were it sorcerous in nature and told me of it."

Most likely, I silently agreed. Masego had rubbed elbows with Juniper for years while holding an aspect related to sight and then eyes forged of Summer flame without noticing a damned thing, so I was not overly surprised that the Warlock had caught nothing. Named power could imitate sorcery, but it should never be mistaken for it – it answered to different rules, took different shapes.

"Or he might not have," Black then genially said. "It appears that the many warnings I received of sentiment being more blinding that I believed were accurate."

"The writing was on the wall after Akua's Folly," I reluctantly said.

Not for reluctance to speak the truth, but knowing how deeply painful it was to him.

"Oh no, not when it comes to Alaya," Amadeus of the Green Stretch softly said. "It is Eudokia I gravely misread."

*Fuck*, I thought, and kept my face blank. I'd waited too long. All this time I'd been agonizing over whether I should tell him or not, if the likely fallout was worth the honesty, and somehow it'd never occurred to me he might just figure it out on his own. How much did he know, though? I'd gotten a confession and explanation, while he must have simply pieced together details on his own.

"It is a bad habit, forcing lack of expression," Black chided. "You still do it sometimes, when taken aback. It reveals that you know something, by consequence of revealing you have something to hide."

I grimaced. He drank again.

"Not that confirmation was truly needed," he noted. "Your request with a private conversation with Scribe stood out even at the time."

"I did not know whether I should tell you," I admitted.

I might have, I thought. I liked to think I would have. But I would not lie to him and pretend it had been a sure thing.

"It would be ill-done of me to rebuke you for behaviour I instilled in you myself, largely through example," Black said, sounding darkly amused. "Though it is a fresh novelty to be treated in so high-handed a manner by anyone save Malicia."

"Scribe, she believed, *believes* she was saving your life, you know," I said, then hesitated before continuing, "and I'm not sure I disagree with her."

"Would you like to know how I inferred what happened?" the green-eyed man idly said, filling his cup anew.

I'd yet to finish mine, or him his, but down the bottle went. I slowly nodded, though I was not sure I actually did. He drank from his cup and I matched him, the brandy's burn a pleasant distraction from the roaring heat of the furnace and this miserable conversation.

"In the moment it bled me, that Alaya stood in that hall and saw me only as a hindrance," Black said. "That she had not, beforehand, even attempted to speak to me so it might be made into a game of silk and steel. That she'd considered a decision that so wounded me to make as inexorable, a betrayal assured – so assured there was no need to even *attempt* conversation."

He paused.

"Then I made myself cease to think of her as Alaya and began to think of her as Dread Empress Malicia," he mildly said. "And I still saw an unexplainable mistake from a woman whose judgement I yet hold in some esteem."

"You figured she knew something you didn't," I said.

"The moment Eudokia intrigued to pass the blame onto her for the botched Salian coup, everything that followed was set in stone," he mused. "Either I had ordered this, and now stood her foe. Or I had been deceived, and anything spoken to me could aid Scribe in furthering her attacks. Or potentially reveal how they had been anticipated and answered. Either way, even a secret missive would have been a foolhardy risk."

I drank again, deep, since what I had to say was like as not to be unpleasant to get through.

"That doesn't excuse anything," I said. "She's still the ally of the Dead King. She still spent decades seeding commands in the minds of people. No one *forced* her to order the Night of Knives, Black. Hers might have been choices with reasons to them, but that does not excuse a single fucking thing. You've

been preaching personal responsibility to me since the day we met – why would she, alone of all the people in Creation, get a pass?"

He held up his cup to the light of the furnace and it cast a streak of shade over his eyes.

"*I trust people to act according to their nature*," he quoted. "*Anything more is sentimentality.* She said this not long after her formal claiming of the Tower, when there was still talk of who might be her Chancellor. It was the talk of Ater for weeks and remains her words most often quoted in Praes. I never thought much of the saying, for it presumes much, but it speaks to the woman who spoke it."

The cup went down, and the green gaze was pensive.

"Malicia seeded commands preparing for a betrayal, and that betrayal came," he said. "I blame her for this no more than I blame you for the terrible habits your learned at my side, though I would chastise another for them."

"Brandy makes you chatty," I said. "You're muddling cause and consequence, Black. Fucking with the minds of your subjects is something that deserves answer. It's not a betrayal to recognize that. You're just being. . . "

I bit my tongue.

"Sentimental?" he finished, slightly slurring. "So I am. Eudokia said the same, when we spoke."

I went still.

"And what else did she say?" I slowly asked.

"That she regretted her actions," Black said, tone dry. "And would not repeat them. That she understood it had been a mistake. I thanked her for this, naturally, for it was a needed lesson to us both."

And yet she was not here, drinking with him.

"So where is she?" I pressed.

"I wouldn't know," the green-eyed man said. "Neither does it matter, for she is no longer in my service."

My fingers clenched.

"You're drunk," I flatly said, "you're regret this after-"

"I made that decision without having had a drop," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said, tone eerily calm.

"Then you're grieving, not in your right mind," I hissed. "There's nothing practical about-"

"No longer extending trust to someone who deftly manipulated me into rebellion and undertaking a road that ends in the murder of someone dear to me?" Black said. "An interesting premise. I offered no rancor and held no grudge. It is a parting of ways, nothing more and nothing less."

"You can't afford to lose Scribe," I bluntly said. "If you do you lose the Eyes, and if you no longer have the Eyes the Empire will eat you alive."

"I considered this, but then decided it to be irrelevant," he amiably said.

He drained the rest of his cup then, with clumsy fingers for one usually so sure-footed, produced a small strip of parchment from a pocket within his

tunic. He put it down on the anvil, without a word. It was in Mtethwa, two words: Come home. I knew not the handwriting, but then unlike him I'd not spent decades corresponding with the Empress.

"You can't be serious," I quietly said.

"All of this might genuinely have untied the knot, you see," Black said, sounding highly amused. "I *did* betray her, in the end. As she always believed I would, deep down. And after that betrayal failed and she triumphed over me so utterly she can now, at last, feel at ease."

He poured his cup full again as I did absolutely nothing to hide the horror I felt.

"Of course, I will never question her again," he said. "I will have lost that right, alongside any notion that this is partnership instead of vassalage. But the doors of Ater will be open to me and, as far as she is concerned, kneeling before the throne as every lord and lady of Praes watches will be my great penance."

"It can still be turned around," I said. "I know it's a blow, the Exile Legions leaving and Scribe having manipulated you, but this isn't your only choice. You have allies, Black."

The green-eyed man tipped back his cup, taking another swallow.

"You misunderstand," he said after. "I could no more do this than I could pretend I still put my trust in Eudokia. It is best to look what you are in the eye, as a villain. Lying to yourself is ever a dangerous business."

"And what is it you are?" I quietly asked.

"Not yet content," he said, smiling as if he was having a private jest at my expense.

I wasn't helping him, I realized. Sitting here with Black and finishing that bottle would not make him feel any better. This breakdown had been a long time coming, maybe as far as Captain's death, but letting him drink and entangle himself in his thoughts would solve nothing. Gingerly, I rose to my feet.

"Sleep it off, Black," I sighed. "Scribe won't have gone far, and that woman would forgive you nearly anything. She'll forgive you this. We can make plans after dawn, when we're all sober and rested."

He looked at me for a long moment, then set down the cup. For a moment he looked about to say something, but instead he smiled crookedly.

"Good night, Catherine," my father said.

I left, limping, and left the blazing heat of the smithy in favour of the cold. The coolness outside leant a refreshing touch the sweat on my brow and neck, but the exhaustion I'd expected never came. Even now, after all this, restlessness lingered in the marrow of my bones. High up above, under the stars and moon, to great crows feathered in darkness drifted across the sky. Their thoughts touched mine, gently, and shared a sight they were glimpsing in the distance. One man, leaving Salia. Well now, that was earlier than anticipated. I saddled Zombie and rode out, declining escort, and the journey on her back was swifter than it had been on foot. The small farm had not changed at all

since my last visit, though perhaps that should not have surprised me: it might feel like an age ago, but I'd last stood here two nights back. The cattle wall, I saw, had been built anew. And stones had rolled down, as I'd warned the White Knight they would. By the eyes of the Crows I would not have company for some time yet, so after tying Zombie to the side of the farm I was spared a few breaths to consider how to comfortably wait.

Inside would be most reasonable, I thought. But the cold was pleasant, and I was reluctant to part from it. Instead I propped up my staff against the sidewall and, after soothing my leg with Night, hoisted myself up the side of the farm. The roof was as sturdy as it looked, good tiles and well set. Grimacing in pain even through the Night trick, I crawled atop it until I was resting my back against a chimney stump. Tightening my cloak against me comfortably, I let myself drift into the mixture of warmth around my belly and coolness against my face. It was soothing, and I almost fell asleep. I was not sure how long I'd been there when I finally heard approaching footsteps in the snow. I heard the White Knight chuckle as he figured out where I was, then deftly climb up the side. As Hanno dragged himself up on the roof, I finished stuffing my pipe and went looking for a match to light it. Finding one of my last sapper pinewoods I struck it against my sleeve but it failed to light. Sighing, I discreetly tapped a finger and seeded with black flame before hastily lighting my pipe with it.

The White Knight rose to his feet and strode to the edge of the roof, the two of us watching the nearing dawn begin to light up the sky.

"Back so soon?" I said, blowing out a stream of wakeleaf smoke.

"Within an hour of Tariq waking, he drew me out of my own slumber," Hanno said.

All else about the man aside, there were Named out there with the word 'healer' in the Name who weren't half as good at the art as Tariq Isbili was. Hells, for a time he'd even been able to cure death.

"And now you're here," I said.

An invitation to elaborate, but he did not take it.

"You were Queen of Winter for a time, were you not?" Hanno asked instead.

I hummed, pulling at my pipe.

"Close enough," I said. "If only by virtue of being the sole scavenger with a road to it."

"And you are no longer," the White Knight said.

"Took a leap of faith," I acknowledged. "All things considered, I don't regret it."

"And when Winter left you, Black Queen," he softly said. "Did it feel like an absence?"

*Oh*, I thought, and was surprised to find I yet had pity in me.

"It felt like flying out of a pit into the blue sky," I gently said. "It felt like the first drink of water after a long day in the sun. But I never loved that power, White Knight, nor did it love me."

Not as he so obviously loved the Choir of Judgement, strange as that sentiment was to me. He stood there for a long moment, looking at the lightening horizon.

"They have all been asking me," the White Knight said, "what befell of Judgement. Would you like to know, Catherine Foundling?"

I had half a dozen flippant replies on the tip of my tongue, but I was not feeling so callous right now as to offer them up to a decent man so obviously grieving.

"Tell me," I said instead.

He flicked his wrist, and in the dawning light I caught the shine of silver. A coin, flipping, for a moment I almost struck out with the Night. But Sve Noc was silent, and I remained still. The White Knight caught the coin and did not even look at what had turned up. To him, and so to me, it'd just been a flip of the coin. There had been nothing more to it.

"Silence," Hanno of Arwad said. "Only silence."

I let out a breath I hadn't known I was holding.

"The Hierarch still fights them, then," I quietly said.

"You warned me," the dark-skinned man admitted. "I did not listen, for never before has the strength of Judgement failed before my eye. You warned me, and now there is silence."

And silence stayed there, hanging in the air.

"And now what?" I asked.

"I am blind," Hanno of Arwad said. "Yet even a blind man can see that war must be waged on Keter."

"I have pledged myself to this," I said. "And do not take such oaths lightly."

He turned towards me, his broad silhouette ringed by morning's light, and met my eyes.

"Then we are allies," the White Knight said, and offered his hand.

I took it.

And so we went to war, against the King of Death.

# Bonus Chapter: Winter III

> "Good Gods, man, you can't simply fire arrows at them. You have to let them finish the monologue first, otherwise it's simply unsporting."
>
> Aldred Alban of Callow, the Prince Errant

The White Knight did not enjoy fighting beasts.

It was not something particular to Hanno's Name, his study of his predecessors had made that much evident. Those of his titular forbears born to Callow, in particular, had often taken such fights as their specialty. There was sense to it, as traditionally rivalry with the Black Knights of Praes belonged to Shining Princes or Princesses. Many a flying fortress or ritually spawned monster had died to the blade of a White Knight, even as the Legions of Terror were scattered by radiant royalty. Yet west of the Whitecaps, White Knights had long been known as first and foremost killers of villains. In time of crusade they rose to higher prominence still, but that was rarer affair and in the greater scheme of things one late to the history of Calernia. Indeed, most of the White Knight memories Hanno had recalled centred around strife against agents of Below. Hanno himself considered his aspects and training to have suited him to a great variety of works, but most deeply so to fighting Named. His dislike came not from a difficulty in fight beasts, even so.

But, he reflected even as he smashed a table's foot and let the momentum flip it up as a manner of greatshield – just in time for torrent of greasy liquid to splash against it and start eating through with noxious fumes – more that whenever he found himself doing so collateral damage became inevitable. The more removed from the plans fate had for them a hero acted, the more stiff and resisting Creation became. Hanno kicked down the warping table before it could get in his way, glancing up in time to see the Dead King's monstrous winged vanguard further tearing through the roof. The greasy liquid it had spewed was likely poisonous as well as acidic, but that was not the most inconvenient aspect. The Dead King was fond of using such creations as transports for lesser dead, and this one was no exception: even as the greasy wetness ate at the floor, the dozen fleshy abominations that'd been vomited out with the liquid began to shape themselves into legged creatures with wet squelches. Most

people would have been struck with deep fear and disgust as such a sight, but this hall was filled with veterans of the war against Keter.

They'd all seen worse, and like as not those sights still haunted dreams. So instead before five heartbeats had passed every royal in the hall had a blade in hand, Princess Rozala Malanza called out for a shield wall and the retinues formed up with finely-honed discipline. There was a reason that even in the heart of Cleves, behind tall walls and sturdy gates and thousands of guards, every single person here had worn armour. The Enemy's reach was long, clever and ever-changing. They had all been taught that lesson the hard way.

"Archers, ready a volley," Princess Rozala said, tone even.

Even before the arrows flew Hanno knew they would have little effect, the following beats proved him right. Steel pierced into the shifting flesh, but there was no blood to spill nor organs to break and so the projectiles had little practical purpose.

"Your Graces," the White Knight said, "I would invite you to withdraw to the Low Keep."

Which was close, and halfway underground. The remains of a fortress that predated Alamans presence this far north, he'd been given to understand, and one very stoutly built. The beast would not find that structure as easy to rip into. Pride and fear warred within the royalty he'd addressed, for though they liked not the notion of retreating they were not unaware that from this hall they could do nothing. With siege engines from the city, yes, and by bringing every priest in the city to bear against this great monster. But arrows shot from here would not even merit attention, and their lives were likely to be why the beast had come to this hall at all. It was the Princes of Cleves within who the war was most decisively fought, and it was pride that won.

"Lord White, we will not abandon you to face that creature alone," Prince Gaspard thundered back. "I yet rule this city and-"

With a groan the ceiling the great hall came off entirely, the roar of the beast above them all drowning out the words of the Prince of Cleves. When it passed, Hanno spoke again.

"Withdraw, Your Grace," the White Knight simply said. "And do not worry of my fighting alone."

Providence punctuated his sentence by a massive streak of lightning screaming down from cloudy skies, Antigone's working ripping straight through the back of the beast and all the way out its belly. More of the poisonous liquid spilled out, and animated corpses with it. A heartbeat later, falling from the sky in the wake of the blinding light, an armoured silhouette wielding a great trident landed on the beast's back. The Myrmidon was in good form today, Hanno noted. The White Knight took a measured step forward, sword rising as he watched the fleshy creatures take what seemed to be their war-shape: a tall, bent humanoid silhouette with strangely gleaming claws on the 'hands' and feet. Thin, he saw, and so suspected they'd be agile as well as blindly quick. Assassins, these, not warriors. The Dead King sought fresh crowns added to his

tally. The arrows earlier shot into them were on the ground, now, like they'd been spit out by the shifting bodies.

"Well?" Hanno politely asked them. "Shall we proceed?"

In ghostly silence the creatures moved, and he moved to meet them. Behind him he finally heard the Procerans withdrawing as he had requested, shield wall tightening to block the back of the hall. It would not be enough, not against ritual-made killers like this. Of the dozen foes, a mere four were heading towards him, falling forward on four legs and they ran like terrible hounds. The rest made to scatter around him, moving so swiftly they found no difficulty in treading tables and walls like they were the ground. Breathing out, the White Knight let Light flood his veins. Control, patience, and timing. This he had learned from his defeats, that with skill little was needed to accomplish much. Light glinting on the edge of his sword, Hanno took a single step forward and a sudden extension of his arm had the tip of his blade piercing the leading abomination's belly. His Name's power pulsed and then the creature was burning away like a leaf lit aflame, for the necromancy that moved it was no proof to disturbance by Light.

With a step to the side his stance shifted, and he took a second through the knee. It shed its own limb, flesh boiling as it surrendered a limb before the burn of Light could swallow it all, but the backswing carved it through the torso. Hanno smoothly finished his pivot, facing the opposite of where he'd begun, and with a step towards there thrust through the back of a third creature. He tamped down on the power he'd slid along his sword, adjusting it to what he gauged to be strictly necessary to the effect. He did not know how long this battle would last, and power wasted was power he might lack when wielding it might have saved lives. The last of the four that'd come towards him opened a mouth where there should have been a stomach and spat out a mouthful of foul black liquid at him. A flicker of Light down to his back leg, using that to push himself forward at speed – a favourite trick of the Flawless Fencer, which he has carefully learned to reproduce without drawing on her memories – the angle he craned his torso forward at carefully measured so the gob would pass over his shoulder. Hanno's blade carved right through, the Light on the edge of it making the process closer to a warm knife through butter than steel through flesh. The remaining eight had passed him, as he'd anticipated. Four on each side, all heading towards the still-open door at the back of the hall the princes and princesses had retreated through.

Numbers needed to be brought down, lest at least one succeed at squeezing through.

"**Ride**," the White Knight said.

He'd been refining his use of the aspect for months now, ever since the battle at the Red Flower Vales. Hanno leapt forward even as he spoke, Light roiling violently beneath him and forming into a horse already at a gallop – the trick had been learning to make it come from his legs, so that he would already be astride the horse and not need additional movement. The lance of Light

formed around his free hand and in the blink of an eye he'd crossed the hall on horseback, the tip of the lance tearing through an abomination crawling up against the wall and breaking as it killed it. That part of the sequence still frustrated him, for the ephemeral had made it impossible to make the weapon more durable even if he'd since figured out how to make it other armaments than a lance. Dismissing the aspect, he did not allow it to simply disperse as he once had: the Light he claimed, for it was own, drew it back to him and then precisely released it.

Grey Pilgrims used prayers and hymns, when drawing on Shine to similar purpose, though Tariq was skilled enough to sometimes dispense with this. The Peregrine still lived however, so it had been by digging through a dozen past Pilgrim lives, three Preachers Militant of Atalante and an ancient Sage of the West that Hanno had crafted a method that was manipulation of extant Light without spoken word, though at the expense of delicate control. The broken mount of Light pulsed, once, and split into three thick javelins that flew out. They tore through tables and glasses and seats as they went, unerringly finding and tearing into the other three abominations on his side. A heartbeat later, all that remained was cinder. The last four abominations, swift-footed and still silent, reached the Proceran shield wall a heartbeat later. Bodies rising above the rim of the shields, flesh swallowing the swung swords without harm, two of the creatures leaned over the shields and quickly punctured the heads of the Proceran soldiers before them. Another simply ignored the soldiery by continuing to run against the wall as it went around them, and the last impossibly leapt above the soldiers and straight to the gates.

It flew back a moment later, missing half its body, and the Valiant Champion entered the fray.

"Gloryful day," Rafaella cheerfully bellowed. "Axe for all!"

The Champion would be able to prevent the last three from going any further, Hanno knew, and the greater threat here was admittedly the beast above. Yet she was not so quick she would be able to put down the last three without more soldiers from the hall dying. Leaving her to the fighting now would mean the certainty of dead soldiers for purposes uncertain, and so he would have to trust Antigone and the Myrmidon to handle the situation a while longer.

"Take the wall-crawler," the White Knight ordered.

She did not answer, nor did she need to. They had fought at each other's side long enough that he trusted her implicit. The two who'd already kill soldiers had followed their assault by crouching down again and slithering through the now open ranks of soldiers, raking claws and spitting venom as they did. A flicker of Light down his back leg, knowledge of that trick courtesy of a woman long dead, and the White Knight was moving again. Boots whispering across the floor, he barreled through the soldiers in his way without so much a speck of the sinuous, unnatural fluidity of the foes he pursed. Better bruises than death, he believed. A flicker of movement caught his eye, the abomination closest having pressed all the way down against the ground as it tried to pass

through and, striking out suddenly, he nailed it to the floor with a downward thrust. His instincts screamed and he ducked, a gleaming claw ripping through where he had been standing. Having missed its opening the creature tried to retreat, but only revealed its position in doing so.

Tossing aside the young soldier in his way like he was made of feathers, the White Knight grunted in effort as he threw himself forward. Wreathing his gauntleted hand in Light, Hanno dug into the squirming abomination's torso and let the blinding touch of the Heavens sunder the sorcery animating it. Returning to his feet a heartbeat after, he rose to learn that the Valiant Champion had meanwhile, found another weakness to these creatures: repeated partition would cause them to collapse like the touch of the Light. Hanno offered his hand to the soldier he'd tackled down, helping the young man back up, and patted his shoulder.

"Thank you, lord," the man said.

"It is everyone's war," the White Knight calmly replied. "We are in it together. Champion?"

"Is me," Rafaella volunteered.

"Best we get at that beast soon," Hanno said. "The kind of sorcery the Witch would use to destroy it would destroy large swaths of the city as well."

And though the Valiant Champion did not much concern herself with details like this, or Antigone for that matter, Hanno was well aware that the treasuries of Procer were like leaking sieves these days. The Principate was beggaring itself simply trying to keep afloat, and the foremost city-stronghold of the Cleves front being half a smoking ruin would only quicken the trouble. Not to mention smoking ruins were hard to defend against assault, and the Dead were not yet expelled from Cleves.

"Is dragon," Rafaella firmly told him.

He flicked a long glance at the monster. It was massive and winged, this was true, and bearing great claws. Yet it did not seem capable of breathing fire, and its scales were not those of a lizard as those of dragons were. To his eye they were instead closer to the chitinous shine of an insect's carapace, and much too large to be a dragon's since every scale was no smaller than a heater shield. Likely they would be easier to break as well, though the flesh beneath could not truly be wounded like a dragon's would be. Undeath was limiting in some ways, but the Enemy was clever in employing its few advantages to great effect.

"It has some distant similarities," Hanno said.

"Is dragon," the Valiant Champion cheerfully said, "and I going to slay it."

Ah. Well, that did explain the insistence. Heroes of the Dominion had a distinct taste for the kind of deeds that'd been the staple of heroics at the peak of the Age of Wonders, he'd noticed. Such customs had poorly aged, in a Calernia where there were so few dark or savage corners left. Yet he would not argue against the truth that Rafaella had a way of eagerly brutalizing monsters that would make even other heroes hesitate. In some ways, Hanno considered

the Named of the Dominion to have best taken to the war against Keter. How long that would last, however, he was uncertain. For though Levant's sons and daughters were known for their bravery, they were not known for their stomach for long, gruelling wars. The old heroics took the shape of a splash of glory and an elegant exit, while the struggle against Keter instead promised to be a brutal, protracted grind.

"We can debate that later," Hanno said. "First we need to get to-"

Through the open ceiling the beast's massive head came down, struck by an unseen force, and even as a deafening roar sounded and a gaping maw filled with great fangs opened to reveal advancing armoured undead, the White Knight reflected that on occasion providence could have a truly rotten sense of humour.

"As planned I," the Valiant Champion smugly said.

"Just as planned," he absent-mindedly corrected.

"No, you just," Rafaella patiently said. "I valiant. This not difficult, Hanno."

The White Knight opened his mouth to argue, then closed it. He'd known for some time that the Champion greatly enjoyed making sport of others, particularly those she considered friends, but to this day he was uncertain exactly how much of her attitude was a pretence. Besides, the dead were beginning to march out of the monster's gullet. Dripping in the greasy liquid that should by all rights eat right through them and their armaments, for the Dead King was nothing if not a thorough enemy. The two of them limbered wrists and shoulders as they began to advance towards the enemy.

"I have idea," the Valiant Champion said.

"You can't keep getting eaten by creatures to kill them from the inside," the White Knight sternly replied.

Hanno honestly suspected that the acid in this one's stomach was the result of Dead King's rising irritation at how successful Rafaella had found that tactic to be. Not to mention Christophe, whose unrivalled ability to take punishment had seen Antigone adopting the tactic of forcefully cramming him down such monsters several times now. The way Dominion heroes kept referring to this as 'Proceran stuffing' only added insult to injury for the Mirror Knight, though after soldiers had seen him walk out of the smoking remains of a thirty-feet tall undead ape creature without a scratch his reputation had reached new heights.

"Is from Book of All Things," the Champion assured him.

"I asked the Peregrine about these alleged differences of text in the Levant, did you know?" he casually asked.

"Oh no, enemy close," the Valiant Champion hurriedly said. "Talk later."

She hastened forward, barreling into the first group of emerging undead with her shield and greataxe raised. Though the acidic grease was eating at the edge of her axe, it hardly mattered with undead. Shattering them was often more practical an approach anyway, and the sheer weight of what the Champion wielded paired with her strength ensured any blow would at least knock the foe down. The great winged beast tried to rise again from its prone

position, screaming in anger, but whatever great working Antigone had used on it was keeping it pinned to the ground. He was pleased to see she'd listened to the talks he'd made all heroes in Cleves sit down for on the subject of fighting within fortresses and cities: pinning down great monsters instead of batting them around not only limited damage, it also allowed their own side to put their own advantage to work. With every moment more priests and mages from the garrison would be gathering, more siege weapons and soldiers with oil or pitch.

Still, the Dead King had ensured that wherever this abomination landed its maw could serve as a beachhead. With Rafaella and himself facing the open maw serving as the gate, it then fell to them to hold the line while the rest of Cleves gathered the might to unmake this beast. Yet before Hanno could step forward and lend his blade to the toil of wiping out the remaining dead, an armoured shape leapt down into the group the Champion was swatting around. The Myrmidon wasted no movements in sweeping away the last few dead, her trident glinting with Light. She offered a muted salute with her weapon as he approached, quite unnecessary to the proceedings. Until the undead began to pour out in earnest, anyway. This band of a mere twenty seemed to have been a mere vanguard, by the lack of follow-up.

"Myrmidon," Hanno greeted the heroine, and she nodded back. "How fares the rest of the city?"

"This is the sole beast," she told him. "Other undead were spilled out when its belly was opened, but the Vagrant Spear and the Mirror Knight have them contained."

Only one beast? Though the White Knight suspected that creating such a construct must have been horrendously difficult and expensive, he had still expected it would be one among a flock or at least a pair. Perhaps the vanguard of a greater assault, for mighty as the creature was it was no match for the number of heroes currently in Cleves. The garrison of the city alone would have been enough to repel it, in his opinion, though significant casualties would be incurred. If this was plain to him, it ought to be the same to the Dead King. That had implications.

"This is a distraction," Hanno said. "Keter sent something after the royals while this drew our attention, as it sent ghouls after those in Hainaut."

"The Repentant Magister went to attend to them," the Myrmidon told him. "Alone."

It should be enough to slow down whatever had been sent, but he must hurry.

"Rafaella-" he began.

"- I stay on dragon," the Champion interrupted. "Go."

He nodded his thanks, extending a similar courtesy to the Myrmidon, and set out as fast as his feet could carry him.

It would end in the Low Keep, one way or another.

# Bonus Chapter: Epilogue

> "And on the first day of the year four hundred and ninety-three after the Declaration did a stranger slay High Lord Baraka Sahelian in the streets of Wolof, and she did not flee. Instead she challenged the Sahelians in such a manner: 'Come now, you who believe you might triumph over me, that I might teach you the error of your ways.' "
>
> Extract from the Scroll of Dominion, twenty-fourth of the Secret Histories of Praes

Inch by painful inch, Malicia had dragged the Dread Empire of Praes out of the pit and herself along with it.

She allowed herself to feel a sliver of pride over that, though only for a passing moment. To grow conceited over victories would signal the beginning of a swift descent. Yet victories she had won, slowly and carefully laying the foundation for them until they could be brought to bear against her enemies. The throne that had been crumbling under her had been forged anew by the fresh blood she'd spilled abroad: watching the Imperial Court through the enchanted wall that said to be the work of Dread Emperor Sorcerous himself, Malicia read the lips of the highborn gathered before her. Rumours had swelled of the developments in Salia and the Free Cities. The sudden reverses against the Grand Alliance only echoed more loudly for the way it had before seemed on the rise to pre-eminence, restoring the prestige eroded by Ashuran depredations and the losses in Thalassina and Foramen. Malicia did not rejoice of this, for she knew every speck of that clout would be needed for what was yet to come. Though in dark days the High Seats and lesser nobles were more easily convinced of great changes, there were many who would balk at the mere setting of a precedent.

The crop before her, however, looked ripe for harvest. High Lady Abreha Mirembe's absence, for Alaya had refused to relieve her from her duties as Governess of the Blessed Isle, had naturally prompted protest from Aksum and the Mirembe. In attempt to make her influence keenly felt Abreha had ordered the lords and ladies sworn to Askum to refrain from attending court until she was summoned back to Ater, but to Malicia's eye this had backfired. Lord Kosu's lion-like mane of hair could be picked out from the crowd, as could Lady Sesay's famous enchanted dress of pure gold. Those two ranked among the most powerful vassals to Aksum, and another half dozen lesser nobility

sworn to Abreha had ignored her edict and attended regardless. None whose holdings were close to the city of Aksum, for Abreha Mirembe's wrath would run hot at the defiance, but enough that the High Lady of Aksum's position was revealed for the worsening drought that it was. A year ago, Abreha had been but a few manoeuvres of having herself proclaimed Chancellor regardless of Malicia's opinion of the matter. Now the vultures were beginning to circle her, her defeats at the hands of General Sacker when she'd attempted to intervene in Callow having soured her position.

In the wake of the recall of the inaptly named Legions-in-Exile, the high-born of Praes had come to believe the entire affair a long-reaching scheme of hers and General Sacker one of her agents in humbling High Lady Abreha. Perhaps if Sacker's soldiers had not so neatly slaughtered the Askum forward parties and driven the refugees back to the Blessed Isle – where they must now be fed at the expense of Abreha – her influence could have been salvaged, but the defeats had been both swift and utter. The Governess of the Blessed Isle was then left with the dilemma of either pursuing a punitive campaign into Callow and risking starting a war with Laure or admitting herself to have been almost contemptuously swatted down. Abreha had attempted to sidestep the issue by accusing General Sacker of treason, which the goblin general had answered in kind, which had been trouble at the time. Amadeus was a rebel in all but name and conceding to the shadow of his influence would have been a grave mistake. By stretching out giving answer, however, Malicia had been able to feign control of the situation and leave the High Lady of Aksum's support to wither on the vine.

With the currents within Praes mastered, it had been time turn her full efforts outwards. The League of Free Cities had been the easiest grounds to make gains in, and so where she had first concentrated her efforts. It had swiftly become clear that Penthes could be bought, courtesy of Amadeus sowing crippling chaos across the nobility during his last visit and Kairos Theodosian then pouring oil on the fire. Reaching an accord with the Tyrant of Helike had proved necessary, for through the Hierarch he wielded great influence over the rest of the League. They'd agreed on the Exarch-claimants that should be spared, and in binding them irremediably through participation in a darker scheme: the deployment of Still Water against the fleets of Nicae. From there, it was only a matter of ensuring that her position in the Free Cities was strong enough Kairos Theodosia's coming treachery could inflict only minor damage. The Magisterium was approached and promised protection from invasion until it had finished its cycle of replenishment for the Spears of Stygia. The deal had to be further sweetened with magical tomes, but in principle Malicia had no objection to an empowered Magisterium tying down the resources of neighbouring city-states.

Antagonizing Atalante had been as simple as inciting the Tyrant and other greats of the League to constantly and publicly slight some of their most beloved preachers, culminating in their delegation being forced to carry a nailed manuscript

of the Book of All Things as a formal member during the conference in Salia. The utter humiliation and the rest of the League's acquiescence to it had made them walk away from the situation the moment they were no longer bound by law to be involved. The Secretariat's longs-standing tendency to state neutrality when its interests were not being threatened – as well as the dire state of its coffers after maintaining so many mercenaries in its service for so long – meant that so long as they were not provoked they could be counted on to be neutral as well. All that was required then to utterly isolate the Tyrant of Helike had been to sever or turn Nicae from the rest, which Theodosian might have assumed to be difficult given their shared treachery against the city and its young Basileus. And it had been a thorny problem for Malicia, she'd admit, at least until Catherine had returned to the surface and begun reminding the rest of Calernia of the looming threat she represented.

It'd only been a question of aiming at Basileus Leo Trakas in particular, from there, and he was not all that complicated a man.

The deceased Strategos whose authority he'd usurped had been a close ally of Cordelia Hasenbach, and now so was Catherine Foundling. A foundation for mistrust. She'd also had dealings with the Tyrant, at the best of times his enemy as well as his ally, and made the leading heroic lights of the Grand Alliance defer to her will several times. Best of all she had the soul of Akua Sahelian, the sole known user of Still Water, bound to her service. It'd not been all that difficult to tip wariness into fear and then fear into the making of mistakes. Not that her victory there had been as complete as it could have been, Malicia silently conceded. Kairos Theodosian had risen from the grave to spit on her plans one last time, a poisonous snake even in death. The Eyes had confirmed that one of his two foremost generals had sworn herself to the war against Keter while the other, General Basilia, had openly declared war on Penthes. A weakened Helike might be able to maul the even more desolate Nicae, should it support Penthes, but it would not find Penthes itself so easy a prey. The distance between the city-states was significant and marching there would involve making pacts with the states between them, which Malicia fully intended to sabotage.

Still, where the League of Cities might have informally been an ally to the Dread Empire instead it was likely to spiral into another civil war that tied it down for the foreseeable future. In the longer lay of things, the Empress would see what might be arranged. If the war went badly for General Basilia and her Helikeans, the Magisterium might yet be convinced to step in for easy spoils. And if it went well? Then the Magisterium it might yet be convinced to step in lest victory allow Helike to resume pre-eminence among the League. The Tyrant might have allowed his people to reach tall heights while he lived but in his death he had left them stranded and surrounded by potential enemies. There would be some pleasure in teaching Helike the consequences of its actions, Malicia would confess. Kairos Theodosian had been an atrocious little prick, convinced he was amusing and that his sneering smugness was somehow

endearing. It'd been draining to deal with him even when he was genuinely trying to cooperate with her, and passing the duties to Ime had not been possible: the moment the little shit had sniffed out how abhorrent she found him, he'd insisted their bargaining be done only between rulers.

Steps coming from the deeper reach of the hidden corridor the Empress still stood in, studying her court as she awaited the proper time to enter, shook her out of her thoughts. Ime's pace was brisk, befitting urgent news. Malicia did not turn, eyes on the overly lingering courtesies Lady Nazar and the younger brother of Lord Salee – affair or scheme? The Salee and Nazar lands bordered one another, lending potential weight to either. It would not be the first time Lady Nazar allowed a foe's younger sibling into her bed as well as her plans.

"Speak," Malicia said, eyes moving to catch yet another of the thousand little details that might allow her to keep the court under her thumb.

"Duchess Kegan had our envoys drawn and quartered," Ime said. "In front of cheering crowds."

Unpleasant, but not unexpected. The Deoraithe were not an expansionist people by nature and with Kegan's appointment to Governess-General of Callow they'd begun accruing honours in the kingdom as the duchess appointed kin and allies to offices. Competent ones, sadly, which only added to the faction's influence. It meant that the Black Queen's promise to the Deoraithe of independence-in-all-but-name along with a tight military alliance was a very difficult bribe to better.

"The Legions?" Malicia asked.

"The Okoro mages cadres were made welcome by Marshal Nim, and construction of the ritual grounds is progressing at a steady pace," Ime replied.

*Good*, the Empress thought. When the time came and signal was sent by the Exile Legions mages, the ritual could be initiated and the armies forced back into Creation from these 'Twilight Ways'. Returnign exactly at the centre of fortified killing ground, manned by her more loyal armies. High officers of dubious loyalty would be taken hostage and kept at the Tower, the unsalvageable purged and more trustworthy men forced in place. Heavy-handed but necessary. The Legions of Terror needed to be unshakeably hers before Amadeus returned. It meant more blunt action than she would have preferred employing, but in these times such bluntness could serve as a reminder of her strength as well.

"And?" Malicia asked.

There would be more. Neither of those reports had been time sensitive.

"Lord Amadeus has gone missing," Ime hesitantly said. "Neither our people in Salia nor in the Army of Callow know where he is. We believe Queen Catherine herself is unaware."

Alaya stilled.

"You are certain?" she said.

"It is like he vanished into thin air," Ime said.

He was not dead, Alaya decided. She would have... felt it, somehow. She would have. And though the Empress had been harsh in demonstrating to him the futility of defying her, it was no more than he had earned. He'd know that, understand how measured the answer had been considering the gravity of his mistakes. Had she not held her hand until he claimed a right to her very throne? Even allowing for what had no doubt been poisonous whispers by Scribe – who, it was now clear, after decades was finally done pretending to be anything but an enemy – there was no light under which those actions could be seen that was anything but a betrayal. It was, Malicia knew, better this way. Now there was no longer anything let wondered and unspoken, no question of what would happen if he turned against her. He had, and he had lost. Swiftly, utterly, without ever landing a blow in return. And with that question finally laid to rest, they could forge a fresh understanding of who and what they were. Amadeus would not have taken his own life over such a thing, for sober admissions of his blunders were at the heart of who he was. He was still alive, which meant he was coming home. One way or another.

"It is likely he went into the Twilight Ways," the Empress said.

"Agreed," Ime said, standing by her side. "And though I know it displeases you to even consider this, Your Dread Majesty-"

"He could be returning as a foe," Malicia said. "I am aware."

Amadeus yet commanded loyalty with much of the Legions and had many sympathizers among the Empire's bureaucracy. Scribe had seen to that. Some of the High Seats might be using to use him as a stalking horse for their own bid for the Tower, too, High Lady Abreha most of all. There might even be some lesser nobles that would genuinely rally to his banner, should he raise it. Though despised by most highborn, his tenure as her Black Knight had also seen him become widely feared. For some that meant respect, especially with families who had martial inclinations by tradition. His Duni birth meant most would not even consider him a possible claimant, true, but there would be some with greater interest in deeds than skin. More worrying were his ties to the Clans and the currently rebelling Tribes, though Malicia had already begun to check those potential threats with measures of her own.

"I would win," the Dread Empress of Praes said.

"You would," Ime agreed. "And so I caution you of assassination."

Malicia glanced at her spymistress, almost amused.

"You believe he'd run me through in open court?" she asked.

"At this point?" Ime said. "Yes. Or, at least, I'm unsure enough of the answer I have to consider the possibility."

"Without his Name, I could have him frozen with a word," Malicia noted.

"That is no reason to expose yourself unduly," Ime said.

"I do not intend to," Malicia flatly said. "I am not a debutante thankfully accepting an ally's antidote, Ime. Regardless of his reasons he has failed and betrayed me. It will be years before I can even begin to trust him as I once did."

She paused.

"But I will not rob myself of what could be restored out of petty fear," Alaya said. "He will have a place in my court, should he return."

What was there left to fear, after all? In Praes, her vise was tightening around all who might yet oppose her. In the Free Cities, she stood queenmaker and holder of strings as the crows gathered above. In the far west she had sown chaos and confusion, stranded for months the Army of Callow, and last of all she stood the sole ally of Keter on Calernia. The Dead King *needed* her, lest the entire continent band against him as the sole crucible of darkness. Lest every hero turn north, the sum of every Hell and Heaven march against him. Malicia would betray him, in the end. That much had never been in doubt. She would betray him the moment the armies of the Grand Alliance were savaged beyond ability to harm her, and in the uneasy peace that followed the Dread Empire of Praes would stand without peer. Hers to mold into what it should be, as she reigned untouchable from atop the Tower.

The storm had come for Dread Empress Malicia, First of Her Name, and she had *beaten* it. She had survived the crucible thrust upon her by Below, and now she would claim her dues from Creation.

"It is time," the Empress said, eyes on the court. "Have them readied."

"By your will," Ime said, bowing low.

Malicia was left to stand alone, watching her court. Where she would soon enter and introduce before the lords and ladies of Praes the beginning of a new age. From the Northern Steppes, chieftains had come. Blackspear, Graven Bone and Stag-Crowned. Large, powerful clans of the southern stretches. Their chieftains had come to be proclaimed Lords of the Steppes, empowered to collect tribute in the name of the Tower from the other clans while themselves standing exempt of it. There were some among the court who would despise this, and what would follow yet more. For there was one more awaiting, hidden. She would be presented as the very first of her kind: High Lady Wither of Foramen, having renounced her former title of Matron as she returned Foramen to the Praesi fold. The Great Game, it always changed.

The only thing that didn't was that Alaya of Satus always, *always* won.

—

Tariq listened in wonder to the roars of the crowd. Mere days ago the people of Salia had been angrily rioting, boiling out onto the streets, and yet now the same mob was cheering Cordelia Hasenbach so vociferously it seemed as if the very sky above might collapse from the ruckus. Merovins Square was considered one of the great works of Procer, the great Salian gathering place built over generations of the rule of the family of the same name. In the upper reaches of the part of the city men called the Joinery, massive arches of pale stone formed a perfect circle above great open avenues. Statues and monuments of every stripe dotted the square, some so worn by ages that the faces had been eaten through by rain and sleet while others were but a few years old. The tall, slender monument to the dead of what Procerans called the 'Great War', for example. The twisted marble, showing a ring of men and women both dragging

each other up and pushing each other down, had chilled him when he'd first glimpsed it. The sculptor has shown great skill in making the faces move from triumph to agony and grief under the vagaries of the 'Ebb and the Flow'. A fitting monument to a bloody civil war.

And now a young father was hoisting up his daughter so that she could peek over the weeping face of a marble woman and have a better look at the First Prince addressing the people of Salia. Merovins Squared had filled with thousands upon thousands, like a sea of people split by elegant islands of stone and metal. From where Tariq stood, under the shade of a great roofed terrace overlooking the magnificent wooden pulpit from which Cordelia Hasenbach was addressing the crowd, he could only barely make out the words the First Prince was speaking. Yet there was no mistaking their thundering approval, the way it echoed through the sunny afternoon air. He was not the only one who had been invited to wait here, far from it. The Grand Alliance's shine must be burnished, for the people to put their hope in it, and so the great names had all been brought. Young Razin and Aquiline, pretending to be speaking politics over wine when they were truly flirting in that heady, hesitant way of those still unsure of the affection of the other. Tall and serious Yannu Marave, in the cast of whose face Tariq could not help but seeing Sintra. Itima Ifriqui, the sole of the Blood could still remember him having a full head of hair, though their long acquaintance had yielded little fondness. Respect, yes, but the Peregrine had always held in distaste the fondness for bloody vengeance of the Brigand's Blood.

Others too, the seconds of their realms: Princess Rozala Malanza and Lady Vivienne Dartwick, seated in the shade and speaking in low tones of granaries and treasuries. Tariq's opinion had already been sought over the matter of a temporary common treasury for the Grand Alliance, though he'd demurred from giving an opinion. It was a sound notion, as far as he was concerned, but he must wean the Blood from the habit of seeking his council. The chances he would survive the coming war were slim, and the surrender of his *crown* had only made him warier of speaking on matters of rule. Yet it was the last here on the terrace that his eyes lingered over. Hanno of Arwad, once the Sword of Judgement and perhaps one day once more, was leaning against the balustrade and look down at the crowd. At his side the Black Queen of Callow, hair loose down her back and a light smile on her face, was looking down with him and speaking without reserve. The easy cordiality that held between the two, natural as a sparrow's flight, had surprised him. Perhaps it should not have been, for those two had never fought before and for a hero sworn to the Seraphim the White Knight could be said to be... unusual.

Tariq approached, as much out of curiosity as desire to converse.

"- wait, so if you recall someone that understood High Arcana, wouldn't you-"

"Only so long as I am within the memories," the White Knight replied. "Which makes you correct, but the knowledge itself impossible to use."

"You still get to learn languages by the fucking basketful, so I wouldn't complain," Catherine Foundling drily said. "Even back when I still had Learn, it took me months to learn what I knew. Even had to learn Chantant the hard way."

"I find Tolesian significantly easier," Tariq admitted, coming to stand at Hanno's side. "Though that might be because of the tradertongue and Lunara loan words."

"Everyone should just speak Lower Miezan," the Black Queen suggested.

"Chantant is the single most spoken language on Calernia, I believe," the White Knight said. "Should it not be the chosen tongue, by virtue of this?"

"It's got more exceptions than a Wasteland loyalty pledge," Catherine Foundling snorted. "Over my dead body."

The Grey Pilgrim's brow almost rose, for though the Black Queen was known as something of a wit and prone to bantering, there seemed to be a genuine rapport between the two he'd not expected. They were both young and attractive, Tariq thought, so perhaps... No, he decided, flicking them a long and considering glance. The Black Queen had a roving eye, a fact he'd heard had been the subject of great interest among Proceran royalty, but the White Knight had no reputation for dalliances. And seemingly little interest in them, which the Grey Pilgrim could only approve of considering the days they lived in. Below them, the crowd roared again,

"The First Prince is in fine form today," Tariq said.

"She is a gifted speaker," Hanno noted. "As one would expect of a woman bearing her title."

"She's offering them hope," the Black Queen said. "She could be stumbling over half those sentences and still they'd cheer fit to shake the earth."

"The Grand Alliance has lost a founding member, with Ashur," Tariq cautioned.

"The League of Free Cities retreats, or joins our ranks," the White Knight said. "And the dreaded Black Queen has been tamed and added to our ranks. There is reason to rejoice."

Young Catherine replied with what he believed to be fairly obscene language in Kharsum, to Hanno's apparent amusement, but Tariq was grimacing. Precious little of the League had joined, no matter the posturing, and Tariq mistrusted those that had. General Pallas and her ten thousand, the appallingly named *Tyrant's Own*, might not have the stomach to truly see through the war to the north. It remained to be seen, and soldiers were not to be turned away, but these were not to be relied on.

"Best for all of us that Cordelia has her day," the Black Queen said. "If parading us all before the crowd puts some spine back in Procer, I'll even smile and say pretty things."

"Your generosity is remarkable," Tariq said, only half teasing.

Most of her allies had, after all, until recently been at war with her. The Peregrine cast a discreet look at young Razin and Aquiline once more, heart

clenching. Blood, both of them, and that would matter in the days to come. But Aquiline Osena had not so long ago tried to kill the man she now courted and yet now the smiled softly at one another. Razin Tanja, defeated and orphaned, had not been embittered or broken but instead risen past what he had been taught. Tariq had heard of his words, of the renunciation of the honour killings. Of the harsh words he'd spoken at what Levant had become. And Gods, but Tariq was feeling his years. His soul had been wounded, and his body was nearing the end of its days. There was a future for the Dominion, but it lay not in Yannu Marave, who embodied at once the best and the worst of Levant, or in Itima Ifriqui's borderlands savagery. Yet those two, the seed of what they might yet become, it would need to be nurtured. Protected. And he might not live long enough to see this through.

"I would, Queen Catherine, ask of you a favour," Tariq said.

Dark eyes studied him, amusement sliding off her face.

"Funny, that," the Black Queen said. "I've been meaning to ask one of you as well."

"A trade might be arranged, then," the old hero said, pleased. "When the Grand Alliance marches north, you are to be among the great warleaders of it."

"Seems likely," the young priestess acknowledged.

"There are two of mine I would have you take under your wing," Tariq said. "Under your protection."

She followed his gaze to Aquiline and Razin.

"You've got plans for them," the Black Queen said.

"It is a new world you would make," the Grey Pilgrim said. "I will not have Levant left behind."

Slowly, she nodded.

"I am told you might be one of the few people alive capable of removing a compulsion from someone's mind," Queen Catherine said.

"I have some experience with this," Tariq acknowledged.

Sorceries to that effect were more easily disrupted, but even alchemies and Speaking could be purged if one knew the way. The Peregrine had greatly benefitted from the tutelage of the Ophanim in this.

"I believe Dread Empress Malicia to have planted commands among several officers of the Army of Callow," the Black Queen said. "I'd request your assistance in removing them without harming the officers in question, which I'm told could be... difficult."

"This I would offer free of recompense," Tariq frankly said. "I will not begrudge you my hand's work when it is to be used to aid your soldiers in fighting for the preservation of mankind."

She seemed surprised, which had him pushing down a grimaced. It had not been unfounded a conclusion, but Tariq was attempting to bridge the gap and vexed to see how deep he had helped dig this one. The Grey Pilgrim was not unaware that there was only so long one could keep treating someone as an enemy before they became one in truth.

"I'll keep the favour, then," the Black Queen said, eyes watchful as she studied him.

Below the crowd roared anew at some fresh turn of phrase of the First Prince. White, Grey and Black, the three of them looked at the lone silhouette of Cordelia Hasenbach. The stubborn soul that would not allow the Principate to fall to its knees, no matter the coming doom.

"The Tower stirs," Tariq quietly said. "The Ophanim whisper of it."

"I suspect," the Black Queen quietly said, "that the Tower is about to have a great deal of trouble on its hands."

Suspect. Was it true, then, that she did now know where the Carrion Lord had gone?

"And if Praes sallies forth?" the White Knight asked.

"Then I will get the east in order the hard way," Catherine Foundling replied, tone steady as stone.

It was a small, almost imperceptible thing. Tariq Fleetfoot saw it anyway, as did Hanno of Arwad. A flicker, a spark. When the Queen of Callow had spoken the words and meant them, something had begun to take shape.

A Name, Gods help them all.

—

It was a beautiful realm, Amadeus thought.

A summer night unending, starry and warm. The kind of realm that made for a pleasant journey even when the sum of your earthly possessions was a horse, bundled armour and a fortnight's worth of rations. Bridle in hand, sleeves rolled up on his tunic as the sword at his hip moved with his leg, he wandered down the road snaking forward through the Twilight Ways.

Amadeus no longer had his armies, not even his personal guard – he had left them in Catherine's hands, requesting she safeguard them through the strife to come.

Amadeus no longer had spies, or wealth or even the power of a Name. He had sent away Scribe, failed Captain and lost Warlock. Assassin was gone, if not from Creation then at least from his service.

Alaya would see him kneeling, or forever gone from her sight.

*Tabula rasa*, a blank slate. After so many decades, the thought of it should have angered him. Should have brought in him despair and bitterness, for all he had built went up in smoke. Instead he felt relieved. Like a weight had been lifted from his shoulder. It was just him, now. Him and a sword and a plan against all the world. He looked up at the starry sky and laughed.

"Evening, stranger," a voice drawled. "Where might you be headed, that it has you in such a merry mood?"

Leaning back against a tree, shrouded in darkness, Hye Su was gazing at him with mild interest. It'd been years since they last saw each other, and she'd hardly changed at all – save for the burns on the side of her face, a mark of Summer challenged but not beaten.

"East, I would think," Amadeus mused.

"Whatever for?" Ranger asked, tone nonchalant.

Voice high and clear, he sang.

"The last is strangest, she said to them
The easiest and the most solemn
For when the tower is yours to claim
You will have forgotten why you came."

There was a moment of silence, and then the Lady of the Lake pushed herself off the tree.

"Might be I'll walk with you a while, then," Hye Su said.

"I thought you might," Amadeus smiled.

And into the starry night they went, side by side.

# Bonus Chapter: Update Schedule (Book VI)

Hey!

The update schedule for the last book will be proceeding differently, since I was starting to feel the sting of three different chapters a week by last book's end. Instead of three smaller updates I'll be putting up two larger ones, on Tuesdays and Fridays.

Word count wise I will theoretically split the length of what the third chapter would have been in two and assign it to the two remaining updates, but practically speaking I expect more content will end up put out there. At the very least I'll have longer to check chapters for typos, which I expect many of you will find a welcome change.

As I said before the break that updates would resume on the 6th that is still what you'll be getting, so the prologue and extra chapter will still be coming out a little after midnight, one day early.

Hope you'll enjoy the new book, and the last stretch of the series!

E.E.

# Bonus Chapter: Winter IV

> "One must admire the thriftiness of Callowan war-making, given the cost of arming bold orphans with enchanted swords compared to that of crafting undead plagues and flying fortresses. They even get to reuse the sword, most the time, if rarely the orphan."
>
> Dread Empress Prudence, the Frequently Vanquished

The silence was how he knew it'd all gone wrong.

Hanno of Arwad was no longer a green boy in the ways of Named, if well short of the priceless experience someone like the Saint or the Pilgrim could rightfully boast of, but he'd been allowed to learn the lessons of others. The softest touch of **Recall** saw them all drift to the surface, the parade of kindred memories. The Noble Corsair stepping onto a ship still and dead, the Shining Princess finding the great hall of Denier empty as the night sky, the Silent Slayer finding a clearing in the Brocelian without a single sound to mar its almost oppressive hush, a hundred others. A thousand. The aspect was best used scarcely, when reaching for patterns, for it was so easy to get lost in that endless sea of memories. Easier still to realize the smallness of what Hanno truly was, but a single speck of light within a great and ancient star. Such silences were the herald of dark news, of ambush, of the Enemy having struck. No surprise marred the brow of the White Knight when he reached the narrow stone corridor that led into the Lower Keep and he found splayed before him half a dozen corpses. Cleves soldiers, the prince's own men, in good ring mail and wielding long halberds. Steady sorts, Hanno knew from having fought at their side on the walls, and skilled at war.

They'd been slaughtered like helpless children.

Some manner of long blade had slashed through the mail and broken both bone and metal with the sheer might it was being swung with. The crudeness of the wound a second glance revealed was undeniable sign this was the work of a Revenant: the blade had not been sharp enough to warrant cutting through good armour, which meant either strength beyond the reach of mortal men or some other manner of power. It was useless to attempt recalling with so little to go on, the White Knight decided, and would lose him time besides. He bowed his head to the dead as he passed, apologetic for not lingering long

enough to close the eyes of the dead. Hanno would seek to keep the living alive before giving honour to the dead, though his lengthening stride as he left was poor repayment for the loyal service these men and women had kept to while they still drew breath. The Ashuran set the guilt aside for now, instead considering the wounds as he sped forward. Too lengthy and broad to be a longsword's work, closer to a broadsword or greatsword. Both were popular weapons with Proceran fantassins from the northern Alamans principalities. Those few soldiers of fortune who could afford one, anyway.

Most likely a Revenant borne of the Principate, then. Or else one so old as to make the current preferences of weaponry among Calernian peoples irrelevant. Even the former was unfortunate, given how few of those lives he'd explored in depth. Proceran heroes – and villains as well, from what he could tell – rarely left the principality they'd been born in. They tended to be called by places as much as stories, in truth. Even Christophe, perhaps the most potentially powerful Mirror Knight in the history of that Name, had been called to his fate by the need of the Elfin Dames for a defender of their sacred waters. Often heroes from the Free Cities and Callow were more useful to learn from by simple virtue of having more often fought and encountered greater breadth of opponents, and when it came to the affairs of wilderness there was simply no matching the Dominion's many heroes. Hanno had also called on the memories of the legendary founder of the Valiant Champion's bloodline to learn his delicious garlic lamb roast recipe, which admittedly some might consider an abuse of his powers. Not that any of his companions had ever complained when it was his turn to cook. Theft of recipes aside, Hanno was coming to realize that in the way he'd chosen to look through lives he'd left a gap in his understanding of Proceran ways. It would have to be remedied to, should he survive the day.

The Low Keep he was moving through was little like a castle as they were built these days, instead as much a shelter and a tomb as it was a fortress and a home. Those who had raised it, thought to be either eastern kin to the western tribes that grew to be the Lycaonese or another people entirely that'd been ended by Alamans northern expansion, had preferred digging below to raising great walls. Yet they must have been a people used to being besieged, for the Low Keep's looping corridors ended in narrow chokepoints and were curved in a way that would allow the defender to strike behind the shield of an attacker. The first of those narrowing points he encountered had seven dead soldiers, the second a full twenty scattered beyond a broken door and barricade. The third had a thick steel grid keeping corpses up against the wall, having been blown off its hinges and straight into the soldiers. A Revenant with great physical might, Hanno thought, as he'd earlier speculated. But not one with an aspect that'd allow it to cut through the likes of steel, as he'd also speculated, else that grid would be cut through instead of repeatedly hammered until it broke out of the hinges.

The White Knight was not overly familiar with the Low Keep, as he'd mostly fought in the city proper and atop the walls, but from memory he should not be

far from what the servants called the Old Hall. Once the banquet hall of the rulers of ancient Cleves, nowadays it was more often used as a wine cellar for its natural coolness. The bottles and barrels had been moved early in the siege and the Old Hall instead been made into the bastard child of an armory and a war room, for though the Old Hall was too small for a great council of royalty and Named it was fit for private talks between those who had already been given duties by the greater council. The princes and princesses who'd escaped the scuffle above should have retreated there, given that the Old Hall's ancient and crumbling wards had been entirely overhauled by Princess Rozala's mages according to the Rogue Sorcerer's design. Roland had allegedly been rather embarrassed to put these to ink, calling them a 'sloppy, faulty mimicry' of those used by the Army of Callow to protect its war camps, but even Antigone had admitted that the Praesi wards were usually half a century ahead of everyone else's. At least in lesser patterns, for she maintained that in great workings no one had yet to so much as touch the feet of the Gigantes.

Hanno has walked the airy streets of Orseis as a young man, where stone flowed like water under the guidance of songs, where great columns of moonstone decreed the very lay of winds and clouds, and so he'd not argued this. It was not without reason the Gigantes were also known as wonder-makers, even though they named themselves nothing but a pale shadow of what they had once been.

Regardless of all else, the wards on the Old Hall ought to keep the least of the dead from entering and hinder even the likes of Revenants. Given the number of soldiers that escorted Proceran royals even here in the depths of Cleves and the alleged presence of the Repentant Magister, he might not be too late in arriving. Nephele had left behind the destructive sorceries she'd learned in Stygia along with the other dark teachings of the Magisterium, but that hardly meant she was defenceless. Hanno's steps slowed as he entered a low, downwards-sloping gallery. It could be no longer than thirty feet, though the span of it had been swallowed by darkness: save for the two torches behind him and the two outside the door on the other side, there was no source of light. A few years ago, the White Knight would have let his Name augment his sight and seen through the dark without missing a beat. He'd been taught better since, by a green-eyed killer who'd delighted in brutally punishing his every bad habit. If darkness had been laid here, it was not because his opponent had expected him to be blinded by it. It was because the moment his sight adjusted a nasty surprise was to be sprung on him. From memory, the gallery was no more than six feet wide and the footing deliberately tricky so that bowmen and spearmen able to strike into the gallery through narrow slits in the side walls might find easier prey.

"Physically strong Named rarely bother with tricks," Hanno noted out loud, "save for those used to fighting creatures even stronger than them."

The White Knight timed the sequence of his movements closely, first snatching out one of the torches at his side and tossing it out into the dark before ad-

justing his footing: one foot horizontal, as if prepare to thrust out with a slender blade, but instead a flicker of Light went down the back of his leg and Hanno propelled himself forward at inhuman speed. The last part of the sequence, strengthening his eyes against light, came the moment he caught a glimpse of a silhouette within the dark. A fraction of a moment later there was a loud bang and a flash of burning light – the kind that would have seared his eyes powerfully, were he adjusting them to see in the dark. Instead it merely stung and stinging he could suffer through without batting an eye. Even as the torch he'd thrown arced up, Hanno caught sight of a tall and broad man in ornate bronze armour plate. Of a helm, too, depicting some snarling creature, but before he could make out which his opponent was moving. A greatsword swung, aimed to carve through the still spinning torch, but as the initial heartbeat of the fight ended Hanno's movement trick ended with him under the very torch.

He snatched it out again, thrusting it towards the helmeted head of the Revenant, and his opponent aborted his blow before silently withdrawing into the dark. A mere moment later, there was no sign left of the undead Named at all.

"A wolf," the White Knight pensively said. "Yet in bronze, not iron or finer."

Not so with the greatsword, which was well-made steel. A more recent weapon, which was interesting. It meant the bronze armour had been kept even with steel plate likely available and that would hardly be without reason. Even more interesting was that he was being met in battle here, in what Hanno could only term an obvious trap, while the undeniably better prize would be the lives of the Proceran royalty within the Old Hall deeper in. The White Knight was being delayed, which implied another entity was already after those lives and the intelligence behind this entire affair believed that other entity capable of breaching the defence of a heroine, wards and soldiers if given long enough. Likely a second Revenant, then, though some manner of specially crafted monster was not impossible. It also meant that Hanno needed to pick up the pace.

"Your hiding trick only works when you have darkness to work with," the White Knight spoke out loud.

The dark-skinned hero genuinely believed this to be true, though that was not why he'd revealed his conclusion to his foe. It was an unusual scene he'd been presented with. The Revenant's former Name must have been geared towards physical might, for him to make use of a greatsword and so swiftly, yet he was not behaving as most Named of that bent would. Hanno was not the kind of fool to dismiss those Named inclined to the strength of bodies as duller than others, but it was true that the breed tended to be more inclined towards recklessness and swift advance than other heroes. As they should be, given that their Names usually rewarded such audacity with luck and power. Rafaella was a good example, for though clever and apt in tactics she tended to prefer throwing herself into trouble with only limited planning. It was where and how she thrived, for that was her Role as a Champion. Yet the Revenant he now faced had preferred laying an ambush, using tricks that many heroes

would outright consider beneath them and was even now lying in wait instead of seeking battle. *Used to fighting stronger creatures,* Hanno considered, though it did not feel like a full explanation. Unfortunately, given that the Dead King's grasp reached across several centuries and lands now considered quite tames had at times been considered more dangerous than the Brocelian, this did little to narrow the scope of possible identities. Torch still in hand, the White Knight began to stride towards the other end of the gallery.

Bronze armour, and a helmet like a snarling wolf. The Lycaonese were the ancient enemies of Keter and they did have a strong cultural association with the beasts, Hanno thought, but they were hardly the only ones. And they'd been one of the first human ethnicities in the west to begin using iron, too, which would make the bronze armour odd. Or would it? Iron hindered many lesser sorceries, he remembered. The darkness trick, and perhaps even the light that had blinded him, might not be faded aspects but instead enchantments woven into an armour. One made in bronze, a metal that the ancient peoples of Calernia had favoured above all others when it came to laying enchantments. Nine steps, before Hanno reached the end of the gallery and the second part of the ambush was sprung on him. It was the light trick that'd given it away, and it was the same reason the White Knight had been unsatisfied with his guess of the Revenant's former purpose. The trick had been woven to specifically hurt a Named fortifying their eyes, which meant his opponent was used to fighting other Named. And that meant the light at the end of the gallery, the other two torches, was a second part to the trap.

Why even leave them, if the Revenant had advantages from the dark? The coming ambush had been obvious enough even with only part of the gallery shrouded in darkness. The Revenant had left a sanctuary at the end of the obvious danger because it allowed him to dictate where Hanno would be moving without lifting a finger. It was, the White Knight decided, a cunning killer he was facing. One whose life might be worth learning from, should he learn enough to tell it apart from the rest of the sea. Three steps now, and timing would be everything. On the first step, the White Knight breathed in. Light, never far from his grasped, stormed through his veins. On the second step, the White Knight breathed out. He grasped the Light by the reins, shaped it and directed it. On the third step, the White Knight acted. He tossed the torch forward again, even as from a dead angle's shadow the Revenant emerged and snuffed out the two torches flanking the gallery's gate simply by clenching his armoured fingers into a fist. The stretch if corridor ahead went dark, for all the other torches were too far to cast light.

All that was left was the flickering flame of the torch he'd thrown, arcing up and forward, and even as the Revenant faded into the darkness the White Knight smiled. And stomped his armoured boot onto the ground, releasing Light in a wave. The Revenant's looming silhouette reappeared, seemingly startled, and Hanno idly confirmed that his guess had been correct. It was the armour that allowed him to disappear, that same armour touching the stone

floor he'd just shot Light across. Modern sorceries might not be so easily disrupted, but this was ancient magic: it shattered at the slightest touch of Light. Without pausing, as the reflected light of the arcing torch flickered across polished bronze, Hanno called on his aspect without so much as a whisper. **Ride**, he thought, and Creation echoed of it. And now the White Knight used a second refinement on the aspect he'd devised since the Red Flower Vales. Namely, that while the aspect usually helped him form Light to use this was not, strictly speaking, necessary: he could use Light already at hand. Such as the one he'd just released across the floor, snatching it up before it could fade and shaping it for swiftness. His arm extended, he rammed the forming lance of light through the weakness in the Revenant's armour, the slight space between helmet and cuirass, and felt the Light searing its way through like a hot knife through butter.

Amaranta Viegle, long ago the Sage of the West, had spent a lifetime studying the Light. She'd been a major influence in the shape the Lanterns took in the centuries after and died at the age of ninety-three, fighting a dragon with her bare fists. That last brawl had made it into Levantine legend, but it had been not the many duels of her early and late life that Hanno had found most useful but instead the stretch from her fifties to seventies. During those decades she'd experimented with applications of the Light, and though most of what she'd set down of those studies had been lost to flame during the Scouring of Vaccei the White Knight had sat through the revelations of those years with her over long hours of mediation within his aspect. Like, for example, the evening where she had grasped that with enough concentration the initial movement ascribed to Light could still be changed when it had been set in motion. All it required was the addition of fresh Light, as for some reason beyond the comprehension of mortals even a speck added to the initial Light would be enough to turn even a pre-existing sea of the power into a completely different working by the Light's own laws.

And so, even as the White Knight's aspect saw Light emerging from his legs to form into a mount, he added a speck more. In the fraction of a moment that followed he seized all the Light that'd been made, and without missing a beat slammed the lot of it into the lance already in the Revenant. The upper half of the dead Named vaporized, and he formed a bladed edge along the lance's length so he could slice through the lower half outright. He'd had only a single opening, but these days that tended to be all that Hanno needed. Ahead of him the torch he'd thrown clattered against the stone, and without a word the White Knight resume his advance towards the Old Hall. The Repentant Magister ought to have lasted this long, he thought even as he quickened his steps, and with a turn under flickering torchlight found himself stepping into the narrow hallway where the Old Hall's gate awaited. Corpses were strewn over the length of it, savaged enough it was hard to tell how many bodies there truly were. The grisly scene reeked of blood and excrement, and the White Knight pushed down a grimace when he saw the heavy oaken doors that should have

protected the Old Hall's entrance had been ripped open.

He could not tell the state of the wards, but that boded ill. As did the silence that was all he could hear coming from what should be a hall crowded with soldiers. Sword in hand, he prepared to – the sound that interrupted him was deafening, like someone had balled up together a hundred screams, distilled them and unleashed them all at once. A thin silhouette was blown out of the Old Hall and smacked against the wall opposite its gate before nimbly rising to its feet. Long claws of steel had been affixed to the Revenant's hands, and it bore a now half-shattered mask of clay painted in shades of grey and green. Sound resumed from within the hall, most of it cheers. Before the Revenant could even decide whether to flee or attack again a small painted clay tile, no larger than a pair of fingers, was tossed onto the ground in front of it. The Revenant hissed in anger and tried to back away the opposite way from the White Knight – who noted with amusement he had yet to be noticed – but the moment it took a step an intricate rope formed of what appeared to be small interlinked shield panels emerged from the tile and snatched its foot, dragging it back.

Even as it tried to kick away the tile the sound from the hall cut out again, as if swallowed whole, and the Repentant Magister emerged from the Old Hall. Loose robes trailing behind her as she advanced in silken slippers, Nephele was holding up a hand and within it was a golden device spinning so swiftly on itself it seemed almost a sphere. It was sucking up noise and sorcery like a hungry whirlpool.

"I did not need them to learn right from wrong," the Repentant Magister said, tone hard but somehow awed – as if even in the depths of her wrath she could not quite believe what she was doing. "And I will not return to their old lessons now like some cowering child."

The Revenant smashed the tile and the rope vanished. Hanno did not move an inch. The Repentant Magister, with a snarl, clenched her hand around the golden device and the deafening blast from before sounded again, smashing the Revenant into the ancient stone and grinding it like some monstrous millstone of noise and sorcery. A ragged remnant of the undead Named fell to the ground, when the working ended. Nephele slowly stepped forward even as her palm opened and the device began spinning again.

"I am not defenceless," the Repentant Magister said, glaring down at the Revenant. "I am not *lessened* by looking in the eye the evil I was once part of and choosing to cast it aside. And Gods take my tongue if I lie, but when this war ends I shall not be ashamed of how I fought it."

Fingers clenched, sound and sorcery roiled, and the last remnants of the Revenant were ground to dust. Hanno thought of how Nephele had looked that night, weeping and afraid, and felt his heart clench with pride. *You are your worst day*, the White Knight thought, looking at the straight-backed and clear-eyed sorceress standing before him. *But you are your finest day as well, and every single other one. Even those yet to come.* It had been a dark day, this one,

Hanno of Arwad thought. And yet it'd become a little brighter for the light just brought into it. *This is how victory comes*, the White Knight softly smiled. *One candle lit after another, until we have chased away the night.* Hanno sheathed his sword and stepped into the light, for the Enemy was still afoot in the city and there was work to be done.

If his steps were just a little lighter, well, who could tell the difference?