Forgotten Embers

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STORYPDF

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Chapter Prologue

This is a tale of Altruon, a magnificent kingdom from a world apart. Positioned comfortably in the south on the mid-eastern plate of Caldor, the kingdom of Altruon has seen much success throughout its time under the reign of a long line of benevolent and virtuous kings. The kings of Altruon are spoken of throughout the lands of Caldor for their fiery conviction and heroic exploits. Long have these kings reigned from Pyre, and there is a light that burns for their just and glorious governance, a flame of promise for the continuance of righteous rule.

Pyre: the radiant city of Altruon and its capital. Pyre was known throughout the world as a city of light and glorious splendor. Many stories were told of it across the seas in far off nations. The streets themselves were paved in gold, or so the stories went. Scholars and warriors from throughout the land would come to the capital to study and grow their talents. Scouts were sent followed by messengers with invitations to citizens throughout the four realms of the kingdom to find and select the best and most promising men to be brought before the king and to serve him. Throughout the centuries, the gates of Pyre have seen the rise and fall of many great kings and the burden of their people, but none like unto Almast.

Zephyr Almast was a man like no other. He reigned in Pyre as king from a castle on a hill at the eastern wall. High Palace, a magnificent fortress, just as dark and mysterious as the king had proven himself to be. He was a recluse to his people, a terror to his enemies, and a glorified success throughout the realms. He had transformed the capital and mining regions into a place of wealth and product.

Still, there were some who told stories, but with time, the old ways of the kingdom were forgotten and replaced. Then came new men with new industry and new ideas. Zephyr cast with the help of these men a revolutionary new vision which would transform all the known world, a newfound element and material they called maurium.

Maurium: a material of unknown origin which revolutionized the building and design industries with its malleability, durability, and comfort. Maurium had been found to be the ideal material for any product from clothing to housing to lighting to transportation. This miracle metal very quickly began to dominate in every industry known to the Altruic race. It was found to be wind proof, water proof, fire proof, and able to endure the greatest earthquake, collision, or pressure. The shavings were able to be spun into thread and woven into material which was inexpensive, protective, durable, and highly flexible. The material was even sensitive to weather, adjusting appropriately, allowing heat to easily escape on hot days and holding heat on cold ones. There were two types of maurium - a dark gray product and its counterpart, a mauve form of maurium which exchanged the increased durability and strength of the gray maurium for the distinct quality of luminescence.

Even education and communication have been revolutionized by this modern marvel. There is now little need for study, as the creation of maurium has enabled the perfection of a cranial receiver which is entirely effective in the reception and download of information within the subject's conscious. The device may be worn as an earpiece and the information will be shown as a part of the wearer's own memory, a quick and easy addition to their present reality. As a result of this, learning has been simplified to the point that it has caused traditional schooling to become obsolete, and children are instead given an eighteen year learning plan which is administered to them in their sleep through wave transmission and open communication with their own thoughts and memories. Reception of these transmissions with a strict adherence to the Kingdom Learning Program, commonly referred to as the KLP, and the king's orders of state communications are greatly encouraged and, at times, required by the kingdom's rulers. However, all such things are more common in Pyre than they are in other parts of the kingdom and its realms.

The kingdom is divided into four geographic realms and seven more arbitrary regions with Pyre at their core - the western plains, the southern foothills, the eastern forest, and the farmlands with the seas to the north. The seven regions were the seven centers of influence throughout the empire - Laoce, Euphess, Pergum, Delphi, Sa'ar, Tyra, and Asrymn. The seven were the traditional Kingsmen regions, the Kingsmen being a long standing religious order based in Altruon with a history as old as time. The Kingsmen influence in Altruon is great, the City Architects and nation's founders having been among their ranks, and they have lived their lives in peace until this day.

But even in this time of advanced technology and growing prestige, humanity still remains as it was. There is still theft, death, murder, deceit, dishonor, injustice, and all of those unpleasant things which are ever part of a world which is fallen. As the citizens of Pyre continued to build new, modern, better things, much of the old was forgotten. Some things seemed to fade away and cease entirely without a hope of their returning, and even the light itself seemed to fade as the air began to harbor darkness.

The city itself was one such thing which faded, the capital having been destroyed by fire about the time of Zephyr's reign and the invention of maurium. Zephyr had called for Pyre to be rebuilt three miles west of the place where the city stood. He called for a new city for the new age and encouraged the maurium be employed as the backbone of the city infrastructure. He called it the Eternity Project, and a great wall of maurium was erected to denote the borders of the new capital, the east gate being sealed to prevent a returning to the old capital and its ruins, and all was peace in Altruon.

Even so, a war is raging in the north against Obed, an old enemy of Altruon, whose people have fought them throughout their history. Though, in times of battle there is an opportunity for heroism and men of merit to rise in the eyes of the people of the nations they call home. One such man is a celebrated colonel, a man whose own descent is that of Obed. His name is

Tyberion Ibori, and he is the father of a beautiful young girl who, in his absence, has become a blossoming young woman whose destiny will be forever tied to that of the nations.

Chapter 1: City of Ruins

She peddled her bicycle through the driving rain outside the city, through the streaming plains of water and soft, muddied ground. Her clothes were drenched. She entered into a wooded area which covered her, providing some small patch of relief from the rain but not her tears. She continued steering through the scattered trees, breaking through into a large clearing as the rain began again to hit her face. She felt her feet slip, losing contact with the peddles as she rode. She lost her balance and fell, tumbling from the bicycle to the muddied ground below her. The bicycle continued on beside her, sliding down the slight decline and tipping over, quickly falling on its side. She sighed and closed her eyes, laying with her sorrows there in the middle of the grassy field. She laid flat on her back in the middle of the sea of green, the raindrops falling gently down upon her face, the clear water of cleansing coating the brown hue of her delicate skin with a glossy, wet shine as she breathed in the sweet air which accompanies a freshly fallen rain, so thick it was almost tangible. She would have smiled had her heart not hurt so badly. It was quiet there apart from the rain, but rain had always been calming to her, and she had needed desperately to get away. She opened her eyes and thought she felt a tear fall from her eye as it streamed down her face, warmer than the drops of water plummeting from the clouded sky. She breathed, beginning to calm, on her face a near perfect expression of peace, and a flash of hope could be glimpsed in her blue-green eyes, deep as the oceans.

A newness of life came as she turned her head, touching her cheek to the well wet grass. She glimpsed a structure in the distance as she prepared herself to rise. Far across the grassy clearing, tucked in near the line of trees and thick shrubs the forest bears and wears as its own illustrious garment, each uniquely and painstakingly woven, there was a building in the midst of it. She raised her head with interest, and her dark hair, shoulder length and tightly curled, spread out behind her, now drenched and heavy with an early summer rain. She lifted herself up off of the damp and muddied ground, captivated by this strange rectangular structure.

She moved slowly forward, beginning to examine its form. There were grand stairs to a broad entrance and a large dome on the roof of the center of it. She was transfixed by this strange aberration as she reached for her fallen bicycle, setting it upright, and taking hold of the handlebars. As she walked, she began to run with it, until at last she hopped up and mounted it again. She pleasantly rode the light downward slope toward this new found point of interest, unable to shake the feeling that the atmosphere had changed. Whatever it was that drew her to this place, it drew her more and more emphatically the nearer came, pulling at her core with ever increasing intensity of implicit necessity.

It was an old stone structure, immaculate but for its mild decay and the vines which gripped it. The smooth stone of the building seemed almost polished under the influence of the cold and driving rain. The vines which loosely gripped the structure, the leaves which climbed the sandy walls trembled and bent with the weight of the tiny silver droplets.

'How could it be that this is here? If this is the ruins, the city was destroyed by fire, but this seems almost... untouched.'

Being within several paces of it, she left her bicycle and curiously drew near to examine the walls. From this distance, she could see the wear on the old stone which was not readily visible from afar. She placed her hand upon the rock and traced over the scars in the weathered stone.

"What is this?" she breathed.

There was an inscription along the base, still readable, but partially covered by the grassy earth. She knelt down, digging out the muddied ground which covered the foundation, continuing to put her hands to work until the aged letters of the worn inscription became clear:

THE THRONE OF HIS KINGDOM IS E'ER ESTABLISHED

And again in another place:

THE KING IS MY FOUNDATION EST'D YEAR 32, STEPHAN-CALIPHUS KING

"Such an odd inscription," she breathed, her fingers tracing out the engraved lettering. "And I can't shake this feeling that there's something more," she muttered quietly.

It had been as if she were being drawn by a strange force, but it was more than a force. Not a force at all, really, but a person. It was as if someone had taken her by the hand and whispered, *"Come with me,"* and so she had.

She made her way across the front of the building, constantly examining it with curious interest. Occasionally, she felt as if someone was standing there beside her, causing her to glance, but no one ever was. Now, there she was, standing before the grand entrance of this great ivory hall. The stairs were vast and used, the huge stone slates laid one atop another having been cut to perfection, making an impressive set of stairs on every side which led into a magnificent portico. The roof of the portico was rounded and beautifully carved within and without, its stone pillars the notable work of a skilled craftsman.

'Incredible.'

There was a plain band around the roof of the portico's edge, clearly exhibiting the writing which read:

LIBRARY FOR THE BETTERMENT OF PUBLIC HEARTS

Her interest grew with each word she read and, seeing the large stone stairs which caught the water as it fell reflecting the remnants of light which the thick covering of clouds could not hold back, she began to make her way forward and up them. She had never actually seen a classic library, only heard about them as being a part of the old ways of their civilization. They had a modern library in Pyre, but it was nothing like this and she had never gone but once as a child.

'I've always liked the idea of libraries. It's just that... I've never had need for them.'

The foreignness of it enchanted her, drawing her ever nearer the platform and pillars with which the entrance was marked. Boldly, she ascended the library stairs until she reached the broad wooden doors of the grand structure with its distinguished domed top. The doors had not even the slightest indication of rot or decay. The brass handles were polished, the wood was finished and firm. Slowly, she reached out, as if to grapple with destiny or grasp it in her hand. She took hold of one of the handles, and breathing in, she began to pull.

Chapter 2: The Librarian

The room where he stood was broad and lined with wooden shelves filled with books, the same which filled the floor space all around him. It was a grand hall with lofty ceilings, marble floors, broad doorways, and a well-polished wooden desk at the front in the center of it all to help and direct those who would come in search of a librarian for guidance. The main hall of the library and its trappings were magnificent. Even at a glance, it could be known that the craftsmanship was matchless - the carvings, the paintings, the bindings, everything had been done with such enduring perfection and careful planning. Yet, beyond that, there was much more grandeur and detail than the sharpest eye could latch onto, even after years of close inspection.

The ceilings and walls were painted a candlestick white. The bookshelves had carved into their sides images of vines, flowers, and other such things, and the whole of the room was trimmed with gold, save the desk and shelves of books, which had been fashioned of a dark cherry wood. The whole of the ceiling was plain and white, being as the walls were, but for the dome.

The dome itself was a thing to behold, a beautiful mural having been carefully placed upon the glass of its delicate frame. On it was painted a magnificent image of the sun rendered in various shades of gold with long, winding rays. Surrounding the sun and its rays was a deep royal blue, dappled with gold like embers of flame against the night sky. A single light suspended from the center of the painting on a long chain. The brazier which hung by its chains seemingly from the sky above it was made of finely polished brass, and a fire inside of it. There was a cord which held it also tied to the rail of the narrow balcony which lined the back of the upper portion of the room with spiral stairs to reach it. Around the top band of the brazier, etched within its metal framework, were the words: *Kiss the Son.* This fire was the only source of light within the whole of this grand and lofty hall, but still the light remained. The light it gave was a perfect, and the air itself seemed to shimmer around it, giving off a strange, magnificent glow.

He was a young man with a comely countenance and pale skin. He was tall, slender, and built for athleticism. He was well dressed, sporting a plain white long sleeve dress shirt with buttons on it along with a gold tie and sand colored vest with matching trousers. His hair was a light copper brown, thick and wavy, which he kept well-groomed and combed to the side in a traditional manner. The round gold wire-brimmed glasses he wore reflected the shimmering amber flecks in his warm brown eyes.

'Here it is,' he reached his arm up to a higher middle section of the shelf, taking gentle hold of the top of a dark green spire with gold lettering. *'Book forty-three of the Kingsmen Chronicles.'*

He leaned the book back towards him and pulled it from the shelf with grace. He smiled as he looked at it in his hand, his eyes carefully considering the intricate pattern of the gold decorating the cover. Gingerly, he cracked it open, leading through the pages until at last he found the desired portion.

"The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not laid hold of it," he read aloud, proclaiming the fate of the nations.

The words on the page seemed to lift and alight as he breathed them out. They took their leave with letters aglow like newly born sparks, each word lit like the sun at the fiery break of dawn. Twirling with graceful movements in rhythmic flight, they floated and danced on the air as they were blown like swirling leaves in a crisp, cool breeze, and the fire reflected in his eyes. His speech was sweet and eloquent, each word, each sentence moving as a soothing stream flowing gracefully, smoothing stones as it washes over them. Still, they came forth with flashing conviction and impenetrable power - undaunted, unquestioning, and without even the slightest hint of doubt. Again, he smiled, touching his fingers to the page and brushing them over the black ink.

'How marvelous you are... how marvelous this light is.'

He walked back past the shelves to the front, holding the book in his hand and carrying it alongside him. He looked to the door.

'Dorcus said she'd be coming. It's about time, isn't it?'

No sooner had he thought it than he heard the door crack as it began to open, the sound of the winds and driving rain entering through it.

'Ah, at last! There you are...'

A young woman stood before him, dressed in a maurium sky suit and quite wet. "Hello! And, may I say, how exceedingly grand it is to have you here," he called out dandily, waving his unoccupied hand as a friendly means of greeting. "Welcome to Pyre! I've been expecting you."

She looked at him with fearful astonishment. Scared and startled, her eyes grew wide with terror. *'Hm... yes, but it seems she wasn't expecting to find me here, was she?'* He looked on her with quiet compassion and careful apology, his eyes soft with empathy. *'No, not at all.'*

He hung his head, a small smile still on his kindly countenance. "I'm sorry," he muttered softly, "I didn't mean to startle you."

She looked at him, tilting her head, her eyes questioning.

"My name is Benjamin Palmer," he explained, raising his head again as he mindfully approached, willing to present himself to her as nonthreatening. "You might consider me the librarian here. Of course, I like to think of myself as the bookkeeper," he stretched out his hand, and patiently waited for her to accept it along with the warm welcome. "Perhaps there's one that might interest you," he invitingly commented with a friendly smile.

He watched her eyes and noted the fear which gripped her still. "Please," he appealed to her softly, "don't be afraid. All's well, I assure you." He looked down at his hand then back to her face, which seemed to calm with the kindness of his words and demeanor.

For a long moment he waited before he withdrew his hand from the beautiful young lady who now stood statuesque before him. He frowned, feeling the pain which was within her, festering and pricking at her soul. "You've hurt a lot in life," he mumbled, softly considering the state of his guest and her needs, his mind still seeking how best to accommodate her.

Her eyes fell to the ground and she clenched her teeth as a flood of painful emotion flooded her face.

He stopped for a moment, visibly overcome with a heartfelt compassion which overwhelmed him.

"What is your name?" he at last inquired.

"Avera," she told him softly, still reticent to answer.

He smiled. *'Good. Then there is hope.'*

"Well, Avera..." he said, touching his hand to the back of his head, "perhaps you would like a towel, something with which to dry yourself off a bit, and a change of clothes? If you're tired, a spare room, also. That I have, I can offer, and *that* I offer *you*, Miss..."

"Ibori," she said with a small smile of thankful amusement. "And yes," she added, coming to herself a bit, "I'd like that."

"Ibori?" he repeated, his smile becoming a small grin. "Good, then."

'Avera Ibori, eh? The same as Tyberion. I doubt such a thing as a coincidence.'

"Well, Miss Ibori, if you would be so kind as to come with me..."

He smiled at her as he walked over to one of the bookcases which lined the right wall of the library's main hall. He pressed against the center of one of the flowers, a particularly delicate wood carving on the side of the finely crafted bookcase. He applied the light pressure to the point of the mechanism which sunk into the space between the pedals until a faint click was heard. He removed his hand, and the bookcase slid back into the wall, revealing a stone stairwell leading downward, deep beneath the library's foundations.

"Coming?" he asked her, looking back with an invitingly curious grin.

Chapter 3: The Light

She followed as he led her down the slender stairwell. The passage was deprived of light, and the unfamiliarity of it frightened her. Benjamin stopped suddenly, placing his hand upon an intricate engraving in the stone wall to the right of the narrow corridor. The etching was that of a threefold cord, wrapping around its own design, its pointed circles interlocking in a timeless puzzle of endless knots. There were cords which ran from the tangled image, stretching from it one way upward and the other down into the depths of the library's hidden chambers.

'What is he doing?'

She watched him as he took a breath and slowly exhaled. As he did, there came a faint glow from beneath his palm. He removed his hand from the patterned wall, and she saw the shimmering light like liquid gold as it began to fill the carvings of a careful craftsman. The light flowed from the center of the pattern, making its way through the channels to the outside of the detailed stonework and out through the cords, carried by them in either direction. There was a strange warmth to this beautiful light, and it was as a river of fire which flowed, flooding the channels and running as a current through the stony banks.

The bookshelf closed above them, sliding quietly into place, and she felt a sudden jolt of adrenaline, the fear of being trapped without a known means of escape. For a moment, her heart raced. Still, she descended the stairs behind Benjamin, trying desperately to convince herself of her own safety.

"You're not really trapped, you know," he said with a voice of calm reassurance. "You are free to go as you wish."

"Ah!" she breathed, her eyes widened.

'What? How did he know?'

"Uh... thank you," she muttered courteously.

'That is the appropriate response to someone reading your mind, isn't it?'

She looked to the river of light which illuminated the narrow passage. *'I wonder what sort of strange magic this is.'*

She felt his eyes as they shifted back towards her. "It's not magic," he muttered, gently correcting her thought statement. "Please," he added softly, "don't fear for anything."

'Don't fear for...' She considered his words and shook her head lightly. *'No one talks like that.'*

They came to the end of the stairwell and turned off through the doorway to their left. They stepped into a long hall which branches into a maze of underground corridors. The walls, floor,

and ceiling were all entirely crafted out of a smooth, seamless stone. There were lamps ensconced high on the walls at even intervals, fiery lights which burned behind the opaque walls of their pearly glass coverings. It was the same sort of marvelous light which shone in the library's main hall, and Avera admired the lamps as they passed by them, making their way down the empty hallway.

"Do you live here?" she curiously inquired.

"I, and several others," Benjamin replied courteously.

"*Others?*" she asked, surprised.

He turned his head, his eyes watching her as if to analyze her reaction. "Yes," he agreed softly.

"Well... where are they?" she asked him with growing curiosity and the remainders of some slight concern.

"Out at the moment," he quietly commented, not readily offering anything further.

"I see..." she muttered softly. "*So...* you have business *elsewhere*, then," she carefully concluded.

He smiled, seemingly impressed and, perhaps, amused. "Yes," he said simply, moving his eyes again to the front. "In town, out of town... in fact, we have business just about everywhere. I, myself, have a short meeting out of town two days early."

'Two days...'

"You mean *early the...* day after tomorrow, then?" she clarified, trying to wrap her mind around the peculiar statement.

"That's right," he said, his eyes glancing back at her again.

"Then... why stay here?" she asked, perplexed.

He smiled. "Sometimes, Avera, the best questions are those to which the answer is *not* readily available."

She frowned. *'Well, that's one of the most original non-answers I've heard, but still...'* she sighed. *'I'd like to know.'*

"It's not that you *can't* know," he explained. "I would much prefer that you did, actually. *However*," he paused, "there are some things which demand more than our passing interests."

He had led her through a maze of corridors in the elaborate halls of the underground when finally he stopped, opening one of the wooden doors which appeared on their left. Inside was a small walk-in closet with shelving stacked with towels, bed spreads, blankets, cloaks, clothing, and linens on every side. As he carefully removed one of the towels from a shelf, he glanced back at her, taking for her, also, a dry change of garments.

"You're tired," he said with a look of caring concern in his warm brown eyes as he placed the towel and garb in her outstretched hands. His tone was soft and gentle. "We do have a spare room here, if you would like to stay and rest." It was a very humble offer, applying little pressure in one direction or the other.

For a moment, she stopped her mind from analyzing all of this wonder of the newfound world around her, and his words echoed in her mind: *"You are free to go as you wish."*

She smiled, feeling herself begin to relax a little. "Yes," she said, feeling the onset of exhaustion, "I think I'd like that."

He led her around to another hall with more closed doors and adjoining chambers, and after a short while, they came to a door on the right which he opened. The room itself was small and simple, having four plain walls of equal dimensions painted in shades of cream. There was a single bed, carefully dressed in sheets and a pillow, arranged against the far wall with a neatly folded blanket laid across the foot of it. The room contained minimal accommodations and was otherwise empty but for chair and a small bedside table with a lamp sitting on it. Avera saw the bed thankfully, her eyelids growing heavy at the sight of it.

"I hope this will readily accommodate you. Please, if it isn't to your liking..." he began to offer something else to her in his courteous manner which she found greatly overdone, but she cut him short.

"It's wonderful," she told him, longing to lie down and rest. "Thank you, Ben. I don't think I realized how tired I was." She smiled wearily with all consideration.

'But somehow you knew.'

He smiled at her, his eyes like the light of a warm campfire. "I'll leave you here, then," he graciously told her before shutting the door and leaving her inside.

She dried herself, peeling her skysuit from her wet skin and changing her clothes entirely. The shirt and pants which Benjamin gave her were made of a soft cotton and the fashion was outdated, but she was thankful they were warm and comfortable.

She smiled. *'Amazing how well these fit for being borrowed.'*

"And *that*," she told herself quietly, eyeing the bed, "will fit even better."

Chapter 4: Who Are You?

Her eyes blinked open and all she could see was the face of the unfamiliar ceiling by the light of the dim lamp.

'Where am I?'

She blinked again, her head still thick with the remnants of slumber.

'The dark here reminds me of the shadows at twilight.'

She sat up and glanced around the unfamiliar room.

'Here? Oh! So, it wasn't a dream, then.'

There was a book sitting on the table by the lamp, and she recognized it as the one which Benjamin had carried when he met her.

"Oh, it's the book," she muttered, crawling down to the foot of the bed to grab it.

She gently fingered the book, her soft hands inspecting the intricate golden designs of its hardened exterior. Slowly, she opened the cover and peaked inside, then all at once began to read the words of the manuscript. They captivated her with their beauty and insight. It wasn't like anything she had ever read - it was something different, something higher, but... all at once intriguing to her curious mind.

'The words of a King rejected by His people. Here I see a mighty one brought low, and...' she went on, her thoughts turned to an unbelieving utterance. "He ransomed to himself a people according to his heart," she breathed. "What does that even mean?"

When she had finished with the book, leafing through from this place to that, she placed it again on the table where she had found it, and promptly got herself up out of the bed. She walked to the door and opened it slightly, peering out into the long corridor. The hall was dimly lit as her bedroom was, but she could still see things in shadows.

'It must be past evening now, and I'll bet the lights respond to the brightness of the sun somehow. If it's not magic, they must.'

There were figures in the distance - three or four in white robes with sparkling gold and a crest of some kind of foreign metal at the collar, reflecting the light. They filed into a room and the two huge doors closed behind them without so much as a sound.

'Silent, but how?' her lips moved but she kept the words inside of her. *'That is the strangest part of all this. Magic I can understand, or "not magic" - whatever, but how can it be that all of this is so outdated and yet...'* she pushed the door to the bedroom open wide with a note of the lack of so much as a small creek, *'not an ounce of disrepair.'*

The halls were a maze of underground chambers, and she hesitated to leave the privacy of the small shelter she had been afforded. She was in an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar people and not a clue as to how to leave on her own, especially being as the bookshelf had closed behind them. Though, still, she found Benjamin's words to be a comfort to her.

'I can go as I wish,' she reminded herself, *'and, so... I can go down to this strange meeting of theirs. Now, can't I?'* She smiled. *'Probably not, because that's probably not what he meant, and I probably know it. But still... I think my curiosity has won over my senses.'*

She ventured thoughtfully into the hall, walking carefully on the even stones which laid the floor, making great effort to make as little noise as possible as she went. She reassured herself inwardly that the whole thing was of no consequence.

'Benjamin never told me to stay in the room, only that I could have it as I wished, and besides, I'm only going down the hall. Who could know? They're probably all in the room already, anyway.'

Her footsteps became slower and softer as she approached the built doors of the broad chamber wherein the shadowy figures had met. The doors themselves were massive, a good three times her height, and could comfortably handle a large number of people. As she drew nearer, she began to hear bits of conversation leaking through the cracks in the old wooden doors.

"It *has* been some time since we have had a visitor," said a man with a voice like a hoot owl, kindly and proper.

"A sign, I trust, of better days to come," pronounced another unfamiliar voice, elegant and booming.

"Or of just the *opposite*," rebutted a third. "This *guest* could mean the end of us! What if Zahaynei has found us, and we've all been compromised?"

"Justice," replied Benjamin with a voice of gentle rebuke, "Zahaynei hasn't *found* us. This is merely a girl who came seeking refuge from the storm. There is no *reason* for us to seek any other explanation."

"Perhaps you consider that our lives are not reason enough!" the man who she presumed to be Justice snapped back at him. "Or have you forgotten our position here?" he asked accusingly, his voice conveying his strong irritation. "And have you forgotten the incident this morning? What of the Colonel?"

"Not two days, and I'll see him," Benjamin replied insistently. "Besides," he went on, "Mr. Waverley and Miss Trimble have agreed to meet the contact tomorrow. If all goes well, I shall have peace."

There was a noise like Justice trying to respond, but he was silenced by the delicate voice of a lady, her words light and lofty. "I believe, gentlemen," she said, speaking in soft, sing-song tones, “we should consider our *guest* rather than our own reputations. I believe we should invite

her to breakfast, and perhaps then to tea?" There was a silence which came as she spoke, the voice of confidence and calm. "We should be glad to meet her, get to know her. After all, it *has* been some time since we have had guests, as Mr. Waverley so *aptly* reminded us, and with that, the *pleasure* of entertaining a visitor to our courts."

There were echoes of celebratory pleasure and joy throughout the chamber followed by a brief hush and the emergence of some casual chattering.

'If I tried, I could probably pick up on some of those conversations, but I think I...' Avera's mind stopped as she heard the click of a latch, and she jumped, making her way back down the hall to her quarters as quickly as she could.

She slipped back into her room and turned to watch as the doors opened, flooding that section of hall with light once again. She shut the door silently behind her, unwilling that they should see her wandering the halls and become aware of her listening in on their seemingly private meeting.

It was not a minute later when she heard footsteps and voices out in the silent hall. The two were having a quiet conversation of some confidence between each other, and Avera strained her ears for their words as they approached. One was the voice of a man, the other, at first, too quiet to tell. Howbeit, she recognized the second voice as being Benjamin's as they neared and their words became clearer.

"I *am* concerned, Ben," the man was saying.

"I understand that, Kypher," Benjamin replied, "but we have to trust him. Apart from that, why be here at all?"

'What are they talking about? Ben and... the other man. Kypher, I take it. I haven't heard him. He wasn't any of the people speaking at the meeting earlier. He was probably there with them, though. It would make sense that he should have come with Benjamin from the meeting.'

"Justice makes a good point. What if we *are* discovered?" the man asked as if seeking to cause Benjamin to consider the thing.

"*If* we were discovered," Benjamin replied steadfastly, "all is well. The King has care over us. We *will* be protected."

There was a breath, a hard sigh from the other man. "You didn't see the raids, Ben."

"Perhaps," Benjamin conceded.

"I know you were young, but..." the man's words trailed off.

"Why are you here, then?" Benjamin pressed him.

"I want to protect you," the man replied immediately.

"*Here?* Why here when we all could have left?" Benjamin persisted.

"I don't *know*, Ben!" the man groaned.

"I thought you were told to wait here," Benjamin answered slyly.

"Maybe we *were*, Ben, but that was so long ago," the man whined in hushed desperation.

"Have you heard otherwise since?" Benjamin asked, continuing to press him.

"Well... no," the man admitted.

"Then, wait," Benjamin stated with confidence.

"I knew we shouldn't have let Dorcus raise you," the voice jokingly sighed with a faint spell of laughter.

"This is me here," she heard Benjamin say, and the slight change in volume suggested a turning to face the door. "I'm going to stop in to check on Avera, see how she's managing."

"*This* is where you left her? Without a guard?" the man gasped with a voice of alarm.

"Do we *have* a guard?" Benjamin inquired, the voice inflection seeming more startled than anything but also implying they didn't.

"...no," the man bashfully admitted.

"Well, then..." Ben replied, with an amused tone suggesting the man had answered his own question.

"Say, Ben... regarding the Colonel," there was a brief pause, such as one approaching a sensitive subject. "I know you're anxious to hear, but... the letter came after nearly three weeks with no communications, and it wasn't the usual encryption pattern. I hate to mention, but I am afraid he might be..."

"He *might be*, but... *God,* I hope not."

"Yes," the man replied solemnly. "Well... have a good night, Ben."

"Yes, Kypher," Benjamin replied pleasantly. "You rest well, also." There was a pause before there came a light rapping at the door. "Avera, are you there? Are you awake?" Benjamin kindly addressed.

"Yes!" she called back, retreating softly to her bed again. "You can come in."

"Ah, hello!" Benjamin said with a friendly smile. He, too, wore a tunic like the others she had seen, and he held in his hand white garments accented in gold. "Did you rest well?" he asked her kindly.

"I did," she said, sparing her words and careful to guard her thoughts.

"Yes, well... I know it's near impossible to tell being underground, but... well, I'm afraid it's now past evening. It's quite dark. I would hate to send you home under such conditions. Perhaps, you could spend the night, wait until morning?" he courteously suggested. "I would give you an escort, but... I'm afraid it's... not entirely possible."

"Thank you," she said softly. "I will stay, then."

"Ah, very good. We cleaned your clothes and dried them for you," he said, presenting the folded garments. "This way, you can be dressed in the morning, and then I would like it very much if you would join us for breakfast," he continued, his voice kind and inviting. "*If* you are so inclined," he emphasized the choice phrasing.

"Of course," she smiled, nodding.

"Very good!" he replied with an enthusiastic smile. "I will be in that next room there," he said as he motioned with his head in the direction of the right of the room as if to indicate another like it was nearby if she were to travel in that particular direction. "Come to see me when you're ready, and I will bring you to our banquet hall."

"Yes, thank you..."

'*Whatever is going on here, they really seem to be going out of their way for me... to be kind to me and treat me well. Benjamin especially, and I really do appreciate it.*'

"Thank you very much. *I* appreciate it," he told her smiling, and with a friendly wave of his hand and a final goodbye, he closed the door again, returning to the outer hall.

She laid down on the bed again. She was still exhausted, but her thoughts were swirling within her.

'How did I get here? I feel so lost. Even if I left... I have no home. There's no one left... except Annetta. And now I'm here. Why, Annetta? I could get lost in this. I don't think it would be so hard if there was no one who cared. They have such strange magic here. Or maybe it's not magic. Somehow, they don't seem like the mages. They seem different. And Benjamin... he's been so accommodating. They've shown me kindness in spite of all of this whatever it is that haunts them. Everyone here seems to be in some sort of ungodly situation. But why? What are they doing here? Why are they afraid of being found? Why do they think Ben needs protection? Yes, the room is nice, this place is nice. Thank you, Benjamin, but... who are you?'

Chapter 5: The Dignitary

She opened her eyes to the simulated light of the morning, the torches burning their peculiar light, and she felt a strange peace. The unfamiliar room with its simple walls and homespun atmosphere left her with a sense of calm. Even in the midst of all its mystery, there was a comfort which she garnered from this newfound reality.

She thought back on the events of the prior evening and her face twisted to a nervous smile. *'I probably shouldn't be staying here.'* She blinked her eyes, lessening the drowsiness as she considered the painted ceiling. *'It is a nice break from reality, though. All of this history from far gone times...'*

She sat up, feeling the shift in the weight of the cotton sheets as they slipped away, falling from the loose brown button shirt she wore and collecting around her waist.

'Everything is so outdated. Still, I can't help but want to stay.'

She turned her head, catching a glance of the garment folded on the chair. The suit was shimmering white with bright gold edging.

"Is that *mine*?" she asked, startled.

She threw the blankets off, jumping to her feet, and approached the chair, curiously examining the sparkling material. She picked up the skysuit, comparing its make and dimensions to that of her own.

"Well, it's *like* mine, but I've never seen anything like this," she marveled. "It seems to be maurium, but..." she stared at its bright, shimmering colors hanging before her face, "scientifically, this shouldn't be possible."

Maurium was used by the Pyreans for practically anything and everything it could be. If a street in Pyre was to be paved, it would be paved in maurium. If a house was to be built, it would be built of maurium. If a bicycle was to be fashioned, it would be fashioned from maurium. The lamps, the posts, the walkways, the doorways, the suits, the sheets, the plates, the floor tiles - all of them maurium.

There were some exceptions, rare citizens of the capital who had chosen to build their lives, their shops, their homesteads of some material, but they would find it more costly and far less reliable. They were thought to be a peculiar people who built their houses of glass and brick and stone, and their neighbors would scoff, because in Pyre, *everything* was maurium... even the flowers.

The flowers grown in Pyre were common gifts and tokens of interest. The maurium-rich soil of the city may have dulled the smells and colors of the flowers it produced, but it did increase the longevity and resilience of the otherwise delicate crop.

It was commonly known, and that much more to the citizens of Pyre, that maurium could be produced in only two colors - grey and purple, each with their own unique set of qualities. The grey was light in color, almost reminiscent of silver without the same metallic quality or texture, while the purple was a pale shade which bordered on mauve.

The grey could be used better for clothing as well as being an effective building material. It was hardy, resilient, and easily molded.

The purple was more desirable for its luminescence. The brittle, stony nature which accompanied the luminescent quality of the purple element made the compound much more ridged than its grey counterpart. It was a challenge to work with, being difficult to mold without breaking, and was, therefore, used almost exclusively for such things as tech, lighting, and decoration. Accents of glowing purple were common in maurium designs, providing a necessary flair of creative diversity to an otherwise dull and monotone resource.

However, the same inherent qualities of the maurium which made it so desirable also made it impossible to dye, and any attempts to do so had quickly proven futile, if not disastrous. Yet here, the grey was now a sparkling white and the purple had turned to brilliant gold.

She stripped off the borrowed clothes which Benjamin had lent her, and dawned the shimmering skysuit with some caution and greater interest. She slipped her feet into the shoe-like footholds of white trimmed with gold and stretched her arms out through the sleeves before pulling the zipper from heel to neck, bringing the material snug against her skin.

'It's a little different, but it feels... cleaner, actually. More... comfortable, maybe?'

She smiled as she thought how her father had always sought to teach her to take care in her adventures. She had always been one to be taken in her curiosities, but there was one particular incident when she was young which would always resurface, finding its way to the front of her contemplative mind.

She was with her father late in the evening, sitting at the dining room table when a small mouse hole had captured her attention.

"What is it you're doing?" he asked with a laugh and a fatherly smile.

"Don't worry, dad," she replied, chuckling back at him with an impish grin, "I'm merely looking."

"Be careful in looking," he said, looking on at her with love. "There are some things you can't turn back from."

She sighed. *'I wish I could go back to that.'*

Tears welled in her eyes at the thought of him, but she shut them away, because she couldn't go back. She couldn't go home. Not now, anyway.

'*But I can't. I can't go home, because...'* the thought came again and stung her, but again she pushed it away, quickly turning her mind on other things, and rushing to make herself ready for the anticipated day ahead of her.

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The halls were vacant as they had been the prior afternoon, and she went right to door which Benjamin had presented as his own.

The events of the past evening remained fresh in her mind, and she thought of the men in the white robes.

'Perhaps...' she brought her hand up in front of her and examined her arm, *'very much like this. It may be the same material that they have, but... is it maurium? Or is it... something else? It's beautiful, but... I've never seen anything like it.'*

Approaching the door to Benjamin's room, she raised her fist and knocked. There was silence, and at once she realized that there hadn't been before the abrupt sound of her knuckles wrapping against the hard wood.

The door opened to the newly familiar face of Benjamin. "Hello, Avera," he said with a friendly smile.

"Ben!" she said, suddenly feeling self-conscious. "I'm not interrupting am I?"

"No, of course not!" he quickly assured her.

"It... sounded like you might have been talking with someone," she anxiously admitted, remembering the unfamiliar sound of words which had passed quietly through the door.

"Well, I *was*," he told her, "but it's... no matter now." He smiled at her nervously, careful to maintain his friendly demeanor and openness.

"There's someone in there, then?" she asked, curiously craning her neck to see past him.

"Well, y-yes, but see," he said, leaning his arm against the doorframe in front of her, filling the doorway and blocking her view of the room behind him, "he doesn't often *solidify* the way which you might expect."

She blinked, turning her eyes back to his face as she watched him blankly. "*Solidify?*"

"Yes, you see, he's... not entirely *visible* to most people, most of the time," he awkwardly confessed, having stopped quickly midway to clear his throat. He seemed to become more uncomfortable with each passing second.

"He's a *ghost*, then?" she clarified, watching him with the intensity of human skepticism.

"Yes," he willingly admitted, "a *spirit*, if you will, and a dignitary from a foreign land." He adjusted his glasses, shifting his weight with the topic. "All of that aside, though, I hope you'll be joining us for breakfast."

'A dignitary?' Her eyes watched him, questioning, but she let the matter go. "Yes, of course," she agreed pleasantly with a smile. "Oh, but Ben!" she said, remembering her prior considerations. "What is this?"

She moved her arm between them, and he cocked his head at her, smiling. "Your skysuit?" he asked, amused.

'Is it then?'

"I thought you might like something a little more... refined," he said simply, a friendly smile covering his face and a spark of mystery in his eyes. "To breakfast, then?"

She nodded, a small smile covering her contemplative expression as she searched his fiery eyes with hers. "Yes," she said softly, her mind still working to uncover the hidden layers of his words, "to breakfast."

Chapter 6: Stay

The great doors of the banqueting hall were opened by the courteous hand of her benevolent host. "After you," he muttered with a bow.

The door had opened to reveal a bright room bustling with life. The pleasant sounds of laughter and friendly chatter echoed throughout the spacious hall. There were grand staircases which curved and ascended either wall, leading up to a magnificent balcony overlooking the glorious sight from the far side of the room. The table was set with baskets of fruits and beads and meats stylishly arranged.

There were a handful of people standing around the table engaging in conversations of various kinds. Each seemed quite caught up in his or her topic and company with regular interaction between groups and friendly banter or the occasional teasing comment echoing throughout the relatively empty room.

There was, also, a man in an apron off to their right, and Avera supposed that he had been the one to prepare the day's meal. He was standing with a petite woman in an ordinary dress. The woman's skin was a dark tan. Her hair was short, stylish, and feminine, curving in slightly above her thin shoulders.

Avera walked self-consciously through the door which Benjamin held for her, and the man in the apron let out a thunderous belly laugh at some clever and boisterous quip directed at one of his fellows, the conversation continuing unimpeded. He was a large man in every way, towering over his fellows. His skin was a deep olive complexion and complemented well with his thick hair, dark grey in color with streaks of lighter grey towards the sides, which he wore wrapped down around his ears. The woman's dark eyes reflected the light as she spoke to him, her pupils expressive and wide. The man put a hand gently on the lady's delicate form, and his palm swallowed up her shoulder entirely. She spoke again, and the man nodded, glancing over in the direction of the entry. He smiled, catching sight of Avera and Benjamin as they came humbly through the doorway.

"Ellis," Benjamin said with a grin.

"Benji!" the man exclaimed with a roar of enthusiasm before rushing over and wrapping his arms around him without any thought of hesitation. Benjamin was quickly picked up off the ground and dangling in the air, supported only by Ellis's huge forearms. "How are you today, my lad?" he asked, lowering the young man back to the ground again.

"Quite well, my friend. I thank you," Benjamin graciously responded, straightening his glasses. "I've brought company today," he added, looking to Avera with a smile.

The man's face broke into an ear splitting grin. "Well, hello there! Miss... Avera? Ben here mentioned ya to me," he said with the same happy enthusiasm he had shown Benjamin. He put a hand out for her to shake it, and as she did, his hand swallowed hers up completely.

"Avera, this is-" Benjamin began by way of introduction, being quickly cut off by the jolly giant.

"Ellis, Ellis Wells!" the man informed her, shaking her hand up and down like a water pump. "My wife Mira and I run the kitchens here, and it's a joy of ours to have a fine guest such as yourself!"

Benjamin grinned, his face alight with amused merriment. "You will find Mr. Wells quite amiable, I'm sure," he told her pleasantly.

"*Amiable?*" Ellis said as if in shock. "A man such as myself? *Never!*" he jested, exaggerating the backwards sentiment.

Benjamin held up a hand as if to ask him to stop while failing to hold back laughter.

Avera looked as another man came to greet them. He was lean, his skin tight and ruddy, and he wore garments which resembled armor made of cloth, a white tunic with layers of ceremonial garb and a crimson sash tied about his waist. He was lanky, yet lusty and quite robust. His dark hair bore a reddish tint, and he wore a long goat beard on his bronzed countenance. He seemed to glide across the stone floor of the dining hall, making his way towards them with swift, calculated steps and an even stride.

"So this is the girl!" the man exclaimed, the comment seemingly directed at Benjamin.

Benjamin stopped his laughter, recollecting himself, and eyes shot over to meet the voice of the man who had spoken. He opened his mouth to speak, a look of dubious surprise in his amber brown eyes, but he was quickly overtaken in his hesitation by the booming voice of Ellis.

"A fine specimen we have here, Justice!" Ellis proclaimed, giving Avera a mighty pat on the back which pushed her slightly forward.

She smiled, almost laughing as she regained her balance. *'At least I know he likes me.'*

"Justice, I..." Benjamin said softly, as if unsure how to continue the sentence, his voice revealing his inner concern.

"I'm not a fool, Ben," the man replied, his voice pointed and factual. "I know how to conduct myself among strangers *and* around *guests*." His cold blue eyes shifted to Avera. "My lady," he said with a bow as he respectfully approached her. "My name is Justice Atticus. I am the king's servant, and it is my great pleasure to meet you and to serve you so long as you are here."

"Yes, thank you," Avera replied simply, as she assessed the man who had spoken of her with such skepticism. She glanced over to Benjamin, who wore an unreadable expression. "It's a pleasure," she added with a smile, extending a hand of greeting.

Justice took her hand and kissed it, then proceeded to position himself upright yet again. "Will you be staying with us long?" he asked her.

"I may, but then I may not. I'm afraid, I haven't made up my mind yet," she answered honestly.

Justice nodded. "You may find that the answers you seek are closer than you realize them to be," he cryptically informed her. "I believe it would be best for you to stay, at least for a short while, until you have reached a decision."

"Indeed," Benjamin agreed, limiting the expression in his voice while maintaining his perfect composure.

"I might," she said, offering a passing smile.

"That's all well," Mira said, her voice light and delicate, "but for *now*, we should all sit and eat." She had on her face a warm, motherly smile, and Avera felt a relief to the tension within her body as she began to relax among strangers.

The seven of them gathered around the table together, there being two other men besides, Alexander Kypher and Joseph Vanguard by name, to whom she was briefly introduced. Benjamin called for her to sit beside him, taking a place towards the center of the spread.

"You want *me* here?" she asked him, thankful for the kind invitation.

"Of course!" he said, smiling as he patted the empty space beside him on the bench.
"You *are* our guest, after all," he pleasantly reminded her.

She smiled. *'Maybe I do have a place in the world, then, after all.'*

He glanced over at her as if she had said something, and his eyes turned thoughtfully upward, glinting with consideration.

'Oh, not this again!' She grinned with anticipation of his remarkable thought reading.

He leaned towards her, bringing his mouth to her ear, and whispered, "There is a place for you here, if you'd like, so long as you desire it."

Kypher abruptly smacked his hand against the table. "By golly, Ben, would you bless us? That meeting kept us up so late I'm starving!"

"Alright, alright," Benjamin replied, laughing. "Just a moment, and I'll save you from hunger."

Vanguard looked to the left and right of him, inspecting those present at the table. "Ben?" he said, muttering as if in some small state of confusion. "Why, yes... I suppose, given the apparent circumstances, it would come to Ben, then."

"Stop looking, Vanguard. They aren't here. They've gone out," Justice told him pointedly.

"Out?" Vanguard asked, as if seeking some explanation.

"*Out,*" Justice repeated.

"Last minute communication from Carder," Benjamin clarified, offering Vanguard a reassuring smile. "All's well, though."

"Yes, of course. All's always well and all, but... how about breakfast?" Kypher quickly commented.

"Ah, Carder," Vanguard replied, looking to Benjamin thankfully. "Shame, though," he added, turning his attentions to Avera. "They were looking forward to meeting you."

"Were they really?" she asked softly, turning to Benjamin.

"They were," he said, smiling, and his eyes softened. "Yes, Mr. Waverley, I think, especially, but certainly Dorothy was, as well," he added thoughtfully.

'Ah, yes... Waverley, my distinguished hoot owl.' She smiled, remembering his impassioned speech. *'How could I have forgotten him?'*

"Did they say when we should expect them back?" Vanguard inquired.

"They had some business to attend to," Benjamin expounded. "I expect them back later this afternoon, certainly before nightfall."

"Good," Vanguard replied happily, turning his attentions to Avera once again. "You should meet them, then... provided you stay. I'm sure you'd like them. They're a different sort of people, but good." He paused, his eyes turned thoughtfully upward. "And friendly," he added with a nod, "very friendly."

"Perhaps you'll have time for tea," Justice suggested.

"Tea?" Avera smiled, clarifying.

"Yes, it's a favorite of theirs," Justice replied without much feeling. "Delphians and their tea, you know? Well, Waverley is, at any rate. I think Dorothy has more grown accustomed to it."

"I'm sure it could be readily arranged," Benjamin assured her, his words soft and considerate.

She nodded. "I'd like that," she told him, her voice soft and unassuming.

"Great! We'll have tea then!" Kypher triumphantly announced. "Now, if we could eat!" he added hopefully, his eyes wide as he considered the bread in the basket in front of him.

Benjamin grinned, holding himself back from laughing. "Of course, Kypher," he told him kindly, and he blessed them before the meal.

Chapter 7: You Haven’t Met

She was tall, certainly taller than he was, he being quite unremarkable in many ways. He was a man of ordinary height and stature, whereas she was a woman of stretched appearance. She was fair skinned with soft grey-blue eyes and long, silvery hair which she had pulled back loosely in a tie. She wore a dark cloak over her light blue cloth button dress which fell around her ankles, and he his usual suit jacket with a vest and tie.

They walked together through the crowd of people gathered around the large wooden platform, anxiously awaiting the next scheduled speaker, and she wondered how they would slip away in the sea of unfamiliar faces. He had tried to lose himself in the crowd, becoming a part of the masses, but she was surprised that they hadn't been stopped yet by anyone. That was something she remembered well, being stopped, especially with him, and he was always so happy and willing to talk. Although, it was in their best interest now that they didn't.

"Well, how did I do?" he asked her cheerily, looking to her with hopeful eyes of brown with speckled orange.

She sighed, shaking her head at him. "Wonderfully, as always," she told him, her face a considerate smile. "But I wish you wouldn't agree to speak at such large gatherings," she gently chided, "and I don't understand why you insisted on bringing me with you." She paused, giving a second glance to her friend's smiling face. "You're going to get us both into trouble, you know."

His eyes shifted as they met hers. "You know it helps me to have you here," he softly reminded her. "Besides," he said again, keeping his voice low, "I've only seen a measly *seven* of Kallida's spies today." His earnest countenance broke into a joking grin, and his failure to keep a straight face contributed to the immediacy of his jest.

She smiled, shaking her head again, and her lips gave way to a small grin. "Your ridiculous jokes will get us in trouble faster than anything," she replied with stifled laughter.

He smiled, lifting his gaze to the blue sky above them. "You know I wouldn't have come if Jordan hadn't requested it," he casually mentioned, seeking to answer her without drawing much attention from anyone.

"*Mr. Carder*," she gracefully corrected, missing neither stride nor measure, "is a lovely man whom *you*, Mr. Waverley, haven't met."

"*Hm...* yes," he sighed, lowering his head with a frown. "Still, I had hoped to see him here. I had thought he might have some involvement, particularly since he invited me, no matter how uncommonly late."

"Well, being as this *is* the annual meeting of the Kingsmen for the northeastern region and being as Mr. Carder *is* their representative on the Council, I would expect that he is also helping to oversee things."

"Yes, but," he let out a sad sigh, "why invite me if not to say hello?"

"Perhaps he's unaware," she suggested.

"Perhaps," he mumbled indistinguishably, his countenance fallen.

She stopped suddenly, holding their progress to a pause. "Horace," she uttered with a quiet sternness which caused him to refocus his attentions.

He had gotten a step ahead of her and turned suddenly, looking on her with furrowed brow. "Yes, Dorothy?" he responded kindly.

"All is well," she assured him, and her lips gave way to a small smile, her soft blue eyes meeting the fiery tinge of his own.

"Yes," he said with a nod, and his eyes dropped away. "Yes, of course. It is well, isn't it?"

"You know, Mr. Waverley, you're much better happy," she told him.

He smiled with some seeming amusement, and he lifted his eyes to hers. "Is that so?" he asked with stifled pleasantry.

She nodded. "I know you miss them," she said, her voice dropping as she offered him her heartfelt sympathies. "There *are* those missing from all of us."

His eyes were filled with a gentle intensity, and she stopped, feeling the weight of them as they watched her. They stood in silence for a moment, and he sighed, a fond smile crossing his kindly countenance.

"I *am* grateful to have you here," he said, taking a step towards her. "Had you gone, I..." he shook his head, "well, I don't know what I would have done."

"You know, Horace," she said with a smile, "this is an awfully bad time to mention it."

He grinned and looked as if he might have offered some quip or witty retort had he not been interrupted by the voice of another man.

"Horatio!" the man called out with great effervescence and friendly enthusiasm.

They turned their heads to look, their eyes met with the fine sight of their ever whimsical friend, and they both smiled as they watched Jordan quickly push his way through the crowd from the far side of the camp to theirs.

'Horatio...' She shook her head. *'I'll take it to mean that he's figured us out, then.'*

"Good God, man, are you *leaving?*" Carder asked him, noting their nearness to the horse stables.

"Well, we *were...*" he sheepishly admitted.

"We have another appointment," Dorothy explained.

"Is that so?" Jordan asked him.

"Yes, I'm afraid we hadn't anticipated coming but for your request," Mr. Waverley told him.

"*Pish posh!* You *must* stay for lunch. I have heard such great good of you from Pyre that I had anxiously anticipated having the chance to finally meet you, Mister..." he paused, keeping his eyes intently set on Waverley. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "You remind me of an old friend."

"Any friend of yours is an honor to be compared with, sir," he graciously responded. "And the name is Waverley," he added with a slight bow.

"Well, I do wish you'd *stay*, Mr. Waverley," he said again, and looking over to Dorothy added, "Both you *and* your wife are more than welcome to lunch, and perhaps some tea?"

She smiled, amused at the offer of tea, which seemed more like bribery than anything else.

"Oh no," Mr. Waverley quickly corrected, "Miss Trimble here is a lovely lady and the dearest of friends, but..." Jordan watched him, his eyes faintly questioning, and Waverley shifted his weight with some discomfort. "We aren't romantically involved."

"Oh?" Jordan said with a look of surprise and the sound of some disappointment. "Well, my apologies to you," he muttered. "I'm sorry to have supposed something so fragile."

She smiled with appreciation. *'Jordan Carder, ever the man of courtesy. He seems so disappointed by it. Though, he would never say. Still, I wonder how much he knows.'*

"Still," he said, moving the conversation quickly forward from his fallacious accusation, "Mr. Waverley, Miss Trimble, the offer is still open - *lunch?*"

Waverley turned his eyes to Dorothy, who smiled at him. "Yes, of course," she said pleasantly. "He would be delighted."

"And what of yourself, Miss Trimble?" he asked her. "You're more than welcome to join us," Jordan quickly made certain to remind her.

"Thank you," she said, "but I'm afraid we *are* expected elsewhere, and I think it best that one of us should keep our appointment."

"Carry with you my apologies," Waverley earnestly requested.

"Of course," she responded kindly. "Lovely to meet you, Mr. Carder," she told him by way of parting.

"Likewise, Miss Trimble," he said, taking her hand and kissing it. "It has been an absolute pleasure," he told her emphatically, his eyes fixed on hers as if to help her understand.

"Mr. Waverley," she added, turning to her constant friend and present companion.

"Miss Trimble," he said by means of acknowledgement.

"Stay out of trouble," she implored him with a voice like a whisper, and he smiled.

Chapter 8: Dorothy Trimble

She wasn't like the others. It was hard to say what exactly, but there was something different about her. Avera watched through the raindrops on the window pane as she dismounted, Benjamin assisting her down from the dapple horse she rode. Water poured off of the cloak and her feet sank down as she planted them firmly on the muddied ground. The woman's dark, mud spattered cloak and boots were a stark contrast to Benjamin's elaborate rainy day ensemble of a clean, bright royal blue. The entirety of the afternoon had been masked by heavy rains which now blew upon Dorothy and Benjamin as he grabbed at the reigns, seeking to stable the horse.

Avera only caught a portion of the ongoing conversation as the two came walking in through the door by which Benjamin had previously exited. Mr. Waverley had been held back at a meeting and sent his apologies. It was unlikely that he would return before night had fallen, and Dorothy thought it more likely that he would make his journey the following day.

"You know how he doesn't much like to travel by night," Dorothy said, still addressing Benjamin. "However, he *did* send his apologies to you for his prolonged absence."

Benjamin shook his head. "No apologies necessary. I understand entirely," he pleasantly assured her.

Avera watched them as they continued on their way back towards her, chatting as they went. Dorothy was a distinguished woman with a certain intrinsic beauty to her form. Her appearance was neat and elegant, even with the mud which spotted the lower part of her dress, and Benjamin treated her with honor.

When they had come only a few feet from her, Dorothy's focus shifted from Benjamin to the young woman who stood silently before her.

"Dorothy," Benjamin said, hastening the introductions as he noticed her attentions shift, "this is our guest, Miss Avera Ibori."

"Hello, dear," Dorothy said sweetly, and she bowed herself slightly, lessening the difference in height, as she stretched forth a hand of hello.

Avera took her hand with a small smile, still somewhat nervous.

"Avera, this is Dorothy Trimble," he said, finishing filling her in as part of an attempt to help her feel more comfortable.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am," Avera said, happy to meet such a lady.

"She and Mr. Waverley have been very kind to me over the years," Benjamin informed her, and his face showed his appreciation. "I only regret he isn't back yet, perhaps if you would stay another day?" he suggested with hopeful apology.

Avera smiled, "Well, I don't have a reason to leave. So, as long as I'm welcome..."

"You *will* stay, then?" he asked, trying to mask his thinly veiled excitement.

'He's funny... always pretending to be so emotionless and proper.'

"Yes," she laughed.

Dorothy smiled. "Good," she said. "Then, I believe tea is in order?"

Benjamin laughed, "Of course."

"To my office, then, for some privacy, a bit of comfort, and a spot of tea, as well!" Dorothy remarked cheerily.

Avera smiled, the inviting nature of her kindhearted hosts beginning to make the strange surroundings of the ruins feel much like home, and she followed after Dorothy and Benjamin as they traveled through the halls to the room which Dorothy called her office.

Dorothy unlocked the door for them and opened it, revealing a very different sight than that which Avera had expected. There was a bookshelf still in use, but the books, seemingly neatly arranged at one time, were partially fallen over because of the huge holes in the lines where the books might have been were they not scattered about the room. There were short stacks of books piled here or there on the desk and around the floor area, which was not especially large. There were three chairs arranged around the desk, one behind and the others, slightly smaller but nicely upholstered in a dark burgundy. In addition to the books, there were papers scattered around the desk and immediate area. Avera glanced around the room, astonished by its shambolic appearance. After all that she had learned of Dorothy Trimble from the brief time she had known her and the anecdotal discussions over breakfast, Avera had imagined her to be much more neat and organized than to allow her office to fall to such chaotic disorder.

Dorothy sighed, and Avera glanced in her direction, thinking that her initial assessment of the woman may, indeed, have been correct.

"Oh, what a mess," Dorothy frowned. "Mr. Waverley and I share this space, you see. And, well, he doesn't care for tidiness as much as I do," she apologetically explained.

"So I see," Avera replied with a faint grin. *'So, I was right, then.'*

"How cluttered is the mind of a genius," Benjamin said with a grin.

Dorothy shook her head at him. "Perhaps if it could be a bit *less* cluttered for ours?"

Benjamin laughed, unable to control his merriness. "Oh, come! Let's go inside."

The office itself was about the size of a small living room and cozy like one. There was a little space between the chair behind the desk and the wall and a little more space between the guest chairs at the front of the desk and the weighty shelves behind them. Avera began to pick up

some of the books from the ground as the others made their way to their chairs, Dorothy to the spot behind the desk and Benjamin to the far side of the room, across from the door.

"Have a seat, dear," Dorothy said softly, as she took her place in her seat. "Take no mind of the books... Waverley may have need of them. Although, it is possible that all this is a result of that invitation from Carder," she mused. "If that were the case, he'd be done with them. Perhaps I'll clean them up later, but no matter now."

Avera took her seat next to Benjamin and smiled, feeling her body starting to relax again. *'It's funny, because everything is so foreign, but I really do like these people.'*

"Now, dear, what of yourself?" Dorothy asked her, pouring three small cups of tea from the pot of boiling leaf juice. "We are very glad to have you with us, no matter the time or its extent."

"Well," she began, noticing again how strangely comfortable she was around these two people who were very near strangers, "I grew up in Kindellend. My mother's family lived there. It's a small town off the coast of-"

"Lake Byer," Dorothy keenly inserted.

"You've heard of it?" Avera asked, surprised.

"Yes," Dorothy said thoughtfully, smiling over her cup of steaming green liquid. "I grew up in Rivdul. My family was from there. My brothers still live there. Well... two of them. The other is in Pyre. It's a spice town not far from there, a bit farther east, nearer the north, in the direction of the Sa'ar River."

"Yes, I know it!" Avera excitedly exclaimed.

Benjamin smiled. "What of *your* family, Avera?" he asked curiously. "This is quite a ways from the north country."

"My mother fell sick when I was still a child. I remember how my father cared for her during her illness, but... she died, anyway, and... it wasn't too long after that we moved to Pyre," she shared with them the tale, maintaining a cold precision to her words, though she felt her heart breaking and she feared her voice may follow.

"Do you have family in Pyre?" Benjamin asked her, becoming concerned.

"No," she shook her head. "My father is a foreigner, an emigrant from Obed. He loved the culture here, and he decided to embrace it. He always called Altruon home, but he left his family and Obed behind him." She paused, contemplating the decisions of the past. "My father was a carpenter in Kindellend by trade, but he was always a soldier at heart. Shortly after my mother died, he was offered a prestigious military post at High Palace. That's why we moved here to the capital. That, and..." she felt the tears beginning to break through and fought to hold them back, "I think we wanted something different for our lives. Pyre was a fresh start for us."

Benjamin looked to Dorothy, who gave him a discreet nod, and they both turned their attention back to Avera.

"Do you have any friends here?" Dorothy asked with empathy and great concern.

"One," she said, smiling fondly as she considered him, "his name is Kelvin. He was a forever friend from Kindellend. Even then, he was quite a marksman, and he hunted with my father. They always brought back a swagorn. He's always keeping up with me through letters, or he *had* until lately. Recently, he received an invitation from the Royal Academy for studies and came to Pyre for schooling."

"You speak of him in very glowing terms," Dorothy observed, softly considering, and she smiled. "Yes, I believe I understand you well. Mr. Waverley and I are much the same. You would like him, I think... if you were to meet him. He is a very gentle man, kindhearted. I am sorry he couldn't be here to greet you. He was so looking forward to it, and he would have been here, but..." her eyes grew distant with intense consideration, "Mr. Carder, well... he's an old friend of ours, of eh... Horace's, especially, and he got himself into a bit of a fix with a scheduling error. It would have been very embarrassing for him had Mr. Waverley been unable to assist him."

"I look forward to meeting him," Avera said, smiling. "Really, I do."

'The man interests me. They all speak of him so fondly, and yet... he isn't here to hear it.'

"That's good, then," Dorothy smiled softly, giving some thought to her words.

"And what of yourselves?" Avera asked curiously. "Miss Trimble, how is it you came here from Rivdul?"

The lady laughed politely, waving her hand as if to ask her to stop. "*Dorothy*, please," she requested pleasantly. "Mr. Waverley calls me that at times, but..." she shook her head, "Trimble was a better man."

"Waverley would contest that rather eloquently," Benjamin quipped.

"Yes, but he isn't *here*, now is he?" she answered, giving him a glance of warning.

Benjamin shrugged, leaning back in his chair with a self-satisfied grin.

Avera watched him with faint laughter and a broad grin, amused by his clever antics.

"*Well,*" Dorothy said, pulling the conversation back to its point again, "my father kept the king's garden, and there were *acres* of flower fields around the house where I grew up. He would take a cart filled with flowers to Pyre every week, and we children would often go with him. Though, there were times I would stay with my three brothers in Rivdul. My brothers kept the fields and helped with the crops of neighboring farms when needed, but often times the eldest would assist my father. I was the second to youngest, but my mother died relatively young, very

much as yours did, and so I would attend to much of the responsibilities and household chores, especially in my father's absence." She paused, her contemplative eyes searching back through far gone memories. "Though... my brothers were fairly self-sufficient, and I wasn't much cut out to be a housewife in many ways. It took some time, but... late in my adolescence, I finally found myself at home."

She stopped for a long moment, as if considering whether she should continue speaking, and Avera continued to watch her intently until at last her eyes turned to Benjamin.

"And what of you, Ben?" Dorothy asked him. "Shall we tell her?"

Chapter 9: Folklore and Fairytales

Benjamin looked up at the ceiling, carefully considering his words.

"Have you ever heard of the raids?" he asked her genuinely as he tried to determine how much of an explanation was warranted.

"Not... really," she admitted somewhat nervously.

'I wonder how differently I would have responded had I not heard Kypher mention it last night. I hope he's not concerned I wasn't more surprised. But...'

"Very well, then," Benjamin replied thoughtfully with his usual friendliness and calm.

She smiled, relieved. *'He doesn't seem bothered.'*

"Have you had much exposure to the Kingdom Learning Program?" he asked her.

"Yes," she said, surprised at the question. "I thought that was normal. I mean, doesn't everyone use it?"

"Many do," Dorothy softly agreed.

"Didn't you?" Avera asked, the question addressed to Benjamin.

"Ben is an exceptional case," Dorothy answered, her voice adopting a grave seriousness which was uncommon of any of them. "Though, not uneducated. What he learns, he reads in books, the likes of which you have seen."

"Why not use the KLP?" Avera asked, trying not to come off as being impolite.

"I'm afraid I would have lost myself in my studies," Benjamin told her, seemingly amused, "but the books do me dandily."

"*Hm.* Yes," Dorthy said, her eyes on Benjamin. "As for the raids," she continued, her eyes returning to Avera with shadows of consideration, "it was the *crescendo* of a lost piece of history."

"It began with the reign of King Stephan," Benjamin picked up, continuing the familiar tale. "He was a kind and benevolent ruler, and the people prospered under his governance. Until, one day, he fell ill."

"In his sickness," Dorothy continued, "he sent out one of his most trusted and loyal advisors, his son's armor bearer, a man they called *Ramus*."

"Ramus was a man of war, a *hero*, *loved* by the people and the king," Benjamin told her, conveying the story with great personal investment. "It was *he* who would ride with the king's

son into battle. It was *he* who would bring matters of war to the King's Court. When a banquet was thrown for the prince's coronation, he was given the *seat* of *honor* at the table."

"It was on that day that the King sent him to the Seer to inquire of him whether he may live, and it was on that day that an ungodly lust for power consumed the man. The King had called him as a friend, but what he had was a man of perdition. Ramus went to the Seer with his apprentice, a man named Blackridge," Dorothy went on, and, as she did, her eyes shifted to ghostly shadows of the past and long forgotten memories. "The two men fought their way through the night against the elements." She shook her head. "There were thunderstorms that night throughout the kingdom, from Rivdul to Nuar it was reported driving rains, tumultuous winds, and flashes of fire from heaven." She paused before muttering, "Perhaps we should have known."

"When they arrived," Benjamin continued on, dismissing the comment, "they were told that the King would live, were his death not determined by their hand."

Dorothy nodded. "Sebastian knew that the men had evil determined against him. He hid his apprentice in the loft of the cabin where he stayed and instructed her to follow them at their departure."

"The men killed the Seer and the King," Benjamin told her, his voice a solemn lament, "and they would have killed more, had the apprentice not come to rescue the prince."

A look of horror spread across Avera's face, she having become enraptured in the treacherous tale of yore, and she felt the weight of his words as he continued to speak.

"Once Ramus came to power, he issued orders for the armies of the king to go out and murder the country's own citizens. All who were loyal to the King of Pyre were put to death."

"And what of the Prince?" Avera asked them, having become overly invested in this lost chapter of their country's history.

"Having escaped the murderous hand of Ramus," Dorothy answered calmly, "he fled to a hidden refuge in the mountains, taking with him many of the King's servants who remained faithful to his father."

"*However,*" Benjamin added with a whisper of excitement, moving to the edge of his seat and raising a finger before his face, "he had a newborn son whom he left in the care of the Seer, and the child remained in the city." His eyes watched her, their amber flecks like sparks of newborn flame.

"When Ramus learned that Casper's son was still in the city," Dorothy continued, her eyes glancing back to Benjamin, "purge of the Pyreans. All who were loyal to the King in the city were put to death. All Armorials were put to death. All who would not comply in the search for the young prince and the officials who remained... were put to death." She paused, looking back into dark and distant memories.

"Within hours of the King's assassination," Benjamin continued, "there were raiding parties headed by Blackridge terrorizing the people in a relentless search for the royal heirs. Fearing for their lives and the life of their child, Prince Casper and his wife, Penelope, took horses and began their journey through the forest to the mountains east of Kedar."

"Even after their departure, the raids continued for weeks without end. There were screams of terror throughout the city. The crashing of stones through windows and other forms of destruction were commonplace. Residents were dragged from their homes to the war-torn streets as explosions destroyed storefronts, and hundreds were murdered night after night. There was much blood and destruction in those days," Dorothy told her with pained expression, bringing her teacup near to her mouth without taking a sip of it.

"But what became of the Seer and the Prince's son?" Avera curiously protested.

Benjamin and Dorothy shot each other startled glances which puzzled her.

Benjamin closed his eyes, lowering his head with his voice, "No one knows what happened. They were lost to the annals of a history no one remembers."

Dorothy sat, gently sipping her tea with a small, pensive smile on her face as he spoke. "Some say they fled to the mountains and were never here at all, others that they were killed during the raids and no one was the wiser. Yet, *some say* that they *live*, even now, patiently awaiting the day that the kingdom will be restored, the breaking of a new and brighter dawn."

"Isn't that more folklore and fairytales?" Avera said, finding the whole thing a bit of a stretch.

'There's a reason some history is forgotten.'

Benjamin's face broke into an amused grin. "Is it?" he said, almost laughing. "*Well,*" he paused, throwing his head back and catching it in his hands, "I suppose it does sound a little extraordinary, doesn't it?"

Chapter 10: Thought Wanderers

The evening came, and everyone had returned to their respective quarters, everyone except for Benjamin. Having escorted Avera back to her room for the night following a full day of touring, festive gathering, and new acquaintances, he pulled the door shut behind him, leaving her to rest.

'Folklore, eh? Well... perhaps.' He chuckled quietly to himself as he made his way to the boardroom.

Once there, he sat, the weight of his body sinking down into the chair. He leaned back, crossing his legs and resting his heels on the broad table in front of him before letting out a sigh, his arms hanging limply over the arms of the chair.

'I am tired. Such a shame I shouldn't sleep.'

He stared up at the ceiling a while before letting his face fall to the side. There was a certain tension lately with the disappearance of their military contact and the arrival of their guest, a tension which had been weighing on him heavily. Thoughts swirled around in his head as his analytic mind worked to unravel the twists and knotted strands of a puzzle known only as time, and again he sighed.

'This is all far too much for me to handle. I'm afraid you'll have to help me. This business with Avera, this rendezvous with the Colonel come morning... it may all prove much more dangerous than anything. Still, I think it only proper to attend, and if Tyberion is, in fact, Avera's father... I may owe it to them both to discover what's happened to him, if indeed something has happened.

'Supposing his position were compromised, however, and they had discovered he was working with us, that might complicate things, because, if that were the case, it would lend itself to the possibility that Avera is working as a spy, presumably in an effort to secure her father's safety, but... of course, I don't believe that.

'When Dorcus told me a girl was coming to see us, though wittingly or unwittingly she could not say, she instructed me to receive her with the same kindness my father would have. It was an advisory, not a warning. Avera is harmless, a young woman in need of belonging... and a home... for some reason.'

'Howbeit, I... do understand Kypher's concern, particularly with regards to the Colonel. There is so much uncertainty during this time. Besides, it is his charge to be cautious for my sake. Not that the others would have me in any form of danger, certainly not, but... I know Kypher still holds himself responsible for what happened. There would be nothing more devastating to him than to see it all happen again.

'This meeting... perhaps it is foolish of me to attend. I know Kypher is reluctant to let me go. He wishes I wouldn't. But... if there is a chance that the Colonel may be there, that he may be in danger, that he may be in need of our help... I cannot deny him, not for the sake of anybody.

'Still,' he smiled, wearily amused, *'I am having trouble wrapping my tired mind around this complex mess we find ourselves in.'*

He chuckled to himself scornfully and sighed. "*Blast!*" he exclaimed, springing himself from the chair and slamming his hand against the table in front of him. "Would that Webber were here. He would have me sorted out handily." He paused with consideration. "Perhaps by morning," he muttered with a soft smile. "But then," he added, his gaze set intensely on his hand, "perhaps not. No matter, though. I was determined that I should go before and I will not be dissuaded of it now."

'No use second guessing things.'

'Isn't there?' a voice like an outer thought replied, and he felt a chill run through him. *'Because, it seems the people who say they care have gone and left you on your own, all alone to navigate things. There's no one else to blame. If you fail, you'll have disappointed them sorely, and they will leave you, also.'*

"They wouldn't," his voice responded to the words, and his eyes scanned around him as he remained stone still.

'Oh, wouldn't they?' the whisper replied as if mocking. *'It seems that they already have. They aren't here, and why should they be? There's nothing special about you. Nothing but the guilt of blood.'*

Benjamin swallowed, feeling increasingly uncomfortable, his body tense. "It's not like that," he muttered by means of a quiet protest.

'Isn't it, though? All those people, all that death... aren't you to blame for it? Couldn't you have prevented their deaths with your own? Selfish child...'

'It was never as you say,' he thought the response, unable to speak and utter it.

'Wasn't it? You didn't see the raids, Ben, but they were all your fault, weren't they?'

He shook his head, fighting the weight of grief and condemnation. *'No! No!'*

'Yes, yes... in fact, it's better that you had never been born to begin with, but you can't help that now, can you? Except by your death. I assure you, it is not only a death better for everyone, but it is a death long overdue. So, what do you say? Shall I kill you? Or, perhaps, you'll have a part?'

He would have said no, but he had gotten caught up in the thinking and hesitated. He tried to move, but he found himself held in place by some unseen predator as it sucked the life out of him. He felt himself grow faint and began to fall forward, catching himself on the table in front of him.

'No one wants this, Ben. Die peaceably and let the suffering end right along with you.'

He found himself struggling to breathe and choking on his own breath, his skin slowly turning to a ghastly pale grey as his life force left him.

Suddenly, there was the sound of footsteps as the door opened and a familiar voice came, stern and proper. "Enough! You no good, murderous *liar!* Get your hands off him!" she commanded, and he felt the thing depart from him, his strength and breath returning.

"Ah! Dorcus," he said , still breathing heavily as he continued to rely upon the table for support.

"Thought wanderers are nasty things, Ben. I suggest you not entertain them," she warned him, reminding him of what he already knew.

"Yes, of course," he said. "My apologies, and my thanks." He smiled up at her, the color returning to his cheeks.

"Ben," she said softly, drawing near and placing a hand on his shoulder as she looked him in the eyes, "you are not to blame for any of this. We each chose on our own. Those who died and those who killed them, each chose on their own. Everyone who's here today, we chose to stay. No one forced us. No one even asked us. We chose. Eliezer and I, we love you as our own flesh and we would never leave you. That being said, you are *not* responsible to bear the weight of our decisions, nor anyone else's. Do you understand? You give *hope,* Ben. Hope that no one else can."

He smiled. "Yes, I understand," he said with a polite nod of his head, but his heart betrayed him and the weight of guilt began to seep back in again, his face displaying his displeasure at himself.

"Don't you feel guilty, Ben," Dorcus said softly, wrapping him in a hug, her voice gentle and soothing. "You're not to blame, and all is well, as Eliezer would rightly assure you."

He closed his eyes and smiled at the kind words of his friend and mentor as he felt her love soak into him. "Thank you, Dorcus," he said to her, "your help is invaluable to me, as always."

"Not at all, Ben," she said, releasing him from the light embrace. "You weren't the only one having trouble with the thought wanderers tonight. Avera was having quite a time with them, too, and while they won't always try to kill you, they *are* more than happy to feast upon any negative emotions they might manage to conjure up."

He offered a slight smile, and she stopped, putting her hand tenderly on his cheek. "I *am* proud of you, Ben," she quietly assured him. "You've grown up beautifully."

Chapter 11: Ambush

A gentle breeze of warm air blew, causing the leaves of the tree to tremble, and Benjamin grabbed hold of the trunk of the tree to steady himself upon the branch.

'It's nearly dawn. If anyone is to come, I should soon see him arrive.'

He had spent the night up with Dorcus, passing the time in quiet conversation. There was some question of Eliezer's returning, which he hadn't, but that was somewhat anticipated. Dorcus had considered that Jordan may impress upon him to stay, which was a likely supposition and a common display of Mr. Carder's ever mindful courtesy.

Now he stood, hiding himself in the tree at the center of the grassless clearing and waiting for the sun to rise. The letter which he had received called for a meeting at the full moon before dawn. The rendezvous was set for a secluded grove near the camps of the armies at the northeastern front, not far from the edge of the eastern woods.

The north country was given to lakes, rivers, and fertile farmlands, but here at the pass between the North Sea and the Royal Mountain Chain, it was nothing but wasteland, dirt and dust with the occasional tree or shrub. The warfront was barren, the life of the earth trampled out by the boots of men and hooves of horses as they fought back and forth pursuing ownership of the land.

He looked past the last lines of scattered trees to the faint and dying fires of the distant camps, waiting for anyone at all. If it were Tyberion who was to arrive, then all would be well, but if anyone else, all of this would very quickly become much more complex. The longer he was left to wait, the more nervous he became.

'He ought to have arrived already. It isn't like him to come so near day, and the dawn is against us.'

He watched as the light began to chase away the shadows from the surrounding landscape, engulfing everything that could be seen in the dull blue light of newfound morning. The coming light of dawn reflected off his white cloak and garments trimmed in gold, and he prayed that the shimmering fabric could not be seen through the leaves and boughs which covered him.

Benjamin swallowed nervously, becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the situation as it developed.

'It's too late. If Tyberion were to come, he would have done so. Doubtless, this is a trap, then. They must be waiting for me. I'll have to wait them out.'

At this point, it was no longer a rescue mission. The colonel never would have left him to wait so long and near the break of day. It was far too dangerous for the both of them. No, it had now become an information gathering expedition, and one which he would very much like to get

out of unscarred. But a man up a tree in a war zone at the break of day was not the ideal situation for a seamless escape, especially with the near guarantee of an ambush waiting.

At last, he saw a man coming over towards the tree from the direction of the camp. The tree had been the identifying landmark in the description of the agreed upon location of their meeting. The present reality that he was hidden *in* the tree rather than standing under it was the product of his clever caution rather than premeditated planning, and he was now very happy for it as he watched the ominous hooded figure approaching on the ground beneath him.

The man's garb was unfamiliar and his face was hidden from Benjamin, who carefully watched him from the heights of the tree. The darkly cloaked man stood under the tree for a short while before saying something, giving some kind of signal. Three other officers quickly appeared, men dressed in intelligence uniforms, and they rushed to the man's side from amidst the surrounding foliage.

'As I thought...'

The four of them spoke softly to one another briefly, the soldiers seemingly subservient to the man whose appearance was hidden from them. In a short time, the men dispersed, and the men who had appeared from the brush went out and began to search the outlying area.

'They're looking for me, but... surely, that's not all of them. They wouldn't have all given themselves up like this. Zahaynei is too smart for that, particularly being as he seems to know I'm here, or he thinks so, anyway.' He watched the line of trees which led back to the forest and towards home. *'The coverage of the trees will provide some safety for me and the limited visibility of the forest is certainly to my benefit, but getting there may present some difficulty.'* He looked again to the surrounding brush and foliage. There was a ditch off to the eastern side of the grove, in the direction of the mountains but not far.

'A likely place for an ambush. I wonder how many of them there are, but no matter. I will escape them. Regardless, there must be more foot soldiers and surely some archers.'

He watched them for a while longer, turning his head this way and that slowly and deliberately, limiting motion so as not to draw attention to himself as he surveyed the area.

'They may well suspect I'm here, but they don't know where I am... thankfully. I can use that to my advantage. But these are the king's men. They caught the Colonel, it seems, and they are more than able to capture me. I will need be careful as to how I proceed...'

A dull purple light reflected off of his metal insignia, interrupting his thoughts, and, just as quickly, an arrow with a glowing tip whizzed by only a fraction of an inch in front of him, piercing violently into the trunk of the tree.

Benjamin's heart pounded. *'Don't move. Not an inch.'* He swallowed hard. *'If they had seen me, they would not have missed. Though, the proximity is frightening.'*

His eyes scrolled to the body of the arrow which protruded from the dark wood near his trembling palm. There was a loud crack and the sound of splintering wood as the maurium arrowhead twisted and tore into the trunk of the tree. The sound began to dissipate, and a hush fell over the barren terrain once again.

Suddenly, a loud bang resonated as the arrowhead exploded, casting out a violent flurry of splinters and luminescent shards in all directions. He winced, forcing himself to stay still as the shards and splinters flew around him. He felt a sharp pain cut through his left wrist as his hand held the trunk, and his fingers dug into the dark wood, responding to the pain. The unfamiliar sensation of this deep and piercing pain began to escalate and tingle, accompanied by a strange warmth. He relinquished his hold of the tree, allowing his arm to drop silently to his side, still without a word. The liquid warmth made its way slowly down his palm until it covered his hand, twisting around his fingertips and dropping to the branch below him.

'Well... this is it, then. Time to go.'

The shards had landed below him in a chaotic ring of glowing purple, patterned almost by design at the feet of the hooded man on the ground below him. There was a long silence which followed only to be broken by the faint sound of the slow drip of blood as it puddled on the soft ground in the midst of the debris.

Drip... plop. Drip... plop.
Drip... plop.

The man adjusted his gaze, intrigued by the subtle sound and motion of the droplets.

Drip...

He watched it fall and splatter against the dampened ground by the dim light of the shattered arrowhead.

Plop.

He bent down on one knee and stretched out his hand to examine the substance, getting some of the dark red liquid on his fingertips and bringing it close to his face.

"Well, this is my chance," he muttered to himself quietly. "Help me, please," he breathed, poising himself on the branch and springing forward into a front flip.

He dove down with a flourish, landing expertly on the cloaked man's back and tumbling to the ground behind him, breaking flawlessly into a dead sprint and turning to the side, away from the camp and the ditch, in the direction of the forest. A flutter of arrows flew through the air, lighting up the sky behind him, but the hasty adjustment by the concentrated marksmen proved enough for his narrow escape.

Benjamin continued to run, the wound hurting as the blood flowed freely from his wrist.

'That's too much blood. It's too far a journey, and on foot...' He closed his eyes tightly, fighting against the stinging pain and blood loss. '*You'll have to help me. That's all. You'll just have to help me.'*

The bowmen pulled again, and a second volley of arrows came chasing after him. They sunk into the ground around him, some in front, many behind, and others striking his cloak, breaking and falling to the ground without any significant impact.

He continued to run, knowing that the footmen would be fast behind him. If not, there was still a threat of the arrows exploding; although, that seemed to him less likely. Either way, he needed to disappear into the nearby brush and eventually find his way back into the thick of the forest to the south.

'A few feet more...' None of the arrows triggered, and Benjamin let out a sigh of relief. *'The first was a scouting arrow. They were looking for me, they sent out a probe, and they found me. They hit the mark, and they found what they were looking for...'* He felt the blood on his hand. *'Pity.'* He frowned. *'But... these aren't scouting arrows, so they will be pursuing on foot, then. I should watch that I'm not followed.'*

He rushed into the brush and scattered trees, thankful to have some level of coverage. He continued to run, thinking it odd that no other arrows were shot at him, and he looked back as he entered into the line of trees which marked the edge of the eastern woods.

The cloaked man stood watching him, his face covered by the shadows, and he held up his hand as if to tell the archers to hold fire and the troops not to follow. The three men who had searched for him were standing at his side. Another four such men were off in the distance, not far behind them.

Benjamin saw the eyes of the archers as they watched him. They stood, bows in hand, not at the ready but at their side. There were others, foot soldiers who had begun to pursue him, but they, too, were quickly stopped.

"Hold!" the cloaked figure cried, throwing off his hood and revealing a familiar face. "Do not pursue him."

At his word, everything stopped, and Benjamin watched in awe as the elite task force came to a standstill, turned docile by the order of the Archmage.

Benjamin turned around entirely, taking in the sight of it. He was caught in shock and disbelief. His eyes grew wide and his mouth hung open. *'Adrien! What is he doing?'*

"But, sir!" one of the officers protested.

"Do you question me?" Adrien responded with an imitation of the hardness expected of the servants of the Altruic ruler. "We have all we need. Now, *stand down,*" he snarled.

'Adrien... thank you.' Benjamin smiled, quickly turning, and he ran again to make his escape into the forest behind him.

He ran for some time, frantically making his way through the flourishing woodlands of the northeastern region, before he felt his heart pounding, desperate for blood, and his eyes turned dark, the colors of the trees and foliage around him fading in and out of black. He grabbed hold of a high tree next to him, catching himself from falling. He stood panting, his breathing hardened.

'Perhaps... if I just rested a bit.' He considered the thought. *'But then... I might not make it.'* He looked to his arm. *'There's so much blood draining... far too much blood draining.'*

He felt faint at the sight of it and began to swoon. Then, a puzzling thing: a hand reached out and grabbed him, catching him as he fell.

His eyes closed as he faded out of consciousness, and he heard the soft words of impassioned alarm and kindly concern.

"Ben!" the man with the voice of a hoot owl cried, taking secure hold of him. "Oh, Ben," he sighed. "Come with me."

Chapter 12: King’s Piece

He was a kindly man with grey hair and large round glasses with thin dark frames. He wore a brown vest with light pinstripes, white shirtsleeves, simple dress trousers, and black tie boots which wrapped high around his ankles. He carried the young man back the few scores' paces to the cabin wherein he was staying, pulling him along, his arms securely latched around the boy's shoulders.

'Poor child,' he silently considered, thinking of the young man's plight. *'It seems we've lost our knight, then, but no matter... I have the king's piece safely tucked away. Hm...'* He pushed the door open, backing into it slowly. *'Thank you for saving him.'*

He laid the boy down on the bed gently, carefully arranging his upper body and placing his head on the pillow before lifting his limp legs upwards, setting them atop the hay filled mattress.

He took the remnant of a white cloth and wet it in the basin of cold water he filled, carrying it over to the bed and setting it upon the small table next to the burning oil lamp. He took a small wooden chair from its place by the fireplace and brought it near the bed where the boy lay, taking also with him gauze and strips of bandages which he set upon the table with the water basin.

He sat down on the chair, considering his friend, and, taking the wet cloth, he began to clean the wound, gently wiping the blood from his hand and arm. It was a deep cut, likely having severed something, but he wasn't greatly specialized in medicine.

He touched the wound, muttering something to himself, and his glasses reflected the flickering light of the lamp as it burned.

'Please, help me.'

He pressed his hand gently against the boy's wrist. "I need you to live, Ben," he breathed, and he felt a warmth like fire flow from his hand into the young man's arm.

He smiled thankfully and removed his hand to see the bleeding had stopped and the wound begun to heal. He let out a quiet sigh of relief before taking the bandages and beginning to dress the wound, which he did, wrapping the cloth tightly around the boy's wrist and slowly extending the area until the soft strips covered much of his forearm and half his palm, tucking neatly between his thumb and forefinger.

"Good, then," he said, tying a knot to hold the thing in place. His eyes turned to Benjamin's pale countenance. "Rest, Ben," he softly entreated, standing and kissing the young man's forehead. "All is well."

He pulled the chair over to a table near the foot of the bed and watched out the window, his attention divided between outer woods and the chess board he had set in front of him. He would pass the time, watching and waiting as he practiced the art of war.

"Eliezer..." a stunned voice came after the length of a little over an hour, and he heard some rustling behind him.

"Ah, Ben," Eliezer replied pleasantly, though thoroughly enraptured in his ongoing game of chess which he had set on the table next to the bed. "How are you?"

"Better..." Benjamin said politely. He looked frantically around the strange room. "Where are we?" he asked, bewildered.

"Carder's cabin," Eliezer informed him, "a few miles southwest of Delphi, and *currently* very graciously afforded to the care of one Horace Waverley."

"I see..." Benjamin replied, still looking around the broad room with interest.

"It is... *providential*," Eliezer added, using his knight to remove the black bishop from the board, "that we met when we did, don't you think?" Eliezer turned his eyes briefly to Benjamin with the question and smiled affectionately before turning his attentions back to the checkered board.

"Expectedly," Benjamin replied pleasantly.

"Yes," Eliezer chuckled, amused. "I couldn't sleep," he said, continuing his game. "I thought a walk might be in order," Eliezer went on moving his pieces, his weary eyes watching the board by the flickering lamplight. He paused his conquest, looking to Benjamin with caring and considerate eyes. "You should sleep, Ben," he told him. "I beg you to rest some more. We stopped the bleeding, but you still need to regain your strength, you understand. You lost a lot of blood." He returned to his game, quickly taking his opponent's knight with one of his bishops.

"We...?" Benjamin asked, questioning, and he imagined he was looking for another person, but he didn't leave his game to check.

"I'm a miracle worker, not a physician, Ben, and I'm not a *magician*, either," Eliezer reminded him. "There's no use pretending I do things on my own, *but...*" he added, taking a bishop with his queen and leaving the enemy's king in peril, "I do know how to respond when in check."

Benjamin let out a faint laugh. "Understood," he said, throwing his head back against the pillow.

Eliezer looked at him and smiled. "Please, be more careful," he softly entreated. "Losing you is losing everything, *and*, very selfishly, I might add that you are the closest thing I have to a son." His eyes turned soft as he looked upon him, and his voice followed in the form of words little more than a whisper, "I cannot bear to see you hurt."

"I know," Benjamin replied softly.

Eliezer stood from the wooden chain which he had set before the window and sat upon the edge of the bed, taking hold of Benjamin's tightly bandaged hand, squeezing it gently, and sighed.

"Tyberion was absent from your meeting, I take it?" he empathetically observed.

Benjamin smiled. "As you say," he said, then paused. "Adrien was there," he told him thoughtfully. "He let me go."

"Adrien... did he, now?" Eliezer answered with a considerate smile as he looked to the knight he had captured. "How very interesting," he muttered. "Well, I'm sure he knows what he's doing. He always was one for chess, though he never could beat me." He grinned, looking to Ben again. "Howbeit, it is well known by all that a king is of the utmost value."

Ben smiled with a nod.

"How were things with Avera today?" he asked him, making pleasant conversation.

"It went well," he told him, laying his head flat against the pillow and letting out a breath. "She thinks we practice some sort of strange magic, and... we had some trouble with thought wanderers this past evening, but... Dorcus handled all things well."

"I see," Eliezer said, passively considering things. "Well, it does help that Dorcus can see them." He smiled, only half joking.

"That it does!" Benjamin laughed, then fell back against the bed, breathing deeply.

"You should rest, Ben," Eliezer appealed to him gently.

Benjamin shook his head. "I must return to Pyre," he told him. "I needn't concern the others by my absence."

"Very well," he conceded. "Stay an hour, rest a little. I will watch and wake you when it's time. When you go, take my horse. I will find my way back on foot, if not with Jordan."

Benjamin offered up a weary smile. "As you say, Eliezer," he said, his voice giving way to tiredness. "I thank you." His eyes shut and he fell quickly into a quiet slumber.

"Oh, Ben," he breathed, running his fingers through the boy's hair.

His hand touched against his forehead, and he felt a feverish warmth. He sighed, taking the cloth again from the basin of water and wringing it out before folding it and pressing it gently against Benjamin's heated forehead.

'All will be well when you arise, I assure you.'

Chapter 13: Blood and Bandages

Dorothy had come and greeted her that morning, bringing her out to breakfast and fulfilling the role of host which Benjamin had so faithfully executed at prior times. Now, she sat in her bed, reading Benjamin's green covered book and thinking it much later in the day than she had expected him returning. In fact, everyone seemed to have expected him sooner, and breakfast had held an unspoken tension which caused her to feel slightly out of place. She thought of Benjamin, considering his continued absence, and becoming concerned.

'The day is half over, and Dorothy said his meeting was at dawn... no wonder they were all so tense, they probably don't know what's happened to him, either.'

At last, there was a knock at the door, followed by the sound of a familiar voice which caused her some relief.

"Avera, are you there?" Benjamin asked politely.

"Yes, come in please," she replied sweetly.

"Good morning, or... afternoon, I suppose," he greeted cheerfully, though somewhat bashfully. His face wore a friendly smile as he entered through the door, and her heart sunk as she saw his arm wrapped in bandages. The cuff of his bright white tunic was spattered with bloody crimson, as was the left hand side of it.

"Benjamin, you're hurt!" she exclaimed, her face stained with unwanted surprise and fearful horror.

"Ah, yes..." he said awkwardly, "the bandages."

"*Yes,* Ben!" she said, thoroughly disturbed by it. "*Blood* and bandages!"

"Well, it's... all right, now," he told her, assuring her of his wellness. "It's been attended. I am... sorry that I was delayed in my returning. I didn't wish to concern you."

"*Concern..?*" she replied in dramatic disbelief.

'Does he think this is normal?'

"Ben, what happened?" she asked, suddenly noting the dried blood trapped around the edge of his fingernails.

He leaned back against the door, pushing it closed with a sigh. "We had a correspondent, a ranking official in the army. He had helped us gather necessary information and countless resources. He was also a go-between to pass messages between us and our contact in the capital. It went several days, then weeks, almost a month, and we hadn't heard from him. There was no communication at all. We were all very concerned. Then, we received a message, but...

something seemed wrong about it. Still, I believed it necessary to go to this meeting and see for myself what had happened. I thought, perhaps, he was in some sort of danger or under suspicion. This morning, I followed the letter. When I went to meet him, I found myself in the midst of an ambush. Whether you might say by fortune or providence, I escaped with only the loss of some blood, and for that, I am very grateful. Still, I am sorry you must be witness to this. I would have spared you from it all."

Avera looked away, but it was difficult for her to keep herself from staring. The blood stains on the pristine gold and white of the shirt sleeve captured her view. She couldn't say why, but the blood terrified her. Then a voice came back to her, the voice from a dream. No, a terrifying nightmare. There was blood and terror. Shouts were heard in the streets. People were dying, and she was left, totally incapable of escaping the horror as the buildings burned around her and the people were devoured by darkness.

'Yes, what was that...'

There had been nothing but darkness when the voice said, '*Run. Run away. If you stay, it's more of the same... blood and horror and pain.'* She remembered the voice whisper, *'They'll all leave, they'll all go. Bleed out, freak show. Avera Ibori, go home. Run away... but not too late. You'll find yourself an awful fate. You look away, and then... you're trapped!'*

The memories of the words echoed in her mind, leaving her with an increasing discomfort, and anxiety began to overtake her.

'It doesn't mean anything. Get that out of your head. Dreams don't mean anything, anyway.'

"Why are they trying to hurt you, Ben?" she asked, her voice breaking as she tried to keep her mind calm.

He smiled, giving her an apologetic look, and said, "It wouldn't be fair of me to answer that."

"I see," she said hesitantly.

The voice came again. *'Run away.'*

"Avera," he said, his eyes watching her, "are you alright?"

This took Avera somewhat by surprise. "Yes, fine. I'm fine. Thank you," she said, quickly dismissing the question.

"Are you certain?" he said again, pressing the issue. "You slept alright? Nothing unusual happened?"

'No... that dream, but... how does he know?'

'Run away,' the voice came echoing from the depths.

"No... nothing," she said, desperately trying to keep her cool.

'Run.'

"You're quite certain?" he persisted.

'Run away.'

"Nothing," she said after some hesitation. "Nothing happened. I told you, I'm fine," she answered quickly, becoming flustered. "*Look,* Ben..." she went on, turning to face the wall, unwilling to look at him, "I've been thinking, I should go. You've got your thing, and I have mine. So, if you don't mind-"

"W-what?" he said, entirely taken off guard by her sudden coldness.

"I told you, Ben. I've had enough of this," she said coldly, keeping her eyes fixed on the wall.

"Avera, I..." he began before hesitating.

"Look, Ben, I don't know *who* you are, I don't know *what* you do, and I don't know what your plan is, but I do know that I don't want any part of it," she told him, feigning agitation. "I just... want to go home."

He stood in disbelief, his fingertips gently touching the wooden door behind him. He watched her carefully, unsure of the response and searching for an answer. She glanced over at him, catching the sight of his contemplative eyes. His lips were moving, but no words came. She looked quickly back away, not willing for him to see the pain in her frightened eyes.

'I'm sorry, Ben. I've... lost too much. I can't... risk it anymore.'

'Run away.'

"You said I could leave as I wished," Avera reminded him, her voice softening as her eyes welled with tears.

There was a vast gulf between them, and a pronounced silence which deafened her.

"You know I wouldn't keep you," Benjamin muttered softly, breaking through the thickness of the air. "If you wish to depart, may I offer any accommodations?"

She looked at him, his eyes as kind and caring, as ever they had been.

'Ben... please stop. You're making this harder.'

"Thank you, but... I have what I need," she replied, her tone softening further, and she turned to face him here again.

"Will you eat?" he asked her, offering her more of his kindness.

"No, not today," she said, carefully maintaining her composure.

"Very well, then," he said. "Let me show you out."

The walk to the door was long and painfully quiet with the constant presence of the silence between them. Any attempt at conversion would have proven to be awkward and uncomfortable, so it was pleasantly agreed to be ignored, and that without words. As they arrived at the main door of the library once again and Avera recovered her bicycle, Benjamin again broke the silence.

"Avera," he said, addressing her with careful tact, "do you... know where your father is?"

She was surprised by the question and returned it with a perplexed look and puzzled glance. "No, he's... missing," she said, unsure of what emotions should have come as a response to the bizarrely poignant personal question. "*Disappeared.* They don't know what has happened to him," she told him, her head vaguely bobbing as her body trembled and her eyes fell away. "So... there you have it. That's all there is. They don't know." She let out a breath, holding her eyes open wide as she could, and fighting back the tears which sought to drown her in waves of familiar sorrow.

Benjamin was watching her. She felt it. His compassionate stare was piercing, but she wouldn't let it take hold of her heart again. She would find strength on her own.

"Avera, I... I'm sorry," he told her, his words a heartfelt expression of care. "I am *so* incredibly sorry."

"Well, Ben..." she said, her voice cracking, "it's not important. Besides, it's not your fault. How could you have known... not to ask?"

Tears began to drop from her eyes as tiny silver droplets against the grassy field below her, and she turned her head up, tilting her face back and allowing the sorrows of her heart to roll gently down her dusty brown cheeks.

"Do you know how to get back from here?" he asked her, his eyes a considerate light.

"I should," she said, not entirely certain.

"It's that way," he said, stretching his arm out and pointing past the front of the library to her right, which was his left. "Due west," he told her, smiling. "That will take you to the Eastern Gate. Then, of course, you can follow the city wall to gain entry through the Main Gate to the west, but..." he added with his quiet, almost apologetic confidence, "I'm sure of that you're well aware. Ensure you've entered by nightfall or you may encounter some difficulties."

She smiled, blinking away the remaining tears. "Yes, thank you," she said. "I'll be sure to take your advice on that."

"Avera..." he addressed kindly with some hesitance, "you *are* welcome to come back and see us, if ever you would like."

'Ben...'

She watched his face, his eyes soft and caring, and the kindhearted invitation warmed her.

'Thank you.'

"Thank you, Benjamin," she said with a quick nod and a determined smile. "For everything."

Chapter 14: High Palace

Avera peddled hard, propelling her bicycle up the grassy hill until she at last broke free of the dense forest of trees on the loosely established path which she rode.

"Finally!" she sighed with great relief at the sight of the dark city walls which loomed ominous and threatening, their powerful appearance stretching far above her.

She rallied herself, worn from the journey, and she began to peddle harder. She rode speedily alongside the southern wall of the capital, becoming only mildly aware of the change in atmosphere as she went.

There was a dark haze which seeped up from the ground, lessening visibility and sunlight. It rose higher the nearer she came to the city and its gates, becoming darker and more prominent until it engulfed everything in sight with its grey spectral hue. The change had been so gradual that she had hardly noticed it until she had nearly reached the western gate and there was darkness all around her.

She looked up at the sky to see how the day was passing, expecting the sun to have been heavy with the burden of night but only to find it still filled with the vigor of the afternoon.

She hopped off the bicycle, dismounting to enter the gates in compliance with the city ordinance. She walked then through the main gates and the guards, surrounded by the multitudes who would enter there, Pyre and its citizens, merchants, peddlers, and travelers alike, all attending to their business and their lives as it pertained to the land and its capital.

She made her way gradually down the city streets towards home, to the house of her neighbor, Annetta Klauthbrid.

It was mid-afternoon when Avera found the little house on Mayverch Street. Taking a deep breath, she walked up the three steps to the door and knocked. The door opened, and she was quickly met with the enthusiastic and tearful embrace of Miss Klauthbrid.

As long as Avera could remember, Annetta had been a close friend of her family, and when Avera had moved with her father to Pyre, Annetta was there to help them become acquainted with the culture and customs of city living. Her kindness and loving concern was always something which Avera had come to rely on, now more than ever she had. Annetta had been appointed with Avera's consent at the request of her father as guardian during his wartime absence. Now, with her father missing and presumed dead, there were some questions of what would be done with Avera under her new status as a ward of the state.

"Avera! Oh, you're back, child! Where have you been?" said the kind faced lady, sobbing as she squeezed her.

"It's alright, Annetta. I'm alright," she said, and her face fell against the woman's shoulder. "It's okay. I'm back now," she reiterated, perhaps assuring herself more than her caretaker. "I'm sorry. I just... needed some space."

She was relieved to feel the gentle embrace of a familiar friend, and her face relaxed into a smile as she collapsed in the lady's plump arms, the tears flowing freely from their eyes.

At last, Annetta, wiping the tears from her eyes and regaining her composure said, "Well, you should come in!" She cleared her throat. "Yes, come in! I was just about to decide what I should make for supper. You should come and help me decide!"

It was a kind invitation, and which Avera would by no means refuse. "Yes, I would like that," she nodded softly and a grin spread over her face as she wiped the tears from her eyes on the sleeve of her shimmering white skysuit.

***

Early the next morning as they slumbered in their beds, there came a loud knocking at the door.

"Who on Caldor could that be?" Annetta disgustedly wondered out loud as she emerged from her bedroom, tightening the belt of her robe, her dark hair still in its curlers.

Avera opened her door in her night clothes, looking to Annetta sleepily with questions in her eyes. The two stood across the hall from one another, each seemingly equally discontented and groggy.

"Oh, I'll get it, dear," Annetta said, unhappy with their early morning visitors. "You go get yourself dressed. I have a suspicion that we're up for the day now," she added with a frown, turning her eyes in the direction of the front door.

"Alright," Avera said yawning. She offered Annetta a quick nod before returning to the small bedroom.

The knocking began again, strong and demanding.

"Oh, hold your horses just a minute!" she heard Annetta yell to the door, addressing the unknown irritant.

'Clothes, clothes...' She glanced around the room, searching blankly. *'Right... they're at my dad's house. Okay. Where's my skysuit, then?'*

She looked around the room, becoming a little more purposed and a little more frantic, the sedation of slumber wearing off as the need to find the missing article began to settle in her mind.

"Goodness! Come on, where is it?" she said aloud, becoming vexed. "Oh, I know!" she said, at last remembering. "It's right... *here!*" she exclaimed, throwing the door shut and revealing a small wooden arm chair with the skysuit thrown haphazardly over the back of it. *"Ah!"*

'But it's... grey.'

"Avera!" Annetta called from the bottom of the stairs down the hall. "Come here, please!"

"Just a minute!" Avera called back with a slight sense of panic.

She carefully lifted the suit by the shoulders and held it in front of her, looking at it with astonishment.

'What... happened?'

"Avera, darling?" Annetta's voice came again, scared and urgent.

"Coming!" Avera shouted back, hurriedly changing into the maurium skysuit.

'I guess I shouldn't worry about it. Who knows? I can't ask Benjamin, and he may not answer me, anyway.'

She rushed down the hall to the stairs, and hurried to the entry hall, distracted by her clothing. Annetta stood by with the door still open. Two soldiers stood beside her, barely inside the doorway, each dressed impeccably in the uniforms of the King's Royal Guard. Avera stopped short and slowed her step as she came to the bottom of the stairs.

"Annetta?" she curiously addressed, her voice serious and low as she looked slowly towards her.

"Avera Ibori?" one of the strapping young men demanded.

"Yes?" Avera answered nervously.

"You're coming with us!" he said, and they seized her, escorting her one on each side out of the house.

"Where are you taking her?" Annetta asked in a concerned frenzy as she followed them through the door.

"High Palace," the man brusquely informed her. "She has been ordered to appear before the King and his court."

Annetta lifted her hand and opened her mouth as if to say something, but the man cut her short. "Ma'am, it's better that you're not involved," he told her, responding to the robed woman's concern in no uncertain terms.

"If this is about the custody hearing," Annetta began anyway, unsure of how to finish.

"Ma'am!" the soldier warned her. "*Stay out* of this. Understand?" he asked, and Annetta stood speechless. "Good," he said, turning back from the frazzled woman on the doorstep as they led Avera away to the High Palace sector.

***

The crowded city streets became sparse and desolate the farther they ventured from the city center into the governmental district.

Zephyr reigned from High Palace, a remote fortress which occupied the northeastern corner of the capital. It was not a place that the townspeople were known to go or to be caught staying in for any length of time. Some said it was for fear of spies, others for fear of the wrath or paranoia of the King, but whichever it was, the illustrious soldiers of the King's Royal Guard were always unusually quick to act upon the threat of citizens. The King and his authority were not to come into question, nor were the people to take too much interest in the palace and its activities.

What townsfolk could be seen in the area kept their heads down and hurried on along their way without a word to anyone. There were no stray glances or passing greetings as they came near the palace gates, only the silence of fear and an air of oppression, the occasional remark or order of a guardsman being the only exception.

There was a guard every few feet along the palace fence, each in his brandish uniform of reinforced maurium, the most advanced of tech reserved only for King Zephyr's personal defense forces. The huge dark metal gates of the palace towered over them as they approached, and the High Palace of the King could be seen up on a hill in the distance behind the massive stone walls.

Avera looked past the gates to the palace fortress as they approached the gatekeeper, not wanting to look at him. The ground inside the gate was stripped earth, dry and barren clay with dust blown by the light wind which blew across the palace yard. The building itself was a massive fortress, an impressive feat of master craftsmanship and engineering, maurium covered in stone and reinforced again by maurium carefully placed in select sections. It was a magnificent masterpiece of wartime engineering commissioned by the King himself for the express purpose of inspiring terror in the hearts of all those who would look upon it.

'It is impressive... but monstrous.'

The two men explained themselves to the gatekeeper, stating their purpose and reiterating that she was under royal summons.

"Called for by the King, eh? Well, good luck to ya," said the gatekeeper gruffly, signaling to his partner for the gates to be opened. "Ye'll need it," he added menacingly, noticing Avera glance over at him as he addressed her.

Then, with a chuckle and a sinister grin, the two broad, bearded men spun the levies and opened the gates which moaned as they swept in towards the winding road in front of them.

Chapter 15: Blackridge

The interior halls of the castle complex were vast with high arched ceilings. Again, a mixture of maurium and stone accents provided the opportunity for some artistic variation. The ornate stone work and marvel floors along with the decorative metal mesh which was found throughout the halls left the feeling somewhere between a medieval cathedral and a modern courthouse. The maurium was a centerpiece, from the luminescent purple cracks in the gray marble to the glow of the purple lamps, orbs of light hanging from the ceiling and ensconced like torches on the wall, to the small, carefully crafted gems which lined the halls, all was to show the prominence, power, and versatility of the fine material native only to Altruon.

As they led her down the corridors, various officials could be seen going here or there about their business and foreign dignitaries walked about with King Zephyr's trusted escorts assigned to their care. There was a certain tension in High Palace. Even here inside the walls, no one seemed quite relaxed and nothing seemed real. Some courts were in session while others were preparing to be, and certain Pyrean citizens were found waiting on benches in the hall for their case to be called, while other proceedings may be heard quietly seeping through the doors of the chambers.

Avera walked in curious silence, wondering where exactly they were headed and why they had gone without hesitation passed the courts, but she was too afraid to ask the guards.

They continued down the hall, down past the scattered gatherings and quiet conversations until the sound of the guards' boots became the only sound in the desolate corridors.

They came near the end of the hall and turned off into an adjacent corridor, different from the others. There were noticeable changes to the design and the size of the hall. The lighting was less, and the floor changed from marvel to squares of stone with light maurium and diamond accents. It was arranged so that each stone flat had pieces of maurium in a diamond design surrounding the center and an ornately chiseled piece of luminescent maurium at its center. Apart from this, there was no lighting in the hall.

They passed doors to the left and to the right of them which seemed to blend into the blackened walls. As they came to pass another corridor, a man dressed in a dark cloak appeared suddenly in front of them, seemingly out of the black.

The startled guards stopped dead in their tracks. Avera flinched and would have jumped back had she been able to do so, but the guards still kept firm hold on each of her arms.

"Lord Blackridge," said the one guard who spoke, his voice trembling. He was noticeably shaking.

"Calvin," he said, acknowledging the man. "Lucio," he added, nodding to the other.

"Sir," said the second guard, who had not spoken before that time. He sounded younger than his partner and his voice was firm and even.

Avera glanced at the guard the man they called Blackridge had addressed as Lucio. He was a dark skinned man with blackened eyes and the beginnings of a beard around his chin. He appeared to be only a few years older than she was, and she wondered how a man so young could become so unfeeling as she looked upon the vacant expression of his emotionless countenance, his eyes unreadable.

"I'll take it from here," Blackridge told them. His voice was deep, mysterious, authoritative, and unwavering. His words left no room for questioning, but he must have noticed their hesitance. "This hearing is closed chambers," he informed them by way of explanation.

"Yes, Master Blackridge," Calvin said. The two guards released her immediately, bowing each on bended knee before they turned again to walk away back down the darkened corridor.

'What power...' Avera marveled at the ease with which Blackridge had dismissed the guards and their willing subservience to his command.

She stood unrestrained in the darkness of the hall with the looming figure of the hooded man in front of her. She had an unsettled feeling in her stomach, and she was more nervous than ever she had been.

'Is it really closed chambers that the guards of the royal regiment cannot attend?'

"Well, young lady, here we are," he told her, his words like silk and his voice like gentle water. "Avera was it?" he asked her.

She shuffled her feet, uneasy. "Y-yes, sir."

"Well, then. Come with me, please," he said, turning down the narrow corridor from which he had first appeared.

Blackridge was a pale faced man with large round eyes. His eyes were dark, so dark that the brown of his irises appeared to blend seamlessly into the blackness of his pupils. His dark cloak covered him in a deep midnight purple and seemed to fade into the blackness of the halls.

This new corridor was yet darker than its neighbor, the only light bearing source being small strips of glowing purple which lined the hall so as to ensure that its width may be easily determined. Travelers, however, were seen as little more than silhouettes.

They moved quickly through the cramped hall, barely wide enough for two men to pass. Blackridge seemed quite familiar with these halls, hardly seeming to rely on the dim light that existed in the narrow corridor, and Avera wondered if he could have made the journey without him. He led her as she followed close behind him, paying careful attention to his cloak in front of her. Somehow, she felt more comfortable around him than she had during her encounter with the guards, so much so that she ventured into a conversation with him.

"Pardon, sir," she began, and his head moved slightly at her address, signaling his attention had been given her. She smiled, glad to go on with her questions for him. "This is a mage's cloak, is it not? And you, sir, are a mage, then?" she asked with confidence.

"Indeed," he said, stopping for a moment as he turned to look her in the eyes. "Very observant. Yes," he said, resuming his travels. "I am a mage, and one of the ten."

"Wait..." Avera said, surprised.

'I hadn't expected that from him, but it does explain the subjugation of the guards.'

"That means you're..."

"That *means* that I am one of the commanding sages of High Palace, a personal advisor of the King, the Archmage, occupying the first of the ten seats of the High Court of the King, to which you have been summoned."

"I am?" Avera felt her blood turn cold. "But why? What have I done?"

"Let it suffice you to consider it a matter of association, and in your case, it would be best to say you didn't know anyone. Now, that's for both of our sakes. I'm a friend of your father's. Do you understand me?"

"I *think* so, but I still don't understand what all this is about."

"No, but you soon will," he ominously assured her. They continued on in silence until he stopped again to face her. "Now," he said, "I've gotten myself into a bit of trouble here, and I'm going to get us both out of it. Remember, you didn't see anything and you *don't know anyone.* Avera, do you understand me?"

"Yes, Lord Blackridge. I understand," she told him, eyes wide with interest.

"Yes, I think you do," he said, smiling before putting his hand to the unseen door in front of them, causing it to slide open. "If anyone asks," he whispered softly, bowing himself to speak to her ear, "we never talked."

Chapter 16: The Hearing

The room was white, and it took some time for her eyes to adjust to the bright lighting. Struggling to regain her sight, Avera would have stopped if it weren't for Blackridge, who didn't seem to be having nearly the same level of difficulty and discomfort she now experienced. He kept her moving forward, his hand placed securely behind her shoulder, guiding her into the center of the room with firm gentleness and quiet urgency.

'Blast it! Why can't my eyes get over this? His have, clearly.'

She blinked, something she had done a great number of times since the moment they had entered the room and its blinding whiteness. They stopped, and she opened her eyes, the room finally coming into view as they adjusted to the light.

She found herself standing in the midst of a vast room with a high ceiling and towering walls. The room was entirely white, having a circular build and domed top.

Avera stood in the center of the room, the curved walls seeming to circle around her. She knew the door was behind her because she had come through it, but it was totally unseen, slipping seamlessly into place against the dull white of the walls.

She glanced around the room, taking it in slowly. There was a set of stairs on either side which wound their way around the perimeter from a balcony on the far side to the center. The rail which lined the staircases crossed the front of the balcony which stretched across the length of the room, covering a third of it in shadows. The balcony was a magnificent design, having ten seats like simple thrones built into its large steplike partitions. There were two sloped rails similar to those which guarded the stairs below, but much shorter in height and length, as were the many small steps up to the great white throne of the King, which sat above all carved into the highest partitions of the balcony. The ten seats, arranged five on each side of the throne, were the seats of the ten sages. Each of the seats of the sages were occupied by men dressed in garb similar to that of Blackridge, all but two, which were empty. A man dressed similarly to Blackridge stood on the floor to her left, not far from the staircase, and Blackridge himself had moved to a similar position to the right of her, likely accounting for the two vacated positions, the seats nearest the right of the King.

"If the court is assembled, you may begin with the proceedings, Lord Blackridge," said the man from the throne, leaning to one side leisurely. His messy dark brown hair, nearly black, fell frayed against his narrow face, a kind contrast to his fair skin. He wore a beard, nearly trimmed around his thin curving lips, strapping the squareness of his chin.

"My Lord the King," said Blackridge, taking a few steps forward, bowing, and motioning towards Avera, "may I present to you Avera Ibori, daughter of Colonel Tyberion Ibori of the valiant men of my Lord the King."

"Avera," said the King, acknowledging her presence. "I understand you took a recent trip outside the city bounds. Is that correct?" His black eyes watched her with passing interest, the darkness of them mitigated only by the violet flecks which lighted within them.

"It is, sir," Avera replied, keeping her courage.

"And where is it you happened to venture?" he asked her.

"A ways out into the forest," she said, avoiding the question.

"And did you happen to venture eastward as you went? Perhaps you made your way through the forest to the place of the ruins?" he suggested.

"I..." she stopped, seized with great and sudden fear, and she hung her head, unable to offer an explanation of her actions. She was well aware that the area was off limits, but she had gone anyway.

"We're not here to punish you," King Zephyr assured her. "I understand you were under a great deal of distress after receiving word of your father's disappearance. Such distress could cause one to do something quite uncanny. No, we're much more interested in what you might have *seen*, or, perhaps, *who* you may have *met*." He spoke smoothly, his words like butter. He was very direct, and she remembered the words which Blackridge had impressed upon her.

'They... are... looking for someone? Benjamin, perhaps... or all of them. But, Lord Blackridge, how does he know?'

"My Lord, being as the introductions are done, I would take my seat," said Blackridge with a short bow.

"Just a minute! My Lord King Zephyr, if I may approach Your Majesty, and if I may speak," entreated the man to the left of her, moving frantically forward, waving his hands.

"Go on, Master Kallida," Zephyr replied, his voice calm and pleasant.

"My Lord, I must request that Master Blackridge remain on the floor, as he, himself, is subject to questioning, and I, as the Master Inquisitor, am both committed and duty bound not only to question him concerning his actions but moreover to hold him accountable for any indiscretions."

"Master Kallida, Master Blackridge is my most trusted advisor and one of my oldest friends. You don't mean to *suggest* that he is suspected of wrongdoing or crimes against the state?"

"My Lord, I acknowledge Master Blackridge's zeal and diligence in past service to Your Majesty, but we must put this aside for the sake of objectivity. The case at hand is one of great complexity, and some of Master Blackridge's actions are in great need of explanation. I am simply requesting an opportunity to question him with regards to yesterday's events."

"Master Kallida, all of this does not explain your insistent refusal to allow Master Blackridge to take the seat of his authority. Why not hold your peace on this and involve him at a later part of the trial? He can always be recalled."

"No, my Lord. Not *unwillingly*."

"Excuse me?" the King said, shifting with a stunned curiosity.

"Once a member of the court has appeared and taken their seat of authority, having been on the floor of judgement in the presence of the King as he sits upon his throne of judgement, the witness cannot be recalled unless he should *willingly* subject himself again to judgement. *That* is what is written in the book of the Court of Royal Decree. *That* is the law."

"And you believe that Master Blackridge would not subject himself to questioning of his own volition?" the King asked, his words quick with unbelief.

"I cannot be sure, and given his recent actions, I believe that this is not a risk which we should take."

"*Master Blackridge...*" Zephyr shot back the beginnings of his defense of the Archmage, his words sharp with annoyance.

"King Zephyr," Blackridge politely interrupted with all humility in subjection to the man who wore the golden crown of the Altruic King, "I withdraw my request. I will remain on the floor for questioning. Let it be no more a burden to Your Majesty."

Zephyr's eyes turned soft as he watched his friend utter those words as he bowed before him. "Very well," he said at last and nodded. "Master Kallida, you may begin. As Master Inquisitor, please state for record the purpose of this hearing. Then proceed."

Kallida seemed to relax, as if he had come into some state of great relief and good unforeseen fortune.

'He knows that King Zephyr would not have granted his request. Had Blackridge not conceded his right, Lord Kallida's continued insistence would have grown tiresome to him. Still, is he right? Lord Blackridge said he is a friend of my father's, but if he knows about Ben and hasn't told them... I can't help but wonder why. There must be a reason... and a reason they're looking for them. But why?'

Kallida was a man of unimpressive physique but great charisma, well able to carry himself in court and hold the attention of his King and colleagues alike. His dark hair was brushed straight back. His face was thin and pointed, his cheeks slightly sunken and his chin well defined. His eyes were dark circles with icy blue rings of color mixed with a sickly pale green, and they now swept the room, calling for the members of the court to offer him their undivided and unquestioning attention.

"My Lords and Rulers of the High Court, this is a preliminary hearing regarding the appearance of pyrite and the reemergence of the Armorials."

A fresh tension fell over the room, the sages clearly uncomfortable with the statement. There was some shifting in the seats and nervous glances from one man to another.

'Goodness... that got quite a reaction. I haven't heard of any of this.'

"At the first," Kallida continued, walking slowly across the floor and moving his hands in wide gestures as he spoke.

'*What a showman.'*

"The pyrite was seen being worn by a young man who was the target of a stealth mission which reached its objectives yesterday morning shortly before dawn. Soldiers report having seen the man wearing a 'shimmering white tunic and cloak with a glistening gold trim.' The man also reportedly 'was unaffected by arrows which had direct impact against the material.' You can read it all in the official mission report of which I have supplied each of you a copy. This report supplies a detailed account of key events which took place during the encounter with the subject.

"Key events, which include some very strange behavior by Master Blackridge which will be addressed at a later time in more detail. It is for this reason that I have chosen to retain Master Blackridge for questioning.

"Due to the delicate nature of this hearing, admittance has been limited to the witness and the Court, and it is because of this that I have chosen to call Captain Zahaynei to speak on behalf of his men. This will keep our guests to a minimum while maintaining the integrity of the soldiers' testimony.

"Lastly, we have with us Miss Avera Ibori, daughter of High Colonel Tyberion Ibori, fugitive of state."

'Fugitive of state!' Avera's eyes widened in shock and horror as Kallida continued.

"Colonel Ibori had come under suspicion of certain... *indiscretions* concerning his handling of classified letters and documents in the weeks leading up to his disappearance. Some had thought him a spy for Obed. We now know that he was passing information on to the Armorials, and I believe we can rightly conclude that he was working for Caliphus."

'Caliphus! But...'

"Pardon, Inquisitor," Avera said shyly, "but who are these Armorials you mentioned?"

"The armorials," Kallida explained, his eyes darting back at her with annoyance, "are a radical sect of the Kingsmen devoted to the practice of a strange deistic magic. They are, also, undying advocates of Palmiere Caliphus and his descendants, a line of conniving and murderous kings who have long been dethroned."

Blackridge let out a soft sigh, and Avera heard it. He was standing close by her, only an arm's length to her right, having retreated somewhat following the exchange with Kallida. She looked with curiosity towards him. His dark eyes had turned suddenly pained and soft, a quiet affection mixed with sorrow showing through them, and she wondered why he cared.

"Is something *wrong,* Master Blackridge?" Kallida sniped, noting Avera's attention shift.

"Not at all, Master Kallida," Blackridge replied with a slight smile, his voice calm and even. "Your description was unprecedented." Kallida grunted indignantly. "Yes, well..." he continued, turning again to address the King and his Court. “Miss Ibori spent three days in the ruins and returned wearing pyrite. Doubtless, she too has encountered this young man from the Thistle project and his accomplices. It is my intention during the course of these proceedings that we should use the testimony of these three witnesses to determine the whereabouts of the remaining Armorials and to put an end to those who would devise schemes against the King and his officers," concluded Kallida, seeming extremely satisfied with himself and his performance.

'Pyrite... is that what that was? But again, I have no reference for it.'

Avera felt herself becoming more uneasy with every word Kallida had spoken, and she had a feeling that this wasn't so much a hearing to gather intel as it was a floor show for a manhunt. She turned her eyes again to Blackridge who offered her a small smile, reassuring her of his confidence as he subtly drew her attention to a small vile of dark red liquid which he held tucked away discreetly in his palm.

Chapter 17: All We Need

"Avera," the King said, shifting his gaze, and considering his words carefully, "how is it that you came into the possession of pyrite?"

"To be perfectly honest, my Lord, I am not familiar with pyrite at all, and I was unaware I had it until now," Avera earnestly confessed.

There were some glances, and one man nodded in the direction of the King.

"Very well, then," Zephyr said, watching her eyes as he spoke. "Master Iphor, as Master of the Magicians, would you kindly explain the origins of pyrite to our guest."

"Yes, m'Lord," said a stout man with a gruff voice. He was one of the ten and seated in the place of the third. "You see, young lady, there is a known element called planetyroid. I'm sure you have some familiarity with it, do you not?"

Avera nodded, watching the bald headed man with interest.

"Of course, it is extremely common. You can find it practically anywhere in the world provided you're looking for it, but the element is unusually common in Altruon. We have a particular abundance here, and we use it like no one else does.

"Now, planetyroid is best described as a sort of metallic clay, marbled in blue and green. The substance is beautiful right up until you try to harvest it and start to pull it up out of the ground. That is when it crumbles and turns to an ashy black powder. You see, the very act of attempting to harvest planetyroid is that which renders it useless, *but* there is a way around it.

"When certain conditions are met, planetyroid can become very useful, but from the time that it is uncovered and exposed to the surface it begins to rapidly decay, so it is important to be ready to provide the atmospheric conditions needed to harvest it *before* the element is uncovered.

"Planetyroid is unique in that it can be transformed into either of two elemental constructs. One such construct is maurium, the uses and qualities of which I am sure you are well familiar, as are all who live in Pyre, since it has become the backbone of our society. The necessary conditions to manufacture maurium are much more easily met than that of the second, more refined construct: pyrite."

"Forgive me, sir," Avera said, respectfully addressing the Master of the Magicians, "but are you meaning to say that maurium and pyrite are of a similar substance?"

"They are of common origin, you could say, yes. There is only one substance, but what is done with that substance is what determines the outcome. In one instance, there is maurium. In the other, pyrite. But pyrite is different, because, *unlike* maurium, there is only one way to produce

it, and that is to purify it. Planetyroid must be refined and cleansed of all of its impurities. One might say that that which is common must be made uncommon, and the only way to accomplish this is by the flame of the Armorials. The fire which they hold... is the *only* means by which planetyroid can be refined. The fire, when administered, burns away any impurity and altars the chemical makeup, creating something entirely new. The resulting substance being an elemental construct we call pyrite," explained the man with the bushy eyebrows and the white handlebar mustache.

Avera listened intently as she watched him, fascinated by this lesson in hidden geology

"However," the man continued, "pyrite and maurium, despite being related in their classification as constructs of a similar element, each being a derivative of planetyroid, are not at all compatible. When the two come into contact, the integrity of the maurium is compromised and its inner structure begins to collapse, causing the maurium to break apart in a state of rapid decay. The pyrite, on the other hand, is totally unaffected by it.

"Hence, when the soldiers' arrows struck the young man's cloak, they fell to the ground, their tips shattered and lying in tiny mounds of dark powdered decay," Iphor concluded, having provided a thorough explanation of the use and origin of the unfamiliar substance.

"As you can see, the only way for your skysuit to have been pyrite is for you to have been in contact with an Armorial," Kallida sneered. "So, tell us," Kallida demanded sharply. "Who made the pyrite?"

"Well, Inquisitor," Avera said, careful to choose her words, "I don't know who made it. I didn't even know it was pyrite until now, only that it was different. How it became pyrite, I don't know, but it's grey now, as you can see."

Blackridge seemed pleased with her answer, and they all seemed quite convinced but also puzzled. Zephyr seemed especially troubled.

"Master Kallida, is there any other explanation?" the King addressed.

"*What?* No!" Kallida snapped back, seemingly taken off guard. He appeared particularly annoyed by the turn the conversation had taken. "Why, you heard Master Iphor! All of you heard him," he said, turning and waving his hand towards the sages in a wide, sweeping gesture, "there is only one way!"

Blackridge took a step forward and began to speak. "If I may offer an explanation for my Lord," he said, humbly addressing the King.

"Say on, Master Blackridge," the King replied, intrigued by him.

"Conditions are ideal for maurium *here* in the capital and in the mines to the south, but they are not so in the ruins. Avera spent *three days* in the eastern woods. It may be that the atmospheric

conditions effected the material and caused a... restructuring of the element. This also may be suggested by the material's reversion back to maurium after the course of the night."

"I see..." said the King, considering the statement.

"My Lord!" Kallida cried out in protest. "You cannot actually be entertaining such fallacy!"

"Lord Blackridge makes an interesting point, Kallida, surely you must agree," the King said coolly.

"No, my Lord. I *certainly* do *not!*" Kallida replied sharply.

"Would you then offer a better explanation?"

"There *is no* explanation. There is only one way to obtain pyrite! And besides, you can't listen to this man, he's clearly covering his tracks!"

"Oh, is he now?" Zephyr responded, sarcastically impressed. "Why don't we hear more about *that?*"

"Very well," Kallida said as he turned to Blackridge, visibly flustered. "Captain Zahaynei, kindly describe for us the events which transpired yesterday morning."

A stout, muscular man in stained leather armor with the insignia of the Royal Guard made his way to the center of the room. Avera watched him as he came forward. The man had brown hair cut short with a trimmed beard which rounded his broad and pale face. His darkened eyes of the deepest brown glistened in the light as he looked to the King on his throne.

"My Lord the King," he said, taking a knee, then arising. "Following Colonel Ibori's disappearance and the subsequent loss of the map related to the final stage of the Eternity Project, we searched his tent for the stolen documents. While we failed to recover the project, we did find something of use to us. The Colonel had left in a hurry. He left his coat and in it a letter to an unspecified contact requesting a meeting. It seems that Colonel Ibori had been passing classified information and state secrets on to this man who we now know to be an associate of at least a subset of the remaining Armorials and, presumably, Caliphus himself."

"The King or the Prince?" Zephyr asked him.

"I would think the Prince, sir, but it is impossible to say," Zahaynei told him.

"I see..." Zephyr said pensively, "please, continue."

"We sent the letter with the Colonel's staff officer who said that he would frequently deliver these letters to a particular mail clerk in the letter office on Season Street North. The clerk handed the letter off to a courier, and we followed the boy to the business district where he left the letter at a flower shop. Lord Kallida now has the building under surveillance.

"Following our communication, we prepared an ambush in anticipation of our meeting with this illusive contact, and yesterday was the day of the operation. We waited for hours before dawn without much success. We never saw the man approach. Lord Blackridge came to stand at the meeting point when daylight broke, but still no one came. He sent men to search the outlying area, and I commanded the archers to fire scouting arrows to clear the areas which the soldiers could not. One of the arrows hit the man, we could see from the fall pattern of the fragments of the head. The young man dropped from the tree and ran. My men were firing at him. They would have pursued, but Lord Blackridge stopped them."

"Captain, briefly," the King requested, "I know that Master Kallida wishes to address Master Blackridge, but I have my own questions to address. This young man, an Armorial certainly, but who do you suppose him to be?"

"It's... difficult to say," Zahaynei said, answering the King's question with some nervousness.

"Well, there aren't many young Armorials now, are there? Perhaps we may find the Ambassador, also. I would think him an associate," Zephyr mused. "Oh, come, Master Blackridge, don't look so unwell!" the King commanded. "It's old history between us, and I've long forgotten your failure to kill him."

"Of course. My apologies and my thanks, oh King," Blackridge replied with a reverential bow.

"Now, Inquisitor, do as you will," the King instructed. "I'm finished my thoughts."

"Master Blackridge," Kallida began, making a call for accusation, "Captain Zahaynei has testified that *you* were the one overseeing the mission and *you* ordered that the soldiers not pursue the man, a *known enemy* of the state! How do you defend such actions?"

"To catch is not always to capture, Master Kallida. Nor is to obtain to succeed," Blackridge replied sternly.

"Why would you let him get away? How could you allow an enemy of the kingdom to escape you when you claim to serve his Kingship? Unless, of course, you are working with them, as well. You *are* the one who gave Tyberion Ibori his position here, are you not?"

"I *am*."

"And is it treason, then?"

"*No*."

"Then tell us, Master Blackridge," Kallida commanded, raising his voice as he strutted about, continuing his floorshow. "*Why not* pursue?" He turned his face again towards Blackridge, pleased with his clever entrapment.

"There was *no need* to arrest him."

"Oh, no?" Kallida called out, his voice cold and mocking. "Ha! No need? Really?"

"Yes," Blackridge told the Court calmly.

"Well, I think the soldiers may disagree," Kallida contended sharply.

"Perhaps," Blackridge readily admitted, "but they would also be mistaken."

Kallida exhaled sharply. "Oh really now? And how would that be?"

"There was no need to pursue, Master Kallida, because there was no need to arrest the man. There was no need to arrest the man, you see, because... I already have all we need to find not only the boy, but also his companions," Blackridge said with a smirk before raising his hand and presenting the small vile of red liquid to the Court. "*This*," he said, holding the vile neatly between his thumb and forefinger, "This is all we need."

Chapter 18: Next Time

Blackridge smiled as he gazed upon the astonished faces of his colleagues. *'And now the performance turns to me.'*

Zephyr lunged forward. "Is that-"

"Blood," Blackridge proclaimed with a triumphant grin. "You see, Master Kallida, the arrow which hit the man wounded him severely. The shard which pierced him was covered in blood, and the man lost a lot of it. Had we pursued him, we would have run the risk of him *dying*, and he is far more valuable to us *alive*. Additionally, this blood sample can be scanned and referenced against our databanks so as to avail us to the identity of our mysterious visitor. This way, they won't know that we know who he is. We will be able to track and capture them *all*, rather than merely apprehending one of them. This is much bigger than an Armorial in a tree, Inquisitor. This is a matter of the future of this kingdom and its people, and *that* is why I prevented the advance."

"Well done, Lord Blackridge!" King Zephyr proclaimed from his place on the throne. "Yes, this may be just the opportunity. To think... after all this time... we may finally have them."

'Lord Blackridge, eh? Is that truly praise or is it merely a provocation?'

Kallida looked to the King before turning his attentions towards Blackridge. He glared at him with wild eyes, his sights focused on him intensely in a jealous rage as his body trembled. Blackridge smirked, returning Kallida's maddened gaze with a look of fierce determination while Zephyr reclined in his chair. The King smiled, flipping a coin between his fingers as he admired his work.

'It seems that Kallida's obstinance is not so easily forgotten as it might have appeared.'

"I am at your service, sir," Blackridge assured him without turning his eyes from Kallida. "Master Kallida, is there anything further?" Blackridge asked.

"Yes," Kallida responded grudgingly, "there is the matter of the girl."

"Say on," Blackridge invited.

"How could you say she's not one of them!" Kallida spat at him.

"Kallida, she doesn't know anything," Blackridge replied sharply.

He glanced towards Zephyr, looking for his approval. A fiendish grin covered the King's face with a look of amusement.

"Oh!" Kallida exploded, pointing a finger at Blackridge and starting a march towards him. "I'm sorry, *Lord* Blackridge! How foolish of me to have *thought* that if someone's father were found

to be involved in conspiracy and espionage and then that certain individual should *happen* to disappear for *days* in the very same area where his conspirators are known to dwell, only to return *wearing* the very *garments* of those same conspirators, it *might be* that the person in question is guilty of treason, also, or at the very least able to supply us with some information regarding these enemies of the state!"

"Master Kallida, most parents don't involve their children when committing crimes against the state," Blackridge coolly corrected.

Kallida's eyes burned with rage and envy.

"Swords, gentlemen?" Zephyr smiled.

'Has Kallida truly gone so far as to offend him this badly or does he merely desire some entertainment? Surely, by now he knows I won't kill him. Still, I'd rather not...'

"At the ready, my Lord!" Kallida insisted, raising his hand to a guardsman who appeared beneath the balcony holding two swords in his hands. "Ready yourself, *Lord* Blackridge! Your kindness will be your undoing!"

'Well. I suppose I've no choice, then.'

Blackridge stretched forth his hand towards the guardsman, and the young man tossed both men their swords. Each apprehended the hilt with their palm and skillfully twirled the weapon into position.

"Kallida, you don't have to fight this," Blackridge pleaded calmly, as Kallida moved determinedly forwards.

"No, but I *want* to! You've had this coming to you *far too long,* Blackridge!"

Blackridge assumed a defensive position, "We'll see about that."

"Traitor!" Kallida shouted as he took a powerful first swing at Blackridge's head. A mighty clang rang out as Blackridge moved his sword to stay the attack, but Kallida continued to push, refusing to draw back his sword for another attack. Instead, the two men remained locked in place, their swords trembling with the sheer force of the continuing contact. "You're done," Kallida snarled as he pulled back for a fresh attack.

"Am I, though?" Blackridge replied with lighthearted banter, as he gracefully dodged Kallida's advances.

Kallida took another swing, and Blackridge skillfully supplied another dodge. The occasional clash of metal persisted throughout the next few minutes as Blackridge danced around his opponent with great agility and careful footing. Kallida was becoming noticeably off balance, taking rapid, powerful swings in all directions as Blackridge circled around, parrying his sword.

'Ah, Kallida... what hatred rules you. The more you strike, the more you lose control, and that same lack of discipline is what will cost you this engagement.'

"Welcome to Altruon, Blackridge, the land that *you* created! Tell me, is it everything you wanted?" Kallida demanded, continuing his furious swinging.

Blackridge found himself caught off guard. His mind raced with a thousand thoughts of past transgressions and the world as it had been. He was becoming uneasy. Distracted and off balance, he narrowly avoided the slashing of his competitor's sword. Kallida was forcing him back, pounding his sword with a quick series of crashing blows as he continued a powerful advance. Blackridge moved for a tactical retreat, but he misstepped, badly stumbling.

Kallida took full advantage of the opportunity to strike. "You are *weak*!" he cried out, lunging at Blackridge with a mighty thrust.

"No, you're wrong," Blackridge said, catching the guard of Kallida's saber with his blade and sending it flying with an effortless twist of his sword. "You never understood strength," he told him, knocking his opponent to the ground.

"Incredible," Avera breathed, impressed.

The disarmed Kallida fumbled to his feet again and scrambled to retrieve his weapon, but Blackridge pursued him, quickly pushing Kallida to the ground again, this time on his back with the shining tip of a sword at his throat.

Blackridge paused, looking to Zephyr. The King stood, watching him with express interest, his face no clue to his thoughts.

'I think he would actually be glad if I were to kill him... but I won't.'

Blackridge watched Kallida, staring down at him with great intensity as he kept the sword close to his neck. Kallida looked back at him, dark eyes still full of resentment and anger. There was silence in the room as all eyes watched them, waiting with anticipation of what would happen.

He turned again to address the King, his sword still at Kallida's throat. "I'd watch who you're promoting, Zephyr," he warned him, using the familiar address. "Men like this? They'll bring an end of you."

"Appreciated," Zephyr replied simply, addressing his Archmage with a brief nod.

Blackridge turned his attentions back to Kallida. "Next time," he warned him sternly, throwing his sword down forcefully beside the bested man.

'I hope that's enough to put an end to this for now.'

He turned to the men of the King's Court. "Well, gentlemen, I believe this hearing has concluded. Assuming you're all satisfied?" He scanned the room, his eyes meeting those of each

of the members with silent warning. "Yes? Good," he said, turning his back to the balcony as he moved to exit.

"Blackridge!" Kallida called out after him. "You cannot avoid it forever, Blackridge. You will kill again. The blood on your hands is *not enough!*"

Blackridge came to a dead halt, closing his eyes, and breathed a heavy sigh, haunted by the memories of things he would have rather left undone and unconsidered.

Zephyr's words echoed in his head, *"I've long forgotten your failure to kill him."* He opened his eyes, seeking some distraction from his thoughts. *'Yes, well that you forgive me the failure, but how can I forgive myself the attempt?'*

He continued on his way, giving no mind to Kallida, and pretended as if nothing had happened. "Avera," he said, coming to the girl, "you're free to go. Come with me. I'll show you the way."

Chapter 19: The Letter

Avera followed Blackridge back through the hidden door and into the narrow corridor, retracing the halls they had come down. The cramped corridor seemed to devour the light which disappeared suddenly and without warning, and all turned to darkness when the door shut behind them. She kept close behind him, the maurium crystals lighting their path. They walked in silence as they went, and they continued on through the dark halls of the now familiar castle.

Lord Blackridge was still giving off a quiet air of intensity which Avera found somewhat intimidating, and she found herself thinking how glad she was to have his favor. Avera felt her mind begin to wander, still swirling with the events of the day. Questions and conversations warred with simple observations and distant memories of home.

"Lord Blackridge," she said at last, "is my father really conspiring against the state?"

"Avera," he said with a sigh, "your father is a good man, faithful to the King. He is a champion of justice. That is why he came here, and that is all he's *ever* done here." He spoke softly and with empathy.

"But what of these accusations of treason?" she asked him, her eyes feeling the burden of tears.

"Avera," he said, "not everything is as it seems here. Your father is a good and decent man with a good and decent heart. He had to flee for his life, because I couldn't get to him in time, and don't believe anyone who says otherwise."

"You... tried to help him?" she asked, her heart trembling.

"We were friends," he told her. "I was the one who asked him to come and work for us. I felt responsible for his well being."

'You were... he never told me who.'

She remembered the day the letter came. Her father was on their porch repairing a wooden rocking chair when a special courier came, a military man from Pyre dressed in full regalia.

"Tyberion Ibori?" the man asked.

"Yes?" her father replied, and the man extended the letter to him. "What's this?"

"A letter for you, sir," the man informed him. "Communications from Pyre."

"A letter? Who is it from?" her father asked out loud, but the man remained silent as he stood and waited. Her father opened the envelope and read the lines of the letter. "...Ridiculous."

"Not at all, sir," the man said. "He was quite serious."

"Daddy, what is it? Who's it from?" she had asked him, tugging at his shirt, her face turned upwards towards him.

"An appeal to my patriotism... from an old friend, but I thought he'd made up his mind to have forgotten me," he told her, patting her curly haired head.

'I wonder what went on between them, why they didn't speak for all those years. I don't want to be rude, but I do wonder...'

"What the Inquisitor said," she began with hesitance, "is it true? ...about the blood."

His eyes shifted back to her, then looked away again. Twice he did this before closing his eyes, but still there was no answer from him.

"I heard the story of a man named Blackridge once," she told him, speaking softly as she aired her thoughts. "I understand he killed a lot of people."

"That's old history, unfit for a new world," he coldly informed her. "Besides that, the man is dead."

They continued on down the hall in silence, Avera fighting to escape her settling gloom over the uncertainty of her situation, which was troubling her quiet mind when Blackridge suddenly stopped as if to say something of some importance.

"Avera, would you deliver a letter for me?" he asked her, discreetly shifting his eyes in her direction.

"A... letter?" she answered back, looking up at him with questioning eyes.

"Yes." He spoke to her softly as they walked. "It needs to be delivered to a man in the northern sector. For me to go see him would be... *difficult* at the moment," he quietly explained, his words shrouded in secrecy, "and a good courier is hard to come by these days."

"Yes, I understand."

"You will take it, then?"

"I will," she said, nodding more than was necessary. "Yes."

"Thank you," he told her, maintaining a soft manner of speaking. "It is a matter of some importance. The letter is for Lazarus. You should find him in the Congregation of the Kingsmen near the Northern Gate." He handed her a sealed envelope addressed in simple ink marked *Lazarus*. "Speak to the congregational leader. He may claim that there is no one there by that name, but you must insist. He knows me well and will ensure that the information is passed on."

"Of course," she said, taking the letter from him and placing it securely in the inner pocket of her skysuit.

"Thank you," he told her, smiling.

"You're very welcome."

They made their way through the dark halls and past the main chambers until they came to the main hall once again, and from there Blackridge graciously escorted her down the path of scorched earth which led to the main gates of the fortified palace.

"If you follow that way," he said, pointing down the broad and winding path, "it should get you back to the main thoroughfare in good time."

"Thank you, Lord Blackridge," she told him, taking a short bow. "I do appreciate your help."

"And yours," he said, smiling. She turned to go, starting to walk away. "And Avera!" he added, calling after her to stop her as went. "All is well." A soft, reassuring smile appeared on the sage's face as he spoke, and it somehow calmed her heart.

She smiled as a warm light penetrated within the depths of her wounded being. *'All is well.'* Somehow, despite everything, she believed it.

***

She walked through the crowded streets of Pyre, the sun shining brightly. Merchants and peddlers were selling various goods from their carts in the broad roads of the city. Shops and houses lined the sides of the streets and people hurried here or there while others stopped to purchase items from this vendor or that.

She carefully kept on her way, trying to avoid the crowds while also hoping to get lost in them. The world had been awfully lonely since her father had gone off to work at High Palace, and so much more now that he was missing entirely. She was thankful for the adventure which had come in place of her heart. It was a welcome change to her thoughts as she fought the wanting of her emotions to sink back into the dark state of despair which had become so familiar to them. At least she could refocus her mind on her mission - the letter.

She rounded a corner to pass the Northern Gate and found the building just as Lord Blackridge had described it. Etched into the stone above the building's entryway were the words *North Pyre Kingsmen Congregation.*

"This would be it then," she muttered. The street was empty by comparison to the main thoroughfare of the city, and she looked around her as she went to enter the building, somewhat inexplicably concerned.

She had never been to a Kingsmen congregation herself, though her father had attended on occasion. There seemed to be a gravity about the place, and she paused, nervously taking a breath.

'Just go in and deliver the letter.'

But still, there was something... something. She grabbed the brass handle of the red wooden door and pulled, then snuck quietly inside, pulling the door shut again quietly behind her.

She stood in a small lobby lined with tables to the left and right which held books and pamphlets of various kinds. A spiral staircase ascended to her right above the white tiled floor, and directly in front of her were two large wooden doors held open with chained latches.

She self-consciously made her way into the entry of the sanctuary, examining the room and its people from her own comfortable distance. Men, women, children, rich and poor, young and old, people of status and people of none were all squished together in the moderately sized amphitheater, every one of them seated on curved wooden benches which she estimated to be quite uncomfortable.

'I've never understood these people. Why subject yourself to this?'

She ducked back behind the doors and out of sight, making an effort to hear what was being said. There was a solitary speaker, a man, reading something she had heard before. His voice was riveting, filled with authority, conviction, and... familiar.

'That voice...'

The room sat spellbound in a silent intensity which grew with every line he read. His words echoed through the chambers of the hall as he shut the book and his voice raised. She closed her eyes to focus in, listening hard to the sound of his voice with its strange familiarity. It reminded her of the pleasantly distinguished hooting of a friendly owl, and she knew that she had heard it sometime before.

'*That voice... I know I've heard it. Who is it?*'

She waited out the minutes and let out a sigh of relief as they reached an end of their meeting, the man dismissing the congregation with a blessing after a song.

Avera moved herself slowly back into view of the doors. The people were scattered in various places, some milling about as others gathered their things, and yet others hurried to go, walking silently past her. A few people stopped to try and talk with her, but she politely ignored them, uninterested. The longer she waited, the more people began to leave, some carrying on quiet conversations as others walked alone. The room continued to empty out until she found it an appropriate time to enter, going against the outward flow towards the platform.

There were still pockets of people standing here or there chattering pleasantly. There were some discussing kingdom policy and kingship, others heavily engaged in matters of deep spiritual philosophy, and others still addressing similar topics she wasn't sure she would like to be bothered with for the time.

'Best to avoid such things.'

There was a man standing behind the lectern at the front. He was gathering papers together, and she expected that he had been the one speaking, which also made him a prime candidate for her letter taking expedition. He was finely dressed in a suit jacket and trousers with a matching vest and tie. His clothes were lightly worn, which was notable but not especially easy to notice.

'*Modest dress. Though, perhaps necessarily. And how unlike a man in Pyre to be wearing regional garb... he's clearly not a traveler.*'

He was, in terms of his stature, very much average and quite unremarkable. He had a round face with peach, lightly tanned skin and a short, neatly kept beard. His thick gray hair was carefully combed in a traditional manner, though it was slightly longer than one might expect and became somewhat frazzled around the ears. He looked up at her as she began to approach him, the brightly glimmering orangey-brown eyes of his kindly countenance being covered only by the clarifying lenses of his large, round, darkly rimmed glasses.

"Why, hello," he said cordially, smiling warmly as he watched her approach. "I don't believe we've met."

"No, sir," she said pleasantly with a nervous smile. "We haven't."

"Tell me, how did you come to-" he began to ask politely before she stopped him.

She closed her eyes tightly, shutting him out, and took a deep breath. "I'm not here for the reasons you think I am," she told him, cutting him short.

"Oh?" he asked, sounding somewhere between surprised and skeptical.

"No," she said, beginning to unzip the collar of her skysuit and causing him to avert his gaze with nervous discomfort. "You see, sir, I have a letter for you," she stated matter-of-factly, assuring him of her righteous intent while pulling from her breast pocket the small folded envelope Lord Blackridge had given her.

"Yes, well..." he began, slightly skittish, "we don't get much mail here, and I wasn't expecting a letter." His voice was kind but hesitant.

"But you are the congregational leader, aren't you?" she respectfully challenged him.

"*Yes*... but-" he was reluctant to explain, and she took it as an opportunity to insist.

"In that case, I was told to give this to you," she told him, shaking the letter for emphasis. "It's for a man named Lazarus."

"*Lazarus?*" he said, a look of alarm suddenly crossing his face.

'That's interesting.'

"No," he stammered, "I'm sorry..."

"Yes, it's a letter *to* you, *marked Lazarus,*" she insisted, shoving the letter towards him.

His mood didn't seem to be at all alleviated, and he let out a hard sigh. "Where did you hear that name?" he asked in a soft but serious tone with a look of deep concern.

"Look!" she said forcefully, presenting the envelope and pointing to the dark writing. "It says it right here *on the envelope!* The letter is *for Lazarus.*"

The man thoughtfully stroked his bearded chin with a look of pensive amusement as he considered her impassioned speech, but he still seemed unconvinced.

"Please," she said emphatically, unsure of what to do to convince him, "the letter is from Lord Blackridge. He's the one who sent me to you." She paused, her eyes watching him and pleading. "He said it was important," she told him, moving her eyes to the letter she still held firmly in her grip.

"*Well,* Lord Blackridge, my, my!" He chuckled at her forthrightness, seeming to relax a little. "What did you say your name was, young lady?" he asked politely, kindly removing the message from her hand.

"Uh... Avera Ibori, sir," she sheepishly informed him.

His face lit with a warm smile which morphed into a small, congenial grin. "Avera Ibori," he repeated after her. "It is a pleasure to meet you after all this time." He extended his hand to shake hers. "My name is Horace Waverley."

Her eyes widened. *'What! No.'*

"*You're* Mr. Waverley?" she asked, surprised and unbelieving as she took his hand in hers.

"It would certainly appear that way, wouldn't it?" he jokingly replied. "And I do so dearly love these people, but, I'm afraid, we shouldn't talk here. Would you be so kind as to join me in my office?" he asked her, indicating a door on the platform behind him.

Chapter 20: Lazarus

Avera followed him through the door into a cramped corridor, and he bolted the door behind them. The short hall presented one small doorway off to their right, its door standing open, and the plain white walls continued onward only to dead end within a few feet of the opening.

"In my office, if you would, please," he graciously requested, gesturing towards the lonely door frame.

The two of them entered into an office, the small and simple room housing only a few bookshelves, a desk with two chairs, and the chaotic organization typical of his rooms or offices. Papers and notes were strewn about the desk beside mess of pens and inkwells. About a dozen books lay open to various pages scattered atop surfaces about the room.

Avera paused to take in the room and all its charm, and he watched her as she did. "I *am* sorry for the mess," he told her.

"No. It's alright. How... cluttered is the mind of a genius," she remarked pleasantly.

"I suppose... *that* or a madman," he replied with a joking grin. "Excuse me while I take care of this."

He grabbed a lamp and brushed some papers to the side as he pulled it closer to the edge of the desk. He fiddled with it, making a few minor adjustments. Then, seemingly satisfied with the lamp and its placement, he turned his attention again to the letter.

'Lazarus...'

He glanced down at the simple address marked elegantly in black ink by his friend's hand.

"I'm rather anxious to read this, you see," he explained, grabbing for his letter opener and breaking through the envelope. "Because Lord Blackridge said it's important, yes, but also... because it really must be urgent for him to have it taken here, much more so directly to me."

"He doesn't send you letters here, then?" she asked directly.

"Here... or at all. We have certain systems in place, should he have need to reach me," he told her, extracting the letter from the envelope and unfolding it. "That's why we ought to take a look at it now. Oh!" He stopped for a brief moment to turn her way. "I don't suppose you've ever seen this done. It might be of some interest to you," he told her, angling the letter so as to show her the ink marked page. "You see?"

"I *see* it," she said, taking a close look at the conglomeration of strange marks and unfamiliar characters. "Are those words you're familiar with?"

'This truly has become a novelty, hasn't it?'

"Not at all," he quietly chortled, "but there is a message here for us. It need only be brought to light."

"But how can you read it if you don't know the script?" she asked with puzzled interest.

He reached over and pressed the wick between his fingers. The oil in the bottom of the lamp began to glow and the wick began to smolder, then ignited and grew into a small flame like sparkling candlelight.

'Thank you,' he smiled, overcome with gratitude.

He took the letter and held it against the newborn flame. "Watch," he gently instructed her, his eyes alight with the fire of the burning lamp.

The written characters began to glow as the words became alive, and he looked on with pleasure as Avera watched in awestruck wonder. Each word, each letter, each stroke began to twist and twirl as it fought its way off the page. They floated up in the air with a spectacular show of dancing light before they wafted once again down onto the paper which he held. The words fell gently upon the page, having been transformed into simple language and familiar letters.

"It's been awhile since last I had the pleasure of this," he told her, smiling.

His eyes became fixed on the newfound pen strokes, still aglow with the light of the lamp, and he began to read, his eyes darting quickly across the page as he took the message in.

My Dear Friend, Twice have I have traded blood for a man's life. Once to the ground and once to the King. Tyberion has escaped with what remains of the research regarding the conclusion of the governmental reforms. As for the boy, it is my regret that I could not spare him from threat, but the King has desired him. Time is short. We will pursue. His life is, as it ever was, in your hands. Knight to D3. Eternally in Your Service, Adrien Blackridge

'Adrien...' He closed his eyes in careful consideration. *'Check, is it?'*

He opened his eyes, his brow furrowed. "Oh dear," he muttered contemplatively, his face becoming deathly serious. *'Well... this could be a bit more trouble than I had realized.'*

"Well?" Avera sputtered, inspiring nothing more than a glance in her direction. "What does it say?" she asked curiously.

He offered a hesitant smile to guise his growing concern. "You were right... it is important," he told her, his mind still contemplating the trouble at hand.

"Mr. Waverley, what is it?" she asked him, becoming desperate for answers.

"We should go now," he told her, burning the note in the fire until it was a pile of ash. "There is a problem, and one which must be cared for speedily. I must ask that you accompany me to the merchant's district."

"Of...course," she affirmed with a quick nod, not seeming to understand why.

"Thank you," he said, and he hurriedly made his way out the door into the hallway. "Follow me, if you would, please."

The girl quickly followed, coming obediently through the open doorway behind him. She started back towards the door to the platform which was bolted, and he stopped her when he saw it.

"Not that way, Avera," he called after her, his voice kindly yet stern.

Avera turned to see that he had taken a right and was now standing at the end of the hall, considering the seeming dead end of the rough walls painted white. He laid his hand against the wall and felt the warmth flow through him, dropping into his palm and spreading out into the painted plaster. Streams of light like liquid fire appeared before his eyes and began to pattern the covered bricks, revealing what was hidden beneath the surface. The wall slowly began to move, dropping down into the ground below them, leaving a grand archway to a long set of stone stairs leading down into the mysterious darkness of the city's underground tunnel system.

"This way, please," he beckoned her with a friendly smile.

'All is well. First to Dorcus, then to Benjamin.'

Chapter 21: The Light Bearer

She followed him into the underground, down the stairs to the mysterious darkness of the passage below them.

The tunnel, itself, was wonderfully built with high arching ceilings formed with chiseled stones, expertly cut and carefully placed. Despite the age of the pathway and some minor disrepair which had befallen the stones above and beneath them, the tunnels presented themselves as a reliable thoroughfare, stretching for miles ahead of them.

There was a certain dampness in the air, and the occasional sound of water slowly dripping from a gap in the stones to the ground beneath them echoed through the vacant halls.

There were torches placed every few yards, ensconced on either side of the hall just below the arch of the ceiling. The depths of the halls were utter blackness, but there was light all around them. The torches would light as they approached and lighten as drew nearer. A similar thing would happen as they passed a torch, traveling onward. The light would wane and slowly diminish, until the torch would eventually go out again, leaving nothing but blackness behind them.

Avera peered into the darkness ahead of her, straining her eyes to see farther down the hall, looking for some indication of an end, but the corridor seemed endless. A new set of torches lit with every few steps, illuminating a new segment of hall and beckoning them further on along their solitary journey.

The occasional passage would open up to the left or right of them, but Waverley kept forward with much determination and quiet intensity, and Avera began to notice about the third time that there were set at every intersection of the halls a collection of round stones placed as markers near the edge of the pathway. Each was engraved with a unique mark, and though the stone which bore a certain marking would not always be in the same position, the same markings would always be present. There was a crown, a bishop, a flower, a book, a gavel, a saber, a castle, and two swords crossed. The stones were arranged around a larger stone which was smooth and blank faced.

The markings on the stones would respond to their presence like the torchlight, but not all would enlighten as they passed them. At times, it was only the flower which illuminated. Though, at other times, it would be the flower and another mark, and the great stone in the center would magically enlighten with the image of the flower, also.

They had passed the intersections of several halls, and Avera had become overwhelmed with her interest at the stones. The flower and the crossed swords lit at the next intersection, and the flower was displayed, also, upon the smooth stone of the center which was without marking.

The symbol of the flower had a certain artistic elegance to it, having four peddles and a curved stem with a broad leaf at the bottom of it, and Avera couldn't help but wonder at it. She rushed over when she saw it, overcome by curiosity, and she placed her hand upon the face of the rock. It was smooth as it appeared, and the beauty of the glowing light showed through her hand, the symbol no less seen.

"Lovely, isn't it?" Waverley said with a look of fondness. He stood now beside her as she knelt by the stones, having noticed her absence from him.

"Yes, sir," she said, removing her hand.

"I suppose you wonder how these work," he said, his eyes moving over to her.

She nodded.

"These tunnels are a labyrinth," Waverley explained with his usual kindness and etiquette. "They were built centuries ago by the City Architects as a means of safe passage for the Court Officers in times of trouble. Each passage is needed at some time but not at all times. Some have said that the tunnels move and rearrange themselves according to the needs of the officers. The same are those who cannot accept that a way could be made long before there is a need, and I reject their theory. Whether we see it or not, the provision is always made long before the trial has started. The darkness ensures the safety of the light bearer. The light illuminates our way. Those without it are lost in these halls. These stones," he said, directing her attention back to the glowing rocks, "show us the way through the passages and mark the turns to any presently accessible exists." He stretched forth his hand to the tunnel which opened to their right. "That way to the crossed swords exit, and this way to the flower," he added, dropping his arm and redirecting it forward.

"And the unmarked stone?" she asked him.

"That is the Waytracker Stone," he told her. "It is a guide stone which reflects the heart of the light bearer and shows the symbol of the desired exit. In this case, we are directed to the flower, which I might have supposed, but it is nice to see."

"I see," she said, "but, Mr. Waverley, why is the bishop in black?"

He smiled and turned around without a word. As he did, the flower faded to black and the bishop lit with the same magnificent light. Still, the Waytracker Stone displayed the flower on its face as before.

'Yes, I understand. The way is behind us.'

"The halls go both ways, don't they?" he asked her smiling as he turned again.

"They do," she replied as she stood to her feet, her curiosity satisfied. She looked to Waverley with a small grin. "Thank you."

"It's my pleasure, believe me," he said, taking a small bow. His eyes turned as he arose and gazed longingly to the darkness yet before them. "We should go."

He went on walking and she kept on following behind him, the silence resumed between them until at last he said, "The mages developed a technique called blood tracking."

"Blood tracking?" she repeated. *'I haven't heard of it.'*

"Yes. They use it as a means of hunting men like animals. They use their magic to create shadow creatures, conjured beasts born of darkness and imbued with a man's blood. The blood from which they are formed is that which they will endlessly pursue. They sense one thing and that is the man's blood. They are bloodthirsty in the most literal sense."

"But that's terrifying," Avera said, becoming nervous at the thought of it.

"It is..." Waverley conceded, carefully choosing his words. "It is, also, why they keep stores of everyone's blood."

She looked at him with surprise. "Do they have yours?"

"I work here," he said, softly considering.

Avera watched him. His eyes seemed set on some deeper thoughts, forever locked beneath the surface of their present conversation.

It was true that there was a blood storage facility at High Palace containing a vile of blood from each citizen and inhabitant of Pyre. Each military or governmental officer, each soldier or guardsman, every person born in Pyre, and every working person within the city bounds was called upon as a requirement of the state to come and give their blood to the governmental blood databanks.

"But the blood databanks are for crime prevention and public safety, Mr. Waverley. It's for rebels and traitors and spies. They wouldn't use the people's blood against them."

He nodded twice without a word. "Yes..." he said after a moment of silent contemplation, "I'm sure they would not use the blood stores arbitrarily. As it is, you should know your father is well."

"You've heard from him?" she asked hopefully.

He shook his head. "No, but Adrien said that he was fled safely, and he disposed of the blood they had on file for him."

"Adrien?" she asked curiously.

"Ah, yes... Lord Blackridge. I'm sorry," he apologetically corrected.

"I see," she said. "Then... my father is alive. He's alright. I can see him." She could barely contain the growing joy of hope within her.

"Yes," Waverley nodded in agreement. "Though, I'm sorry, I don't know where he is."

'Yes, but knowing he is well is enough. I will find him or he will find me, and we will see each other again. But wait... he could have told me that. It isn't pressingly important and it doesn't explain why we're going to the merchant district.'

"Mr. Waverley, that couldn't have been all that the letter said."

"No," he chuckled softly and grinned with amusement, "it isn't. It said, also, that Benjamin is in danger, and I must go help him."

Avera was suddenly gripped with a sinking feeling of dread as she remembered the vile of blood which Blackridge had held in his hand and the wound which Benjamin had sustained the morning of her departure.

"They wouldn't use the blood tracking on Ben, would they?" she asked in shocked disbelief.

He looked at her with pain in his eyes. "That is precisely their intention," he affirmed, his voice full of regret.

"What will you do?" she asked, becoming slightly frantic.

"Enough," he softly assured her.

'Enough?'

She smiled, his quiet confidence somehow stirring something within her.

'Enough.'

"Mr. Waverley," she said again, slowly shifting the subject, "why did he call you Lazarus?"

"Ah," he said, letting out a breathy laugh and a sharp sigh. "Adrien Blackridge was a man I knew years ago in very different times. He was my apprentice and my friend, and he was great friends with your father then, too. They used to tease each other, as young men do.

"At the time, it had become a sport to try to kill me, and once, they thought they *had* killed me. They would have gladly thrown me a funeral, but I never have held a fondness for death. After that they found I lived, they called me Lazarus in the papers, and it seems that Lord Blackridge never forgot it.

"But come," he said, "we're nearly there."

Chapter 22: The Gardener

"It's early yet. You'll find time," she told the fair skinned man in the black business suit and tie as she wrapped his flowers and the beautiful aroma of roses wafted up between them.

"Haha. I sure hope so," he chortled, his palms grasping the edge of the counter.

She wrapped the red ribbon tight around the bouquet, presenting him with an expertly arranged collection of red and spotted white.

He grinned happily as he watched her slender fingers tie the band around the roses, and his eyes danced with the light of eager expectation. "Hey, Dorothy, thank you!" the man said, brimming with exuberance. "I don't know what I would've done had you not been here. So few places are open."

"Yes, well... there are *reasons* for both those things," she reminded him.

"The closed I get. You being here, I don't," he moved his eyes from the flowers to her. "Why don't you come to the Kingsmen meetings?"

"Well, I..." she hesitated and the string slipped from its place, loosening the bow. "*Blast!*" she muttered softly.

"Dorothy, why not come with Louise and I to the congregation by the North Gate? Be our guest." He raised a finger with the idea.

"I... don't think so, Charlie," she said, maintaining a small, plastered grin as she attempted to retie the bow with shaking hands.

"Oh, come now, Dorothy! Why not?" he amicably protested. "Listen. Mr. Waverley has oversight, and he's the kindliest man you've ever met, I *promise* you!"

She smiled, pulling at the ends of the string which held the bright red bow around the deep green of the thorny stems of the dozen roses she had laid in the space between them. "I don't doubt he is," she replied softly, considering the beauty of the flowers she had wrapped for him. "I'm sorry," she said, her eyes still focused softly on the roses. "It's bad timing just now, but... perhaps, some other time." She paused. "I would very much like to hear him."

He watched her with quiet concern, unsure of what to say as he caught the sadness in her steely blue eyes. "Alright, Dorothy, some other time," he replied softly, then smiled and added lightheartedly, "But I'll hold you to it!"

"Please do," she lithely requested, her lips parting to a small grin.

He smiled with a nod. "Sure thing, Dorothy."

"Thank you," she said softly. "And a *happy anniversary* to you, Charlie," she added, presenting him with the bouquet and a friendly smile. "I wish you and Louise all happiness." There was a quiet sincerity to her words, though her heart remained heavy with the dull pain of an old memory.

"Thanks! It really should be a good one," he replied, holding the bouquet tenderly in his arms with silent contemplation. He took a deep breath. "Wow... good old fashioned roses." He smiled. "Louise will love them. Take care now, Dorothy, and thanks again!" he said happily, tipping his hat to her as he made his departure.

"Bye now!" she called after him with a friendly wave of her hand, and the silver bell jingled as the door closed behind him.

The shop was empty, filled with the sweet scent of flowers of various kinds, and she breathed it in, resting her arms on the counter in front of her.

'Funny, I can still remember when flowers weren't such a rare thing, but to so many that's all they've ever been. Still...'

Her mind began to stray to dated images and distant memories of her father's work in the palace gardens and her subsequent time there, all the years she had admired the many colors of blossoms in bloom.

'There was such beauty then. Things seemed simpler, despite all of our uncertainties and questions. We thought of life and all that we had hoped it would give, all that we would hope to make of it, and we pondered why things happened and who we were meant to be.

'Even after those days with my father were passed and I and my brothers were grown, still I would walk in the gardens at night and often before dawn, and then, at times, I would find him there, considering the stars, and we would walk together in the garden, discussing life and dreams and wonderings.' She smiled fondly at the thought. *'There was such beauty for us then and life held such great promise.'*

She glanced out the window at the bleakness of the maurium city. The image was marred by the raindrops which had begun to fall on the large windowpanes of the glass storefront. The cloud cover had captured the city and its people in a prison of darkness and shadows of grey.

'There was color once, but this seems more appropriate for the time, that that same beauty should be hidden in the midst of all of this decay.'

She smiled a sad smile, her cheek resting on her interlocked hands as she continued to look longingly through the glass.

At the same time, there was the faint sound of smooth stone sliding and a section of floor began to open up in front of her. Startled, she jumped back and refocused her attentions forward. An emerging staircase led up to the checkered floor of the small shop with its orderly displays of flowers.

Her eyes widened at the sight of the opening in the center of her floor. "Eliezer?" she called out, watching intently for the familiar form of her beloved companion.

"Hello, Dorothy!" his voice called back merrily. "I've brought company with me."

She felt a bit of relief, but not enough to stop her from reprimanding him for the carelessness of his action.

"Eliezer, you mad man!" she shot back with some vexation, airing her disapproval. She rushed around the desk to the main area, blocking the view of the hole through the glass front. "You realize it isn't yet three o'clock? The store is still *open!* Now, suppose that I had customers! What would I have done should the floor have opened up beneath them? Or beside! Why, Charles Dapper was here not moments ago! Surely, he'd have known you, and what would I have told him?"

"Dorothy," he said again, "please, listen. I didn't mean to alarm you, but I do have urgent business for us and we do have company, also."

"Eliezer, I swear, your parishioners will get me in trouble even before you can!" she said, continuing on without hearing. "The man keeps trying to get me to come to your meetings. He seems to be under the impression that I'd actually *like* you!"

"Well, one couldn't possibly be sure of such a thing as *that!* It seems a bit radical that someone should actually *like* me, particularly one such as yourself, fair damsel," he jested, stepping over the threshold of the stairs. His face wore a joking smile. "Now, I repeat, Miss Trimble, I have company with me."

He rubbed his thumb lightly against the tips of his index and middle finger, a nervous habit of his which she had grown used to seeing on occasion.

"Stop it," she said with an amused grin. "You, Mr. Waverley," she warned, wagging a finger at him, "are an incurable comic and entirely in the wrong. Why would you come here?"

"As I told you," he said, "I am here on business, and ehm..." he paused, looking around the room with a quick set of exaggerated glances, "the patrons don't seem to be much of a problem now, do they?" he smiled at her, his eyes alight with the glimmer of playful jest.

"But that isn't the *point!*" she argued with him softly. "It was *reckless* of you to come here now."

"No, my dear. I assure you, it would have been reckless of me had I *not* come," he said, moving past her to the door and flipping the *open* sign to *closed*. "Now, Miss Trimble, *please*," he quietly implored her, his eyes softly pleading, "kindly say hello to Avera."

Dorothy's eyes shot back to the opening of the passage to the tunnels, to the place where Avera now stood. "Avera! My goodness! Well..." her eyes glanced back over to Waverley, "you *had* said you had brought us some company, hadn't you?"

He offered her a short nod and a small smile.

"I'm sorry," she told him, quickly apologizing in gentle manner.

He returned the words with a look of forgiving fondness and smiled at her. "I see no trespass," he quietly assured her.

'Good.'

She felt a bit of relief and turned her attentions back to Avera.

"Hello, dear," she said, addressing the girl with her usual pleasantries.

Avera grinned, seemingly amused by them. "It's nice to see you, Miss Dorothy," she replied with a friendly wave of her hand.

"Yes," Dorothy said again, " it *is* a pleasant surprise to have you here, and under such odd circumstances, yet again." Avera laughed, and Dorothy passed a small grin at Waverley. "I may have to apologize for that."

"Or I might," he said, returning the grin, "...or *Adrien* might, being as he's the one who sent the letter by her."

Her eyes widened. "*Adrien...?* You've heard from him?"

He nodded, his own concern reflected in his caring eyes. "Yes. It seems that the ambush was more successful than we'd realized. They plan to use blood collected against Benjamin to find him. It seems that Zephyr has taken some great interest in his capture."

Dorothy's face twisted along with her stomach. "I see..." she said thoughtfully.

"You've read the reports on blood tracking which were delivered us. You know the dangers this brings. He *will need* our help. You asked why I had come. The *reason* is that I may request your assistance."

She nodded, appreciating the seriousness of the situation. "Yes, of course," she said, and her eyes steadfastly watched him.

He turned his attentions to the girl. "Avera, it may be best that we part company with you here. I wouldn't want to have you mixed up in this any more than you already are, certainly not unwittingly and without consent."

"I appreciate that," she told him, the light of the window reflecting in her dark round pupils.

"You will be heading home, then?" he readily inquired.

"Yes," she said with a nod.

He nodded thoughtfully and his eyes dropped, his face crinkled with concern. "Avera," he said, refocusing his gaze on the child again, "you *do* have somewhere you're staying?"

Avera's face broke into a small grin. "I do," she assured him. "I'm staying with a neighbor. My father appointed her as guardian."

Waverley smiled. "Good, then," he said with a nod of approval. "Come and see us when you're ready," he kindly invited. "You know where to find us now. It's no secret... well... to you, anyway. The others don't often come here, but I have difficulty staying away, and Dorothy..." he shot her a disapproving glance, "seems to follow me."

"Thank you," Avera said, "I'll be sure to stop back sometime and see you."

He opened the door for her, and they exchanged pleasantries in parting, Avera stopping for a moment to ask directions of Dorothy back to the main thoroughfare.

"Would you prefer that I *not* follow you?" she asked him once Avera had gone and the door was locked behind her.

He looked at her and smiled with a distinct and tender happiness. "Not at all. In fact, it's entirely the opposite," he told her, his face breaking into a grin, and he grabbed her wrist, pulling her along to the passageway behind him.

Chapter 23: Shadow Beasts

'Hm...' Benjamin crouched down, sitting back on his heels beside the freshly laid soil and examining the new growth. *'It shouldn't be much longer now.'*

The clouds moved out of the way of the sun, warming his face and illuminating the gardens.

He smiled. *'That should help.'*

He stood to his feet, turning his face upward and closing his eyes, soaking in the brilliant sun of the afternoon, and he watched the light seep through his eyelids. When he opened his eyes, the sky was a brilliant blue, painted with white clouds moved by the wind. He looked to the west as the wind blew eastward. Silver storm clouds loomed in the distance, making their slow march towards him.

'*A storm then.'* He looked back to the bright green sprouts peaking out above the soil. *'The rain should help, also.'*

He thought to return to the library, but something stopped him, catching his glance as he turned. There, in the distance among the trees, there was a strange mist like a dark cloud of smoke moving quickly over the forest floor and out into the open field. His muscles tightened and he felt his stomach twist as a burst of adrenaline rushed through him.

'That can't be good.'

The mist came rolling like waves from the woodlands, passing through the line of foliage and surrounding the trunks of the trees with an eerie haze of deathly darkness. It continued to expand into the field and began to envelop the grass far off in front of him. As it approached, he could see the image of two beasts running in the midst of the darkness. Their slender forms were like that of wolves crafted from smoke and shadows, their bodies a clouded phantom grey, and their piercing eyes a glowing purple which pulsated through them.

'What are those...?'

He turned and ran as fast as he could back towards the main doors of the library, the creatures following behind him with unnatural speed, vanishing and reappearing as they came nearer and nearer. He rushed onto the steps and up to the portico, propelling himself forward towards the doors and desperately grabbing hold of one of the handles. Still, the beasts were racing towards him, speedily closing the distance between them.

He lunged forward as he threw the door open, compelling himself through the doorway onto the floor inside and slamming the door shut behind him with a single fluid motion. He stayed on the ground, supporting himself with one of his elbows and looking back towards the doors, his heart beating as he breathed heavily, catching his breath.

'Some sort of shadow creatures... doubtless, some sort of sorcerer's magic, but... it's nothing like I've ever seen, unless...' he looked down at the bandages wrapped around his arm and his teeth clenched. *'Lord, I hope not.'*

He watched as the strange mist captured the world outside the windows of the library's main hall. It began to rise and thicken until the sunlight fled and the room was held in darkness. He could hear the beasts on the portico, their soft steps and heavy breath a sound of threatening to their helpless prey. He felt his chest tighten, and he began to slowly push himself backwards, away from the doors and the bloodthirsty horror of the animals behind them.

He glanced back at the fire which burned in the bronze brazier behind him.

'You'll have to help me.'

Everything stopped. The beasts howled, and there was a brief silence.

'Is that... it, then?' He paused, hesitant to believe it. *'No, but the mist is still here thickening.'*

He had begun to raise himself to his feet when a deep pain suddenly entered his left arm, finding its focus in his wrist. It was a pain like needles which tore at him with the ferocity of an animal biting at his flesh and erupted, quickly breaking through his skin and muscles, entering his veins and filling them with the fierce burning of acid, each cell of his very blood bursting forth into a source of terrible agony and rehabilitating pain. He let out a terrible scream, grabbing tight hold of his arm with his other hand as he fell to his knees, writhing in pain.

"Yaaaaaaaa!" he cried again, and the mist darkened, beginning to seep through the cracks between the doors, entering between the door and the threshold.

He was still doubled over in pain, holding his wrist and pressing his fingers into the bandages with force, wishing to pull the insides out and somehow stop the pain. He couldn't think. He couldn't move. There was only pain and burning. He clenched his teeth tighter, wanting to scream again, but unable to think to manage. Instead, he dug at his arm with his thumb and fingers and let out a low sound of painful moaning, his breathing coming near to a whimper.

"Save me," he choked the words out through his pain, "lest I die. The pain is too much."

The wolves howled again, and the pain left him altogether. He breathed a sigh of relief and began to cry, falling forward on his hand.

"Thank you," he muttered, pressing his watering eyes.

He heard the sound of ghostly wind, and he raised his head again, watching as the two magical wolf-like creatures materialized in front of him, fading into view from the nothingness of the air. They were grey ghosts with ornate markings which pulsated purple and glowed like their menacing eyes, blind and without features. There was a circle on each of their foreheads with lines beneath their eyes and up their pointed ears. Each dog had stripes on either side of their bodies which ran from snout to tail and a circle at the connection of every joint to its body.

They growled, bearing their needle-like teeth, their sharp ears pointed back as they crouched as if to pounce.

He felt his heart skip a beat, and he exhaled sharply, caught in the tremors of shock and terror. He felt his voice forming in the back of his throat, but he was lost for words, and what came out was an inhuman gargling sound of muddled terror.

"What is this?" he voiced through clenched teeth in frightful terror.

A shot of adrenaline came, and he jumped quickly to his feet, cautiously backing away from the beasts and their threatening. *"Yaa-aaaa!"* he breathed nervously. *'What is this?'*

He felt his heart quicken. "Again," he said, "please help," and with that he spun himself around, propelling himself forward, and began a mad dash back into the rows of bookshelves.

The wolves sprang forward, following fast behind him, their breath at his heels. He ran forward, faster than he'd ever ran, and stretched out his arm, hurling books down at them as he knocked them from the shelves, but they continued forward, bounding at him, nipping at his pants and ankles.

He grabbed a bookshelf and spun himself around to the next isle, changing direction. The wolves pounced at him in the moment when he paused, sending themselves forward and barreling clumsily into the shelves behind him, stunned for a moment as they fell flatly to the ground. He continued on with a short glance behind them. The wolves had begun to recover, slowly regaining their footing and positioning themselves again for the chase. He saw their purple eyes open and their jaws snapped at him with an unsettling bark of threatening agitation. He kept on, hastily making his way to the bookshelf with the corridor to the chambers below ground.

'Come on...'

He pressed the button at the flower center, and the bookshelf moved, the stairwell coming quickly into view. Relieved, he let out a breath and placed his hand against the wall to the side of the stairwell. He breathed and his heart warmed, his blood like a warm honey flowing through him.

'Please, help me... I trust.'

The light came like fire, filling the cracks in the stone and igniting the lamps as it flowed out before him.

He smiled, happily relieved. "Ha," he breathed with shallow breath. *'Thank you.'*

He made his way swiftly downward, lightly proceeding from step to step with uncommon speed and careful stride.

'I must believe that it's my blood they're after. If I could only get to Kypher or Justice...'

As he went, the passage closed behind him, and he heard clearly as the wolves howled.

He closed his eyes. *'Oh no...'*

"Yaaaaaa!" he screamed, the same pain again returning.

He stumbled, having lost his footing, and tumbled down the stairs, crashing violently into the wall and dropping to the ground below him.

"Yow..." he groaned.

He pushed away from the narrow wall and turned his battered face upward.

'Right, then. No more defensive maneuvers... for my health.'

He closed his eyes tight and blinked, fixing his glasses. The howling had ceased and, when he opened his eyes to see again, the mist had already begun to fill the passageway, the wolves materializing at the top of the stairs, their sights fixed steadfastly upon him.

He waved his arm and fire flew out towards them, causing them to shrink back. He smirked, pulling himself to his feet.

"Thanks for not breaking my glasses," he said with a sly smile, pressing his back against the wall.

'Come. Here I stand. Jump at me.'

The wolves pounced, looking to spring on him, but he patiently waited and fled quickly to the adjoining hall, leaving them to crash helplessly into the stone wall of the underground, leaving them stunned for a moment and buying some time.

He ran through the halls in a dead sprint, anxiously looking behind him for the hounds to follow. Again, the wolves appeared behind him, jumping out from the stairwell and bounding after him, effortlessly pursuing down the hall.

At once, he heard the sound of frantic footsteps, boots hitting hard against the floors beneath them, and he looked to a room up ahead of him.

"How about a hand there, Ben?" Kypher said, sliding from the doorway, and turning quickly, running past him to meet the beasts head on, his sword already in hand.

"Or two!" Justice added, coming barreling from farther down the hall, his sword drawn and at the ready.

"Appreciated!" he called back after them as they went rushing past him into battle.

"We heard you scream," Kypher told him, "figured it couldn't be good, and thought you might like some help."

"Very much! Thank you!" Ben called back to them, pausing to watch their fight.

"You handle the right, and I'll take the left," Justice suggested.

"You've got it, Atti!" Kypher replied with his usual lighthearted enthusiasm.

The two rushed at the beasts, swinging their swords with the same skillful display of strength and stunning precision which he had come to expect of the well versed fighters. Their sparking blades flashed with the light of the lamp fires burning as they sliced at the beasts and their swords passed through them.

The ghostly shadows of the beasts' clouded coats appeared to move with the swing of the men's swords, being pulled by the force of the wind, and they paused, suspended in their stride, neither moving forward nor falling to the ground, but they became as living statues before them. Then, within seconds, the smoky essence of the beasts' gaseous forms pulled back into place, and they began again as if unaffected, the stride of the beasts returning with the same speed and velocity as before the time of their suspension.

"What?" Kypher exclaimed as the beasts hit the ground in the midst of a powerful run.

"Even with the pyrite..." Justice muttered, considering the thing.

'Impossible...'

The dogs jumped up at the two men, coming at them with force as they sprung forward, continuing their run. They braced for impact, pulling their swords back at the ready, but the two beasts never impacted, instead phasing through their bodies with spectral indifference.

He froze. *'They're only real to me.'*

"Run, Ben!" Kypher called out to him, turning around after the shadow creatures.

He did run, but too late. The beasts sounded a chilling call as they pounced on him, shrill and deafening, and a swirling portal opened up behind them as a stormy grey and purple vortex.

"What?" Kypher exclaimed again.

"It's magic, Kypher," Justice proclaimed dryly. "Sorcery."

The hounds leaped on Benjamin's back, digging their claws into his flesh as they knocked him violently to the ground. He fell under the weight of their force. He tumbled, and he felt the pain as his face and battered body hit against the stone covered ground, skidding and scraping his ivory skin.

"*Aaa!*" he let out a momentary cry, the beasts pinning him to the ground and pressing the weight of their paws against his head and body as they sniffed him.

He felt the power of the vortex pulling him backwards, and he tried to grab hold of the ground, but the wolves grabbed hold of him with their needle-like fangs and began to drag him back, their eyes and markings glowing red like blood.

He closed his eyes. There was pain, and then... there was light and the familiar sound of the rushing of flame. The wolves released him, lifting their heads, and he opened his eyes as he felt the warmth pass over him.

"Curse these villainous blood hounds!" a familiar voice chided from the far end of the hall with disgruntled agitation.

Benjamin looked up at the determined face of his friend and let out a sigh of relief, his body relaxing as he rested his face back against the cool of the floor. *'Thank you.'*

"Webber!" Kypher excitedly exclaimed.

"Gentlemen," the man acknowledged with a faint smile of greeting.

"We thought you might be in need of assistance," the light voice of a woman pleasantly stated as its owner walked out into the hall beside him.

"Dorcus!" Kypher happily proclaimed.

She laughed. "Hello, Alexander."

"Excellent timing," Justice remarked.

"Just in time is a little late for my liking, *but...*" she looked to her partner.

"I'm afraid it's all that I can manage," he replied with apologetic embarrassment.

Benjamin felt the pointed pressure of the wolves' feet as they walked on him and growled, crouching low to the ground and baring their teeth with barks of menacing warning as they positioned themselves between him and his newly arrived companions.

"Oh, hush!" Dorcus upbraided, chastising the hounds, and the beasts' mouths shut.

"We'll have to shut that," Eliezer said, considering the portal.

"It should vanish with the beasts," she thoughtfully informed him.

"They don't appear to be fond of the fire," he observantly remarked.

"No, I can't imagine they would be," she replied, voicing her agreement.

"Well, then..." he said, bringing his hand before his face. "By order of the King, I hereby order your immediate dissolution." He stretched forth his hand and fire flew from it, consuming the creatures in the radiant heat of sparkling light.

The wolves cried and whimpered, collapsing into lifeless heaps of ghostly shadows, their red eyes quickly fading into darkness. Their bodies decayed rapidly, smoke like vapors rising from their fading forms, and the portal vanished along with them, as Dorcus had said.

Benjamin pulled himself up from the ground to his feet as he watched the beasts' destruction with awe, and he moved his eyes to his friends, who smiled at him.

"Yeah, we got them!" Kypher cried out in joyous celebration with overwhelming exuberance, jumping and pumping his fist.

"Good show, Webber," Justice said simply with his usual understated gladness. "Well done."

"Please," Eliezer said humbly, his face flushed with embarrassment, "what did *I* do?"

'That's twice in two days...' Benjamin looked to him and smiled with appreciative gratitude. "Thank you," he said, bowing himself.

Dorcus ran and hugged him. "Ben," she said, "are you alright?"

He smiled, returning the loving gesture. "Quite well," he quietly assured her. "Thank you."

Chapter 24: Spirits and Men

It was a reasonably accommodated area, a remote military installation of the intelligence corps in the eastern woods, nearer to Pergum than it was anywhere. The tent which they were given was comfortably sized with seats and tables for each of them, especially equipped with advanced technological gadgets and magical enchantments for each of them to use according to their needs. Zahaynei had prepared the tent area in haste while being mindful to maintain careful consideration, willing that Kallida would want for nothing and all should go well for them in this final mission to apprehend the enemies of their Lord the King.

Kallida has spent much of the time in a sort of trance, controlling the shadow creatures he had conjured and instilled with the life of the enemy's blood and causing them to thirst for it. All the while, Zahaynei was handling the recording and technical work while Blackridge monitored the situation, ensuring that no unexpected complications should present themselves. Everything that his partners did and all of the results they gathered were sent directly to him, also, as he kept watch over the reports of the personnel, magic, and technology in use.

He sat at the table, frantically reading through the reports as the machine spit them out at him with exceptional speed, the magic levels and vitality of their blood hounds being constantly monitored through Kallida's magical life force.

"I've got him," Kallida told them, his eyes glazed over in shimmering blue. "Opening the portal."

"Energy levels look good," Zahaynei replied. "I'm upping the electrical current to support the demands of the vortex. We should be ready for them. I've sent word to my men at High Palace. Once we have him through the portal, we can recover the memory tapes and we'll have them."

"Right," Blackridge acknowledged nervously. "No problems with the systems. Everything's running according to plan. Execution looks fine. All tech is sending properly. Kallida, your power levels are high, but so is your expenditure. Please, watch that for me."

"The vortex takes power," Kallida responded, "but I need it to bring the little brat in alive, and we need him alive to recover the memory."

"I understand," Blackridge said. "As long as you're aware of it. You don't have much in reserve."

"Yes, yes," Kallida said, as if it was more a bother to him than it was a concern. "Also..." he began to go on, but something happened and he cut himself short. "What?" he breathed, and there was a brief cut to the sorcerer's connection. "Alhor, more blood," Kallida urgently requested. "I've encountered a problem. Blackridge, I'm upping expenditures."

Blackridge held the paper in his hand and stared at it, wondering at the sudden drop. *'He... lost connection. What was that cut to his thread?'* The readings continued to print furiously and

unmonitored, the paper which he had been guiding to the ground folding over itself and piling sloppily on the table in front of him.

"*No, no, no, no!*" Kallida was muttering angrily. "*Darn it!* They're not..." he growled. "*Listen to me!*" he shouted, rising up and slapping his hand against the table. "*Attack them!*"

'Them?' a kind of hopeful expectation entered his heart, and he smiled. *'Then they did make it, after all.'*

"*No!*" Kallida screamed, pounding his fist against the table in a furious burst of immense frustration, the reports showing a complete loss of magic and his eyes returning to normal. "I lost it!"

"Oh?" Blackridge said curiously as he turned his head towards Kallida and tried to appear disappointed. "But you were doing so well."

Zahaynei spun around in his chair. "You *what?*" he spat.

Kallida was seething. He gripped at his face, his upper body slouched over the table, his wild eyes racing. "*You,*" he said at last, turning sharply to Blackridge. "You did this," he snarled.

Blackridge wet his lips, still in a state of extreme relief. He fought to keep himself from smiling. "Excuse me?" he blinked, his words clipped with careful monotone.

Zahaynei was watching them, his eyes slowly walking back and forth between the two men.

'He doesn't know what's true, does he? He hasn't made up his mind yet as we have.'

"You, Adrien Blackridge, are a traitor," Kallida proclaimed from the end of his rope, "and I know it. Though I don't know *how* you've done it, I *assure* you, Blackridge, *I do know*, and when I find out what did happen, I swear, I'll-"

"Kallida, what *did* happen?" Zahaynei broke in, still wanting to understand. "You haven't told us."

Kallida turned again towards the wall of the tent wherein they three had gathered for the mission. His back was turned towards Blackridge as it had been at first. He pressed his hand against the desk, staring with great intensity at nothing in particular. "I *had* the man," he told them. "The hounds had him in their jaws, but..." he shook his head, "something happened, some kind of power hit them, and I lost control. I told the hounds to attack, but they would not obey me. There was an interference. The hounds would only listen to *them!*"

"Them?" Zahaynei asked with interest, and Blackridge remained silent.

"A man and a woman!" Kallida said, grabbing his forehead and throwing his head back in exasperated anger. "They came and took control of the hounds. They bound them and cast fire on them, fire which *threw me out!* ...and cut my ties," he muttered helplessly, supporting himself with his hands on the table.

A faint smile crossed the face of Blackridge before he dispelled it. *'Well done, old friend.'*

"Now..." Kallida went on, furrowing his brow, "I imagine that the hounds are lying on the ground disintegrating as we speak, slowly returning to the dark vaporous mist from which I conjured them without their mystic lifeblood and bonds. What's more, I've lost my connections, and I can't use magic... not until I find another source. We've lost the memory, we've lost the blood..."

Zahaynei looked to Blackridge. "We may consult the mages with this," he suggested, as if still internalizing the sequence.

"Of course," Blackridge said. "We *can*, and perhaps, we *should*. However, they *are* Kingsmen," he gently reminded them, the corner of his mouth turned upward as he tried to refrain from chuckling. "Armorials, also."

Kallida turned, his desperate eyes fixed again on Blackridge with anger and skepticism. "What are you saying?"

"Why, only that they have spirits fighting for them as well as we do us," Blackridge replied coolly. He leaned back in his chair, pondering for a short moment the matters of the unseen realm. "Of course, they don't control them as we do, and it's not so much a matter of force as it is love with them, but... they are gentler and much more powerful," he said softly, a small smile appearing as he felt the warmth begin to flood his being. "There is a governing rule which states whenever the power of a lesser spirit comes in contact with that of a greater spirit, the lesser spirit is unable to operate. You know that, Kallida."

There was silence between them. Kallida stood stone still, his eyes darting frantically back and forth as he raced to internalize the information. Both he and Zahaynei shared a distinct look of astonishment. The confusion was clearly falling away from the two men.

"*You!*" Kallida said again, pointing a finger in the direction of the Archmage. "You did this! You knew! It was *your* idea, *your* plan, *your excuse* for *your own failure!* You never intended for us to catch this man." He stopped, a look of sudden realization coming across his face. "He's the heir, isn't he? Yes... and *you*..." Kallida began a slow march, shaking his finger at him, "you sent word to Eliezer. That's why he arrived late! He wasn't there, but you know where he was." He stopped and another thought came to him. "He's in the city somewhere, isn't he? Yes... of course, he is," Kallida breathed, watching his eyes. "I *will* find him, and he *will pay* for your disloyalty."

Blackridge sat in silence, his countenance unmoving and indifferent as his eyes locked with Kallida's, each man's gaze filled with a fiery intensity.

"You knew this would happen. You told us," Kallida reminded him, his voice quiet and threatening. "Greater spirits, lesser spirits... a simple rule known to all who master the arts, and yet... so easily forgotten. I was Master of the Magicians once; yet, somehow, *you're the one* who

reminded us," Kallida said, his voice low. "It *is* a *pity* that spirits don't reject the will of God as men do, but *you... knew that,* Blackridge, didn't you?"

'Kallida...' Blackridge kept his mouth from speaking and his face from all expression, not wanting to give Kallida any opportunity against him or any hint of a clue.

"I thought so," Kallida said, turning up his nose. "*Look*," he added firmly, turning his head to the side, "just because you're an intolerably talented swordsman and dueling happens to be Zephyr's favored determination of justice doesn't mean that things have gone unnoticed, merely *un-mentioned*." He turned his eyes back on him, his gaze a burning coal of immense hatred and undying resentment. "And the next time that you send word to Dorcus and Eliezer of our plans, make sure to tell them that I said hello, because you see, *Lord* Blackridge, *I... know... everything*."

Blackridge watched Kallida as his eyes watched him, boring holes into his soul. *'Best not to say anything.'* His eyes strayed to Zahaynei, who sat, watching the scene with quiet interest. *'Alhor...'* he almost laughed but didn't, *'always so inspective. Though, I do wonder what he thinks of it all. Oh well...'*

He turned his glance again to Kallida, meeting his eyes with increased intensely, and he smirked as his determination grew. Kallida seemed surprised by him, but Blackridge leaned forward, wetting his lips as he put his mouth to the man's ear, and he offered only a simple phrase as he whispered, "Clearly not."

Chapter 25: Forbidden Knowledge

Avera paced the floors of the house on Mayverch Street until she had thoroughly determined to leave.

"Annetta," she said, calling to the kitchen from the main hall, "I'm going out."

"You're leaving?" Annetta said, surprised. "But you haven't left the house in days. It's good you're getting out, I suppose, but where is it you're off to?"

She grabbed at the doorknob and held it for a moment, biting her lip. "I'm going to the library," she told her.

"The *library?*" Annetta replied in astonishment. "Why would you ever go there?"

"My father always wanted to take me," she told her, giving a soft reply after a brief silence. "That, and I have some research I need done."

"Avera, darling, your father died when you were still a child. I told you once already this week. You really must stop pretending."

"Ah, right..." Avera said softly, her voice low.

Annetta had been saying things like that, things that didn't make sense, and Avera was becoming increasingly uneasy over it.

'Annetta... ever since my visit to High Palace, she's been...'

"I don't see why you need to go," Annetta went on, unhindered by Avera's thoughts. "You can stay here and use the KLP, use the cerebral link, take a nap if you like. Let it do your research for you. It would be easier."

That was something else Annetta had been doing: always talking about using the KLP, which Avera hadn't been, and discouraging her from leaving the house.

Avera paused, leaning on the metal knob as she pensively wet her lips. "Yes, but I'm in need of a walk," she diplomatically replied. "I've been in too long, like you said."

"Well, alright..." Annetta said, "but wouldn't you like some lunch first?"

Avera's body became tense. This had happened several times when she had tried to leave the house. There was always something, some reason she shouldn't, another excuse to stay inside... forever. "Annetta, I..." she stopped.

'What can I say?' She gripped the knob and turned it, pulling the door open and feeling the sunlight for the first time in days. *'I'm sorry.'*

"I'll be back before dinner!" she called back, rushing out the door and pulling it shut hastily behind her.

"Avera!" Annetta was saying, looking to add something more, but it wasn't anything she hadn't already heard.

Freed from the house, Avera made her way through the crowded city streets to the state sanctioned library at the heart of the capital.

The building was tall. It took up only a small amount of space on the city block, but it extended far into the sky as a mighty tower. She looked up at the silver letters marking the elaborately carved entrance:

Zephyr Almast Library Of Advanced Studies For the Betterment of the State

She stepped inside the spacious lobby, well lit and comfortably furnished with modern accommodations. There were dark metal stairs which lined the glass front of the towering structure, winding around the perimeter of the square base upward, and she speedily began to climb them up to the resource floors.

The resource floors were different, and the first on which she now emerged had the added help of a librarian's desk. The room was large with high ceilings of tinted glass reinforced with maurium. There were bookshelves strategically placed throughout the floor, lining nearly every wall with some found in between. There were rolling ladders attached to a shelf on every wall for the sake of acquiring the higher levels of resources. There were small tables and padded armchairs arranged throughout the levels in remote pockets for the visitors to read or discuss.

Much of the lighting was provided by the ambient light of the sun through the glass wall of the front, though it was a particularly dreary day and the clouds had shut up much of the light, leaving only dark and grey. For days like these, there were, also, maurium lamps and floor lighting provided for convenience and style.

The shelves, which were designed with a grid of individual tiny compartments like shadow boxes, were filled with holodexes, technologically advanced units resembling scrolls and used for storing holographic virtual copies of books and information, each embossed with a symbol and lettering denoting its priority level, title, and usage.

The place was peppered with students, many of whom were about her age, if not a little older, young men and women dressed in the uniform of their respective academies.

The most common of the uniforms was that of the Royal Academy, plain black pants and a jacket which resembled a simplified version of the palace guard - double breasted with two lines of shining silver buttons, delicately accented with the careful embroidery of silver thread around the cuffs and collar. The collar itself wrapped around the neck of the wearer, standing an inch high, and parting only for a short distance at the front. It bore the royal insignia of the

house of Almast, a snake constricting a diamond with a sword through its head. The insignia was stitched amidst the complex and dazzling design on the left side near the front of the collar.

Avera glanced around the room, the layout of which found a fine balance between employing maximum space efficiency while remaining uncluttered.

'That's...' she glanced again around the room, scanning the shelves, and considering the holodexes, which must have been in the scores of hundreds*, 'a lot of information.'*

She looked around again, this time for help. There was a librarian sitting at the service desk to her right. She was typing away on a computer, single-mindedly focused on her work when Avera approached.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Avera said, politely attracting the woman's attention.

"Oh, yes?" she said, looking up at Avera with a smile. "Hello, Miss. My name's Kara. What can I help you with?"

She was a nice looking lady - youthful, fit, pretty, and plain with fair skin and dark brown hair which she had pulled back fashionably with two strands left loose, framing her face.

"I..." Avera stopped, staring at the woman seated behind the desk.

The woman was conservatively dressed, topped off with the necessary maurium jacket bearing the insignia of the state. She wore a metal name tag which read Kara as she said, but there was something else that had caught Avera's attention - a small golden shield branded with a cross and boasting a three pointed crown.

'That pin... it's like the one that Benjamin wears.'

"Miss?" the librarian asked, offering a slightly concerned and puzzled look in return for Avera's hesitance.

"Sorry. It's just that I noticed your pin," she said, indicating the shield. She offered a friendly smile, treating it as an ordinary object of interest.

"Oh, why thank you," she said, appearing a little nervous, though she tried to hide it. "It's just an old family heirloom."

"Oh... well, it's very nice," Avera said, dropping the topic. "Anyway, I was hoping you could help me find some information on a Pyrean King by the name of Stephan Caliphus and a man called Ramus."

Kara frowned, her long fingers sliding slowly down from the elevated grid of black buttons stamped with lettering. "Stephan Caliphus, you said?" she asked, her head down and voice low.

"Uh... yes," Avera stammered as she watched the woman shrink. The delicate frames of the librarian's large round glasses were all that she could see of her bright blue eyes as the light of the computer screen reflected off of the lenses.

"I see..." Kara muttered, resuming her regular pose and entering some information into her computer. "There wasn't a lot published around that time... well," she stopped herself, shifting her shoulders as she weighed the statement, "not a lot that we have left of it, anyway."

"Why's that?" Avera asked with interest.

"It was all lost," Kara told her, issuing a glance in her direction. "You know," she added, "during the Great Fire." Avera looked at her, unknowing, and she began to elaborate. "See, Stephan prided himself on his public works projects, and one of his crowning achievements was this really illustrious library he had built. All of the official documents and the entirety of the collections of the Royal Library were stored there, and when the city burned, the books burned with it," Kara stated, continuing to search through the catalogue. "The people who saw it said that the library burned brighter than anything, *but,*" she added with a final click and a triumphant expression, "we do have one book by Webber, but it's only available in classical book format."

"What's the name of it?"

"Til Here We Find Ourselves Again, but it's in the restricted section. You'll need a security pass to get there."

'More red tape?' Avera's heart sank, but she hadn't had the time to say anything more when she heard a familiar voice speaking.

"Anything more than a Security Access Pass from the Royal Academy might permit?" the man asked from behind her.

'Quince?' Avera spun around to the sight of her friend. He was a comely young man, tall and slender with dark hair similar to Benjamin's but kept shorter. His bright blue eyes danced like the light on the ocean, and yet still they seemed dark to her now, a deadness inside of them.

"No, sir," the librarian said, "you should find that works quite well here."

"Quince!" Avera exclaimed, surprised and delighted.

"Well, Avera, shall we go?" Quince asked, redirecting his address with an impish smile.

"Yes, actually. That is, if you don't mind it?"

"Not at all! It's a good chance to catch up, anyway." He smiled fondly. "It has been far too long."

She smiled. "It has. It's... good to see you, Quince."

"Likewise," he told her.

The two of them dashed one after the other up the many flights of spiral stairs until they came to the stairs with a panel of dark glass covering them. The atmosphere was quite unsettling. The room was dark and dimly lit with reddish lighting, concrete walls, empty space, and wooden floor boards, a drastic departure form the lower levels.

"Here," he said to her, indicating a carved lit piece of glass with Almast's serpent embossed, "this is a key code reader."

He held up his security pass and pressed it against the place he had shown her. Within seconds, there was the ascending sound of electronic chirping and a blue light appeared, a portion of the glass surrounding the stairs then turning aside to grant them entry.

"Voila!" Quince said, taking a jokingly accentuated bow.

"You haven't been here before, have you?" Avera asked him, making conversation.

"I haven't, but I have heard about it. The upperclassmen say it becomes useful later. They come here often searching for answers. We are given a security pass and a key code when we are accepted to the Royal Academy for studies. If we are to serve the state, we must have access to its secrets," he said. Then, realizing he had moved things from a nice chat to a dark and heavy topic, he became embarrassed. "Plus," he added quickly, "it really builds those calf muscles!" He laughed nervously, trying to relieve some of the tension. "It's great exercise to climb up here."

Avera laughed. "Right," she said, skeptically raising an eyebrow.

The top floor of the library's restricted section was dark, haunting, and built entirely of maurium. There were maurium lamps scattered senselessly throughout the room without reason, sloppily hanging from wall hooks and set carelessly on shelves or tables, establishing an eerie purple glow throughout the presently deserted area. She glanced around the shadowed room. Bookcases filled with books, dust, and cobwebs lined the walls. There was a large table in the center with a mat on it along with a few stray books with pens and papers. There were piles of books on the ground surrounding the table and some of the shelves, some nearing the height of the table itself. There were only a few holodexes found held in a smaller shelf roughly a third the length of the others but just as tall. There were also some scrolls mixed in with the holodexes, and she guessed that the number of them was about ninety in total.

"Wow, it sure is dark up here!" Kelvin observed, retrieving a lamp from one of the shelves. "Reminds me of High Palace."

"Yeah. Me, too," she frowned.

"Oh, really? You've been there?" he asked, his voice still maintaining the tone of a playful friend. "Probably because of your dad, huh?"

She smiled, glad not to have to explain. "Yeah, that's it," she told him, getting pulled into his good mood.

'He is himself still, isn't he? I've missed him.'

"Til Here We Find Ourselves Again, right?" he asked her, holding the lamp to light their way.

"That's it," Avera agreed pleasantly.

"Well, why don't we see if there's any remnants of order left here. I would think it's in the section on divine governance, but why don't you grab a lamp and we'll spread out," he cordially suggested.

After a short time searching around the dusty bookshelves and scattered piles, Kelvin returned holding two books.

"I found it," he triumphantly proclaimed, seeming quite pleased with himself. "*And*, I also found another book which might help. This one," he said, sliding one of the books down onto the table in front of her, "is a common history of the kings of Pyre from Ja'miel Elphaz, who was technically the first but is generally not considered in the lineage of kings because he violated his oath and was consequently removed from kingship without a successor, to Palmiere Caliphus, who replaced Elphaz and by whom the kings were reckoned, to Theoezra Caliphus who was Stephan's father." He pat the book with a smile. "It didn't come up in your search, because Stephan's not actually in it. Now, the other," he continued, setting the second book on top of it, "is the one you asked for. I flipped through it. It's a personal narrative detailing life in the kingdom under Stephan's reign, and it contains interviews with some of the king's advisors."

She considered the book with the worn blue cover and the sparkling silver print, running her hand over the words embossed on its front.

"Wow..." she muttered softly, "thank you for finding this."

"Of course!" he said, still sporting a friendly smile. "Although," he began again, having taken a short break from speaking, "I am curious as to how you knew to ask about this."

"Oh?" she looked at him, puzzled. "Why's that?"

"Because," he addressed her quietly, leaning over the side of the table and putting his face close to hers, "most people don't remember Stephan *to* ask about him, but you do."

Chapter 26: The Inquisitor

She looked at him, scared and nervous, her face only inches away for his own. He stared into her beautiful blue-green eyes, now shaded with fearful shock, and he felt a sudden cutting conviction.

'What am I doing?'

He stopped himself, easing off and pulling himself back from the table. "Sorry," he mumbled, placing his hand on the back of his neck awkwardly.

"Quince..." she began, her eyes watching him.

"No, it's okay," he told her, looking away. "You... don't owe me an explanation. I'm sorry," he said again quickly. "Look, I have a meeting about my apprenticeship. So, I'll... have to get going." He tilted his head back towards the door, letting out short nervous chuckle.

"Sure, Quince," she said with a soft smile, twisting her hair around her finger. "Thank you again for this," she added, tapping the book's cover.

He offered a small grin. "I've enjoyed this. If I didn't have this meeting today, I'd stay and learn some history with you."

She smiled. "Next time, then."

"Definitely," he assured her with a smile and a friendly wave as he departed.

He walked down the streets of Pyre, the rain still gently falling.

'Stephan... how does she know? Outside of the academy, we are forbidden to speak of him. Who would tell her? Mr. Ibori? No. He wouldn't involve her in this, but... she does remember him. So, then, there is something... she isn't telling me, and she isn't using the KLP, either!'

"Gah!" he cried out in frustration.

A few more steps and he stopped for a time. Caught up in his thoughts, he stared into his reflection in a puddle down below.

'Should I have said something? Should I have pushed her or been more forthright? Should I... turn her in to the men at High Palace? No...'

He kicked the puddle as he turned away, distorting his image as he sent the water flying in all directions.

'No, I need to get my mind off this. I have this meeting to go to. I'll be assigned to a member of the King's Court. I need to get my head together.'

He looked on to High Palace, setting his sights on the castle.

'Come on, Quince, destiny's calling!'

One of the guards met him at the gate and escorted him to a solitary waiting room deep within the fortress of High Palace. The room was a compact cube, which he estimated was about nine feet in any given direction. The door was easily recognizable from the outside, but it opened into the wall and was nearly invisible from the inside.

"Lord Kallida will he in shortly," the guardsman assured him.

He nodded an acknowledgement and watched the man as he left, paying careful attention to the door as it slid open, then shut again, noting its positioning.

'Just in case. Someone checking for it blindly would expect it to appear dead center, but it's about a foot to the left of that.'

The room was dark. Terribly dark. So dark, in fact, that he could not delineate between the floor, walls, and ceiling. Everything was swallowed up in complete blackness. Yet, there was light coming from somewhere, because he could still see his hand, though vaguely, and had some idea of depth.

'Still... I hate it when they pull things like this. It feels like I'm imprisoned. Ha! Maybe I would've been better to stay with Avera at the library, after all. Oh well...' he ran his fingers through his hair and brushed the tips of his fingers against his thumb nervously as he waited, *'too late now.'*

An indeterminable amount of time passed. It felt to him like hours, though he assured himself it had been merely minutes. A door opened to his left, a dark silhouette appearing against the backdrop of the bright white rectangle of light pouring in from the outside world.

He took note. *'A second door, this one likely a limited access way.'*

The silhouetted figure stepped forward into the room from the doorway, and the door closed behind him, leaving them in utter darkness. The man made his way forward and Kelvin felt him approaching as he made his way to the center of the room.

He swallowed, his stomach twisting. The room seemed darker than it ever had, the dim light fading further with every step this man took. The footsteps stopped, and he knew the man was standing right in front of him, though he could not see his face.

"Kelvin Q. Dehnhardt of Kindellend," came a voice from the darkness.

"Yes," he acknowledged, trembling in body, though his speech was unaffected.

"Tell me, what is it you desire?"

"What I desire?" he asked, taken off guard.

"Yes," said the voice. "Some men desire glory, others honor, praise, or acclamation. Some men desire wealth, wisdom, or reputation. Some men desire knowledge, understanding, or

longevity. Some seek belonging, others love or reverence. There are those who seek justice, worth, or meaning. Then, there are, also, those who seek after secrets and ancient power and many other things. So, tell me what you seek. What is it you desire? Tell me, and I will tell you what manner of man you are."

"And what of yourself?" Kelvin replied carefully, "What manner of man are *you*?"

"You would answer a question with a question?" the voice seemed to hiss as it commented with deep interest.

"I would," Kelvin asserted. "How can I allow myself to be known if I know not my adversary? And if I know not what manner of man you are, how can I say what manner of man I am to you?"

"Very well," the voice answered. "I am a man of *power*," he told him, and a pattern of glowing purple appeared in the floor as he said it, the eerie glow lighting their forms from beneath.

Suddenly, the two could see each other as they stood face to face and less than two feet apart.

Kelvin dropped to one knee and bowed himself. "Lord Master Inquisitor," he said humbly before taking again to his feet.

On Kallida's face came a small, devilish smile. "Well? I'm waiting," he spoke with elongated tones.

"I am your servant, sir, the son of a fisherman, seeking to prove himself worthy of the King's favor."

"I hope you are aware," Kallida began slowly, "that I came in here with very high expectations of you." Kelvin stood at attention, his muscles tense and unmoving. "I have not been disappointed," Kallida told him. "You answer very wisely."

Kelvin bowed his head, "Sir."

"Do you have a preference as to which of us you should be assigned?"

"A *preference*?" Kelvin's eyes widened.

'Was it not enough to have been considered for an apprenticeship at my age? I have nothing to my name. Then to be given to one of the kingdom's ruling members, but now... a preference? It's beyond me.'

"My Lord," he said simply, "it would not be right of me to say."

"I don't see why not," Kallida answered him without hesitation and spoke without any hint of emotion. Kelvin was taken off guard and his face showed it. Kallida smirked. "Perfect marks in nearly every category of study, a vigilant fighter, an observant tracker, an artful debater, a willing understudy, an eloquent persuader, an innovative thinker, a quick disguiser, a brilliant strategist, a reliable tactician, a skilled swordsman, and a marksman without equal, more than

able to lead and order forces, and all of that without any formal training. It seems to me that you would excel regardless of where I place you, so the question is not so much where you *would* succeed as it is where you would *like* to." He paused and their eyes met. "Of course," he continued, "I *could* place you, if that is what you *want*."

"I would prefer it," Kelvin asserted, his eyes locked onto Kallida's in the faint purple light.

"You know," Kallida began, tilting his head back, "many make it here and no further. They never see my face," he told him. "They allow themselves to be fully open, they answer all my questions, and they never *think* to ask a *word* of who I am or who they're dealing with. They don't count the paces to the door as you did."

'*What!*' A look of surprise came over Kelvin's features.

"What?" Kallida went on, "You didn't think I'd noticed? You counted the steps I took from the door as I entered the room. You followed me with your eyes despite my having plunged us into utter darkness. I'm quite confident you did the same with your own steps when entering and with the guard when he exited. Tell me, Mr. Dehnhardt, am I wrong?"

"No, you're quite correct," Kelvin affirmed, a small grin coming across. He was impressed.

"Tell me, then, Dehnhardt, would you aspire to one of the ten?"

"I might," Kelvin responded.

"I see." Kallida smiled, and he seemed as an animal who had captured its prey. "And, tell me, would you be willing to *kill* for it?"

"To kill...?"

'That's a strange question. Surely, he would mean in war or on the field of battle. He couldn't mean...'

Kallida's eyes watched him.

'No...'

"In war or in peace, for your own personal ambitions or a united cause, there is no difference. Does this bother you?"

Kelvin's fist clenched. "Doesn't it you?"

"This position is a lifetime appointment," Kallida told him. His words were cold and unfeeling. "Do you understand? These seats are not vacated by accident. A man does not attain to so high a position without bloodshed. Generally, a seat is gained by means of a duel, that is the preferred method of our King. There are times that a seat has been won through guile or treachery, though that is much *less* common. Still, we are... careful."

"It was my understanding that the Court vacancies are filled by appointment," Kelvin replied quickly.

"When the positions were created, the sages were appointed," Kallida explained, "but, as of now, only one remains."

"I see," Kelvin muttered thoughtfully, lowering his head and staring at the ground.

'Bloodthirsty arrogance! They have such a lust for power that they have become almost inhuman, having totally abandoned any reservation regarding the spilling of blood. I don't know that I could ever be witness to it, let alone partake. Is the expectation that I become accustomed to it, because I'm not sure I want that. I have no qualms in an honorable challenge, but to kill a man for his place, a noble man to take his office, a goodly man for selfish gain?' He shivered, repulsed by the idea.

"Doing some soul searching?" Kallida said with a smug smile. "Thanks to our little discussion here, I now know *exactly* with whom I should pair you. It's a complex assignment, but you may be just the man for it. You prefer the position given through appointment to that obtained by ambition and bloodshed?" It was only a half question. "I'm not wrong," he added without taking a breath.

"Ha," Kelvin breathed, raising his head again. "I admit, you're correct."

"Very well," Kallida began with a peculiar glee, making Kelvin no less nervous. "I will appoint you as apprentice to the Archmage, and I will oversee your progress as you go."

Chapter 27: Til Here We Find Ourselves Again

She shut the book, having taken her fill of a history of Pyre and its kings, and turned her attentions to the other. She lifted its cover, faded and worn, and read the words of the title printed on the inside.

Til Here We Find Ourselves Again: The Court and Reign of King Stephan Caliphus by E.H. Webber

She began flipping through the pages, reading through a series of listed achievements and matters of interest accompanied by aged photos and personal anecdotes from the author as she considered every word carefully. It told the story of Ramus, a man spiraling out of control, and though it was never directly addressed, a clear picture was painted of his dissent into the darkness of selfish ambition.

As she read about the hero's decline into villainous treason, Avera couldn't help but wonder about the man who was writing. *'It is a brilliant presentation. I wonder how long ago this was.'* She closed the book on her hand and consulted the cover. *'E. H. Webber... I'll ask Mr. Waverley about him when I see him.'*

She opened the book again, continuing on in her reading.

On another such occasion shortly thereafter, my work brought me to the southwestern region past Laoce, and on my return from the mountains to Pyre, I was stopped by a group of bandits who identified themselves as having been paid to ensure my unsafe passage.

She turned the page over and stopped, her eyes straying to an image down below. It was an old photograph printed in black of a group of dignitaries gathered beneath the portico of a large building with a familiar phrase inscribed.

Library, for the Betterment of Public Hearts

"The library..." she breathed, astonished. *'No. But the librarian told me that the library had burned; it was destroyed and all the books were lost.'*

She touched the picture, almost in disbelief, and tried to envision it as if it were the present time. *'It's hard to believe, but then...'* She looked to the caption.

Dedication of the King's Royal Library Photo: Joseph Vanguard, Public Affairs

'Vanguard? But...' She stared, studying the grainy image, her mind racing. *'Justice, Kypher, Blackridge...'*

Here Present: His Royal Majesty King Stephan Caliphus (center); in order from the King's right: Prince Casper Caliphus, Ramus "The Wind of War" (Royal Armor Bearer), Alexander Kypher (Captain of the

Guard), Justice Atticus (Chief War Council); in order from the King's left: Sebastian Trimble (Seer), Dorcus Garner (Seer Apprentice), Eliezer Webber (Kingsmen Ambassador), Adrien Blackridge (Knight Apprentice).

'Stephan and Casper, Sebastian and Ramus, standing shoulder to shoulder with... Justice, Kypher, and Blackridge? But, then... this is a recent history, and that means... this book can't be much more than twenty years old, if that.'

She looked to the two names she hadn't recognized. "The only people I *don't* know are these two," she processed aloud, tapping a finger on the right side of the picture.

"Dorcus Garner..." she read, studying the dull image of a young woman, slender and elegant. *'She seems happy.'*

"And... Eliezer Webber," she muttered aloud, consulting the list of names. "I take it he's the author." Her eyes moved to the clean shaven man with glasses. He was dressed in a vest with tie and shirtsleeves, and Avera let out a breath of laughter. "He dresses like Ben."

She stared at the two of them. *'They seem... familiar.'*

She began to turn through the pages, looking for something to tell her more of the two of them until she had come to the section marked for interviews. There, she found a chapter titled *An Interview with Dorcus Garner.*

I was continuing to collect my notes from the various places I'd stashed them, the sound of human screams, breaking glass, and burning buildings still faintly in the distance. We were sealed up behind closed doors, kept in hidden chambers, and very grateful to our hosts. It was against this setting one night that I had decided to consult Miss Garner.

"Dorcus?" I called out softly as I knocked against the wood, "Dorcus, may I come in?"

"Eliezer, please," was the reply.

I entered to find her crying at the foot of the bed.

"Dorcus," said I as I rushed to her side.

"Do you think he's happy?" she asked me through tears. "All the people he's hurt. How could he do this?"

"Pride is the fall of men and angels," I told her, and we went on like that for awhile, discussing present things and what might have been.

"Are you still working on that book of yours?"

"I am," I smiled.

"Here? I can't believe you!" she chuckled.

"Why not? Stephan authorized it. I'd like to say it was finished under his reign."

"Isn't it a little late for that now?"

I shook my head. "They've created such chaos that no one knows for certain what's happened or who's responsible."

"Very well, then. How can I help?"

I opened my journal and readied my pen. "I would like to chronicle what happened at the cottage with Sebastian last night."

She looked to the infant asleep in the bassinet and sighed. "Is it right for one so young to hear of such violence?"

"The world does violence," I told her. "He's come to be a part of it - born in treachery, to be raised in adversity, and destined to reign. The kingdom belongs to his father, but it is his to regain. So, let's hear it."

She watched the child and nodded. "It wasn't a surprise, really. Well... you know how Sebastian was."

"Writing," I abruptly inserted, flicking my pen against the page. "How was he?"

"He saw the thing beforehand. He knew they were coming, and we spent the afternoon making preparations for it. 'Dorcus, help me with this,' or 'Here, take these there,' and so on. He told me some of it, but he knew more than he said or he told me at the time. I think part of it is that he didn't want me to worry. I had an inkling, but this was far worse than I had imagined."

"I see, and what did he tell you?"

"That we had to move some of the papers. He said there was destruction coming from the hearts of violent men who had determined violence against us, that their path was the path of bloodshed. He told me to pray they be restored. I asked if he knew who. He said he did. I asked if these were people we knew. Very simply, he turned and looked at me, and sadly he said, 'It is... familiar friends.' He would say nothing more.

"He told me not to leave the house until they did, then to take my horse (which I had saddled with some papers and supplies according to his instructions) and find Prince Casper. He told me that he and Princess Penelope would be in their bedchamber, and that I should speak to no one else on my way. I was to bring them to the way point in the forest nearest the cottage by way of the tunnels and to hide us in the stables until a clear path opened to come here. Then... the rest, but we shouldn't discuss that now, since you're... recording all of this."

"Quite. Incredible. So, he had the entire escape plot planned out ahead of time."

"Yes, he knew precisely where we should go and when so as to ensure our safety. I assure you."

"I see. Anything else?"

"Yes. He told me... you're a good man."

I dropped my pen, and her eyes met mine. "...What?"

She offered a passing smile, looked away, then back to me. "He said, 'Eliezer Webber is a good man.'"

"I see," I nodded. "Ehm... then what?"

"He blessed me and told me they were coming, rushing my along. I hurried up the stairs to the loft, securing a place on the floor where I would be hidden from view but still able to observe the happenings... Are you all right?"

I nodded.

"Eliezer, you're crying!"

I shook my head. "Please, go on."

"I..."

"Dorcus, please."

"Well... it was a stormy night, but Sebastian could hear the hoof beats in the distance. There was the sound of horses followed by a banging on the door. 'Kick it down!' another man yelled, and I recognized the voice as that of Ramus. The door burst open, and two men came. They were drenched with rain and water poured from their hats down from their dark rubbery attire onto the floors of the house. I could scarcely believe it: there stood Ramus, and Adrien stood there with him."

"Adrien Blackridge."

"Yes. All the while, Sebastian stood by the fireplace, watching the wood burn, and never looked away from it. He didn't flinch, even when they forced the door open.

"Sebastian said it was unnecessary of them, that he would have let them in, and he asked if the king was in good health.

"It was Ramus who spoke. He said that the king was quite ill, as Sebastian knew well.

"Sebastian told him that he had come to inquire as to whether the king might recover, and Ramus said that he supposed he also knew of his plans."

"Plans?"

"To kill the king. Sebastian told him that the king would surely recover were it not for his death by his own hands, and Adrien shook when he said it. Then, Sebastian pointed a finger to address him, also, and he told Adrien that he would see the destruction of Pyre from storehouse to basilica, that he would burn the city with fire and leave women childless. He said that because the two of them have turned to bloodshed and determined evil against us, they will live by their swords and die by their sabers; they will search for their enemies, and they will not find them; they will look to an end, but they will not attain it. He said, 'Pride has been your folly and pride will be your downfall.' He said to Ramus he is a man of violence and violence will follow him. He will try to escape it, to erase the memories of the past, but what

is done cannot be undone, and the blood which was shed cannot be brought again to life. He said of him, also, that he has not ascended to the throne but has rather descended into darkness.

"Adrien asked him where I was, and it was strange to me, but he sounded almost concerned."

"That's... not strange," I said, and I knew I had interrupted. "I'm sorry. Please, go on."

Nodding, she complied. "He said that he knew they would come and he sent me away."

"Sebastian, said this?"

"Yes."

"Alright. What then?"

"Ramus ordered Adrien to kill him. He was so unfeeling, but Adrien stayed his hand. 'Fine, I'll do it!' Ramus told him. He seemed angry. He drew his sword, and without hesitation, he thrust Sebastian through.

"So, There Sebastian lay, dying on the ground, and he said, 'So shall your sins follow you.' Ramus was callous. He smirked as he wiped the blood from his cheek and sheathed his bloodied saber. Adrien seemed... much more impacted, but... nevertheless, he followed him. The two of them departed, and I left after, as Sebastian had instructed."

There was more, but Avera shut the book.

'The Ambassador and the Seer... and the child.'

She opened the book again, turning back to the page with the photograph, and contemplated the man who wore the rounded glasses.

'I need to find Mr. Waverley.'

Chapter 28: The Archmage

He had spent the day writing recommendations and letters of state to be handed off to various government officers. He sat at his desk scribbling notes, not much farther along than when he had first began, with a pile of crumpled papers beside him, but his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the door sliding open. He glanced over his shoulder to the sight of gloved knuckles as they rapped against the door frame.

"Lord Blackridge, I have a proposition for you."

'Kallida. But he never follows proper protocol on titles. Unless...' He set his pen down on the letter he was drafting and turned his chair to face the door. There stood a second figure behind the first, and he smiled. *'As I thought.'*

"And I perceive a guest, as well, Master Kallida. Or to what do I owe the honor?"

"Well, Master Blackridge," Kallida began, "it is the time for apprenticeships to be awarded, as you well know."

'That's better. I was concerned the man may have developed some sense.'

"Yes, I am aware, but that usually doesn't affect me, as *you* well know."

"Well, yes, but... *this* year I think I have just the man for you."

"Oh really? I thought that I had been deemed a bad influence."

"Well... yes. And you are."

"And didn't you get up before the king last year about this time when he asked why I had not been awarded an apprentice and give a speech detailing the way in which I would go about bending the minds of our youth and corrupting their morals?"

"Well... yes. And again, I stand behind the sentiment."

"Well, then. Master Kallida, *what* are you doing here?"

"Lord Blackridge," he said, beckoning the young man forward and presenting him to the Archmage, "this is Kelvin Dehnhardt. He is the highest ranking student at the Royal Academy, and is currently in training to be a Knight of the Royal Guard. Additionally, he prefers that position be gained by appointment rather than bloodshed. Need I go further? When given the opportunity to choose his instructor, he gave me no preference but submitted himself to my judgement. Naturally, I thought of you."

'I understand now. I can't corrupt someone who's like me.'

"Thank you, Master Inquisitor. This seems... an appropriate placement."

"I'm pleased to hear you think so, Lord Archmage."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Sir Dehnhardt," Blackridge said, addressing the young man who stood respectfully before him.

"It is merely Mr. Dehnhardt, Lord Blackridge," he humbly corrected with a bow. "And the pleasure is mine."

Blackridge smiled. "Perhaps," he said softly, "but it will be." He turned his attentions to Kallida. "You will leave us now?"

"Indeed. I will leave you to your comfort, Lord Blackridge," he stated with a bow much less extravagant than Kelvin's before making a speedy exit.

"Thank you," Blackridge said, amused.

'That was nice. I wonder if I could get him to show such respect more often. But then... he has been suspiciously polite since the incident with the blood tracking, and it's making me nervous, especially given my present lack of a means of communication.'

"Well, Mr. Dehnhardt, it would seem that we're going to be spending quite a bit of time together. I think it would be best that we become acquainted."

"Yes, sir. I would agree."

"Would you like a chair, then?"

"No, sir. Thank you. I'll stand."

"Very well. Was there anything you wanted to know, any questions you have for me?"

He watched as Kelvin's body tensed.

'What do they do to these poor kids?'

"On second thought, you sit here," Blackridge told him, vacating his seat and motioning to it on his way to the door, which he pulled hastily shut.

'He seems extremely uncomfortable with the idea of taking my seat. I don't know what manner of mind games Kallida subjects these students to, but he has somehow managed to intimidate them to the point that they have developed a genuine fear of kindness. It was foolish to promote him, and for what? Killing Gilbert in cold blood?' He winced. *'Then again, I suppose the same could be said of any of us... God! Whose seat did I take?'* He closed his eyes. *'I don't want to think on it now.'*

"Look..." he sighed, his head down and back against the door, "Kelvin, I don't have your file. I don't know anything about you outside of what Master Kallida just told me. I don't know what went on leading up to our meeting, but I will do my best to teach you. If you have a question, I will see that it is answered. If you have a request, I will see that it is granted. If you have a need, I will see that it is met. This is neither a judgement nor an evaluation, but it is an

apprenticeship and it will require your cooperation. So, what do you say, Mr. Dehnhardt? Will you work with me?"

Kelvin smiled. "Yes, sir," he said, seeming to relax a little, "I'd like that."

"Good, then," Blackridge said, smiling. "Firstly, do you have a naming preference?"

"A naming preference?" he blankly repeated.

"Yes. You know... a naming preference, something you like to be called by."

A light came into the young man's eyes. "Quince," he told him.

"Very well, then. Quince it is, and where are you from?"

"The region of Sa'ar, from a town called Kindellend."

"Oh really?"

"Yes, sir. My father was a fisherman on the North Sea."

"That's interesting..." he said, considering. "A good friend of mine was from there. Tyberion Ibori. You remind me of him quite a bit, actually."

Kelvin nodded. "I knew him. He and his family showed my family a lot of kindness," Kelvin relayed, moving his hand over his chest with emotion. "I grew up with his daughter. She's a good friend of mine."

"Funny," Blackridge replied with a contemplative smile, "I met Avera for the first time not long ago. She is a remarkable young woman. Her father's very proud of her, I know."

"Were you the one who called him back here?" Kelvin asked him emphatically. "We couldn't understand why he left after all that time to come back. I know a letter came; I saw the courier about noonday. He had his things packed by nightfall. He wouldn't say much, but I knew he had visited High Palace, and soon after, he was gone."

'*He seems distressed. All these lives I've upended... I can scarcely begin to imagine them.*'

"I... apologize," Blackridge said, bowing himself. "That was my doing. I called him here to help me. I needed someone I knew I could rely upon."

"I see," Kelvin said, trembling. "Thank you," he muttered, fists clenched and eyes filled with water. "I had hoped to see him, but they've quite erased his memory."

Blackridge frowned, his heart filled with remorse, and his mind stopped.

"Lord Blackridge," the boy went on, seeming to calm himself a little, "is this how your instructor conducted himself during your apprenticeship?"

Blackridge watched him for a moment, considering the brokenness of a man in anguish, and he was haunted by a flood of memories. "One of them," he softly admitted. "I had two."

Quince shook his head. "That's unheard of," he said, clearly impressed.

He smiled. "Yes, I suppose." He paused for a moment, looking to the bookshelf. "Here..." he said, grabbing a book from the shelf. He began to rifle through the familiar pages and sighed. *'All of this is pain now.'*

Kelvin was watching him with interest as he flipped through the pages. "I have a picture here for you," Blackridge explained, finding the photo of the nine of them huddled together. "Here we are..." he said, finding the page and showing his apprentice the dated image. "That's me there," he said, pointing to the young man in the long cloak, a bit more slender than he was now.

"Funny," Kelvin said, leaning in to examine the fuzzy image, "you haven't changed much."

Blackridge let out a breath of laughter. "I suppose not." He looked into the happy faces of the others around him, and a wave of sadness hit him.

"Who's this beside you?" Kelvin asked him.

"Eliezer Webber," he said, considering the man in the glasses. "The man was a cutup and entirely disorganized, but there *was* something almost otherworldly about him. He was the Kingsmen Ambassador at the time, and he really cared for people."

Kelvin nodded thoughtfully. "It seems you knew him well."

"Yes... he always did consider me a friend," he said, thinking on the matter fondly.

"I'm afraid I'm unfamiliar with the Ambassador's position."

"I don't know how familiar you are with Pyrean governmental history, but-"

"Not very."

"I see," Blackridge said with a sympathetic smile. "Well... it was a position which had existed since the formation of Pyre. When we underwent the reconstruction of Pyre and the modern governmental reforms, the twelve seats of the High Court were taken down to ten and the Ambassador's position was dissolved. Originally, the idea was that there should be a member of the Court appointed as the official representative of the Kingsmen in matters of state. He would act as an intermediary between the Kingsmen Council and the City Architects, who in later days were known as the members of the High Court of the King. At the time, the Court dealt primarily with matters of war and law, whereas the Council controlled matters of peace and policy making. The Kingsmen Ambassador would be the one to speak for them, and any concerns that they may have would be brought before the Court or taken to the Council by his hand. It was also true in the case of the man who trained me that he was responsible for recording the years of the king's reign. Hence, this book."

"I see," Kelvin muttered softly, "and you said there was another man?"

"Yes. The other man I served was Ramus," Blackridge said, pointing a finger to the narrow face of the armor bearer which sported a twisted goatee, "and Ramus was a warrior, bold and celebrated. He could navigate any battlefield with ease. He had a lot of ambition. However, his pride would sometimes get the better of him."

"How was it," Kelvin curiously addressed, "trying to serve two masters?"

Blackridge looked down into the frozen faces of the two men, considering them before turning his eyes again to Kelvin. "Impossible," he confessed with honesty.

Chapter 29: The Ambassador

He sat reclined at his desk, his feet up with the papers, a cluttered desk for a cluttered mind. He remained lost in thought, tossing the ring in the air and catching it again in his hand. It was gold, ornately decorated, an ever present reminder of the promise his life once seemed to hold. Up it went, a flash of light, ascending only to return to his palm again with a similar flashing of brightness.

'I wonder how he felt once he realized that I had figured it out all that time ago, that time that does constrain us. In constant, I am thankful for that, also, the time was not wasted. Still, Adrien, would you have killed me if you'd had the chance? I wonder.' He watched the ring fly up, falling again into his hand, and he sighed. *'My only hope is that he isn't trying to acquit himself of that which is forgiven.'*

He paused as he heard the footsteps approaching, and he caught the ring in his palm. *'There isn't a soul I was expecting...'*

"Mr. Waverley, are you around?" the question came from the hall around the corner. "I'd like to talk to you about something."

He took the ring, returning it hastily to his vest pocket. "Avera, I'm here in the office," he called out after her.

She quickly appeared in the doorway and entered the room, coming up to the front of his desk. "Please, have a seat," he offered kindly, motioning to the chairs on either side of her.

She shook her head. "No, that's alright. I'll stand."

He looked to the chair positioned behind her. It was covered in a jacket, some books, and other objects. He jumped up, embarrassed. "On second thought, you can have my seat! Please... I-I'm sorry." He hung his head. *'First rate hospitality, Mr. Webber, as always.'* He sighed.

Avera chuckled. "No, thank you, Mr. Waverley. You're kind enough. Ben and Dorothy warned me about your organizational tendencies. Really, it's fine. I've been sitting all day, and I'd rather stand, if I may."

"Very well," he nodded with a warm smile, "so long as you're comfortable. I will sit, if you're not opposed?"

"Not at all."

"Thank you," he said, returning to his chair. "So," he continued, pulling the chair in closer, "what is it I can do for you?"

"I read in a book," she began, curiously watching him, "about a man appointed by the Council as an ambassador to Pyre. While in Pyre he endured much hardship. Still, he was faithful to his charge. I thought the book was old. I thought that it told stories of a faraway time. Then, I saw

something that changed my mind about it. It was a photograph taken at the dedication of a library, the same library where I met Benjamin in the ruins. In the photograph, I saw Justice, Kypher, and Blackridge standing side by side with Casper, Ramus, and Stephan. Sebastian was there, too, with his apprentice and the Ambassador beside them."

He listened to her closely, but his mind stopped, and had no words. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk and his mouth on his folded fingers. His eyes watched her. He couldn't have looked away if he had tried to. He was far too invested.

"The Ambassador was a man from Delphi, as you are. He wore dark rimmed glasses, like you do," she said, and paused as if considering whether to wait or speak further.

He watched her with some mild concern, considering silently deep within himself whether there were any words with which to respond, but he had none.

"He was a good friend of the Seer," she added, "and a better friend of his apprentice, I think."

He closed his eyes as he lowered his head and sighed. "Avera, would you kindly bolt the door for me?" he solemnly requested.

"Of... course. Which...?"

"Both, please," he told her, sending her on her way.

He pressed his hands against his eyes and breathed, collecting his thoughts. He felt the grief of his heart open, and sorrow poured out like blood through his veins.

'If there is to be any more hardship, let it fall on me. I could not bear to see them harmed.'

He removed the ring again from his pocket, considering its design. When Avera returned, he asked her, "How much do you know?"

"I read a good portion of your book, sir," she told him. "E. H. Webber... the H is for Horace, I take it?"

He shook his head. "Horatio."

"Ah," Avera said, accepting her error. "And Dorothy is..."

"Sebastian's apprentice, as you suppose," he told her plainly, and he paused, his eyes glancing up at her. "Do you see this ring?" he asked, directing her attention to the shining piece of metal held between his fingers. "I had it specially made, and I bought it the day the city burned. The last thing I remember is closing my eyes the most optimistic I think I've even been. 'Come tomorrow,' I said, 'I will delight in all my heart desires.'" He swallowed, his eyes tearing. "When I opened my eyes, everything was dark. All I could see was the fire in the distance. Sebastian's house was burning. When I arrived, I found him dead. He was pierced through, lying in a pool of blood in his own sitting room.

"Then, I came to find that the King had been killed, also... along with many of the Court officers. I hid myself in the stables when I heard it. I laid down on a haystack, and I thought I'd die that night."

"But you didn't."

"No." He shook his head. "Although, I have no doubt I would have died had I been in Pyre that evening. The guardsmen fought valiantly to quell the insurrection, but it was a difficult task. Our enemies were our friends, coMr.ades, and colleagues. Kypher said it was nearly impossible to tell who was loyal and who wasn't. I can only imagine what chaos there must have been."

"Yes... I understand. It must have been hard for you all, especially with Ramus leading and Blackridge joining in the rebellion. But, Mr. Webber, what happened to Ramus? There's no more record of him than there is you."

"Ramus was a title of honor, but that never was his name," he told her. Stephan called him that, and everyone knew him by that name. He was even knighted by Casper as Ramus when he became his armor bearer. Stephan said he was his 'arm of strength,' though he became his greatest weakness. Casper called him 'the right arm of the kingdom and Altruon's strength,' though he would steal his headship, ravage the land, and plague us with grief.

"In the weeks following Stephan's death, the name came to mean no more than the violent and murderous rebellion he had inspired. His legacy was tarnished by his unsatiated lust for power. There had been such great bloodshed that the people were appalled by him, and he could no longer bear it. When at last Ramus came to power, there was such resistance to his reign throughout the seven regions that he asked that they crown him by his name." He paused, and Avera's eyes watched him with a spark of understanding. He nodded, knowing that she already knew the rest. "They crowned him Zephyr Almast according to his wishes," he told her. "He wanted so badly to escape the past. That is why he began the Kingdom Learning Initiative, which resulted in the Kingdom Learning Program, as part of the Eternity Project. Through magic, the system interfaces directly with the user's memory, allowing them to implant, edit, and *remove* the memories of *anyone* who is subjected to it." He stopped, arising from his seat and walking to a nearby bookshelf. "And *that* is why *this*," he said, grabbing hold of one of the backwards volumes and holding it up between the two of them, "is so different from the history most people remember." He walked back to the desk, taking his seat and presenting to her the blue covered copy of his writing. "Zephyr sought to erase his former life, his disgrace and shame, even his title, but a man can't outrun his conscience," he told her.

"I see," she said, pensively considering things. She touched the book, running her fingers lightly over the silver words.

"It's yours if you'd like," he said, "but it's not lawful to have it."

"Thank you," she replied softly. "Maybe... next time," she muttered, pushing the book back towards him as she lowered her eyes. "I do have one more question, though."

His heart was towards her, and he smiled, his eyes expressing his care. "Ask anything," he said, extending the invitation warmly.

"Blackridge... I don't understand. Why is he working with you when he partnered with Ramus in the rebellion? He knows who you are. Shouldn't he have apprehended you?"

"He should have *killed* me," Eliezer told her, leaning back in the chair. "In fact, Dorcus had a dream to that effect." His mind strayed to the past, and he remembered the day as though it was the present moment.

"It was during the time of the city's reconstruction, in the early days of the Eternity Project. Dorcus came to me early one morning and told me that Adrien would come that day to slay me. He sought to prove his allegiance to Zephyr by my death at his hand.

"By that time, we were all in the library together, and I decided that, rather than wait, I would go out to meet him. I would go down to meet him in the valley and die there, that the others may be spared their lives for mine.

"I stood on the crest of the hill and watched as he came riding on a black horse and racing from the forest into the valley below me. I called out his name, wanting so badly to speak with him. He looked at me, and then... there was a *flash* of *marvelous* light. He fell from his horse, and the beast kept on without him. I ran to him down the grassy slope.

"When I reached him, I found he had been blinded. I took his hand and grabbed him. He was crying out for me to help him.

"'Adrien,' I said, 'you can still turn back from this. You don't have to keep on this path you're on.'"

He swallowed, his eyes tearing. "It took some convincing, but he did take me up on that.

"He said, 'Alright, old friend. I'll surrender,' and his eyes were dark until that point, but the light returned when he said it, and at once he could see again. I've never seen such relief on a man's face before or since.

"You see, Avera, Adrien Blackridge was given the choice between two fates. One the path of bloodshed, which brings with it sweet pleasantries, though only for a season, and the end of which is destruction. The other is the path of forbearance, which takes us through trials of various kinds, enduring patiently the present things for the hope of the glory which will one day come to us. The same is the path of life. The first is the fate of Ramus, the second is mine, but the choice is there for us all, not just for Adrien."

Chapter 30: Enemies of State

A week had passed since he had received his apprenticeship. From early morning until late into the evening, he attended to Lord Blackridge and his needs. His time was filled with meetings, hearings, inspections, and various matters of state, which, on this particular occasion, meant piles and piles of paperwork.

Kelvin sat sorting the papers as Blackridge read through them, writing out the replies.

'It's funny... this work is all so political. I would've expected the position of Archmage to be a little more magical.'

He stared at the piles of assorted papers. There were so many of them - hirings, promotions, demotions, firings, transfers, reports, commendations, assignments, propositions, debriefings, witness statements... he shook his head.

'I guess that's why we have so many lesser mages.' He lifted the next sheet from his stack and noticed the name written on it. '*Even Lord Kallida reports to him.*'

"I think we ought to call it a night," Blackridge announced, setting the paper he was reading back on the desk and removing his glasses. He rubbed his eyes and leaned back in the chair. "Everything's beginning to look the same," he told him.

"I understand, sir," Kelvin told him. "I'm not quite there, myself, but I admit that I *have* been doing considerably less reading. Howbeit, the papers are... well, *mostly* stacked."

"I do appreciate you staying," Blackridge assured him. "It can be hard with these long hours, and you do help me a great deal."

The door slid open and they both turned to look. A young man in a guard's uniform wearing a mage's cloak stood in the doorway and solemnly entered. He was a handsome man of fine stature with pale green eyes. His skin was ivory and his platinum hair fell to the bottoms of his shoulder blades.

Kelvin watched him with intensely. *'He must be a mage-royal, but why would the King send one of his personal servants?'*

"Mage-royal Charlenade, to what do we owe the visit?" Blackridge asked him.

"My Lord the King is troubled. He lies awake restless. He cannot sleep. Lord Blackridge, it is my duty to summon you for an audience with the King. Lord Kallida and Captain Zahaynei have been sent for, also. You will meet in the throne room, immediately," Charlenade stated, his voice and countenance void of any emotion.

Kelvin looked to Blackridge. *'He doesn't seem bothered by it.'* He smiled, relieved.

"Very well," Blackridge told him. "Tell the King we will make haste to come to him."

'We...! Does that mean he plans on taking me with him?'

"As you wish," the man replied. He turned to walk away, but stopped by the threshold of the door. "Candles, Lord Blackridge?"

"Yes, what of them?"

"It is unusual to say the least," the man replied. "When you could be using maurium or a simple illumination spell, you choose to work by candlelight, instead. And fire. Correct me, but are candles not generally used by-"

"*Me,* Master Charlenade," Blackridge cut in unabashedly. "They are generally used by *me*."

"Of course," Charlenade sneered, "and others." He walked silently away, and the door shut behind him.

"My Lord," Kelvin addressed him, concerned.

Blackridge shook him head. "I don't know what this is about, but I would ask that you accompany me, if you're able."

"Yes, of course," he said, surprised. "I am honored, sir. But... forgive me, wouldn't the others object to me being there?"

"If they do, they'll let us know. That being said, I don't think you'll have any problems," he reassured him.

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The throne room was large and dark, the walls and floor similar to the room wherein he had first met Lord Kallida. King Zephyr reclined in his throne, which appeared almost to float in the air above them. The King sat to the side, his legs crossed over one arm of the chair with his head resting against the winged headrest, watching as they entered. Blackridge took his place at the left side of the room before the throne, and Kelvin followed, keeping a step behind him. Zahaynei was already present when they entered, standing in position to their right.

The three men stood in silence at attention as they waited for Kallida to arrive. It wasn't long before the grand double doors swung open seemingly of their own volition and Kallida came striding in with some irritation, patterning the floor with glowing purple runes as he stepped. He stopped, taking his place between his fellow officers, and the doors fell shut behind them.

"Feeling a bit showy, Master Inquisitor?" Blackridge jested.

"Aren't you?" Kallida sneered.

"Master Kallida," the King cut in, annoyed, "is there any sort of *reason* for such a frivolous show of magic in my throne room?"

"My Lord," Kallida protested, "you have an archmage who has his apprentice help him with his paperwork rather than using a simple sorting spell. I'm quite certain that there is more than enough room for some frivolous use of magic by me!"

"Ah, yes," the King went on, his eyes moving to Kelvin, "Mr. Dehnhardt."

"My Lord King Zephyr, if it would please My Lord the King, I would humbly request the allowance of his partaking in our audience... unless there be any objections by my colleagues to his presence here," Blackridge quickly persuaded.

Zephyr smiled. "I have no objections. Master Kallida?" the King addressed.

"If my Lord has naught against it, nor do I."

"Captain Zahaynei?"

"I've no objections."

"Very well, gentlemen. I am king over all the realm. I am rich and mighty. Yet, there is a thing that troubles me," Zephyr told them, standing to his feet and beginning to pace. "See, you three are my most *trusted* allies. Together, you oversee every area of my reign. So, tell me, *how*..." he said, staring them down as he spoke, "after all this time and all this progress, my enemies have somehow alluded me? After *twenty years*, how is it? The kingdom is *mine.* The power is *mine.* But somehow they are left to live! They live their lives, they walk the streets, and I am restless because of it! Tell me, have you failed me? How can my kingdom stand if they are left to live? They will be my *undoing!*" He snarled at them, his eyes a burning caldron. "For *twenty years* you've searched, and you haven't found a *single one of them!*"

"My Lord," Kallida interjected, "what would you desire more than the blood of your enemies?"

"Kallida, you're on thin ice this time!" Zephyr warned him. "There is very little to guard your life at this moment."

"Is it not the derision of a mocker?"

"Explain," Zephyr demanded.

Kelvin watched with wonder. *'What is Lord Kallida doing? He clearly thinks himself clever, but if he's not more careful...'* he clenched his teeth and felt his muscles tighten, '*this could still end very badly for him... and for all of us. Still, it is remarkable to think they never found any of them. Not one? I can understand the King's frustration.'*

"What if I could give you such a person?" Kallida asked him. "Say, a man for whom you have a deep inner hatred. Why would you kill him outright and in secret? Why not subject him to a public trial before the execution? Then, all men would despise him as you do."

"I'm listening, Kallida, but you'll have to give me more than suppositions."

Kelvin looked to Blackridge, who watched them intently, though he remained silent. *'He seems... strained. He has focused his energy on not expressing anything. I've seen him do this before, but... why now?'*

"I have such a man, an enemy of the state, and one whom you would very much like to have on hand."

"*Present the man,*" Zephyr commanded, unamused.

"I shall, my Lord, but hear my proposition before I hand him over - arrest him *publicly*, try him *publicly*, and execute him *publicly*. We will make a public example of him, and the others will fall along with him."

"Master Kallida, if you had such a man, why did you not commit him to me *sooner?*"

"I sent my spies to watch him, along with several others, but there have been some recent incidents which convinced me of his guilt," Kallida explained, still exuding confidence. "I had wanted to follow him, in hopes that he may lead us to the others, but..." he paused, his face fiercely determined, "he's been far too careful."

Zephyr laughed. "Come now, great mage! Don't tell me you've run into someone more cunning!"

"Regrettably, my Lord, it seems I have," Kallida grimaced.

"Tell me, Kallida, is the public mockery of such a man for my sake or yours?"

"I would not have suggested it if it were not the best solution for us all."

"And how do you know this is our man, being as he has thus far outmaneuvered you?" Zephyr asked dubiously.

'Of course. A public trial will require more concrete evidence to properly conduct, particularly if they want everyone to buy in.'

"The Ibori girl is involved, also. Let me bring her in tonight. She should have evidence we need. If all goes well, we can make the arrest by noon tomorrow," Kallida assured him.

Kelvin's mind was racing. *'Ibori? Avera? No... no. This can't be about the book, can it? It must be. No... but Lord Blackridge had a copy, too. It can't be that. It can't be wrong. Avera's not our enemy. She's not a revolutionary or a radical. She's just a girl.'*

"And what if all goes poorly? Suppose you fail to bring her in," Zephyr challenged from his throne. "What then?"

"Then, it will be only the more certain, and we will have him by morning. Who knows? Perhaps he'll talk and help us find the others. Though, I doubt it from all that I've heard of him,"

Kallida replied coldly. "Still, we may have the good fortune that they should come and try to save him. And not only that, but the map you've requested... we've nearly finished it."

"Good," Zephyr replied, seemingly satisfied. "This time, see that it's not stolen."

Chapter 31: Come with Me

The three of them sat in the office together, the room dark but for some small light from the lamps in the hall and a chamber candle which Dorcus had lit and set on the desk between them. They sat each in a chair, sipping on hot tea as they discussed their plans.

"So, they *will* arrest you, then?" Benjamin reconfirmed after rehashing some of their previous conversation.

"Yes, I think that's best," Eliezer agreed. "It may cause Adrien some serious problems if they don't find me, and I would hate for them to come here and find the two of you along with me."

"Will they kill you?" Ben asked, his heart unwilling to ask anything less direct.

"No, I don't believe so," his friend assured him. "Although, I think they'd like to."

"Well enough," Ben nodded. "I should like to attend the trial," he told him after some hesitation.

Eliezer looked to Dorcus, then to his tea, then back to Benjamin. "You know I couldn't prevent you, but I will request that you be careful."

"I'd like to see his face," Benjamin confessed as he stood to go. "It's not often that he makes himself publicly accessible."

'Strange... I suppose this is all politics to him, but it means much more to me than that.'

"Anyway, I must be off if I'm to reach Avera in time," he added as he moved to exit the room. He paused, turning back to them with a bow. "Thank you for your great sacrificial service... both to the kingdom and to me. These years have been ungrateful, I know, but I assure you, I am not."

"It has been..." he looked to Dorcus, who nodded, "and *is* our great honor and privilege, Your Majesty," Eliezer promptly assured him with a gladsome smile. "We would gladly spend and be spent for you, as you know."

"And Ben," Dorcus added softly, "don't forget to wear those gloves that Kypher and Mira made for you. I would like to see you avoid a repeat of the previous week's incident."

'They truly have shown me such great kindness.'

He smiled, taking the gloves from the tiny end table and slipping them on over his fingers, pulling them tight at the wrists with a *snap*. "Most assuredly, I will take all due caution, and know that I expect the same of each of you," he told them, lifting the hood of his cloak in preparation for his departure.

His attentions turned again to Eliezer, and he offered a passing glance behind him. *'Fair well, old friend, and may you find favor in the eyes of our most generous King.'*

"Ben," Eliezer called after him, catching a secondary glance. He stopped, attentive. "Don't fret, dear child. The kingdom is already given to you, and as for me, all is well with me."

Benjamin nodded with a faint smile and went his way. *'Eliezer... thank you.'*

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He slowed his pace as he approached the house on Mayverch Street, moving stealthily towards it from the rear. There was a magical barrier surrounding the structure with the appearance of a translucent purple bubble.

'Hm... a constraining barrier. I should be able to get in all right, but... once I do, I'm trapped in there. And that means that Zephyr's mages have already arrived, as well. Although...' he looked around, *'they seem to be primarily guarding the front.'*

He continued forward with caution, crossing effortlessly through the barrier. Once inside, he reached back and placed his hand against it. The boundary was hard and immovable. He took a breath, isolated from the noise of the streets. *'You'll just have to help me, that's all.'*

He scaled the wall to a second story balcony and pulled himself up over the railing. *'Hopefully, this isn't locked.'* He took hold of one of the curved handles and slowly turned it until he heard the faint *click* of the latch. He breathed a sigh of relief. *'Thank you.'*

He pushed the door carefully shut, having slipped silently into the house undetected. Light streamed through the French doors of the balcony and filled the room with the purple tint of fainting moonlight.

He looked around to get his bearings - a desk, a chair, a door, a closet, a bed, a nightstand. He moved quietly around the side of the bed until he caught a glimpse of the sleeper's face in the moonlight.

'Avera.'

He tapped her shoulder twice frantically. "Avera," he whispered. No response. *'Come on, wake up!'* He put his hand over his face and exhaled sharply. *'I'll try again.'* He tapped her shoulder, this time a little more forcefully, and she began to stir. "Avera!" he whispered to her harshly. "Avera, wake up!"

She turned slightly, her eyes blinking open. "Mm... Ben?" she squinted. "Ben, what are you doing here?" She stretched.

"Avera, we have to get out of here. *Now.* There's not much time," he whispered emphatically.

"What?" she asked him, beginning to collect herself.

"Avera, I need you to get dressed and come with me now. We don't have a lot of time," he quickly reiterated.

"Ben, *what* is going on?" she demanded loudly.

"Shhhhhh!" he whispered emphatically, putting a finger to his lips. "*Please*, keep your voice down!"

"What is going *on?*" she whispered back.

"*Thank* you," he smiled at her. "Now, listen to me. Zahaynei is outside *with* a military squadron *and* a regiment of mages just *waiting* for a signal from Kallida saying that his men are in place so that they can come in here and arrest you, because *they know* you've been talking to Webber."

"Oh, you shouldn't be here, then," she yawned.

The comment had taken him off guard. "*What*?"

"It's too dangerous, Ben. These people would contract with Hell to find you, and probably *have.* They've killed thousands of people all because they wanted *you* dead. I don't know if you realize this, Ben, but the people who run this government are a bunch of bloodthirsty lunatics! And the blood they want is *yours!* You know it's a trap, but you came anyway," she asserted. "That's why you're crazy!" she added with a yawn.

"The glory of a king is his people," he told her, "and being as I'm here now, would you come with me, please?"

'Come on, Avera. There's no time for this now, and if your worry is for my safety, the best thing to do is cooperate.'

"Yes, alright," she conceded. "I'll get dressed. Just wait in the hall," she told him, pointing to the door. "I'll come out."

It wasn't long before Avera emerged from the room in one of her skysuits. Benjamin looked over at her with a frown. *'No, that won't do. She's far too vulnerable to attack.'*

He unlatched his cloak and offered it to her, having removed it from his own shoulders. "Here," he said, "take this and put it on. I don't know what time we have, and if we get ourselves into a fix, I don't want you harmed."

The fabric sparkled in the moonlight as she held it in her hands. "Is this pyrite?" she asked, donning the cloak.

"Indeed, it is."

"Then it's impervious to maurium," she mused.

"Precisely," he said, impressed by her knowledge of the substance. "Maurium is no more than corrupted planetyroid. When properly refined, you get *this*," he said, putting a gloved hand before his face.

She smiled, then frowned. "Ben, I'm sorry I ran away before."

He shook his head. "Forget that and come with me."

"No, but-" she began to protest only to be drowned out by the sound of a loud bang and a crashing from the lower level. "*What was that!*"

Benjamin darted down the hall and peered over the railing of the loft. There was a scene of chaotic destruction below.

"Stay there!" he told Avera as she began to follow him.

Broken glass was sprinkled around the room on singed carpets with the soil of broken flowerpots and houseplants strewn about the increasing mess of what was formerly an entrance hall. There was another loud bang with a flash of light and a tiny explosion. The room began to fill with thick smoke. He heard a pounding at the door accompanied by the sound of the bending of wood.

'Smoke blasts! They've shattered the windows, and they're breaking down the door!

"They're coming!" he called back to her. "We have to go! Is there an upstairs?"

"Yes. Back this way. There's a stairwell that leads to the roof," she told him.

"Right. Start running!" he told her, dashing down the hall. She hesitated, overwhelmed. "Come on!" he said, grabbing her wrist and pulling her along. "Avera, you have to run!"

There was another loud bang, and the house began to fill with the sound of soldiers and shouting. "How are we going to get out of here?" Avera asked as they maneuvered up the winding stairwell.

"I don't know," he admitted.

"What do you mean you don't know? Ben, we have the army after us!"

"I may not know how, but I assure you that we will," he said, lifting his head. "You'll have to trust me this time!"

'You'll have to help us. That's all. I've run all the options. There is no other way.'

He threw open a door at the top of the stairs, and they lunged through it, the sky opening above them. The roof was flat with thick cut blocks of maurium that peaked over the edge lining the perimeter.

"What now?" she asked him.

He peered over the side at the back of the house to the ground below them.

'This is it then, isn't it? There are three ways out of here, and I only like one of them.'

"Ben?"

"We wait," he told her with a grin.

"Wait? You were just telling me to run. Ben!"

"Look," he said pointing to the barrier. "Do you see that over there?"

She turned her head, her eyes following his hand. "Yeah, it's... some sort of magic all around us. What is it?"

"It's called a constraining barrier. It acts akin to a magical cage that exhibits itself as a one sided, indestructible wall. They use it as a tool to capture people by trapping them inside. That's why the mages are here, that and the clean up after Zahaynei's soldiers are through wrecking the place."

"Are you saying that we can't get out?"

"Not at all. There are three ways out - death, arrest, and translation," he confidently stated.

"Trans-*what?*" she said, but he continued on as if she hadn't spoken.

"Now, personally, I'd like to avoid the first two, but, like I told you, you'll have to trust me for that." He paused. "Here, give me that cloak back, if you would, please."

"A-a... alright," she said, perplexed by him, and she handed him the cloak.

He took it and put it on, pulling the hood back over his head so the shadows would cover his face. There was a stampede of footsteps coming from the stairwell.

'Alright, then. Time for the show.' He smiled.

"I'd like to attend that trial tomorrow," he told her, "and this should help to clear you for that, as well, supposing you would be so kind as to join me."

"What? Ben, what are you-? Aaaaa!" she screamed as he lunged at her suddenly, grabbing her from behind and pulling her towards the edge. "What are you doing? Stop it! Have you gone *mad?*" she was still screaming as the army officers began to file out of the narrow doorway.

'Sorry, Avera. This isn't what I had planned, but you need to be exonerated. I trust you'll forgive me for this.'

"There!" one man said. "It's the man from the ambush!"

"Blasted armorial scum!" another man remarked.

"Here," a third called out, "they're on the roof!"

The guardsmen began to fan out, moving quickly into formation around them. Benjamin drew his sword, holding it across Avera's chest and angling it at her neck as he continued to pull her back towards the edge of the landing.

Avera was frantic. "Stop it! What are you doing?" she shouted, beginning to panic.

"Secure the girl!" an officer commanded, and the men began to move in closer.

Benjamin felt his foot hit a brick, and he stopped, pressing the sword against Avera's throat. "Don't worry. Just trust me with this," he whispered to her. "Gentlemen," he announced, "not another step!"

"Hold, men! Stand your ground!" the officer ordered. "Listen," he demanded, beginning to address Benjamin with some great irritation, "I don't know who you think you are trying to kidnap a girl and ordering us around, and I don't know if you've noticed, but we have you surrounded! You're trapped. There's no way out. So, you are in no position to be making demands!"

"Is that so? Well, then. What would you suggest?" Benjamin spoke plainly.

"Here's our terms if you want to live: give up, and release the girl immediately!"

"I'm sorry," he said, extending his arm to the side, and releasing his hold of Avera, "I'm afraid I can't oblige." He held his position for a moment, taking a breath.

'*I'm trusting you with this.*'

He kept his right arm straight, the sword held steady as an extension of himself, and spanned his left arm likewise, his feet locked together.

'One... Two...' He took a deep breath. *'Three.'*

"Get him! Now!" the officer commanded, and a flood of men began to rush towards him.

"My apologies, gentlemen, but I won't be joining you. Not today. You see," he said, leaning backwards, "I am glad to serve a King who is better than I."

"*What the...!*" the officer shouted in disbelief as he watched Benjamin fall slowly backwards over the edge of the rooftop.

His gaze turned upwards as he fell into the air. *'The stars look nice tonight.'* He smiled, closing his eyes as he felt his body lift, and he was caught up in a strange lightness.

Avera spun around frantically. The soldiers rushed to peer over the side of the wall where he fell, fully expecting gravity to have taken its course, but when they looked, he was nowhere in sight.

Chapter 32: The Arrest

Kelvin walked down the cluttered halls of High Palace uncomfortable with all that he had seen. The term "enemy of the state" had left him with a much more sinister impression than that of the mild-mannered man who had met them at the door of the Kingsmen congregation early that morning. Generally, an arrest was made with much yelling and screaming of curses and revilings on the part of malefactor, but Webber had conducted himself with unparalleled dignity and given himself peaceably to their charge. He hardly spoke a word, even when the soldiers mocked him.

It was an embarrassment to Kelvin to have been associated with such an apprehension, one in which justice seemed crueler than the man at fault. And for all of that, Kallida had recovered a ring, one which he now held and was sent to be delivered to Blackridge along with the simple directive to "see what he says."

Blackridge was conducting interviews regarding the disappearance of the man at the Klauthbrid residence when Kelvin met him.

He bowed, presenting himself as the mage emerged from one room on his way to another. "Lord Blackridge," he politely addressed.

"Kelvin," he responded with a smile. "Welcome back. You're in good time, really. I have one last interview, and I would like to have your help for it."

"Of course," Kelvin replied with a quick nod.

"How was it with Kallida?" Blackridge asked him.

"Very smooth," Kelvin informed him. "Everything went well, and the arrest was made without incident, which reminds me..." he paused, remembering the ring, and reached into his pouch. He removed the metal band, presenting it to Blackridge. "Lord Kallida sent this for you."

Blackridge kept his face from emotion, but his dark eyes told another tale as they reflected his inner sadness. "Thank you, Kelvin," he said, and he reached slowly forward, gently plucking the shining piece of metal from his hand. He took the ring and turned it in the light, carefully examining the intricate crafting of delicate flowers and circular bands. Blackridge let out a soft sigh. "Where did you get this?" he asked him.

"The Ambassador, sir," Kelvin responded. "It was in his pocket when we searched him."

"You're certain there was no one else there?"

"None, sir," Kelvin assured him.

"Right. Well," he murmured, placing the ring in his pouch. "I'll hold onto this, then."

"Yes, sir," he replied.

'Another person? He couldn't know who that belongs to... could he?'

They came to another room for interviews, and the door slid open revealing a dark room with a table and three chairs around it, all of them maurium, and one of which was inhabited by a familiar figure.

'Avera!' His eyes grew wide with astonishment.

"I have good news for you, young lady," Blackridge proclaimed as they entered. "You're being released."

"Lord Blackridge," Avera addressed with some relief, "thank you." She was blinking from the sudden change in lighting. "And Quince!" She smiled. "How nice to see you, also!"

"Avera..." he stammered, and he smiled, unsure of what to say. "Hi."

"Mr. Dehnhardt is my apprentice," Blackridge told her, taking a seat at the end of the table. "He and I will he taking your official statement."

"Avera..." Kelvin began slowly, "what happened? I heard you were nearly kidnapped."

"It's hard to say," Avera expressed. "I was asleep. Then, suddenly, there was a man in my bedroom telling me to come with him."

Blackridge turned his eyes down to his papers and began to fill the information in frantically with his pen. "What time was it about?"

"I don't know," she told him. "It was dark. I was asleep."

"Do you often sleep in your clothes?" Blackridge asked her.

"He had me dress," Avera informed him.

"Please describe the man," Blackridge asked her, adding quickly, "for the state's record."

Avera thought for a moment. "He was tall, about six feet... maybe a little over. He wore a white cloak and tunic accented in gold, and the fabric sparkled in the moonlight."

Kelvin leaned forward, moving to the edge of his seat. "You didn't see his face?" he asked suspiciously.

"As I said, he wore a cloak," Avera reiterated, her eyes locking with his. "I take it that he didn't want to be recognized."

He would have pressed further, but Blackridge stopped him. "That is consistent with the testimony of the guards," the Archmage asserted, still scribbling notes.

"But she was much closer to him than they were," Kelvin protested, and they looked at him, startled.

"Mr. Dehnhardt," Lord Blackridge said sternly, "Avera is not a suspect. Her release has already been granted. The only reason we are here is to get a statement. Is that understood?"

Kelvin was taken aback by his instructor's sudden change in tone. "Yes, sir. I understand," he muttered, bowing his head. "My apologies," he added quickly, turning to Avera. She still seemed stunned by the outburst, and he felt a twinge of conscience.

"Alright, Avera," Blackridge continued, putting the interview back on track, "so, this man appeared in your room and told you to get dressed... then what happened?"

Avera wet her lips nervously. "He heard the soldiers and took me to the roof," she said, carefully choosing her words. "He was trying to figure a way out. That's when he started dragging me back towards the edge. One of the men, an officer, I think, told him to release me and surrender."

Blackridge nodded. "That was probably Colonel Garner. He claimed to have had an exchange with the suspect, and I've heard several testimonies to that effect. How did the man respond?"

"Well, he *did* let me go, but then he..." she shook her head, "he just dove off the edge, right behind me. I felt him fall. Then, when I went to look, he—"

"Vanished?" Blackridge concluded, taking a pause to look up from his paperwork.

"Yes!" Avera responded, appearing frazzled and frightened.

Kelvin frowned. *'I may have misjudged this. I should offer a better apology later.'*

"There was some mention that he may have said something to you," Blackridge diplomatically stated.

Avera shook her head. "You'll have to trust me," she told them, recalling the words. "That's all he said."

"I see," Lord Blackridge said. "Thank you. I think that's all we needed from you, Avera."

"Wait," Kelvin said, his mind still on the vanishing prospect.

"Yes?" Blackridge addressed with a tone of interest and warning.

"Lord Blackridge, people don't just disappear. I mean, surely, he didn't hit the ground, but... he must have gone somewhere."

Blackridge nodded. "Yes," he said. "Somewhere. Are you familiar with translation, Mr. Dehnhardt?"

Avera's eyes widened.

"You mean like Pyrean to Obedi or Seacrish to Camadonian?" he asked, fairly certain of his own lack of understanding.

Blackridge smiled with amusement. "Not quite. Translation is a known occurrence wherein a man is somewhere and then he isn't. The individual who is translated is carried away as if by the wind and without natural explanation. In one instance, he is somewhere, and in the next, he is another place entirely. There are accounts of this recorded in the Kingsmen Chronicles and a handful besides."

"You knew about this?" Avera asked, surprised.

"Of course," Blackridge said, mildly perplexed. "It's not a secret."

"Don't you find that a little strange?" Kelvin cut in, finding the whole thing unrealistic.

Blackridge looked to him, questioning. "Not at all. The man was an armorial, wasn't he? He would have been familiar with the tales, as I am from my studies with Webber. I'm sure that he would not have jumped had he not known he would soon be landing elsewhere."

"But teleportation is a complex spell only effectively executed by the most powerful mages. How could this man—"

He stopped, his words brought to an abrupt halt by the intensity of the burning gaze of the Archmage, his dark eyes like smoldering coals which pierced him.

"Need I explain Kingsmen power structure to you, Mr. Dehnhardt, or do you not understand what many men seek by force they receive without measure or merit?"

Kelvin was speechless. "Yes, sir," he sputtered. "I understand plainly."

"Perhaps," Blackridge muttered, turning his face to Avera. "Is there anything else?" he asked her.

"Yes, actually," she replied nervously. "I don't suppose that there's a trial tomorrow?"

"There is," he said and paused, considering.

'Yes, but she shouldn't be aware of that. No one is.'

"I see," Avera muttered softly.

"Will Ben be there?" Blackridge asked, his eyes locked on hers.

'What the... who is Ben?'

She nodded. "He's the one who told me about it," she replied, her voice hesitant and low.

"Thank you," Blackridge replied, picking up his papers and rising from him chair. "I'll look for him." He turned to Kelvin. "Mr. Dehnhardt, would you be so kind as to show Avera out, please?"

"Yes, sir," Kelvin readily consented.

His master smiled. "Thank you," he said. "After that, I want you to report to Master Kallida. I have some personal business to attend to," he told him as he turned to go his way.

Kelvin turned to Avera and smile, beginning to relax again. "Well," he said sheepishly, somewhat ashamed of his unregulated zeal, "I'll walk you to the door, then."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Dehnhardt," Avera grinned, seemingly amused by his obvious embarrassment. "You are most kind."

Chapter 33: Questions of Loyalty

He made his way speedily through the hidden passages down narrow, winding stairways to the dark dungeons deep below High Palace, saluting no man on the way.

The rough and unfinished halls of the prisons below were primarily made up of crudely carved out tunnels winding through the uncut earth. It was much busier in those burrowed halls than it had ever been, their uniquely distinguished guest attracting a myriad of government officials and their guards.

He eased his pace as he approached the door leading to the prisoners' hall. He could hear voices coming from behind the door as the men engaged in celebratory remarks of lighthearted banter and cheerful mockery. His heart sank.

'How can I go in there with such revelry?' He slowed his pace almost to the point of standing still, his heart unsure of his purpose.

The door to the prison block opened up ahead of him, and a group of magicians and guards exited the hall followed by the King, who was accompanied by a selection of his mage-royal.

"Ah, Lord Blackridge!" Zephyr announced, greeting him gladly. "This is a day of celebration, is it not?"

"It is, indeed, my Lord," his servant addressed with a bow. "And may all the enemies of my Lord the King be as this man is."

"Aha! What, of good conscience?" the King laughed, and Blackridge returned his mirth with a look of mild amusement. "Why so punctilious?" Zephyr inquired, becoming a bit more serious.

"It's nothing, my Lord. Perhaps... tiredness," Blackridge suggested, cleverly accounting for his somber mood, and it was true that he was tired.

The King turned to his royal retinue. "Gentlemen," he said, addressing the entourage, "I would like to speak with my friend here in private. Go, await me in my bedchambers." The servants obeyed him, clearing themselves from the hall, and the two men were left alone. They stood face to face, and Zephyr put his arm around Blackridge, resting his hand on his shoulder. "Master Blackridge, a word," he said.

"Of course," the mage responded, bearing the weight of his address.

"You know, in all the four reams of the kingdom, there is not a man I would consider more highly than yourself, and there is no man in whom I have placed my trust if not in you. I have found no fault in you, but I will speak plainly. There are those among our ranks who question your loyalty."

"My Lord," Blackridge began, raising his hand with an appeal, "you know I have—"

Zephyr stopped him, waving a hand of dismissal. "I will hear nothing of it. Let the matter go no further between us," he entreated.

Blackridge looked at him with some concern and waited for the request which was sure to follow.

"Kallida may be shrill but he does do good work, doesn't he? Think how long we've waited, our eyes longing all these passing years to see our enemies in shackles, and here he has made this a day of celebration," Zephyr mused. "It is a funny thing... he owes you his life many times over, and yet he continues to challenge you. I honestly don't know why you let him live. Many times I've thought it a mistake, one which will one day haunt you, but I am grateful for it now."

'He's just... discussing things. We haven't talked like this is ages. Surely, he's planning something, but what does he want?'

Blackridge watched him, listening closely to the formation of every word the King spoke. There was no such thing as talking with Zephyr; there was always a request.

"No, it's a little like the hubris of Adam," the King continued, unhindered by the Archmage and his thoughts. "He doesn't realize it, but he'll do whatever I want and nothing more." He laughed. "Can you believe the man wants to prosecute a public trial with hardly any evidence?"

Blackridge shook his head and brought his hand up as if to pitch something over his shoulder. "It makes no difference what evidence he has," the Archmage reminded him. "Whatever is said, he can simply rewrite and edit to his liking. Master Kallida will suffer no more than momentary embarrassment."

"He would need my cooperation for that," Zephyr corrected, "and I won't give the order."

Blackridge's eyes widened in shock, and he looked at Zephyr in disbelief. *'But why? The KLP was designed to adjust reality to his liking. Surely, he can't want Kallida to fail.'*

"You seem surprised," Zephyr observed. "Well, look here, Blackridge, I may despise the man, but I do have respect for him! The man's a living oracle, for God's sake!" the King passionately defended. "I just finished talking with him," he said, indicating the door behind him. "Do you know he's the same man now as he ever was? The unwavering consistency of a moral Delphian is the one thing I find most appalling. It makes them *most* uncooperative," Zephyr lamented.

"You have my sympathies," Blackridge muttered, trying to present himself as caring.

"Yes," the King went on, barely affected by his subordinate's comment, "and he did always have such a unique way of showing up at *the* most inopportune times. Why, I can think of several instances offhand wherein he disrupted my plans *entirely!*"

Blackridge nodded solemnly. "Yes, as I recall, that happened rather frequently."

'But you always got your revenge, Ramus. Now, didn't you? You always made certain that you were never crossed, and, if any man crossed you, his life was your demand. Whether in death or in service, the misery of your adversary was your just reward and nothing else could recompense. Even so, what could have meant more than these past twenty years in which they've suffered deprivation?'

"For all of that, still, I admire him. How a man could endure so much for so little and remain faithful for so long without reward, I may never comprehend," Zephyr said and sighed. "I will allow the trial, but I will leave Kallida to his own volition. If he wants to prosecute the trial, I'll let him. Though, it's foolish of him to try. Personally, I think he would have a better chance of convicting the Royal Confessor in Tyra, but if Kallida thinks himself clever, if he thinks himself cunning, if he thinks himself ready and able, so be it. He can have his trial, but he won't have my order for the KLP to correct it."

"I am certain the Ambassador will appreciate you leaving his dignity intact, if not his life," Blackridge diplomatically commented.

The King laughed. "Then it's sure! You know the man better than anyone!"

Blackridge shook his head. His face wore a small smile. "Thank you, but that isn't true. Eliezer loves a woman who knows him better than I do."

Zephyr's face fell, and he appeared almost remorseful. "Oh, does he?" he murmured. "Well, we have destroyed a great many things, now haven't we?" His words carried with them a strange silence which fell. "But I had come with a request," Zephyr admitted, recomposing himself.

"Whatever you require, my Lord, I am your servant," Blackridge replied, having been comforted by Zephyr's momentary softness and the friendliness of his address.

"Good," Zephyr stated with a wide smile. "I would like you to perform the execution."

Blackridge felt his heart drop and his stomach twist. He shut his eyes and felt the pain course through him.

"Dissolve the rumors and quell the dissension in the ranks, Lord Blackridge," the King instructed him. "What better way to prove your loyalty to me than to vanquish the Ambassador by your own hand?"

Blackridge swallowed and nodded. *'I should have expected this.'*

He opened his eyes and choked out the words. "May it be done, my Lord, according to your wishes."

Zephyr smiled with devilish delight. "Very good, Blackridge. The matter will soon be settled, then." The King patted his arm and began on his way, taking the first steps of a long walk through the shifting corridors of the castle complex to his chambers. "Oh, and Blackridge..." he whispered in the mage's ear as he passed by him, "don't show weakness. Not like last time."

Chapter 34: Love and Loyalty

"Gentlemen," he said gruffly as he pushed through the door.

"Lord Blackridge!" the men called out as they parted, surprised by his stormy demeanor.

"Where is he?" he demanded.

"Right in there, sir," one of the soldiers indicated, pointing to a door on his right.

He burst through the door without another word to any of them, his frustration at its peak. The room was damp and poorly lit with minimal accommodations. To the left, there was a large cell with black iron bars reinforced by maurium and fused with magic. Ahead there was a group of soldiers, some sitting at a table and the others standing around them. Their heads shot up as the door slammed open, the weight of the metal crashing against the wall.

"Get out," he ordered them.

The men froze in stunned silence.

"I said get out!" he roared, advancing towards them with anger.

"But Lord Blackridge," their commander protested, "we have been ordered to-"

"Benson, you'll leave if you know what's good for you," he snarled. "Now, *get out!*"

The other men fled, leaving their captain to his convictions. "But, sir," he said as he rose trembling from his chair.

"Benson!" he shouted, and the man dashed out the door.

Blackridge closed the door behind him and pressed himself against it. He bolted the door shut and, letting out an emphatic sigh, he closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against the cold metal.

'How could this happen?'

He remained still, isolated in silent lament and trembling with fear and anger as old memories whirled around in his head.

'How could I have let this happen?'

Suddenly, a voice came, breaking through his solitude with the soft words of an old friend. "Hello, Adrien."

He leveraged himself from the door, spinning around and stumbling back towards the cell. He shook his head, despondent, and at last he said, "They've asked me to preform the execution." He shook his head again.

"Will you?" the prisoner asked him, his voice a soothing calm.

He shook his head. "How could I?" He tearfully choked out the words, unable to face him.

"What will you do, then?" he asked again, propelling his thoughts.

He shook his head. "I don't know," he admitted, and he sighed, exasperated.

He hung his head and closed his eyes. *'How is it that it has come back to this? And what have I done? After all this time, what have I done to make amends for all that was broken? What have I allowed that now we are here?'*

He opened his eyes and turned to face his friend. The sight of him was both a balm and a heartache as he looked at him behind the bars of the prison. He appeared lightly battered, a matter which could doubtless be traced back to the guards' poor treatment of him. "Eliezer, what are you doing here?" he asked him.

"If you don't know it, how could I?" he asked with a joking smile, his voice softly fluctuating. "I was arrested, if they haven't told you."

He smiled, amused. *'Ah, that same old gentle humor.'*

"Yes," he conceded, "but you allowed that. Did Dorcus tell you or did you know already?"

He smiled with a nod. "You know us too well. She came by my room last night and told me, but I did have an inkling of it, myself."

"I thought so," he replied, considering. "It was you who told Benjamin, then."

"Yes... we *did*," he replied hesitantly. "We sent him to help Avera escape. He isn't *here*, is he?"

"No, he isn't," he said, reassuring him. "You know," he told him with a look of amusement, "he couldn't get her out of there, so he played it as a kidnapping."

Eliezer's eyes widened. "Oh my!" He chuckled, shaking his head. "That *is* exceptional."

"No," Blackridge corrected, laughing and pointing a finger at him, "the boy is crazy like his father was."

He laughed again. "Perhaps a bit more avant-garde," he suggested.

"Whatever it is, it works for him," Blackridge confessed with gladsome admiration. "He escaped without incident, and, thanks to his fanciful performance, Avera is free, as well."

"It worked for Casper, also," Eliezer reminded him.

"True. Ah, true. We did have some remarkable adventures then," he reminisced.

"Many of which I was quite pleased to hear after the fact as riveting tales of valor and heroism."

"Ha! But you had your own share of exploits," Blackridge reminded him, pointing a finger at his friend, "and those were much *more* remarkable in many ways." He paused, looking the man in the eyes until at last he whispered, "Lazarus." His lips parted into a grin.

Eliezer smirked, turning his gaze to the ground beside him, and he gave a gentle nod of consideration. "I suppose," he muttered.

"I don't know how you're getting out of this," Blackridge sighed, "but I know you will, and when you *do*..." he said, reaching into his side pouch.

Eliezer watched him, curious. "Adrien..." he addressed softly.

"...you'll need *this!*" the mage declared triumphantly, pulling a gold ring from the interior of the bag's purple velvet. He presented it to his friend, extending his hand between the bars. "Here," he told him with a look of satisfaction, "I thought you should have this."

Eliezer bowed himself. His eyes began to well with tears, and a look of deep appreciation spread over his kindly countenance. "Thank you," he said, taking the ring from Adrien's outstretched palm.

Adrien shook his head, on his face an unrelenting smile. "What are you still doing with that, anyway?"

"It was..." he lifted his eyes in thought, trying to hold back the tears, "bad timing, as you suggested." A smile briefly crossed his face, and he let out a sigh of lament.

'I did say that, didn't I?' Blackridge considered.

"It wouldn't have been if it weren't for me."

Eliezer shook his head. "This isn't your fault."

There was a brief silence between them. "Did you know that Benjamin plans to attend the trial tomorrow?" he asked him, changing the subject.

"Yes. He told me. He wants to see Ramus."

"I see," he said, considering things. "I told Avera I would look for them. Hopefully, he won't get into too much trouble. The trial is public, so..."

Eliezer bowed his head. "I *am* grateful to you."

Adrien nodded with a small sound of acknowledgement. *'Yes, but...'* He bowed his head, considering the ground on which he now stood.

"I should go," he at last replied.

"Adrien," Eliezer said, calling him back, "how do you know I'm getting out?"

He was surprised by the question. *'How do I know it? Wait, doesn't he know?'*

He shot a puzzled glance at his friend. "Didn't Dorcus tell you?"

Eliezer smiled, shaking his head. "No such thing, but I believe it."

'Well... I know, because, Lazarus... it simply cannot end like this, behind these bars, within these walls... there must be a more glorious end... for all of us.'

"Then take it on *my* word and *my* conviction that neither you nor I will die tomorrow!" Blackridge declared. "And know that I could never kill you, either," he added with a determined smile.

"Adrien," he said, stopping him as he went to leave.

He turned again, curious.

"Thank you for this," he told him, shaking the ring as he held it between his thumb and his forefinger.

Adrien smiled with a nod. *'Any time, old friend. Any time at all.'*

He moved the deadbolt and left him. The guardsmen were still gathered in the hall outside the door, and their eyes watched him with looks of nervous dread.

'Right...'

"Well, gentlemen," he addressed with all of the enthusiasm he could muster, "thank you for your cooperation. It has been a long night, but a glorious one."

They all seemed to relax a little. *'That's good. I wouldn't have them too upset with me.'*

"Gentlemen, to the future!" he declared, snatching a small glass of bubbling clear liquid from the round. "May all the enemies of the King be cast down, and may their schemes be brought to nothing!"

The response of the men to his words was one of relieved jubilance. "Here, here!" they echoed the reply, raising their glasses one to another in celebration.

"To Pyre!" he proclaimed, holding the glass high.

"To Pyre!" they cheered the enthusiastic reply.

He smiled, his heart finally at peace. *'To you, oh prince, and to you, oh my King.'*

And with that, he set the drink down on the table and left them.

Chapter 35: The Bookkeeper

She waited by the gates of High Palace, watching the faces as they entered there. The guards wandered about, patrolling the masses as they flooded into the castle.

The King had sent out an invitation over the airways: there would be a public trial of Eliezer Webber, the former Ambassador of the Kingsmen and a nefarious enemy of the state. High Palace would be opened at noon and accessible to all. It was a rare opportunity. High Palace had not been made open to the public in years, and King Zephyr himself was a recluse to his people, having not made any sort of public appearance in over a decade.

The streets of the city were nearly empty outside of the Palace District, and many businesses had shut down for the remainder of the trial. The trial was also to be broadcast live and a recording made available on the KLP for those unable to attend, though she wondered how accurately the events were being recorded.

'If they are broadcasting it live, they wouldn't be able to edit it, would they? But then, what is it they're planning? They must have some way to avoid disaster with this. Of course, they might plan to change it later. Zephyr could issue a decree, and everyone would have their memories altered. No one would remember a thing that happened. How frustrating!' She was becoming increasingly annoyed just thinking about it. She felt her stomach turn. *'The KLP: they called it the perfect marriage of magic and technology... but it isn't. All it is is mind control.'* She sighed. *'Mind control... what a sickening thought.'*

Perhaps she had been pulled too deep into thought, because she hadn't noticed the guardsman as he approached her.

"You alright, lass?" he asked her, and she found his voice was strangely familiar.

Avera jumped as a jolt of anxiety rushed through her, spurring an inglorious return to reality. She looked up at the man and smiled nervously. "Oh, yes, sir," she muttered.

He grinned with amusement, "You don't recognize me, do you?"

"I, uh..." she said, looking the man over.

He was lean and muscular. He wore a helmet with a dark visor which covered his eyes and a tight orange beard which wrapped around his pale face. His uniform was that of an officer's with a high ranking insignia, one which Avera well recognized. It was the symbol of an eagle with outstretched wings and a rolled map in its talons, the emblem of the High Colonels.

The High Colonels were an elite team of military intelligence officers entrusted with the state's most sensitive secrets and high security missions. The group consisted of ten officers, each retaining a sponsoring member of the High Court. If a recommendation was made by one of the Court officers, the prospective appointee would then be interviewed by King Zephyr

himself, and the nomination would be either approved or rejected based on his evaluation of the candidate. Once approved, a member of the High Colonels would report solely to his sponsoring Court officer, Captain Zahaynei, and King Zephyr, unless under the King's alternative direction.

'There's no doubt he's a Colonel like my father was, but still... I don't know him.'

"No, sir. I'm sorry," she said. "You must have me mistaken for someone. I don't think we've met."

"You are Avera Ibori, aren't you? The girl who was here last night?" he asked her, maintaining a confident smile.

"Yes," she said with some surprise.

'Maybe we did meet.'

"Well, I'm Marcus Garner," he said, throwing up a fist and pointing his thumb back to himself with a broad grin. "I helped to oversee last night's rescue mission," he enthusiastically explained. "It was pretty strange the way that fellow jumped off the roof like he did. My men and I were relieved to get you back safe."

"Oh, yes," she said smiling. "I should thank you for that. You saved me from that maniac on the roof."

"No thanks necessary," he told her with a wave of his hand. "Though, I am impressed to see you here. If it were me, I would've been afraid to come."

"Well, my friend asked me to meet him here," she stammered. "He really has his heart set on coming. But I am a little nervous," she confessed.

"Aye! What kind of man is he to leave a lady waiting all alone in the street?"

"Well, uh... maybe he's just nervous, too?" she awkwardly suggested. "*Ha!*"

"Yes, I suppose that *is* a possibility," he chuckled.

"Oh, look!" she said, spotting Ben as he wound his way through the crowd. "There he is now!"

"Whe-oh," he said, his voice dropping off and his countenance changing. "Is... that your friend there?" he asked her, pointing a finger to a place in the distance.

"Uh... yes," she affirmed. "There, with the glasses."

Marcus stood as if paralyzed.

"Is... everything okay?" she asked him.

'Why is life always strange lately?'

"All's well," he muttered. "But your friend, he... has a remarkable likeness to a man I knew once."

"Oh, really?" she asked, turning his eyes toward him with interest. "What was he like?"

"He was, uh... a little more muscular, a little more built, very handsome, face like an angel," he told her. He kept his voice low. "His hair was considerably lighter, but the face and the eyes... overall," he breathed, "incredible."

"Interesting," she said flatly.

'I wonder if he knew Casper.'

"This man, what happened to him?" she asked.

"He... left," he told her. "He had kind of a family crisis."

She held back from laughing. *'Well, that's a diplomatic way of saying it.'*

Ben came and greeted them, dressed in his usual vest and shirt sleeves with matching trousers. Today, the color was sand accompanied by a deep red-violet tie with a gold pin of the armorial crest attached to the center of the knot.

'What was he thinking wearing that here?'

"Benjamin, you say?" Marcus asked him.

"Yes, sir," Benjamin pleasantly asserted. "Benjamin Palmer."

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Benjamin," the officer told him, shaking his hand. "My name is Marcus Garner."

"A pleasure, sir," he assured him.

"I like that pin you have there," Marcus stated, and Avera began to feel uneasy.

"Oh, this?" Ben asked him, indicating the crest. "Thank you! Actually, it's an old family heirloom. It was my father's, and now it's mine, but I always wear it when I'm thinking of him."

"Your father's not around, then?" he asked him.

"No, sir," Benjamin earnestly confessed. "I lost my parents when I was very young. There are times that I miss them very much, and there are times that I have regrets about everything that has happened. I was looked after by my family's servants, and they have loved me as a child. I have grown, and now, I long to be a better man, to live well, and to conduct myself appropriately to the task of life ahead of me. I have received favor from the King of Himmel and his servants. They have blessed me with life," he told him, a soft smile returning to his face. "I am grateful to them both."

"This kingdom," Marcus said, speaking slowly with an air of sympathy, "is quite different than the one your parents knew."

"I appreciate that," Ben said softly.

"Things have changed a lot around here," Marcus told him, "but maybe they're ready to be changed again... for the better this time." He smiled. "Let me walk the two of you inside."

He escorted them into the building, past the rivers of people and the various security checkpoints to the service desk. Behind the desk sat a heavy set woman with a security badge and a low-ranking guard uniform. Her hair was dark and wavy, pulled back loosely in a ponytail with a red headband. Her skin was tanned and flawless. Her eyes were a dark and captivating brown with long eyelashes that fluttered about.

"Hello, Helena!" Marcus said in friendly greeting.

"Marcus, how are you?" she asked, happy to see him.

"Doing well! As always, doing well," he said with a smile. "Hey, Helena, these are some friends. I would like them to be put in my section," he told her. "That's..."

"Right up front, practically," she told him, checking the capacity sheet. "We can do that, but I'll still need the names and occupations."

"Thanks! Uh... this here," he said, reaching past Ben and placing his hand on Avera's shoulder, "is Miss Avera Ibori, daughter of the noted Colonel, Tyberion, and she is a..."

"Student, ma'am," Avera told her with a pleasant smile.

'This could get complicated with Ben.'

"Thank you, honey," Helena said sweetly. "And for you, sir?"

"Now, this..." Marcus went on, moving his hand over to Benjamin, "is Mr. Benjamin Palmer." Helena typed something on her holodex and made a face, then began flipping through the pages of one of her piles of papers.

'Oh, no! What's wrong?'

"But you won't find his name on the census forms," Marcus added, quickly correcting his error. "Benjamin is an orphan boy my sister raised. He lives outside of the city."

'What!'

"I didn't know you had a sister, Marcus," she said with surprise. "Your two brothers are all I ever hear about!"

"Yes, well, I... don't really mention her much. I haven't seen her in some time. It's kind of a complicated situation, really. Strange... family dynamics, you know?"

'I can't believe this. Is Dorcus really his sister?'

"Uh-huh..." Helena gave Marcus a distinct look of skepticism. "Okay, then what is it this orphan boy does?"

"Ben? Well, he's a... uh..."

'Oh no. He didn't think this that far through, and neither did I!'

"Bookkeeper, ma'am," Benjamin told her, saving Marcus from his struggle to come up with an answer.

'Ah... well, he does keep the books, doesn't he?'

"And where is it you keep books for, young man?" Helena asked him, still seemingly unconvinced.

"For the North Pyre Kingsmen Congregation," he told her.

"Mr. Waverley's church?" she asked with puzzled surprise.

"Yes, and I can't think of anything that has left me more shocked than hearing what a terrible, ungodly man he's turned out to be. I always thought him quite gentle and rather inspiring."

'Clever wording, Ben.' Avera smiled.

Helena shook her head. "It just goes to show you, you never can tell."

Marcus grinned, clearly pleased with Benjamin's performance. "Well, maybe you can about some things," he said, lightly shuffling the hair of his newly adopted nephew.

Chapter 36: Begin

Eliezer watched as the grand courtroom began to fill with people. He stood at the front of the room behind a partition which came to about the height of his waist with a guard set at either side. He scanned the sea of faces, passively watching the entrance for Benjamin. There were rows of benches throughout the room with people standing behind and a balcony above from which the citizens could observe the proceedings.

He saw Benjamin and Avera as they entered, escorted by a red haired officer, his helmet tucked away beneath his arm.

'Marcus?'

He watched in silence and closed his eyes to stop himself from following as they went. He lowered his head and took a breath of air.

'Well, he always did have a way of finding himself in the most intriguing circumstances.'

He glanced over past the partition to his right. Adrien Blackridge was standing near him with Demetrius Kallida and Alhor Zahaynei farther off. He scanned the crowd again, relocating Benjamin. He and Avera were left standing behind the last row of benches. He looked to Adrien, catching his eye, then to Benjamin again. Adrien's eyes followed him, and he gave a discreet nod.

Kallida was monitoring the room. He held in his hand rolled sheets of parchment. He called an officer over and whispered something to him.

"Yes, right away, sir," the man replied bowing himself before he hurried away. Kallida's eyes were stayed on the man intently, and Eliezer could only surmise that he must have taken some interest in Benjamin.

'I'll have to do something. The boy does bear a remarkable resemblance to his father.'

Eliezer squinted, keeping his eyes on Benjamin. "Say, who is that man there?" he asked.

'No games, Demetrius... none but mine.'

"The red haired man in the last row seated with the light haired damsel?" Blackridge asked, playing along.

"No," Kallida corrected with minor irritation. "The man in the glasses, the one with the crest on his tie."

"Oh, yes," Blackridge said, peering over at Benjamin. "Interesting fellow."

"Quite," Kallida said. "He looks like Caper's ghost. That or his *son*," he added, casting a warning glance at Eliezer. "I don't know who he is, but I soon will. I have sent a man to inquire for me."

Kallida's man returned quickly, handing him a small slip of paper. Kallida's eyes scanned the page rapidly and his countenance changed as he read it, flooding with anger.

"Is something wrong, Demetrius?" Eliezer asked him.

"*You*," Kallida breathed in furious anger. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath of air to calm himself. He flicked the paper with annoyance. "Benjamin Palmer," he announced, glaring at him. "He's your bookkeeper." He glanced at Benjamin, then at Blackridge before his eyes settled on Webber once again.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, feigning surprise and smiling. "Is that really Ben?" His wrists were bound in tight leather bonds, but he lifted his hands to remove his glasses, rubbing his eyes. "Forgive me," he said, "my eyesight isn't what it was." He replaced his glasses and looked to Benjamin again. "Ah, yes. Ben, indeed. How silly of me not to have recognized him." His eyes moved to Kallida. "Of course," he said pointedly, "I wasn't afforded much sleep last night, either."

Blackridge smirked. "Well, that could be said of all of us."

Kallida examined the two of them with bitter hatred. "It could, indeed," he commented coldly. "Howbeit, Ambassador, *you* will have plenty of time to rest after the execution."

Eliezer bowed his head, and his eyes focused on the bonds strapped around his wrists. *'My hands may be tied, but yours are not. Therefore, if there be life, O King, let there be some left for me.'*

"The trumpeters," Zahaynei said, nudging Kallida and turning his attention to the stage behind them.

"They must be ready, then," Blackridge replied, turning to the place where the monarch would soon appear.

The stage was crafted into the wall and elevated high at the front of the court. There was a railing across the front of it and a throne sat in the center, whereupon the King would sit to cast judgement. There were two men who had come into view of the courtroom, young men in uniform holding long, silver trumpets. They took their positions on either side and moved towards the crowd until the horns of their instruments stretched over the rail. There they held their place and began to sound the song of royal announcement, capturing the attention of the court.

Charlenade emerged and walked across the stage. His pace was slow and dignified. His image was captivating as he paused to address the crowd: a man dressed in elaborate garb. He wore a long white coat with shining gold braid, sparkling chains, polish buttons, and colorful gemstones which reflected the light of the courtroom. White gloves covered his hands and forearms, and a velvet cape of shimmering gold was stylishly arranged to the side so as to cover one shoulder and not the other. He stood between the trumpeters with perfect posture and stony stillness. Only his eyes were set on Webber with distain, and his icy gaze pierced the object of his cold, undying hatred, sinking sickles into the man's soul.

Charlenade adjusted his eyes to the people at the conclusion of the blasting of the trumpets. "Citizens of the public, welcome to our court. I am Cessil Charlenade, commander of the Mage-Royal and personal servant to our King," he declared. "As we conduct this trial here today, I ask that each of you remember the kingdom as it now is. Altruon is at its strength, and we are feared among the nations. The very mention of that name strikes dread into the hearts of our enemies. Our land is plenteous and its people are prosperous. This is an age of great innovation and modern progress. Altruon has entered into a new age, a greater age of glory and enlightenment. Our society has risen to take its place at the forefront of the world stage, and our people rise with it. Now, I ask that you rise and applaud your great and glorious King, Zephyr Almast."

The trumpets began again, and Zephyr entered, dressed in decadent royal robes which far outshined those worn by Charlenade, but as much as Charlenade's garments were meant to convey richness and plenty, Zephyr's were to convey the unapproachable darkness of his majesty and strength. The King wore black dusted with diamonds and decorated with shining silver braid. His cape was a dark purple velvet, so dark it was near black, and his double breasted coat shimmered with the royal majesty of the stars on a moonless night.

'Ramus...'

The eyes of every man were fixed on him, and the courtroom rang out with uproarious shouts of adulation following his every stride, the people inspired by the lofty words Charlenade's illustrious speech.

'How foolishly a man exalts himself. What is this all to you? Is this a mere show, a pageant, or a mockery? Or is this something more?'

There was an end to the trumpet blasts, and the applause of the people began to die down until silence fell upon the vast hall. Charlenade stepped back as the trumpeters exited from view, and a tension gripped the crowded room as Zephyr turned to address the people.

Eliezer was left staring up at the man who he had known so very well so very long ago. He considered his manners and visage as he stood there shackled, listening to the sound of his own breathing as the silence settled all around him.

"Citizens of Pyre and the surrounding realms," the King addressed, taking Charlenade's place at the center of the stage, "today we gather for the trial of an enemy of our great state, a man of bitter malice and zealous rancor, and an affiliate of an illegitimate and hostile government. Eliezer Webber is a man with a sordid and ignominious past, a stark reminder of the dark annals of our nation's history. Men like Webber are a threat to our very existence. They have rejected our way of life, and they speak against us in our strength. These are men of *weakness*! They call us *back* into the weakness of former times. They speak of Caliphus and of returning to the ancient paths. Citizens of Altruon and of Pyre, her great city, as I stand before you, I assure you of our strength, and I assure you of the *weakness* of our *enemies*!"

The crowd cheered, enthralled by the King and his words, and Zephyr's lips turned to a wicked smile.

"Altruon is in its strength! Pyre is in its strength! We will *not* be brought again to *weakness*!" the King declared, raising a clenched fist.

Again, the people cheered, breaking into uproarious applause and shouts of adulation.

"Caliphus is weak! The armorials are weak!" he continued, ushered on by the praise of the people. "And what of this man? Is he weak?" the King demanded.

"Yes!" the people cried.

"And what do you say, shall we purge our weakness?" the King asked.

"Yes!" the voices resounded.

"Shall we execute this traitor?" the King called out the question.

"Yes! Execute him!" the people shouted.

Zephyr laughed, and he turned his eyes to Webber with a sick satisfaction. "Do you hear that, Eliezer?" he asked, addressing his familiar rival. "The people are against you. Your own countrymen are calling for your death. Here you stand in chains before me, and who is there to save you? The King of Himmel?" He laughed. "Let him save you as he did Sebastian and Stephan, his Ambassador as his Seer and his King," Zephyr jeered. "I killed them, Eliezer," the King spitefully reminded him, "and I will kill you, also."

Eliezer remained silent and a small smile appeared on his lips as he exhaled sharply, bowing his eyes. *'Well... now you'll have to help me. Elsewise, what of your name?'*

"Master Kallida will be conducting the trial for us," the King announced. "I ask that you lend him your attention and enjoy the show," he said with pleasure.

"Thank you, my Lord," Kallida stated.

Eliezer raised his eyes to Zephyr once again, brushing his thumb anxiously against his fingertips.

The King took his place on the judgement seat and there reclined, crossing one leg over the other in a relaxed position.

'He seems quite pleased with himself over this, but he will soon regret it.'

Zephyr smiled and raised his hand high. "Begin!" he said, enacting the ordeal with a definitive snap of his fingers and a look of immense enjoyment covering his face.

Chapter 37: All Is Borrowed

Blackridge watched as Kallida stepped out and addressed the accused. "State your name for the record, please, sir."

"Eliezer Horatio Webber," he replied humbly.

"And, Mr. Webber, could you please state your occupation for us?" Kallida requested, arching around the front of the floor with his hands folded in silent consideration.

"I am a Kingsmen clergyman," Eliezer stated, his eyes watching Kallida as he circled around him.

"Mr. Webber, as a Kingsman, do you consider lying and deceit to be immoral?" Kallida asked him with a quick glance and a clever smile.

"I do," Webber replied simply.

"Then tell me *why*, Mr. Webber, you have lived for the past *twenty years* under *false pretenses* and a *fraudulent identity!*"

'Kallida's a fool if he thinks this will work. Painting Eliezer as two-faced and self-interested is about as credible a cause as claiming that the sky is grey because it has clouds in it. The fault in the approach is with Eliezer, himself. The man is too meek to be believed as a conman. Still, the way the crowd reacted... terrifies me.'

"It was necessary should I return to Pyre as I had hoped to fulfill my position as ambassador that my identity as a court officer remain unknown. Elsewise would I have put in jeopardy the lives of countless others."

"Were others your concern or was it your own self-preservation that you had in mind? Isn't it true that you *knew* if you were identified it would jeopardize your *own* life?"

"No," Webber insisted. "It wasn't like that."

"No? Then why not turn yourself in? You knew you were wanted. You clearly recognized the danger that you, as an outlaw, would bring to those around you. So, why would you not turn yourself in, if it were truly their safety you had in mind?"

'I'll give Kallida effort, but nothing more. All that man does is out of concern for his companions and his God. There is no way to rectify that with the appearance of a man Kallida is trying to create. There is a quiet genuineness which will save him... at least from shame, if not from death.'

"I am that I am not to myself only, nor to the people among whom I minister, but to the Supreme King, whose I am and whom I serve. It is to Him that I have committed my life, and it

is He who has spared me from the shackles of death. To throw away such liberty I would consider utmost treason."

"So, then, you admit that you serve another king."

Blackridge was appalled. His eyes widened. *'No! What is he doing? Putting the whole of the Kingsmen on trial? But he can't!'*

"The governments which rule over men are those which are subject to the Divine governance which has authority over nations and kingdoms and peoples. All creation is subject to Him and His judgements. Any governmental authority which is exercised here on earth is merely borrowed, awarded according to His just allocation. Nations rise and fall at His hand. It is He who will uphold the throne of a king and it is He who will despise it. All is borrowed." He took a moment to pause, moving his eyes upwards.

All the while, Kallida watched him as a serpent ready to strike.

"You have mentioned," Webber began again slowly, "my life and its value." He wet his lips, moving his eyes again from the balcony to the right. He looked to Blackridge for a moment. His gaze then swept across the crowd until his eyes finally rested on Kallida. "My life," he told him sternly, "was never mine to lose. It was never mine to keep or to uphold. My life was never mine. It was borrowed. *All* is borrowed."

"Such flashy words for *treason*," Kallida hissed, continuing his address of the court with a thin smile of dastardly delight.

'What is he doing? The Kingsmen are the lifeblood of the empire. Would he charge every one of us with treason? He could force another rebellion. Would he burn their buildings, also? It would be a blood bath... Not again.' He grabbed at the hilt of his sword, but Zahaynei stopped him.

"Adrien, hold! It's not what you think," Zahaynei whispered, leaning towards him.

'Alhor!' His eyes locked on Zahaynei with furor.

"You *knew* about this?" Blackridge quietly demanded.

"Don't worry," he whispered, keeping hold of his arm, "the Kingsmen won't be eradicated. This is only a means of reform."

"You *knew* and you didn't try to stop them?" Blackridge felt his heart hasten with his growing anger.

"Listen, Blackridge. This thinking? It's old. It should have been abandoned long ago. These reforms may not be orthodox, but they are necessary. The world is changing, and the Kingsmen must change with it. They have failed to adapt to modern times, so we're going to give them a little encouragement."

He turned to face Zahaynei, his hand still wrapped around the hilt. "This is not something to play with," he warned him.

"This is from the top," he told him. "The order came from Zephyr. All he wants is their absolute loyalty. He has tired of these questions of authority and right. No longer will he allow them to undermine his power. He says it's time that they recognized his lordship. That's what we were told. I thought you knew."

'Zephyr... he knew. He knew I would never agree with it. Such a plan would be...'

Blackridge felt everything begin to twist along with his stomach, and the world began to turn into perspective.

"What is this, then?" he asked, easing his grip on the sword.

"It's a trap, all of this. Look around you. Don't you see? The security, the guards... this isn't crowd control; it's an ambush. There's our fish," he said, pointing to Benjamin.

"Webber's bookkeeper," Blackridge breathed, still pretending not to recognize him.

Zahaynei shook his head. "The *prince*. Kallida sent for information on him. He has no records - no record of birth, employment, or parents, no record of schooling or housing or guardianship. They wouldn't have let him in had Colonel Garner not vouched for him. Here, Garner said the man lived with his sister, which is ridiculous, because everyone knows that Garner has no sister, but a clever tip-off nonetheless. We'll have him arrested him by the end of this."

"I see..." Blackridge replied hesitantly.

'I forget how little Zahaynei and Kallida know about some things. They were away in the war fields while I spent much of my time at the palace. I doubt they had occasion to speak with the royal gardener or his kin, and they hardly knew Dorcus. If Marcus never mentioned their association, then... I suppose they wouldn't know. Marcus must have recognized Benjamin when he saw him, but why not turn him in, then? And why mention Dorcus so discreetly? Marcus...' He lifted his eyes and watched him as he walked through the crowds of the back center section. *'Could he be loyal after all this time? Could he still want to protect him? If part of that is keeping him close, was all of this meant to help ensure his safety? Or is this all... merely a part of the floor show, and is it all a trap for me, as well?'*

"Is something wrong?" Zahaynei asked him.

"No. Nothing. But I don't understand," Blackridge went on, deterring him. "Why arrest this man?"

"Look at him, Adrien," Zahaynei instructed him, directing his gaze. "Can't you see? He looks like Casper's ghost."

"He does, doesn't he? The spit and image of his father," Blackridge said, easing his grip. He looked to Zahaynei. "You really think this is the heir, then?"

"We're pretty sure of it," Zahaynei said, speaking with confidence. "Can't arrest him now, though," Zahaynei told him, releasing his arm. "We need a good clip of this."

"The trial."

"Yes. *That...* and they want the Seer, but I'm not sure she'll come."

"You mentioned reforms," Blackridge reminded him, his dark, steely eyes fixed forward. "Tell me about them."

"Simple," Zahaynei told him. "So long as these Kingsmen serve the High King of Himmel, we will never have their allegiance to the throne. *You* know. Even their sacred texts have the stories of Palmiere and his exploits. They still maintain his divine right of rule."

"The promise of his throne to be established," Blackridge plainly stated.

Zahaynei nodded. "Exactly. Of course, this creates a problem for us as some start to question the validity of the King's rule. We can't have that. So, Zephyr came up with a clever plan to let Kallida have his trial, but the trial wouldn't be about Caliphus. Instead, the trial would center about the Kingsmen beliefs and the reliability of the Chronicles. He would let all of Altruon hear Webber speak of the undying love and the truth of his King, as he does with such eloquence, and then... kill him." Zahaynei paused, his eyes stayed on Blackridge with malicious intent. "Kill him right in front of everybody."

Blackridge felt his stomach twist and his heart drop as his eyes widened with disillusionment. *'But, they can't...'*

"That's why the execution's so important. We're not just executing Webber here today. All that he stands for must die with him."

Adrien's eyes dropped to the ground blindly. *'Then... that's why... none of this matters. Kallida's loss here at trial was already accounted for. He wants him to lose, because the goal is not to justify the execution, but rather to show that there is no justice, no deliverance, no hope in this land. The trial, the execution, it's all... a claim to divine rule. He is the Ambassador, after all... and Zephyr is King.'*

"That's why they want Dorcus so badly," Zahaynei told him. "It's because the Kingsmen need to see there is no hope in their god, and she has proven to be a hindrance to our plans."

Adrien swallowed and he felt his shoulders droop as his eyes stung with sadness. He redirected his gaze up towards Webber once again. *'No, but... you couldn't be martyred. Not after all of this madness. The two of you...'* He clenched his teeth. *'No. Darn it, Eliezer, get out of this!'*

"Ah, don't look so glum, Blackridge," he said, giving him a hearty slap on the back.

Blackridge blinked, turning his face back towards him. *'He seems pleased by this.'*

It was an unpleasant reminder of his present situation: a pat on the back when his friend's life was in peril, and that by his own sword.

"They can still teach the principles. All they need to see is none of this is real. Some of their leaders teach that already. There shouldn't be much resistance, certainly not here. Perhaps in the regions... some of them. Laoce is always most cooperative, and Pergum will fold... with the right incentives. Most men can be bought, you know, Adrien. We're not expecting many casualties."

'Not many casualties? No. No, I suppose there wouldn't be; because, if Zephyr's plan succeeds, then they will have broken the Kingsmen's will to fight before they know there is a battle. Still, we made a similar request of the armorials those twenty years ago, and the streets were bathed in blood.'

Chapter 38: Fear Not

'They're so cruel,' Benjamin pondered. *'It's harmful to their humanity, but still they persist in it.'*

He had watched helplessly from the crowd as Kallida continued his dedicated character assassination. The conversation had moved from the Ambassador to the Kingsmen, then to the Armorials, and now to Caliphus. They met in a discreet contest of words as two men battling over a ship's rudder, the gentlest tap or smallest adjustment capable of redirecting the course of the conversation entirely.

Kallida was, by this point, becoming visibly bothered. "Supposing that Caliphus *was* promised his descendant to sit upon the throne in Pyre as you have claimed and the Chronicles of the Kingsmen record. How can you explain the world as it now is? Stephan is dead and Casper, his son, is alive in exile. How is it that such a thing would be allowed under your beliefs in this mighty king and his divine power?"

"The evil which a man tolerates is that which will one day overcome him." Webber spoke calmly with some regret. "I can see no greater example of this in our own time than that of King Stephan."

Benjamin's face broke into a small smile. *'He doesn't appear to be affected by it. But then... I suppose, there is a strange glory here, in this.'*

He turned his eyes to Zephyr, who sat upon the throne of judgement with indifference. The King's expression was cold and uncaring with a slight tinge of wicked satisfaction.

'It is strange that my family would have employed such an egotistic despot. I feel as if I should apologize for him. Yet... for all his feats of heroism, to have allowed himself to be brought so low... it is extraordinary.'

"Do you mean to say," Kallida began, his voice elevated and his proper mannerisms declining quickly into increased agitation, "it is your belief that all this was *avoidable?*" He spoke emphatically, taking some steps forward and pointing a finger at Webber. "That if Stephan Caliphus had only dealt with the problems which *he knew* existed within the ranks of his *own appointed officers*, Caliphus would still be here today, sitting upon that throne in place of our illustrious king?" Kallida threw a hand up towards the judgement seat and turned his back on his opponent. "Ha!"

He faced the audience, walking back towards them with slow, winding steps. He threw his hands out to either side, tossing them twice in the air. "Ha! What foolish jabber!" He spun himself around on his heals, fully animated. Again facing Webber, he mocked him and said, "If the man was so incompetent, maybe he was never fit to rule in the first place! Or maybe you haven't thought of that, have you, sage? You never consider your own folly or that of this *book!*"

Kallida contended, snatching the copy of the Kingsmen Chronicles from the desk of the court clerk and throwing it violently downward. There was a loud thud as the thick book hit against the hard ground with its soft leather binding, and there was a strange silence which followed.

Eliezer's eyes were stayed on the book with a clear and distinct sadness which could only be described as the deepest lament.

"No," he said with lasting conviction at the end of it all, "my folly is my own, but there is none such in God." He turned his eyes to Kallida with fierce indignation. "And you, Demetrius, will know it." He paused, taking a breath. His eyes turned upwards, then back to Kallida. "You have made a very grave mistake, one which you will soon regret."

"Oh, have I now?" Kallida asked mockingly.

Then, as if on cue, he was interrupted by a loud bang and the sound of a faint crackling. There was an explosion in the hallway, and smoke began to bellow into the court as the large doors which separated the two rooms burst forcefully open with undo dramatics.

The situation quickly devolved into a screaming panic of disorganized chaos. The smoke began to clear and standing in the doorway was a man dressed in white holding two glistering swords.

"Kypher?" Benjamin blurted out with grateful perplexity.

"Kallida!" Blackridge cried out. "What have you *done?*"

"Oh, please! Spare me," Kallida scoffed. "Alexander Kypher is a far cry from divine retribution," he told Blackridge dryly, picking the book up off the floor.

"Fear not! For I have arrived!" Kypher declared triumphantly. "Eliezer, I apologize for my lateness. I had some business out of town, as you know."

"Excellent timing, Kypher, as always!" Eliezer applauded gladly.

"Any time!" Kypher grinned. "I trust you've been treated poorly?"

"But of course," Eliezer laughed.

"Good, then!" Kypher told him, "I was concerned."

The guardsmen were struggling to contain the crowds, attempting to calm them. Some of the people were ducking in fear beneath the court benches, while others were pushing past their fellows in an attempt to get away from it all.

"Almast," Kypher proclaimed loudly, "the years have been hard on you, I see."

"Kypher," Zypher sneered, "no worse than for a failed guardsman who let his king be killed."

"Well," Kypher shrugged, swirling his swords, "what is there to say of past betrayals?"

"Benson!" Zahaynei ordered, "Take the prisoner back down to the dungeons!"

"Yes, sir!" Benson said, taking charge of Webber and escorting him through a door at the front.

It was the responsibility of the guardsmen to restore confidence and maintain order while keeping everyone properly stationed. Zahaynei was yelling out orders to his men and reminding them of this when one man shouted in a voice far above the tumult.

"Terrorists! Evacuate!"

Ben heard the voice bellow from behind him, echoing throughout the chambers and filling the hall with a renewed sense of panicked urgency. It was the voice of Marcus Garner.

The room plunged into total chaos, the guards being overrun by the rush of the crowds of people towards the exit.

Benjamin remained still as the people began to flow out, pushing hastily past him. Immediately, he felt a hand on his shoulder. "Well, young man... better run," Marcus told him, patting his shoulder before walking away into the crowd.

'...What? What is he doing?'

"The rest of you, forget about the crowds! Arrest that man!" Zahaynei ordered, calling their attention to Benjamin. "We can't let him escape!"

"Come on, Ben!" Avera urged him, grabbing his arm and pulling at him.

He stood staring into the streams of people where Marcus had vanished against the crowd.

'All this time...could he have known? Was all of this... truly done to help aid my escape?'

The crowds had begun to thin as the people funneled out in terror and a rush of adrenaline.

"Ben, please! We need to go!" Avera pleaded, doing what she could to move him.

He turned his face back towards her, and his mind began to focus. "Right. Sorry," he said with a quick nod of his head.

He glanced around the spacious hall, now mostly empty, looking for an acceptable means of escape. There were scores of guardsmen which peppered the room. Zahaynei stood alone at the front with some of his leading officers, issuing orders. The rest had gone. The guardsmen continued their offensive, barreling towards them.

'It appears the advance is uncoordinated, at least for now. It shouldn't be too difficult to evade them. Although... Ramus is gone along with Blackridge and Kallida. I'm sure he has arranged provisions for this. Likely magic. I'll have to watch we aren't trapped again.'

Suddenly, his thoughts were interrupted by a pointed pressure at his back.

"What now, prince?" asked a rough and unfamiliar voice like gravel.

"Ben!" Avera shouted.

"Watch it, missy!" the man warned.

He felt his heart go cold as his body tingled with numbness. He took a hard breath, his eyes wide with unwelcome surprise. He closed his eyes. *'Rats! They snuck up on me.'*

"Don't move," the man said. "It wouldn't be good for your lifespan."

There was the sound of advancing footsteps racing towards them, followed by a sound like the shattering of clay pottery and a harsh declaration. "Nor yours!"

He felt the pressure leave his back and his heart revived. *'Kypher.'*

"Kypher!" he exclaimed gladly, opening his eyes. He turned to see the man collapsed on the floor behind him, a gash on the right side of his forehead and fragments of a sword scattered about him.

"He'll be alright," Kypher said, looking down at the man. "I had to hit him upside the head." His tone was dark and serious, his face declaring a fiery passion. "I never thought I'd be grateful for maurium."

He turned his head, keeping all vigilance, and fought off three more guardsmen as they approached. He kept his swords raised and his vision on the advancing guards, and his hands were always at the ready.

"If they keep charging us one and one like this, it'll keep my job easy, but no matter. That door there," Kypher told them, making a motion with his head towards the doorway to their right. "Justice is waiting. I'll cover your exit."

"Yes, I understand," Benjamin quickly assured him. Though, his voice aired his hesitance.

"Alright, good," Kypher replied determinedly. "Oh, and don't you worry about old Webber, Ben." He smiled. "He'll come out of this fine. He always does."

He smiled, thankful for the reassurance. *'Yes... yes, I suppose, he does.'*

"Ready?" Kypher asked, taking a glance back at him.

Benjamin nodded.

"Alright... Run, Ben!"

Chapter 39: A Life for a Life

He sat with his back against the wall, his knees bent, and his hand pressed against the ground beneath him, slowly brushing over the rough and compact dirt. He sighed and closed his heavy eyelids. *'Lord, I'm tired.'*

"Hey, there! No sleeping!" Benson barked from the other side of the prison's bars.

Eliezer opened his eyes and smiled. "No worries," he told the man in the chair whose feet rested comfortably on the table in front of him. "I wouldn't dream of it."

He chortled, self-amused, and put his head back, his eyes turned upward. His heart labored from exhaustion.

'Now might be a nice time to save me. Though, I will leave the timing open to your discretion, as per our usual arrangement. Howbeit, I do request you not take too long. I'm afraid my heart cannot handle much more of this.'

He heard the sound of the door opening, and he turned his head to the side to see the man as he entered.

"Colonel Garner, sir!" Benson said with surprise and some embarrassment as he hurried clumsily to his feet, standing at attention.

"Officer Benson," the man addressed him, "I've come to relieve you of your post. You are to report to Lord Blackridge immediately. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir," Benson said, saluting. He hurried off, and Marcus watched him as he went.

Eliezer stood to his feet, grabbing hold of one of the metal bars of the prison cell. Marcus grabbed hold of another, and the two men stood face to face with a silence between them.

"Marcus," Eliezer said at last.

"Eliezer," Marcus reciprocated.

'Marcus, I...' He swallowed, years of consideration coming back at him.

"It's been... quite some time," he said, unsure of how to address the man he had not seen in so long.

"It has been," Marcus agreed. He paused for a moment, hanging his head. "You know, I swore I'd never get caught up in this. There had been so much trial, so much bloodshed. I wanted no part of it, but now..." he shook his head, beginning to break down.

"Marcus..." he muttered softly, his voice filled with empathy.

'If I could alleviate such hurt... but only you, O King, can recompense and mend us in our brokenness. Though our nature be as dust, you make us as the remnants of starlight. But hear now, my friend, what shall we do? Or what words can be offered for such sadness?'

"Here you are, old friend, imprisoned right in front of me, and here I am responsible." His voice was breaking, and tears began to stream down his face, falling to the earth below him.

'What shall our well of sorrows bear for man's repentance? He who was once as my brother, now broken before me in contriteness.'

"What have I done that it has taken such a thing for me to see how far I've gone? After all the pains my father suffered and the life my sister bore, I have seated myself at the table of injustice with all its decadence and added to their sorrows more and more," Marcus cried, choking back tears, and his voice broke as he spoke. "Tell me, Eliezer, how is she?"

"Well," he said, his voice sure and kind.

Marcus raised his head again, breathing deeply. "Ah," he paused to wipe his watering eyes. "Does she know about this, about you being here?"

He nodded. "Yes. Actually, *she* is the one who told *me* about it."

Marcus shook his head. "Of course!" he laughed. "And she's *alright* with this, is she?"

"She was... concerned," he carefully admitted. "We kept the night up talking. I... tried to be of some comfort to her, but I know this has been very hard for her. I think she may value my life more than I do." He paused. "Of course... that may be a mutual agony of ours."

"It always has been with you," he said in a voice not much more than a whisper and his eyes still red with tears.

"Yes, well... still, I *am* sorry," he said softly. "Marcus, this time has come with such suffering for all of us, and it is a great regret of mine that you and your family were caught up in it all. If I could have saved you from this, even at the expense of my own life, I would have done so gladly."

"Well," he breathed, smiling, "let's alleviate some of that suffering, shall we?" He relinquished his hold of the dark metal bars and moved directly to the cell's security pad.

"Marcus," the ambassador pleaded, grabbing the prison bars tightly in his hands, "I wouldn't have you put in any undo danger. For your sister's sake, if not for your own sake or mine!"

"But, Eliezer, you have to live. You see, because... sacrifice is something I can understand, but I've never been much of one for tragedy," Marcus told him. His fingers brushed skillfully against the buttons, disabling the elaborate lock mechanism. "I need you to live, the two of you. That, *and* I'm not so keen on the idea of initiating a war against Himmel." He paused. "You *are* still the ambassador, after all, Eliezer, aren't you?" He jokingly smiled.

"Yes, I suppose," Eliezer said, letting out a breath of laughter.

"I suppose his mind's made up. Still, I...'

Letting go of the bars, he backed away from the door of the cell. There was a pleasant electronic chirping sound as the lock was released and the door began to slide open.

"The beard looks good," Marcus grinned, stroking his own. "Although, I expected more of a clever disguise from a man of your reputation," he laughed. "You could've at least lost those old glasses of yours or chosen a different profession."

Eliezer smiled. "Well, I may not have lived the life that I intended, but I am grateful for the life that I have lived. The time I was afforded has afforded me a multitude of kindnesses, for the which I am a better man," he replied humbly.

"And yet how now still not my brother-in-law?" Marcus playfully harassed him. "You really must remedy that for me!"

Eliezer shook his head, his face flushed with embarrassment. "You and Adrien," he muttered with a sigh. "After all this... you still remember. But I promise you I will. Only... after all of this... after all of this is over."

Marcus laughed, putting a hand on his hip. "I want you to live your life, Eliezer. The life that you never got the chance to live. You and Dorcus, you're good for each other. You know? You're better together." He smiled, and his countenance softened. "In fact, I never saw her so well as when she was with you. Not with anyone."

"And would you give your life for mine?" Eliezer asked him.

"Ahh," he said, shrugging it off, "I've seen better men die for lesser things. Besides, we are immortal, after all. Might as well live like it."

Eliezer laughed and smiled with a nod. "Yes, I suppose."

"Yes, well... you'd best get going," Marcus told him. "I'd hate for them to catch the both of us."

"Very well," he said, taking a step forward, and examining the man standing in front of him once more. "Goodbye, Marcus," he said with a tearful embrace, "and thank you."

"Goodbye, Eliezer," he said, closing his eyes as he hugged him. "Give Dorcus my love. I've never been more proud... not of either of you."

Chapter 40: Resignation

Zephyr had ordered the mage-royal to the roof of the spire, a defensive position at the palace center from which they would cover the area in magic, surrounding it with a constraining barrier and thereby cutting off the escape of the officials and Caliphus. Additionally, he had called a meeting of the ten to be held in the chambers of the High Court.

Blackridge had sent Dehnhardt ahead of him with Kallida and now made his way alone through the empty halls of High Palace. He went quickly through the royal bedchambers patterned in red and gold, into the hidden passage behind the wardrobe, and walked down the stone hall which led to the lofty spiral stairs of the tower. He hurriedly made his ascent, his feet propelling him each step ever higher. He reached the top of the staircase, a wooden platform around the edge of the circular tower with ladders leading upwards to the archers' stations and a door leading out onto the slanted roof.

He quietly opened the door with care, inspecting the scene. The roof was sloped, covered in dark maurium tiles with a stone base around the perimeter. The stone portion was walled, flat, and about a three foot drop from the base of the spire.

Charlenade stood directly to the right of the door, directing the five remaining members of the mage-royal who stood expertly positioned around the base of the spire. They stood with their palms raised, chanting some ancient incantation. Sparkling mist of poisoned red fell around them and shot up like pillars in the sky, each descending as an arc, growing and solidifying as a barrier upon the ground.

'This is a constriction barrier, a sorcerer's entrapment. This isn't what Zephyr ordered. This is far worse! As the barrier constricts, the particles will begin to fall, releasing a poisonous gas, and...' he looked down, examining the grounds. There were hundreds of civilians still trapped within the bounds of the barrier. *'They will kill every last one of them.'*

He spotted Benjamin and Avera running towards the massive gates of the palace with Kypher and Atticus following, defending against the pursuant guards.

'Of course, they can always just blame it on Caliphus. They already accused them of terrorism. It wouldn't be much of a stretch.'

"Charlenade," Blackridge said, stepping out onto the roof and stretching his left arm out towards the barrier, "what is this you're doing? Zephyr ordered a constraining barrier not a constriction entrapment."

Charlenade turned his face slowly towards him. "Lord Blackridge," he said, his voice devoid of any emotion. "You shouldn't be here. The king summoned you to his court. Which begs the question of why you *are* here. Tell me, is it peace?"

"What have you to do with peace? Those people will *die*, Charlenade!" he shouted.

"*Everyone* dies, Blackridge," Charlenade told him, unfeeling. His green eyes sparkled with the reflection of the red death around them. "Which brings us back to the original question of why you're here. Is it treason, then? You know, loyalty is a sin amongst rebels." He turned to look away.

'Reckless, heartless, uncaring...' Blackridge drew his sword, his blood boiling. *'You dare to speak of strength... you're a bunch of murderous cowards!'* His breathing hardened.

"Fighting?" Charlenade asked, not looking at him. "Good, then. I've always hated you, anyway," he told him, turning back in his direction.

Blackridge was seething.

"You *are* one of them, aren't you? An armorial. It seems strange, but... I understand you have some connection to that idiot Webber."

Charlenade's head turned with the impact as Blackridge punched him, his gloved fist sinking into his left cheek and the knuckle guard of the sword cutting into his pale skin.

After a time of short, momentary shock, Charlenade reached over with his right hand and touched his sore and bleeding skin. Slowly, he removed his fingers from his face, looking at the dark red stains smeared across the dirtied white of his gloved hand. He turned to Blackridge and smiled. "I had hoped to be the one to kill you."

"And I had hoped you wouldn't have to die," Blackridge told him sternly, sword in hand.

"Hehe," Charlenade chuckled dryly as the dark clouds gathered and a sword solidified in his hand, its blade forged in the shadows of enchantment. "You always were weak."

'Again, what is weakness?'

Blackridge breathed a strange utterance and a fire began to flow through him, making its way to his hand and winding itself around his sword, covering it in liquid light from grip to point, the deep grey of the maurium blade fading slowly into the sparkling white of pyrite.

He looked on it and smiled. *'Thank you.'*

"Well, Charlenade, shall we begin then?"

"Let's," Charlenade spat, striking at him with his sword.

Blackridge met his strike, the two swords colliding with a resounding clang. The two men danced around the gradient tiles, each attempting to catch the other man off guard.

Charlenade jumped back from a collision, putting space between himself and Balckridge. He bent down to steady himself, his hand touching the maurium tile. "You are as good as they say," Charlenade smirked, "but none better."

"You could've turned back from this, Charlenade," Blackridge reminded him, moving his sword to the side and maintaining his position.

'You all had your chance. Now is the time for the reckoning.'

"We don't want your King, Blackridge. We have our own," Charlenade spoke in defiance. He stood to his feet and readied his sword. "We have crowned him with *might*, and we will break your bands asunder. We will cast away your cords, and we will establish for ourselves an empire *here*."

"Very well," Blackridge said, "if you have your king, then you will have no need for mine."

Charlenade charged at him directly, his feet moving swiftly across the slanted slate.

'This is the end, then,' he told himself, unmoving. *'He's broadcasting his attack.'*

Charlenade rushed in, taking a slicing downward swing at his neck and upper torso.

He stood and waited for Charlenade to strike. Anticipating the blow, he sunk down, and Charlenade's blade passed over him. Blackridge took aim, and, aligning his sword, he thrust it into Charlenade's abdomen, skewering him. He felt the impact as the blade tore through his opponent's body.

Charlenade's sword vanished into smoke and vapors as his power left him, and he fell to his knees, his body doubled over the sword. His pale green eyes looked toward Blackridge, beginning to gloss over.

Blackridge closed his eyes, not willing to see the blood as it began to seep through and saturate the illustrious white garments which Charlenade was wearing.

"Why," Charlenade gasped, his life force draining, "do you never die?"

"Because I am weak," Blackridge told him softly, "I do have need of Him."

Charlenade's blood began to drip to the ground beneath them. Blackridge pulled back his sword and Charlenade collapsed onto the maurium tile in a lifeless heap, his fine hair falling as a platinum curtain over the soft skin of his white cheek.

"Goodbye, Charlenade," he said, rising to his feet. "I have need to bring forth deliverance to these people you have held as captives for so long."

His eyes turned to the horizon. The red wall of the constriction entrapment had already begun to close in, slowly raining the particles of poisoned magic down on all those trapped inside - guards, officials, and citizens alike.

He gripped his sword, his heart aflame and determination renewed.

"Will you fight me, also?" he asked the mage-royal as he approached, each man's back turned to him. "Or are you so lost in incantation that I can..." he thrust his sword through the mage's cloak, piercing the man through.

Immediately, a fifth of the barrier dropped, the magic disintegrating. He removed the sword, and the man fell forward, dropping to the stone of the castle wall below the spire's edge.

He looked around. The others of the mage-royal were likewise entranced.

"This will make things easy," he muttered, and he repeated the process with the other four, each man dropping to the stone of the castle wall below. He stared down at the sixth man when he fell and the barrier was fully dissolved.

'I fought for all these years to avoid killing anyone, even Kallida... they said I was weak, but... still, they left me no choice.'

He turned and made his way back towards the door and paused beside Charlenade, contemplating his lifeless form.

'How could a man become so wicked?'

He sheathed his bloodied sword, looking to the open doorway. There Benson stood staring at him, trembling with his mouth agape.

"L-l-lord Blackridge," he stammered.

"Benson," he said, surprised.

"C-colonel G-garner s-said you had n-need of me, sir," he told him, his panicked eyes moving rapidly between Blackridge and Charlenade.

'Garner?' Blackridge considered, perplexed. *'But I haven't spoken with Garner, and I certainly wouldn't have sent for anyone.'*

Benson was becoming increasingly uneasy with the enduring silence of Blackridge's confusion.

'What was Garner... wait! Wasn't Benson...' He smiled, coming to a sudden realization. *'Good old Marcus.'*

"Benson," he said, "can you take a message for me?"

"Y-yes, sir," Benson nervously stammered.

"Good!" Blackridge said, smiling. "Consider this my resignation. Tell Zephyr I'm through working for him. I don't want any more part of his bloodshed. The remainder of the King's Court awaits my presence at chambers. I won't be joining them. So, please, tell them, as I said, that you may consider this my resignation."

"Yes, sir," Benson said hurriedly, turning quickly to go.

"Oh, and Benson," Blackridge called after him, causing the man to freeze on the stairs with fright. "Leave Garner out of it, if at all possible. He had no part in this."

Chapter 41: Consent

In the chambers of the High Court of the King were gathered nine of the ten ruling sages. They stood each in his place before the judgement seat where Zephyr sat. Kallida stood in the place of the second with Dehnhardt standing close behind him. There was an emptiness to his left.

"Where is Blackridge?" Kallida inquired in the form of a harsh whisper directed toward the young man standing behind him.

"Uh..." Kelvin moved his feet, uneasy.

'I wish I knew. He should have been here by now.'

"Like I said, all he told me was that he had some brief business to attend to that demanded his immediate attention," he reiterated to the Inquisitor for what must have been the fifth time, "and he told me to go on with you."

"I know, but I don't like that," Kallida whispered back again.

"Does the Inquisitor have something he would like to share with the Court?" Almauni's voice boomed from the place of the fourth seat of the Wartime Counsel.

Jasper Almauni was a muscular man, large in stature. He was a beastly man with tanned skin, a grizzly beard, and wild hair like raven's locks.

Kelvin froze. *'Some of these men... give me the creeps, and I don't like it. It's amazing, but... I was quite fortunate with my placement. It's good that I didn't make a request, because I wouldn't have had the audacity to ask to be paired with the Archmage, anyway.'* He looked to Kallida, who seemed likewise appalled.

"We were merely discussing the whereabouts of the Lord Archmage, who is *missing*," Kallida sent back sharply, "as you can well see!"

"Yes, where is Master Blackridge?" Zephyr asked curiously, leaning forward, his chin resting on his knuckles with interest. "Mr. Dehnhardt?"

"Ah," Kelvin squeaked, moving a bit to his left and taking a few steps forward. "My Lord the King... and members of the High Court, I... well, I don't know where he is. He said he had business to attend to briefly. That was all," Kelvin told them, stepping back.

"That is highly unusual," Iphor commented.

"It is," the refined Rosenfelt agreed from the eighth seat, "and much more so for Lord Blackridge. He's always so quick to come!"

'Rosenfelt might not have been a bad man to work for,' he thought as he considered the slender man with the wispy white hair, bushy eyebrows, and handlebar mustache. *'Although, domestic affairs isn't exactly my ideal position.'*

He turned his face to the door, longing for Blackridge to walk through it with some over-the-top apology which Zephyr would quickly dismiss out of fondness. He frowned with increasing concern.

'Last night he said there was a personal matter, and the guardsmen said he freaked. I just hope... I mean... because, I really like working for him.'

"Well, gentlemen, I don't kno-" Zephyr began, being interrupted by the sound of the opening of the chamber doors. It wasn't Blackridge. It was two other guards dragging a red headed man behind them.

'What! That man's an intelligence officer!'

"What is the meaning of this?" Zephyr demanded. "Dragging an officer into *my* court!"

Kallida's eyes widened as the men approached, and he seemed to become uneasy.

'He must know the man.'

"My Lord King Zephyr," one of the soldiers responded, and Kelvin recognized that they, too, were of the intelligence corps, though not officers, "we bring you Marcus Garner of the High Colonels. We discovered him in the KLP and Processing Lab destroying our systems and resources. Being as Captain Zahaynei is otherwise occupied, we weren't sure where else to take him."

"A High Colonel, eh? We haven't had much luck with those lately, have we, Master Kallida?" the King replied, addressing the Inquisitor.

"No, my Lord," Kallida grudgingly admitted, "we haven't."

"What was the extent of the damages?" Zephyr asked, addressing the guardsman.

The man shook his head. "It's all shot," he told him. "It will take us at least a week to get the systems back online and our blood storage is..." he shook his head again, looking out into the distance as if to visualize the word, "shattered. Sir, there's blood everywhere. There are no independent vials."

"Well, my, my, that is quite the impressive show of derision, isn't it?" Zephyr smirked as if somewhat impressed. "And at such a convenient time. Officer... *Garner*, was it? Yes, let me guess - you are... related to Dorcus. Is that it? A brother, maybe? I suppose foolhardy zeal to be a family trait."

Marcus looked up at him, his blue eyes glinting with newfound hope. "You," he said, the two soldiers continuing to hold him by the arms as he kneeled before them, "understand nothing at all."

"Oh? Don't I now? Explain it to me," Zephyr said shortly, adjusting his positioning.

"You," Garner told him plainly, "have spilled many a man's blood. You have drunk the blood of righteous men and bathed in women's tears. You have robed yourself in another man's garments and built your throne on treachery. All of us you have made accomplices to your evils - your lies and your murderous works. Still, you do not relent! You, being unsatisfied with your place, no matter how lofty, have resolved to make a war with Himmel, and I will not consent to it! Not this time."

Kelvin was taken aback. *'What is with these people? What do they not understand? A High Colonel... a man could live a comfortable life with that kind of position. There's a lot of prestige with it, and he's a handsome man. What more could he hope for? Why throw it all away? For what?'*

"The Ambassador, then," Zaphyr said coldly, his voice dripping with distain. "I see. Well, I can't very well keep an intelligence officer who has elected to maintain sympathies with someone who so clearly defies our form of government."

Marcus remained silent.

"My Lord, if I may," Rosenfelt courageously interjected.

Zephyr gave him an intense look of surprise and warning.

"We could acquit him," Rosenfelt boldly suggested.

"*What?*" Zephyr nearly fell out of his seat, his eyes bulging with anger.

"Without the KLP, it would be difficult to continue this process with Ambassador Webber as you had originally planned it," Rosenfelt continued. He addressed the room, unwilling to face Zephyr directly, and his eyes turned often to Marcus. "This man's concerns are not his own," Rosenfelt told him. "This nation is inhabited with Kingsmen, many of whom share in these convictions. We could very well avoid much unpleasantness by simply acquitting the Ambassador."

"Master Rosenfelt," Zephyr snapped with open hostility, "another word like that and I'll have your head and not just your thoughts!"

The door opened once again, this time to another officer, a guardsman. He was a nervous man, fair skinned with deep blue eyes and light brown hair. He was running and nearly fell on his way through the door.

"King Zephyr, my Lord!" the man called out frantically as he approached.

"What *now*?" Zephyr demanded, jumping to his feet in agitation.

"O King, I..." he stopped, freezing at the sight of Garner. "Colonel Garner!" he exclaimed in horror. "No... not you, too."

"Benson!" Kallida erupted. "Tell us what happened! Who relieved you of your post?"

"Why... Colonel Garner did," he said as if baffled. "But that's just it, sir," he went on, "because when he did he said that Lord Blackridge had need of me, and when I found him..." Benson paused, his body trembling.

"You *have* seen Blackridge, then?" Zephyr inquired of him.

"Yes. Yes, my Lord, and..." he continued as if pained, "Lord Charlenade was dead, my Lord, along with the others of the mage-royal. Lord Blackridge had killed them. He said to consider it his resignation, that he would have no more a part of your bloodshed. Rather... an ironic statement, as I look at it."

'He did what?' Kelvin felt as his heart sank and pain began to pulsate through him. *'No... no, he couldn't. Did he plan this? Is that why he sent me away? But... why?'*

The room was caught in a shocked silence, and Zephyr closed his eyes tight, his head turned down and to the side. "Would any of you others betray me?" he snarled through clenched teeth. "It seems to be the time for treachery," he said, his eyes moving to each member of the silent court, his gaze penetrating with a hot intensity. "No one? Now is your time," he jeered, beginning to descend the great white stairs with slow and deliberate steps. "Allow me to remind you all of something, being as it seems to be so easily forgotten: *I am* the King, and I will *not* have my *authority* questioned! Especially not by the High Colonels or *any* of the members of this court!" he scolded them, his voice raised. "I suppose, *Colonel* Garner," he paused, drawing his sword, "that Ambassador Webber," he said with an icy glance towards Rosenfelt, "is no longer imprisoned. I must congratulate you on your *heroism.*" His manner was menacing as he stepped onto the floor, his words a mocking rebuke. "I must assume by your lack of answer to my earlier questions that I was correct."

He continued to address Marcus harshly as he walked between the court officers, five men aligned on either side of him. There was a stress on every one of them, a danger for their lives, and each man stood watching the floor in front of him so as to avoid their eyes making chance contact with their king's.

Kelvin watched Zephyr as he went. Some of the officials had sweat dripping from their brows and trembled in terror before him. A chilling, ghostlike presence lingered as he went and the authority of death swirled around him. Kelvin swallowed hard. This was not the sort of thing which he enjoyed.

'Lucky I was here and not with Lord Blackridge... or else...' a shiver went down his spine. *'Still, I wonder if he planned that... that I not be there. It seems that he did.'*

The guardsmen released Garner and backed fearfully away as Zephyr approached, the sword in his hand two-edged and black.

"You are a relative of Dorcus Garner?" Zephyr asked him.

"I am," Marcus stated, his eyes beholding the King.

"Where is she?" Zephyr asked him, considering his polished blade. "Tell me, and I'll let you live."

Garner's breathing hardened, every man's eyes turned on him for an answer.

"I'd take it," Kallida muttered in little more than a whisper.

"Eh!" Kelvin squeaked, his face turned to Kallida in surprise.

'Does he really think so little of his own heart?' His gaze fell again to Garner. *'This is a real quandary for any man.'*

"Even if I knew, I would not tell you," Garner said. His voice was firm but wavering, and he paused. "But as it is," he confessed, "I do not know."

"Then I'll tell you what I will do. I will send out the guard and take them in their flight, these men you and Blackridge released. I will command the men to follow them and pursue until they have found the Seer's apprentice, and *when* they find her, which they will, they will bring her here to me and the Ambassador along with her. And, having them both, I will delight in their agony as each pleads for the other's life." Zephyr spoke his words like venom which he injected slowly into his victim's veins, and a wicked smile spread across his lips at the thought of it. "Then, I will hold a public assembly whereby to execute them both. But I will torture Eliezer beforehand with Dorcus watching as I do, and I will abuse her in his presence, also. Then, when the time does come to execute them, I will kill her first, and I will do so right in front of him. Oh! Only a fool would make himself so vulnerable!" he laughed with sadistic delight, his words brimming with excitement. "I will at last see him fall *helpless* before me, and *then*, only then, will I take from him his own life, also, and I will watch with *pleasure* as the lifeblood drains out of him and the light of his eyes is finally extinguished. You have spared them from suffering, but I will see to it that their suffering is multiplied before I've had my fill of it!" Zephyr proclaimed. "Your sister will suffer much for the man you have released, and you may count yourself culpable!"

He raised his sword, taking the handle in his hands and bringing the point down upon Marcus's back. Garner fell forward with a pained cry as Zephyr quickly withdrew his bloodied sword.

Kelvin looked on in horror, his eyes wide and heart racing.

'He... killed him! I suppose... that's just... the way it has to be. But, still, I wonder... if they will kill Blackridge like that, too.' He paused. *'A war with Himmel, eh? I've heard of better things.'*

He looked to Kallida, who was biting his lip, keeping his black eyes down as they flickered, deep in thought. *'So much for Kypher being a far cry from divine retribution.'*

Chapter 42: The Raven

He felt a pain pierce through his back and deep into his chest, nearly knocking him from the blue roan horse he rode. He grunted as he fell forward, one arm grabbing at his aching body and the other at the horse's muscular neck.

'Mm... that should have been me, shouldn't it?' He steadied himself, centering back on the borrowed saddle. *'Well, Marcus, I would have liked to have more appropriately thanked you, but I will do my best to satisfy your request.'*

On he rode through the scattered trees of the eastern wood until he reached the sight of a familiar face.

'Dorcus.'

He let out a relieved sigh.

She stood beside a tree with her horse, a dapple gray, looking on at him as he approached. He slowed the horse and called it to a halt.

She watched him through soulful eyes. "You're late," she said as he dismounted, her hands on her hips.

His face wore a soft smile. "Oh, am I now? My apologies," he said humbly, coming around his horse to meet her. "I *was* detained," he jokingly reminded her.

Dorcus grinned. "Eliezer," she chuckled politely with a slight shake of her head. Her eyes were alight with the bright sun of the afternoon.

"I spoke with your brother," he told her.

"Which? Marcus?" she quickly asked with utmost interest.

He nodded.

She took a breath. "How was he?" she asked hopefully.

"Remorseful," he told her. His voice was soft and gentle, brimming with kindness. "He's very proud of you."

"Is that so?" her eyes began to water. "Well... I'm glad to hear it," she muttered quietly.

"It was Marcus who released me," he added with a comforting smile. "He helped me to escape and provided me with a horse."

He reached his hand back to pet the able bodied stallion.

She smiled, offering a quick nod as tears began to roll down her cheeks.

'I know she has been concerned for him. That's why I know this is a joy to her, a blessed release... no matter how tearful. When Adrien wrote us of Marucs and his advancement in the military, it was the first we knew of him working for Ramus and his government. She was heartbroken. Ever since that day, she has cried for him. Perhaps this can be the last time.'

"Is that all, then?" she inquired of him softly.

"He sends his love, and..." he stopped himself from speaking.

'No, I won't mention that. Not now.'

"And?" she looked at him with heartfelt curiosity.

He sighed. "He made a request of me, also, but it's... bad... timing," his words fell away as he spoke.

"Heh!" She smiled, wiping the tears from her eyes. "Well, if it's bad timing, then... I'm sure it is nothing so urgent that it cannot wait."

"And it shall," he said with a smile.

"Mm..." she tucked a strand of hair back behind her ear. "Benjamin and the others arrived some minutes ago. They came by way of the tunnels. They would have waited, but I sent them on ahead of us with the horses I had kept for them. I thought it best that they return to the library in peace without any threat of further complications."

"Yes, I think that's best," he agreed.

"I was glad to see you come," she told him. "I had begun to become concerned."

"Were you concerned for me?" he frowned, furrowing his brow.

'Dorcus...'

"Please, forgive me," he said, lowering his head. "Dorcus, my dear, you are forever my heart and forever my heart is towards you, as you know." He smiled. "I am both well loved and well cared for. You should know that I should never truly perish, sweet lady."

Dorcus closed her eyes with a smile, on her face a distinct look of fondness. "Eliezer," she muttered quietly, "you're hopeless."

She opened her eyes and looked back at him. He wore on his face a look of satisfaction.

"Please, don't do that again," she softly entreated.

"Don't worry," he said with a grin. "I'm not planning another vacation for awhile. Now, then, shall we ride before further complications find us?"

Dorcus chortled, raising an eyebrow. "Good then, and yes, I think so."

Eliezer helped her mount her horse, though it was entirely unnecessary for him to do so. "Dorcus," he said, looking up at her.

"Yes, Eliezer?"

'I...'

"I *am* glad to see you," he said simply, letting go of the thought. "Thank you for waiting for me."

She smiled with a slight bow of the head. "Likewise," she told him.

Eliezer bowed himself, and a raven alighted itself on the branch of a tree behind him. The creature cawed as its talons gripped the branch, and the noise captured the pair's attention. He turned, staring up at it.

The feathers of the large black bird were tinged with a dark blue coloration and the air around it was shimmering. Its eyes were like gaping voids which captured and dissolved any and all light from around them.

'Magic. That creature is either conjured or spellbound.'

Beginning to feel uneasy, he rushed to his horse and mounted it quickly.

"We were going, weren't we?" he said, watching his companion's eyes.

"That we were," she said, still watching the raven. "It is a bit unsettling," she told him.

"Sorcery, isn't it?" he asked her, looking back to the tree.

"Yes," she confirmed, "but I couldn't say of what sort. Sebastian always was better with that than I am."

"It's much more your specialty than it is mine," Eliezer reminded her.

She shook her head. "Regardless, someone sent it."

"Kallida, more than likely," he surmised. "We ought to watch the way as we travel back."

"Agreed," she said, circling her horse around and guiding it next to his. "Eliezer..." she began again.

"Hm?" he turned his head curiously to face her.

"Mm... never mind," she said, tipping her head and turning her eyes, her cheeks turned rose. "It can wait," she murmured.

He sighed, considering things.

'Dorcus...' his heart turned to water and a familiar warmth filled his chest. *'Yes, I know. I know I said that, but I wish so much I hadn't. For everyone's sake, but none more than yours. I know these years... have not been kind. A little more insistence on my part might have spared us much hurt.'*

They rode together deep into the forest, and they heard the sound of the raven as it lifted from the branch with an eerie call. Still, they continued on through trees of scattered woods.

All the while, Eliezer watched the dark shadow as it followed them, passing over from time to time and never far behind them. There was an occasional caw which rang out from the sky above them, a cause of his ever increasing concern.

'It seems that Ramus and Kallida have taken a particular interest in our location, and that is something which I would very much prefer to keep between us. Whether they intend to set a trap before or behind us, it's surely not to our advantage to have this bird broadcasting our whereabouts. And Dorcus...' He turned his eyes, looking on her fondly, and a small smile crossed his lips. *'My life is mine, but I could not bear to see any harm come to her.'*

He began muttering to himself some unfamiliar phrases, and Dorcus looked curiously at him.

“I would like very much to be rid of that wretched fowl," he told her straightly.

She nodded and began to follow suit.

After a short while, he turned up his palm and watched in deep appreciation and awe as a small flame appeared and began to grow. At the start, it was no larger than a coin, but the flame began to dance and move until it became alive. The fire circled and spun in his hand until it came to resemble a small turtle dove, its wings and body fashioned of burning light.

He cupped his hand around it, and the bird rested peacefully in his palm, offering a sweet melody of soft coos.

"One bird for another?" he whispered in humble consideration, and he smiled. "Thank you.” He breathed the words as he moved his hand upward towards his mouth and blew.

The gentle wind of his breath lifted the little turtle dove upwards, and they watched in wonder as it went, the light from the fire of its wings creating the sparks which flew and fell around them, the light of the fire reflecting in their eyes.

The dove ascended to the place of the raven, and Eliezer watched the shadows as he rode. The raven was easily overtaken by the tender dove and stricken by it, the darkness descending as it fell again to Caldör. He let out a relieved sigh as he watched the raven fall from its place in the sky above them while the dove ascended to its home in the realm of the heavenlies, and he considered the matter thankfully.

‘There is such endless sky above us. What a fantastic and immeasurable privilege to have the consideration of so great a King, and what great peace surrounds us.’

He looked again to Dorcus and smiled, his eyes filled with the affection of his heart.

‘Oh, my King, you know my heart: my intentions and my desires, and how my heart is ever towards her. Therefore, I will ask, my Lord, this one thing more: to preserve our lives and lead us home.’

Chapter 43: Coming Home

"They're back!" Kypher announced excitedly from his place at the window.

"It's about time!" Justice responded with his usual curtness, though unable to mask his obvious joy.

Kypher laughed. "Justice, if this were a funeral, you'd be mad at the man for *dying!* Just be glad he's here!"

"I am," Justice admitted. "In truth, I was worried."

"Why Justice, you do have a heart!" Kypher teased.

Avera looked over to Benjamin. He stood with a faint smile, watching the door. *'He seems relieved, but I think he'll feel better about everything once he sees them.'*

Mira turned her petite frame towards Ellis who was standing beside her. "Do you think they might need something to eat?" she asked him, touching her fingers to her chin. Her voice was light and gentle.

"That may well be," he told her agreeably. "Eliezer's been in prison. I can't imagine they fed him, and you know how Dorcus is with eating."

"Yes, I do," she said, turning her attentions to the door. "I think I'll wait, though," she added softly, playing with the small pendant she wore around her neck, "I'd like to be here to greet them."

Ellis smiled down at her. "Yes, I think they'd like that, too."

'I don't think I've ever seen a group of people so excited. It feels like we should be throwing a party or something.' She smiled, taking in the room and its inhabitants. *'They're all so happy. Well... except for Ben. He's so uptight. Ever since the trial, he's been...'*

Her thoughts were interrupted by the beautiful booming voice of Joseph Vanguard. "They're coming! Ready, everyone!" he called out as he hurried from the window to the place where he had set his camera.

The door opened to Eliezer who held it for Dorcus and he followed in after her. The two walked in together side by side having a quiet conversation which was promptly disrupted by the flash of a camera and the unanimous clapping of hands.

Eliezer's face flushed pink as he exhibited a glowing grin which Dorcus found on her face, also, and the pair broke into laughter. Eliezer shook his head, then whispered something in Dorcus's ear which caused her to fall forward laughing, her pale face quickly becoming a bright pink.

"Stop it!" she said, laughing and giving him a gentle tap on the arm with the back of her hand.

Avera watched with some surprise as the two of them walked slowly forward.

'They seem so care free, and I've never seen Dorcus so happy. It's strange, but... she's like a different person.'

Benjamin stood a few paces in front of them, still clapping his hands. He grinned as he watched them enter and his face began to glow as his concern vanished. He held up a hand as they came to stand before him, and the room turned to silence.

"Ambassador Webber," he said in a regal tone with a nod towards Eliezer. "Seer Garner," he added, showing equal regard to Dorcus.

The two of them looked one to another and then to Ben. "My lord, Prince Caliphus," they acknowledged together with a bow.

"Mister Ambassador," Benjamin said, turning his attentions to Eliezer as he arose.

"My Lord the Prince," Eliezer politely responded, a look of fondness in his eyes as he looked upon the visage of the young royal.

"Welcome home," Benjamin said expressively with a wide smile and eyes full of tears.

"Ben..." Eliezer spoke softly, his face becoming an expression of his heart.

Benjamin lunged forward, wrapping his arms around his friend and sinking his face into the front of his shoulder. Tears fell from his eyes and sunk into the worn tweed of Eliezer's suit jacket as he hugged him, sniffling.

"Ben, watch your glasses. We don't want you hurt," Eliezer chuckled as he held the boy in his arms. "Oh, it is good to see you," he told him, kissing the crown of his head.

Avera watched from a distance. *'I've never seen Ben act so undignified and honest. Not with anyone. It's strange for him to have put on something so proper and procedural just to break down like this in front of everyone.'*

Justice had made his way over to her and began a quiet conversation. "He never really knew his parents, you know?" he passively reminded her, his eyes still fixed on Benjamin. "They're the ones who raised him," he added with a nod to Dorcus and Eliezer.

"Oh, yes..." she said, watching them.

'That does make sense. Actually, now that he mentions it, I do think I recall Kypher having mentioned something about that, also.'

"He won't say it, but it means a lot to have them back well and all. Of course... pit's not just Ben. I think we all feel that way about it. I don't think we would have stayed if it weren't for those two, to be honest with you."

Avera looked at him with surprise, but he continued on in deep consideration as if nothing had changed at all.

"We would have all fled to the mountains with Casper, but Eliezer... *wouldn't* leave. He kept going on about those who would remain here and how if he were to count his life precious at the expense of their lives, he would have done so at the expense of his own life, also." He paused. "Dorcus has direction to stay here. She told us that Sebastian had straightly charged her to remain in the city as a light, and that the King would provide us with safety. Then, there *was* some concern about Benjamin traveling so far in uncertain territory being as he was barely an infant. When all was said and done, we five stayed with them."

"That's incredible." She breathed the words quietly. "He does see things differently, doesn't he?"

"That he does," Justice agreed. "I don't know what goes on in that man's head, but there is some good in it." He smiled, shaking his head. "Webber has this remarkable tendency to have his life endangered, but..." he tilted his head back and touched his bearded chin, "he does always manage his way out of it. In fact, there was a joke in the old kingdom that it would be easier to kill the King himself than it would Webber." He chuckled, then sighed.

'That may have been a bit too accurate.'

"The sheer *number* of times that people tried to kill him..." Justice took a breath and sighed. "Well, it nearly drove Kypher mad. He was in charge of palace security, and he knew there was *someone* to blame. I look back now and wonder if we truly didn't know it was Ramus, or if we simply didn't *want* to believe it was."

Avera was shocked. "Has he really been trying to kill him for all this time?"

'Although, that would explain the animosity Zephyr and his people showed him at the trial just now.'

Justice looked at her as if confused by her surprise. "Almast hates him like I've never seen one man hate another. Is that really so hard to believe?"

'No. No, at this point there's not much of anything I would struggle to believe, and the more I learn of Zephyr, the more I see of bloodshed.'

Chapter 44: Rest

"How about a speech there, Webber?" Vanguard called out from his place behind the camera to their left.

"*Absolutely* not!" Eliezer responded, turning his attentions to the room. "And you all should know better than to ask that of me, anyway! I don't give speeches, and what's more... I'm tired."

He made a broad sweeping motion with his hand as he spoke, overdramatizing the subject to preserve the lightness of the mood, but she could see the weariness as it began to seep through his merry visage.

"Oh, come now!" Vanguard protested.

"No, no," Eliezer said, raising his hand with some insistence. "*I* am going to bed," he announced in no uncertain terms.

"Eliezer," Dorcus muttered softly, attracting his attention.

He turned to her and his eyes softened. "I must admit that I am feeling rather faint," he confessed to her with quiet tenderness, "but I wouldn't want them to become concerned for me."

She felt her heart pulling at her.

'Eliezer...'

"Yes, of course," she quietly assured him. "Eliezer..." she hesitated. "Are you... alright?"

"I'm *fine*," he assured her with a comforting smile and adoring eyes. "I only need a little rest."

"Very well," she told him with a caring smile.

'I wish you wouldn't allow yourself to get like this, but in this instance... I'm not sure there was much choice. Still...'

"Ellis," she called with a wave of her hand, catching the attention of the gentle giant. "Take Eliezer down to his chambers, please, and see to it he gets to bed alright."

"Of course, m'lady," he said, and he hurried over, wrapping his arm around her companion with a smile.

Eliezer nodded, much too tired to protest the favored treatment. He blinked wearily, his eyes watching her.

"Thank you all for the kind welcome," he said as he approached the staircase with Ellis. "I am sorry to cut it short."

There were scattered greetings of parting and well wishes which echoed from around the room.

"Oh, and Ben," Eliezer called out, stopping at the threshold of the stairs.

Benjamin's head turned to face him. "Yes, sir?" he said inquisitively.

"All is well," he told him, offering a quick nod and an affectionate smile.

Benjamin bowed himself deeply, returning the sentiment, and she saw the drops of water as they fell discreetly to the wood floor beneath him.

'Poor child. All is well, indeed, but... even so, there has been such hardship for all of us. True, Eliezer has taken the brunt of it, always, but... it does so hurt my heart...' she looked again to Benjamin, *'and yours.'*

"Mira, darling," Dorcus said, affectionately addressing Ellis's wife when her husband and Webber had gone.

"Yes, ma'am," Mira replied, coming quickly to her side.

"Would you please fetch Mr. Webber some water and see that he drinks it?" Dorcus kindly requested.

"Consider it done, Miss," Mira told her with a gentle smile. "And will you be needing bread?"

'She's so sweet.'

"None for me, thank you, dear, but... take some to Eliezer, if you would, please. He is in need of nourishment, no matter what he may tell you."

"Of course, ma'am," Mira said, discreetly giggling.

"Thank you," Dorcus replied softly. "I do very much appreciate your help with this."

"As do I," Ben said, looking to Mira with a nod.

Dorcus smiled at him, then nodded to Mira. "Go on."

Mira bowed and hurried over to the entrance of the underground chambers with her long skirt dancing behind her as she went.

"Ben," Dorcus said, turning to him with quiet consideration, "you *do* know he's alright?"

Benjamin smiled, his countenance lifting. "Yes," he said with happy confidence, the fire of his amber eyes meeting the steely blue of her own. "Do you?" he asked, reciprocating the question.

"I do," she said with a grin, amused by his ever plucky attitude.

There was a sudden change in the atmosphere of the room as the shrill pitch of a raven's caw pierced the ears of its hearers. The call was followed by the unsettling sound of pecking at the

window and another screech. All attention turned to the window, and Dorcus felt her blood turn cold. There sat a raven, its ruffled feathers tinted a deep and ominous blue, dark as midnight. Its eyes were filled with blackness, and the air around it shimmered with the particles of residual magic.

'Another bird, or... perhaps, the same.'

There was the faint sound of hoofbeats, and Kypher rushed to the window, chasing the bird away and peering out into the distance.

"Alexander, that bird..." Dorcus began.

"He's circling overhead," Kypher told her, his voice serious and grim, "but there is a more pressing issue."

"What's that?" Ben asked him, taking a few steps forward.

"Horses," Kypher reported, "several of them. Five that I can count, actually, but there are, likely, more on the way. Zahaynei is leading them." He turned his back to the window and faced them, on his face a dire expression. "Ben, we don't have much time before they get here."

"Right," Ben said, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose as he considered the thing. "Everyone, below ground."

'Oh, Lord, I am sorry. Eliezer was right to be wary of it, but Eliezer was, also, weary.'

She glanced back towards the passage.

'Perhaps, they sent another, or... perhaps, it followed farther back. Oh, it doesn't matter now, does it? They're here, and we'll just have to deal with it.'

"Ben," she said apologetically, "I'm sorry. There was a bird which followed us. Eliezer cast it down, and we thought that we were rid of it."

"I'm sure you were," Benjamin assured her, removing his hand from his face, and he turned to her with a look of sudden alarm. "They're not after me, then. It's you..." There was a deep concern which shadowed his countenance, and he paused, still looking at her. "Justice!" he called out urgently.

"Yes, my lord," Justice acknowledged, presenting himself on bended knee.

“Go; keep watch over the Ambassador. I want you to guard him with your life, and let him rest, lest it be necessary to wake him. Justice, I need you to see that he is not harmed.”

"My lord, it shall be done according to your wishes," Justice politely assured him before sprinting to the bookshelf and descending.

"Kypher!" the prince called out with like urgency, demanding the attention of the faithful guardsman.

"Yes, my lord!" Kypher replied, exemplifying the same formalities shown by Justice.

"Zephyr's hatred is at its height. You are to guard the Seer. Do you understand me? You *will not* leave her!" he charged him, pointing a finger in the direction of his knight.

"But, sir..." Kypher began to protest softly.

"Kypher, that's an *order*. You will not leave her - not under *any* circumstances."

"Yes, sir," Kypher conceded with hesitance.

"Ben... don't send your guards." Dorcus began to plead with him quietly. Her voice was filled with love and concern. "Not for our sakes. We would give our lives for yours."

Benjamin turned his attention back to Dorcus, and his eyes were alive like sparks as they fixed upon her. "He's with you," he told her, sharply maintaining his position and leaving no room for protest. "Dorcus," he said, and he whispered to her softly his insistence, "it's my turn to give."

Her eyes were watching him, and she respectfully nodded as she acquiesced to his earnest desire for their protection.

"Live well," she charged him, and he smiled determinedly.

"I want all of you underground *now*," he urged them, and she felt his hand on her back as he pressed against the blade of her shoulder, guiding her gently back towards the bookshelf. "Kypher," he said with a nod, and he rushed to escort her at his word. "Avera, get going. You, too," Benjamin commanded, addressing his newfound companion who stood at the edge of the room scared and bewildered.

"Ben," Avera responded, her voice shaking, "what are you doing? They'll kill you."

Benjamin nodded solemnly in unspoken acknowledgement. "Get downstairs, please."

Chapter 45: Blood of Kings

'It's no good: all of this death, all of this hurt. I won't allow it any longer. How long will this darkness prevail?'

He stood alone in the library hall. They were all gone. They had left him according to the words of his request. There was only the stairwell, a clever means of slipping away into an underground world, which remained open to him. This had been his home, and those whom he had loved as family and cherished as friends he had hidden away within its walls, held in the safety of its depths.

'I appreciate your devotion and your sacrifice, truly, I do, but, this time, as I said, it is my turn to give to you.'

He stretched forth his hand and let out a slow breath of air. Fire flew from his fingertips and impacted the carved stone of the wall, closing the entrance to the stairs and concealing it neatly beneath the bookshelf. He lowered his arm, content to have procured the safety of his companions.

'If I die, I die, but none shall perish beside me. For, if a man must die today, let it be my life only and naught of the people.'

He watched the doors as they opened, thrown violently by Zahaynei and the soldiers who accompanied him. There were five guardsmen who rode with their Captain and entered the hall. Three of the men held swords, and the other two were bowmen who remained back in the entrance as the other men entered.

He kept his eyes on them with great intensity, fiercely determined to see an end to their chase, and he stood before them, unmoving.

"Well, that was rather unnecessary, wasn't it?" Benjamin told them dryly. "I would have let you in, you know? You could have knocked."

Zahaynei stopped, his eyes fixed on Benjamin with ire. He put up his hand to signal the guardsmen, keeping their place, and his eyes darted to either side of him, surveying the room. When he was satisfied, his attention turned again to Banjamin.

"Caliphus." He spat out the name as if it had left a bad taste.

"Captain," Benjamin acknowledged.

"Would you consider it irony?" he asked with some irritation. "Here, I've spent the past two decades of my life hunting for you. Yet, now..." he paused, his eyes searching the grand hall, "you're not the one I want and here you stand before me."

"I consider it providence," Benjamin told him. "But tell me, Captain, is the King in good health?"

"He is quite well, as you know," Zahaynei sneered, filled with suspicion.

"And he sent you here after the Kingsmen Representatives. What? Is my life not enough for you now?" Benjamin earnestly commented as he posed the question with boldness.

"You, also, know of our plans, then. *You,* young Caliphus, are far too small a fish for us. We're on to greater things - a Kingsmen reform with Zephyr as their King! The first order being the death of the Ambassador and the Seer along with him," Zahaynei said, almost gloating.

'Of course. When Zephyr became King, he restructured the Royal Court and its positions. Of the twelve, there were only two which he eliminated entirely - that of the Kingsmen Ambassador and that of the Seer. Those seats which Zephyr removed, those which I have retained... the same are those whose lives he seeks... to snuff them out in a show of public humiliation and triumph. For what? A statement. He will say that he is King to exult himself over Himmel. The man is mad. It will not happen. Their lives are mine to keep, and I will not give them over into darkness.'

"A war with Himmel, then," Benjamin surmised and contested. "You might tell Ramus that his plans are pride and folly. He has chosen the path of bloodshed, and the blood to be shed is his own. His life shall be required by *my own hand* and none other than I shall slay him!"

"Why you little..." Zahaynei snarled in anger.

"You have burned the city with fire and disrupted the lives of the people. You have burdened them with your evil and deprived them of life. You have turned to bloodshed and executed evil against the innocent. You have lived by your swords and you shall die by your sabers. You have searched for me but could not find me. Now, you search for them, and they are nowhere to be found. You have sought an end, but you will never obtain it. Pride is as folly and your path is your demise; you men of violence cannot escape it. Can what was done now be undone, or the blood that was shed be brought again to life? Truly, you have not ascended to the throne but have descended into darkness."

"I could kill you," Zahaynei threatened, drawing his sword, its polished blade reflecting the light.

"And what is my life?" Benjamin asked him. "Or what is my blood to you?"

"I would gladly have your blood spilled out," Zahaynei told him without any hesitation.

"But what would you benefit from it?" Benjamin persisted.

"I don't need a reason to kill you. You never should have been alive in the first place!"

"Then is my blood to you accursed."

"Where are they?" Zahaynei growled with frustration. He was becoming impatient.

"I knew you would come," Benjamin stated calmly. "I sent them away."

"And what of Kypher and Atticus? What of your guards?" Zahaynei asked him, his eyes searching the room for the swordsmen before returning to Benjamin. He held his gaze, staring as if trying desperately to find some secret written on his face or hidden in the young man's eyes.

"Gone along with them," Benjamin freely admitted, "*at* my command."

Zahaynei stood in silence.

"You see, Captain, it's just you and me here. Well... and *your* guards. My friends have all gone. Their welfare is in my possession, and I intend to keep it."

"Are you a *king* that you would reign over us?" Zahaynei chided. "You may be a prince but you are no heir. You're a *fool,* just like your father was!"

"So be it," Benjamin said, his words even and measured. "It's your own life you bargain, not mine."

"Last chance, boy," Zahaynei demanded. "Where are they?"

"God as my witness and may He so help me, I would not tell you for my life. Their lives have been entrusted to my charge, and I will not hand them over as lambs to be slaughtered on your alter of derision against us!"

'Try as you might, I will see to it that no harm comes to them. Be it at the expense of my own life, also, you shall neither have nor harm them, nor even shall you touch them.'

"Shoot him," Zahaynei said coldly.

There was a bowman to his left, a tall and slender man with dark hair, light skin, and bright blue eyes, impeccably dressed. Instantly, the arrow left his bow. Zahaynei had barely spoken, and the second archer had no chance to fire on account of the man's precision.

Benjamin felt the sharp and cutting pain of the metal as it ripped through his clothes and pierced his chest. He let out a sharp cry of agony as he fell back, hitting his head against the desk behind him. He laid there on the floor, gasping for breath, with each beat of his heart more painful than the last. His breathing was short, sharp, and labored, ridden with hurt. He felt the warmth of his own blood as it began to cover him, the crimson stains spreading across the white of the buttoned shirt he wore.

'Funny, I always thought this your job.'

Zahaynei approached him, sword still in hand. "Was it worth it, Caliphus? All this pain for lives worth so little," he antagonized him. "I could put you out of your misery," Zahaynei offered, putting the tip of his sword to the base of Benjamin's neck and pressing it against him, "if you'll just tell me where they are."

He shook his head faintly, blinking his eyes slowly, his head becoming light and foggy as the blood rushed from his body, saturating his garments. There were words which came to him from one which he had read and known, and he began to recite it wearily.

"Fear not for the night affair And fear not for the fires Burned in city Pyre bring Forth fulfilled desires. New life from the ashes springs With love much more than death Coming forth from death arise In royal splendor blessed."

He spoke the words in short and labored sections, each line a breath and each breath a gasp as he grasped at the remnants of life. He watched as the light faded to shadows and the shadows turned to blotched impressions of light and dark. The whole of the room was slowly fading into darkness, and it was not his eyes which failed only, but the light of the fire of the holy flame which flickered and faded along with his life.

'Fear not...'

"What is that he's muttering?" one of the men asked curiously.

'Fear not...'

"It's an old Kingsmen prophecy," Zahaynei told them, walking back away from the boy as he died.

'Coming...'

"Oh. I wonder what it means," another man commented in awe and intrigue.

'Forth...'

"It doesn't *mean* anything," Zahaynei snapped at him, their voices and footsteps departing.

'From... death.'

Benjamin heard the voices but could no longer comprehend the words, his mind weak and slipping into blank nothingness as he felt his strength fading. He fought his eyelids as they began to shut, his face sickly and pale. The flame flickered, the light fading and the world falling into darkness. Then... black.

Chapter 46: You Again

There was a strange silence, broken only by the clacking of his boots against the stone portico as he apprehensively approached the doors of the large building.

He had seen a group of men on horses leaving High Palace in pursuit of the officials following their escape. The troop had been headed by Zahaynei, and Kelvin was with them. He had lamented the boy's involvement, but some decisions could only be made by a man and not his friend. They were, however, being led by Kallida's birds, which made him uncomfortable, and he had seen the six men returning whilst he traversed the wood, which made him all the more uneasy. Now, the sight of the half-open door which led into a darkened library hall left him with great concern.

He pressed his hand against the wood of the door, scraped and beaten, and he pushed it slowly open. The room was dark with a faint white glow emanating from it.

'The flame is out.'

He felt his heart twisting as he entered the room with vigilant care.

'My nervousness is not befitting, I know. But...'

He took a quick sweep of the room with his eyes. It appeared dilapidated and grey, as if it had been left uncared for some time. The room was filled with dust and cobwebs all around; disintegrating scraps of old books and papers were strewn throughout the cold and dreary room.

'How quickly do we fall to disrepair.'

There was a ghost-like figure in the center of the room, his semi-translucent form a soft white which emanated light from within him. He had the appearance of a man, though blank faced and without features. It was as if a man had taken a stretch material and covered himself in it entirely, but he, himself, was light which the material could not contain.

The ghost knelt on one knee next to a body which lay seemingly lifeless on the ground beside him, and he remained watching it until his head turned to Blackridge at the door.

Adrien stared at him, speechless.

"You again," he said at last. He looked to the man's body, his still form illuminated by the light of the ghostly specter. "He's dead, isn't he?" he asked as he approached them.

The man looked to the one on the floor, then turned his head again to Blackridge.

"Why are you here?" Blackridge asked him. "What have you to do with death?"

He came next to the spirit and looked down on the lifeless form of a man. *'Ah..! Benjamin...'*

The spirit tilted his head.

"You are the one who lives and makes alive. You belong to the living, not the dead," the weary sage reminded him. "Uh... he *is* dead, isn't he?" he asked, and his voice caught, his eyes fixed on Benjamin with deep sadness.

The ghost gave a slow nod and turned again to Benjamin, placing his hand on his chest. He looked to Blackridge, who watched him with interest. The specter, then, stretched forth his hand, taking hold of Adrien's wrist and placing his hand on Benjamin's wound.

He felt the blood, wet and cold, as his hand touched the torn garments, pressing against them gently.

'Oh, Ben...'

He swallowed, tears welling in his eyes, and his breathing became heavy as he fought off crying. He brought back his hand and the blood stuck to it, staining his fingers and palm with crimson. He lifted his hand to his face, staring at it.

'Is this my doing, also?'

"Listen..." he said quietly, turning to his ghostly companion, "if this is about what happened before, I..." he stopped. "Well, if it was, then you shouldn't have..." he felt the water as it began to run down his cheeks. "No, I suppose not," he muttered. "Really, I should thank you. I... well, you know." His eyes looked away, cast downward from the expressionless face with overwhelming remorse. "I wish I..." he stopped again, unable to complete the statement of heartfelt sentiment.

The spirit reached out and placed a glowing hand on Adrien's face. The mage closed his eyes as he felt the warm light penetrate him, and he took a deep breath, beginning to calm. The hand slowly slid down his face, peeling away his guilt and removing his shame.

Adrien exhaled sharply. His face was radiant. "Well, then," he breathed, "what *is* this about?"

At once, an image came to mind, a reminder of his days as an apprentice. He and Eliezer were traveling through the southern foothills with Marcus to deliver a message in Za'rah, a border town just north of the Arünan Heights, when an explosion from a nearby mine caused a rock-slide along the mountain pass they journeyed. Marcus was caught in it, and they watched in horror, unable to help, as the young man was swept away and buried by the rubble. Eliezer rushed after him, sliding down the slope of fallen rocks to the valley floor below the narrow pathway.

'I thought... there was no way he could have possibly survived that. I told Eliezer he was dead, but he wouldn't listen. He just kept searching through the rubble, pushing aside boulders, throwing off rocks, and brushing away the dust. He dug his way down until he found him. He uncovered a few strands of Marcus's hair first, and he kept digging until he had uncovered his body entirely.

'He asked me to come and help him, but... I didn't. I was scared. He asked me again, and I came down the slope and watched him work.

'He was dead. I knew he was dead. His skin was dusted white. He had a gash on his head with blood spilled out over the rocks and ground beside him. Eliezer said that he would live, but I yelled at him... that... he was dead.

'"No... he'll live," he told me. "Watch me." And he... put his hand on his wound and said, "Live, Marcus," and... nothing... happened. And he put his hand on his chest and breathed on him and said, "Live!" and... he... started breathing.'

He looked into the expressionless face of the specter's glowing countenance. "Really? Is that why you're here?" he asked, and the spirit nodded. Adrien was startled. "Wha- Why *me?* I mean, I..." he stopped himself in disbelief. "I just *killed* a man, and you want me to raise the *dead?*" his voice squeaked as his words became frantic. "Oh, no!" He jumped up and sprang to his feet, retreating away from the man from Himmel. "This time... this time, you've lost it! You've really gone too far!"

The spirit remained on the ground, staring at him, and he tilted his head, questioning.

"Or have you?" Adrien pondered, regaining his composure and kneeling beside his friendly phantom. "Alright," he breathed, settling down, "I'll do it, but... you'll have to make it work for me."

The two looked to Benjamin, whose body lay lifeless on the ground in front of them. Adrien stretched forth his hand and placed it upon the boy's arrow-pierced chest, the blood soaked clothes squishing beneath the weight of his palm. He closed his eyes and took a breath to calm himself.

'Ben... oh, my God, I would have killed you once, but how my heart breaks for you now.'

He felt the spirit's hand as it touched his, and he opened his eyes to see it. The glowing hand of ghostly white set upon his own pressed slowly down, the two melding together as one. He smiled.

"Benjamin," he said, "live." He paused, but there was the same deathly silence.

The spirit looked at him.

'Right...'

He pressed his hand against the wound and blew upon the prince. "Live!" he said, again.

This time, the shining light of his hand entered into the lifeless body of the boy and began to fill it with divine radiance. His eyes grew with excitement, and he drew his hand back as Benjamin began to breathe.

"Thank you," he said, addressing his ghostly companion.

The specter arose, making his way to the stairs leading upwards towards the narrow balcony which stretched around the edge of the grand hall. Adrien watched as he climbed the spiral staircase and continued around the loft with the light following him. He reached the end of the balcony, the white glow of his ghostly essence dimly illuminating the room of dark knowledge and forsaken splendor. He pulled the chord of the large bronze brazier which hung by its chains from the ceiling, bringing it to himself.

"It's your job to light it," Adrien muttered, remembering the content of Sebastian's speech from the library's dedication.

'Yours, and no one else's.'

The spirit stretched forth his hand over the brazier and, with a great flash of light, the fire ignited, the ghostly figure vanishing without a trace into the air. Brilliant sparks of beautiful golden light filled the room, falling softly like feathers all around them. The scene returned to its former glory, no more in darkened disrepair, the vibrant colors, fine woods, and expert artistry returned to their intended state of class and beauty.

Benjamin's eyes opened and lighted with a spark of recognition as he saw the man bending over him. "Adrien," he said pleasantly.

"Prince Benjamin," Adrien addressed with a thankful smile. "How are you?"

"Wonderfully well, thank you," Benjamin replied. "But... what are you doing here?"

"Ah..." he answered bashfully, "well, I resigned my position at High Palace, and..."

Suddenly, Benjamin had his arms wrapped around him, and he hugged him, smiling.

"Welcome home, Adrien," the prince said kindly.

Adrien smiled, thankful for the gracious acceptance of the young monarch.

'Home, indeed.'

Chapter 47: Time

'Ben...'

She sat on her heels with her back against the wall and her eyes watching the ceiling. Kypher stood across from her, leaning against the wall with his face serious, arms crossed, and head down. There was a door to her left through which Justice had entered and behind which Eliezer still slept. Ellis and Mira had gone to make ready some provisions for their eventual, seemingly inevitable journey to somewhere, and Avera had elected to assist the Wells in their preparations, which both Dorcus and Kypher had agreed was probably for the best.

Kypher's eyes strayed over to Dorcus, the two having long remained in silence. "You know, if you wanted to go in, I don't think Justice would mind it," he told her, his words being quickly dismissed by his female charge.

"I'm quite comfortable here, thank you," she said with a quiet brusqueness.

"Right..." Kypher said, a little taken aback by the curtness of her reply. "Uh... sorry."

Dorcus sighed. "No... *I'm* sorry, Alexander," she told him. "I know you mean well, but... it's just..." her words stopped but her mind kept on.

'...all much more complex than that, and... I think, at times, that we're all just a little more human than we would like to admit, also.'

His eyes watched her with curious interest, and he opened his mouth to say something, but the two were interrupted by the sound of footsteps. Both turned to face the direction of the noise as it progressed, Kypher drawing his sword and Dorcus rising to her feet. He stepped in front of her, putting his arm out to protect her from any unforeseen dangers.

'Thank you, Alexander.' She smiled faintly. *'I know you would have stayed with Benjamin, but... I do appreciate your constant valor.'*

Two figures rounded the corner, appearing at the end of the hall, and their eyes lightened to see them.

Dorcus was awestruck. "Adrien," she said, smiling thankfully.

"And Benjamin with him!" Kypher proclaimed, sporting a triumphant grin. "Well done. Well done!" He dropped his arm and sheathed his saber. "Adrien Blackridge, I haven't been so happy to see someone in the better part of an hour!"

Adrien laughed. "Well, you know what they say, Kypher - timing is everything and mine *stinks! Fortunately*, I have someone to make it up for me."

"Nobody says that!" Kypher laughingly protested.

"Well..." Dorcus interjected, "I've never heard it from anyone else, *but* Eliezer does, anyway."

Kypher shook his head. "I knew it... you're *all* crazy."

"Now, Captain," Adrien teased in overstated formal address, "I hereby present to your lordship the honorable prince, Benjamin Caliphus, and do henceforth commit him to your charge." He bowed deeply with exaggerated form, whirling his arm around in a broad swooping motion before Benjamin.

"Why, Ben, your shirt..." Kypher said, his attention turned suddenly towards Benjamin as he spotted the crimson stains.

"Blood, isn't it?" Dorcus inquired.

"It is," Benjamin admitted with some hesitance. "But, I assure you, all is well. I... was dead, is all."

Dorcus smiled, looking to Adrien with gladsome admiration. "Well done," she said.

Kypher looked to Dorcus, then turned his head to Adrien. "You did this?"

"Not exactly," Adrien replied humbly. "Dead raising isn't really my prerogative. It does make for an interesting story, though."

"I see..." Kypher said, considering. "Keep this up, and we'll be calling *you* Lazarus." He paused. "Hm... that and the jokes."

Adrien smiled. "I pray it never comes to that," he replied genuinely.

"Right, well..." Kypher began considerately, "Ben, you should get a fresh set of garments and talk to Ellis; let him know the state of things here."

"Very well," Benjamin agreed gladly.

"I should like to accompany you, provided that you're unopposed," Kypher added.

Benjamin smiled. "I'd be pleased if you would," the young prince assured him, and he and Kypher departed, leaving their companions alone together in the vacant corridor.

They stood for a moment in silence, and the sight of him was foreign, no matter how familiar. Still, she was glad to see him.

"Adrien," she said after a short time, "it has been quite some time, and I am sorry for it."

He shook his head. "Much more my fault than yours," he told her.

She smiled. "We've missed you."

"I might say the same thing," he said, returning the smile and offering a quick, congenial nod.

"Eliezer is here," she told him, "he's resting now, but I know he would be happy to see you, also."

"Yes," he replied. "I enjoyed the talk we had this morning, though I would have preferred circumstances that were a little *less* dire. That being said, I do have some information for you which may prove useful."

'Eliezer didn't mention that Adrien had come to see him, but... I suppose, he was tired.'

"Did you need to speak with him now? I could get him for you..."

"No, let him rest," Adrien gratefully instructed her. "I'm sure he needs it. They don't treat prisoners well there, and I imagine that to be much more true of him."

"Yes," she muttered. "Yes, I can imagine that. Thank you," she told him with deep gratitude.

"Surely," he said, smiling with a gentle nod. "It can wait."

Her eyes lit with pain and tears began to run slowly one by one down her slender face. Her eyes blinked, trying to hold back from crying, and she brushed the corners of her eyes with her fingertips, gently wiping away tears.

"Say, Dorcus," Adrien began slowly, obviously affected by her sudden change in mood. "There is one thing I would like to ask you, if I may."

"Of course, whatever," she said softly.

"Thank you," he said, offering a soft smile of empathy. "The day Sebastian died, the day that Ramus overthrew the kingdom..." he began carefully.

She watched him, his dark eyes filled with consideration, searching for the perfect phrasing of the question which he had held for all those many years.

"Eliezer was going to see you. That's why he wasn't at the palace. He had gone into town that day and then to Elkshire. He had told me that he was planning to stay there for several days, and I had tried to dissuade him, but he was highly intent on it." Adrien paused as if approaching a delicate subject. "Did he... speak to you at all?" he asked her. "I tried to ask him about it, but... he says it was bad timing."

Dorcus sighed. "I think I regret saying that more than anything," she told him, looking over her shoulder at the closed door behind her. "Yes, he did come to see me," she told him softly, "but we didn't talk, really." She looked back at Adrien. His face was full of surprise, and her eyes fell away. "That was my doing. He... asked if I would talk with him a moment. I knew it was important... he never asked me that, but... I..." Her eyebrows furrowed. "We were in the middle of making preparations, Sebastian and I. 'Eliezer,' I told him," and she took a breath, "'I really would love to, but... it's rather bad timing, is all.' So, we never talked." She gave a sad smile which fell quickly into a frown and the water returned to her eyes. "And, you know... I asked

him if it was anything so important that it couldn't wait until tomorrow, and he said that it could wait. So, we left it that he would come the following day."

She turned her eyes again to Adrien. "Anyway, Sebastian had seen him and asked me what he had wanted. I told him that he had wanted to talk, but that it was rather a bad time then; so, we didn't, but I told him that he had been very understanding and sweet about it; so, he would back tomorrow," she choked on the words, shaking her head. "He, um... tried to persuade me to go and see him. We knew he was staying with Jordan. He said it was better if I spoke to him then and that I was working so hard... I should take some time to see him. He even offered to finish the preparations himself, so long as I was back before sundown. 'Or, better yet,' he said, 'invite Eliezer here,' to the cottage."

"But you never did go," Adrien surmised.

She shook her head, "No, I wouldn't listen. I told him that Eliezer had said it could wait. I didn't see why I should go." She paused, the conversation still fresh in her mind.

He had been sitting at his desk on the loft beside the window while she was gathering things and moving them to the specified places. Her arms still full of scrolls, Sebastian stopped her.

"That was Eliezer there, wasn't it?" Sebastian had asked her.

"It was," she told him.

He dropped his quill and turned around in the chair to face her. "What was it he wanted?" he asked with interest.

"He asked to talk," she told him, considering the strangeness of the request.

"And he's gone?" he asked her, puzzled.

"Yes. I told him it was rather a bad time. He'll be in town all week. He'll be back tomorrow," she assured the aged seer.

"Dorcus, you had better see him now. Speak with him now. Leave this to me," he offered her.

"Why?" she asked him, not understanding. "He just wanted to talk. I asked him... he said it could wait."

"It's better that you go today," he pressed her. "Please... for me. It's important that you go."

"Sebastian... I don't understand. You said that we needed these preparations for tonight," she reminded him.

"Dorcus, you've been working so hard. Go and take some time to see him. Leave the preparations to me. So long as you're back before sundown. I'll need you here then. Or, better yet, invite Eliezer here! It would be nice to see the two of you together."

She shook her head. "Sebastian, he said it can wait. It would be silly for me to go now."

"You won't go see him, then?" he asked her with some disappointment.

"I don't see why I would go now, being as Eliezer said-"

"It can wait."

"Yes!"

He nodded, turning back to his desk, picking up his pen, and resuming his writing, "And it shall."

"I never did hear him, and now..." she stopped, her eyes a reflection of the pain of distant memories. "I've asked him, but... he's never told me what it was he had to say."

'Not that I don't know, just that I would like for him to be the one to tell me. I'd like to hear him say it, just as he had intended. Particularly because... I'm the one who stopped him when he tried.'

"I see..." Adrien said softly, his voice tinged with sadness, and he bowed his head. "Thank you," he added briefly.

"Adrien," she said with a comforting smile, "one day, when this is all over... he and I, we'll talk then."

'And I will make for him all of the time in the world.'

Chapter 48: Near Morning

The room was dark when he opened his eyes. He blinked, his mind adjusting back to reality. The dim lighting suggested it was somewhere past dusk, but whether it was the time after dusk or the time before morning would be difficult to determine with surety. He sat himself up, throwing his legs over the side of the bed. He put his hand to his face, pressing it against his tired skin, and stopped for a moment, staring at the blurred shadows in front of him.

'Well... here we are.'

He reached over to grab his glasses from the stand and tidily put them on his face, placing them neatly on the bridge of his nose and sliding them upwards.

'Again, I will remind you that I've never been entirely certain as to why you ever thought of me... at all, but especially for this. Though, I am very grateful for it... in spite of it all.' He smiled.

He wore still the clothes of the previous day: white shirt sleeves and a brown striped vest with matching trousers. His jacket still lay where he left it, having been draped over the back of a chair in the corner of the small room, a chair which had somehow found its way to the center much nearer his bed.

'That's not... where I left it.'

He slipped on his boots and walked to the door, opening it with a soft click of the metal knob as he gently turned it.

The halls were dark outside the room as he exited, quietly pulling the door shut behind him. *'Perhaps much more near morning,'* he considered as his mind processed the notable silence of the halls.

He turned to sneakily make his way to his office, having to stop suddenly for nearly tripping over Dorcus. He refrained from shouting as he caught himself, regaining his balance against the wall.

'Dorcus...'

She sat asleep in front of him, her back against the wall and head tucked down in slumber. He stopped; his heart melted at the sight of her.

'I would ask you why you're here specifically when there are such better ways to rest, but I think we both know that would be silly of me. I told you I was fine, but you know me well enough, I think, to realize how I exaggerate my own wellness.'

He made a wide arc to her right and lowered himself down next to her. He sat there in silence a moment, thinking too much to think anything at all. He felt as though he had a million

thoughts and he couldn't grab hold of any of them. His eyes slipped back to her and he felt his heart beat lightly.

"Dorcus," he said at last, speaking softly in the night as he put his hand on hers.

Her eyes blinked open and a smile lit her face as her eyes met him. "Eliezer," she said with gladness.

He smiled, his eyes full of tearful affection. "Go to sleep, my dear," he told her. "Come," he said, "I'll help you to your room."

He squeezed her hand, lifting it gently as he arose. Her eyes watched him, and she lifted herself as he steadied her. He led her through the halls to her chambers, offering his arm as a support for her. They went in silence with only the sound of their feet against the stone floors beneath them. Dorcus stumbled along wearily, holding tight to Eliezer's arm.

'She must be exhausted.' He glanced over at her. *'Come to think of it, she hadn't slept any more than I had, and what with all this stress...'*

"Dorcus," he asked her, "this is your room, isn't it?"

She nodded.

'Good, then...'

He quietly opened the door and escorted her inside, helping her down onto the bed and pulling the blanket up over her. He turned to leave, but she grabbed his wrist, preventing him.

"Adrien is here," she told him sleepily, her words falling delicately as she lay. "He should see you come morning. He wanted to talk, Eliezer." She fought to keep her eyes open as she watched him.

He sighed, his heart hurting.

"Go to sleep, my dear," he whispered softly as he bent down to kiss her cheek, "and we'll meet the day tomorrow."

She closed her tired eyes smiling, and he snuck away, stopping at the door. He held the handle, his eyes intently fixed upon it until looking briefly back with heartfelt affection.

'Goodnight, Dorcus.'

***

The office was unusually neat, and he laughed softly. *'Ah... Dorcus's need for a clean office is like the need of water to a thirsty soul, and yet she chooses to share the space with me!'*

"Well..." he sighed, "I will try not to mess it up."

'The trouble is, I can't much seem to help it.'

He sat at the desk and lit a lamp, the soft light of the burning oil illuminating the shadowed room. There were papers in the drawers which he took and placed in front of him one by one as needed, writing letters of greeting and declaration on each before moving it aside. There was a stack of papers which began to develop beside him when there was a knock at the door, also.

Eliezer raised his head. "Yes?" he answered. The door opened to the familiar face. "Adrien!" he gleefully proclaimed, placing his pen down and standing to his feet.

"Hello, Eliezer," Adrien said, smiling as he pulled the door shut behind him.

"I am pleased to be able to provide for you better accommodations than your last visit," he joked as he moved to greet his friend, giving him a light hug.

Adrien laughed. "That may have been more my fault than yours."

"Have a seat," he said, ushering him into the room. "Would you like some tea?"

"Certainly," Adrien replied thankfully. "You know, it has been *quite* some time since anyone has offered me a cup of tea."

"I don't doubt it," Eliezer said, heating the water. "Though," he added, sitting down, "perhaps you could settle a disagreement I've been having with myself. Tell me, Adrien, is it past dusk or is it near morning?"

Adrien laughed, amused by him. "Near morning," he told him, smiling.

"In that case, I'm surprised to see you so early," Eliezer remarked.

"I learned not to sleep much," Adrien commented, leaning back in the chair; his eyes pointed to the side. "Say, Eliezer... you don't seem surprised to see me."

Eliezer smiled thoughtfully. *'No, I suppose I'm not.'*

"Dorcus," he confessed. "Dorcus told me."

"You spoke to Dorcus?" he asked, surprised.

"She said that you had wanted to talk," Eliezer mused. "I suppose that's why you're here now."

"She waited up for you..." Adrien's voice softened in awe.

Eliezer nodded, not uttering a word. Whether he was unable to speak or unwilling to, he could not say.

"But I did want to talk. You see," Adrien began, his eyes fixed on his friend, "Zephyr, he... wants the Kingsmen under subjugation at any cost. He'll kill them if need be, but... he hopes it will be enough to execute their representatives."

"I know," Eliezer told him. "And no, it wasn't Dorcus. There are some things that I know on my own." He grabbed a sheet of paper, one of the many letters he had written, and handed it over

to Adrien. "Here, read this. I've been writing these," he said, "in preparation for our journey to Elkshire."

Adrien took the paper and his eyes grew as he read the scattered words of a skilled penman. "A declaration of war," he said, astonished, "to be distributed to every Kingsmen Congregation throughout the seven regions."

"Yes," Eliezer said, leaning pensively back in his chair. "I know because it's my business to know, and... last I checked, when an ambassador is treated the way they've treated me, it is a clear and unrelenting sign of open hostility towards the nation and the people he represents."

Adrien nodded, considering. "To Elkshire, then?"

Eliezer nodded in agreement. "Yes, to Elkshire," he affirmed. "We'll go to see the Council, Benjamin with us." He paused. "*Everyone* with us."

"Is Jordan still the representative from Delphi?" Adrien asked him.

"And as ever as dear a friend," Eliezer confirmed. "We'll see him first."

Chapter 49: Elkshire

They were talking in the hallway about a place she had heard of but never been, a town called Elkshire. Sometimes referred to as the "Kingsmen Capital", Elkshire was a forest town and the most prominent of the eastern region. The town itself was relatively unremarkable with two notable exceptions. The first: that the Council of the Kingsmen was seated in Elkshire and from there they judged the Kingsmen from throughout the empire. The second: that Elkshire was itself a city-state, entirely independent of Altruon and its government.

It was vital that Altruon and Elkshire should remain in each other's good graces. Diplomatic relations were vital between the two states, and they were quickly falling to pieces, because the man the Council sent to Pyre was the same man that Zephyr was hölle-bent to destroy.

The Kingsmen Council consisted of seven representatives from each of the regions throughout Altruon - Euphess to the south, Arymn to the west, Pergum to the southeast, Tyra to the northwest, Sa'ar to the north, Delphi to the northeast, and Laoce to the southwest. These representatives were elected each year at a regional meeting of the area's overseers and sent to Elkshire to rule there. Together, the seven would send forth proclamations, execute judgements, settle disputes, allocate resources, and govern the Kingsmen body. It was, also, within their power to declare war, though that had never been done in all the years of the Council's existence.

The conversation passed her door, moving on down the hall, and she hurried to prepare herself for the morning meal, wanting to hear more of their plans.

When Avera arrived in the banqueting room, the others were in the midst of a dispute over when would be best to depart on their journey, whether better to travel by day or by night.

"To go by day would be to leave ourselves open to scouts and tracking. They would know where we were and where we are going, and they would have guards waiting for us in Elkshire long before we arrive!" Justice contended.

"Howbeit, if we were to travel by night as you suggest, we would be leaving ourselves vulnerable to ambush and identification by the guards as we would be in violation of curfew," Webber reminded him.

Benjamin was sitting back in his chair, considering everything in pensive silence.

'I wonder what goes through his head. It's hard for me to believe that he could really have nothing to say.'

"Hm... I am inclined to agree with Atticus, but Webber makes a good point about the roadblocks," Kypher considered. "There's nothing wrong with off road travel, but at night it will be difficult to see and we won't be able to use our maps, either, which may lead to problems for us getting there."

"Well, I think it's better to go by day," Vanguard asserted, "for the reasons you just mentioned. If we were to be followed, at least we would be able to *see* and we could make adjustments. We have no chance of that with a night ambush in the middle of Elk Forest!"

"We *could* ask Dorcus," Benjamin said. "I would like to consult her before making a decision."

"Understood," Justice said with a nod in Benjamin's direction.

"Of course," Webber politely conceded.

"Hey..." Kypher said, looking around, "where *is* Dorcus? I was wondering how this had gone on so long. Isn't she usually here to help settle our disagreements for us?"

That was the first that anyone had vocalized Dorcus's lack of being there, and Avera was surprised by it. She glanced around the room to reconfirm the lady's absence and began to take account of all those present.

'Benjamin, Kypher, Justice, Webber, Vanguard...'

Kypher was right - Dorcus *was* missing, and that was highly unusual. Mira and Ellis weren't there, either, but that wasn't abnormal. She was sure they would be found in the kitchen, preparing the meal for them.

'Dorcus... really isn't here, is she? It's early, I know, but... she's always here before I am. I would think she's still asleep, but that would really be strange, because she seems to sleep less than any of us.'

"She must still be sleeping," Vanguard said, giving voice to her thoughts.

"Yes," Justice agreed, "but it is unusual for her to sleep in."

Blackridge looked discreetly to Webber, whose eyes were fixed solely on the table in front of him, his forehead crumpled with some concern over whatever it was he was thinking.

'There's another mind I wish I knew. He always seems so sure of what I do not know. But I would like to know, eventually.'

"Yeah, it is," Kypher said, his fingers thoughtfully holding his chin. "I'll go get her, so she can settle this for us!" He turned hurriedly to go and find her, but he was interrupted before he had taken a second stride.

"*No!*" Webber shouted, jumping up from the bench where he sat. His hands pressed hard against the table and his body trembled. He closed his eyes and took a breath to calm himself. "*Please,*" he said, his voice pleading, "let her rest."

"But, Eliezer, don't you find it unusual that she would be asleep at this time?" Justice commented, his eyes keeping careful watch of his companion. "Surely, if we were to wake her she would be-" he stopped, Webber's eyes cutting into him with an unfamiliar fierceness and seemingly unrestrained intensity.

'I always thought Justice was fierce, but here Mr. Webber is staring him down, and he's the most gentle person I've met.'

"Yes, Justice, I do," Webber responded, his words short and precise, much unlike his usual fluctuating and flowery speech. "And I think it likewise unusual that she would go two days without it, and that I should be arrested, and that Benjamin be *shot*," he stopped for a moment to wet his lips, clearly trying to maintain his composure and keep his voice from elevating. "Yes, it is *unusual*, but it is not the least bit *strange*. So, *please*," Webber petitioned them, his eyes lifting from Justice and fanning the room, "let her rest." He lowered his eyes sadly.
"She *has* been under an immense amount of stress lately," he added quickly, his eyes soft and pleading.

There was a silence in the room as they all watched him, and his face turned red with embarrassment.

"Please..." he said, bowing his head and sitting himself down again at the table, "forgive me my forthrightness." He turned to Benjamin. "My apologies, dear prince."

The corners of Benjamin's mouth turned upward. "Fear for nothing, Ambassador. All is well," he graciously assured him.

Webber smiled. "Thank you," he said, bowing his head humbly.

'Ah, everything's alright, then!'

Blackridge didn't seem surprised by any of it, but the others did, and Avera turned her eyes to Benjamin.

'Ben is very gracious, but I do wonder how much he truly knows and how much he merely trusts. Even just yesterday, that time on the roof... and then here with Zahaynei... did he really know? Did he really know that it would be alright, or did he just... believe it?'

"I see," Justice muttered.

'Hm..?'

"So, it is like that, then," Kypher quietly added.

'*What?*'

Justice nodded solemnly. "It would certainly seem so."

'I... missed something, clearly.'

"Yes, well..." Blackridge said coolly, "that *aside*, we should wait a few days before departing."

The attention of the room shifted entirely toward Blackridge as if he had changed the topic of conversation altogether, but he continued on as if unaffected by their shocked and inquiring glances.

A faint smile crossed his face. "They may believe that Caliphus is dead, but they weren't *looking* for Caliphus. Zephyr wants a total reform of the Kingsmen. He wants to make a point. He needs the Ambassador to make that point, and he desires the Seer, as well," Blackridge explained, shooting a quick glance of care towards Webber. "He will send out Zahaynei who will search relentlessly for us. He will go house by house, town by town, and city by city until he finds you," he said, his eyes focused on Webber intensely, "and when he doesn't, he will start again until he does. I imagine that one of the first places he would think to look for us is in Elkshire." He paused, turning his eyes to the room. "So, we should wait a day, or two, or three, until they see that we have not fled there. Then, they will abandon the town and we will be free to conduct our business in peace."

There was silence as a certain tension gripped them, and Blackridge smiled, trying to lighten the mood.

"So, let her sleep!" he said, offering a friendly laugh. "Whether by night or by day, we'll have *plenty* of time before our departure."

Benjamin grinned. "That's good enough reason for me. Wouldn't you say, Ambassador?"

Webber gave a short nod and a thankful smile.

'Ah. All's well, then.'

***

It was two days and just before twilight that they saddled their horses and made ready for their journey. Having consulted Dorcus, they had determined that dusk would be the best time to leave, the night journey being much less perilous with the grey light of even. The last leg of the journey would be in darkness, but they should be out of the thick of the woods by that point and more able to navigate because of it, the lights of the town becoming visible and helping to guide their way.

Ellis and Mira would embark the following morning to join them in Elkshire, bringing a covered wagon with supplies by way of the main road. It was, the others assured them, not unusual that such accommodations be sent to Elkshire, and the Wellses were neither wanted nor recognizable. They had spent their former years as palace servants with whom, Blackridge was quick to point out, Zephyr had always been faithful to never associate nor address. Whatever kindness may have existed in Zephyr at the time, it had, according to Blackridge, always remained hidden from the lowly and reserved for those whose kindness would benefit him.

'Zephyr...' she was thinking of him as she was awaiting the sign to go, sitting upon a black horse which she borrowed. *'What a jerk. It's hard for me to believe he's king now. The image I have of him is so different from the one I had before all of this. Whatever the reason that my father left, I'm sure it was for a good cause. I'm sure of it. He's always been one for a cause. Working for a man like that, that could*

kill a person from the inside, and, if it doesn't... it will kill them from the outside, instead. People like that... with plans like that... and ambitions like that... they catch up to everyone eventually. They kill the best of us, the rest of us too cold to care.'

"Ready?" Ben asked her, looking back.

'But they're not cold.'

She nodded with a smile. "Ready as I'll ever be!" she said, half-joking, but it was the serious half of her she found concerning. "Ben," she hesitated, "about this whole Kingsmen thing..."

"Avera," he said, laughing, "you're not rethinking this *now*, are you?"

"Well, it's just that I..." she stopped. "Mm," she shook her head. "No. Well... *yes*, actually, but I think it's a discussion better for some other time."

Benjamin turned in the saddle to face her. "*Now* only happens once, you know? So, if you have questions..." he paused, watching her.

'I do, but I can't ask them now.'

"You're not a Kingsman, are you?" He smiled. "I knew that," he said, staring thoughtfully into the distant woods. "I only hoped that perhaps you had changed your mind already." He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. "I suppose not."

She smiled. "Not just yet."

Chapter 50: Jordan Carder

He rode at the front, Dorcus to his right, and Benjamin behind them with Justice and Alexander at his wings. Avera followed behind Benjamin with Joseph and Adrien accompanying her. It was a familiar journey and one which he had been given the task of navigating. Still, he was not accustomed to it by night, and he kept his map open as they moved quickly through the forest by the fading grey of dusk and twilight.

"Eliezer," Dorcus said after they had been riding for a short while.

"Hm?" he glanced in her direction before consulting his map again.

"We'll have to speed up a bit. Elsewise, we shan't break through the thick of these woods before the night falls upon us."

"Yes, of course," he said, raising his body upwards and gently pressing with his knees against the horse's body.

She smiled, urging her horse forward as she followed after him.

They continued swiftly on through the forest by the thinning light of even, staying clear of the roadways so as to avoid government checkpoints and threat of discovery. They reached the forest edge just as the final slivers of daylight faded into total darkness, and they all rejoiced in heart to see the lights of Elkshire appear before them as they broke through the line of trees.

"Nearly there!" he happily proclaimed.

"We are, indeed!" Dorcus replied triumphantly. "Well done, Ambassador!"

'Now, I only pray that there is no further difficulty. If Adrien is correct, then Alhor should have abandoned the town already. My hope, then, is that we should be able to see Jordan without any threat of complication. Though, I am thankful. This has been a providential journey. We are past all major obstacles without incident and find ourselves on schedule as we ride together through this beautiful night.' He looked to the stars. *'How glorious they all are, fragments of your kingly splendor strewn about the open sky.'*

"Admiring them," Dorcus asked, "or are you trying to count again?"

"Not this time," Eliezer chuckled. "Tonight, I'm merely sightseeing. Though, I wonder which sight is more splendid, whether this," he said, his face turned upwards, "or that," he added, adjusting his gaze again to the shining lights of Elkshire.

***

When they arrived in Elkshire, the burning street lamps and lights from houses dimly illuminated the large town with a soft orange glow. They had slowed their horses to a walk,

remaining cautious of the ever present guards who walked the streets by night. There were a few people here or there, still out milling about in the late summer evening. He kept his eyes fixed on the road ahead, careful to avoid contact with anyone as they went on quietly through the night.

He was glad in heart as his eyes laid upon the familiar sight of the house of Jordan Carder. It was a fashionable wooden structure, large enough to comfortably fit a family or some guests, fully finished with large windows and a standing porch with stairs down to the lawn and path which led up from the main road of the town thoroughfare. There was the warm light and flickering of fire in the lamp of the house which passed through the broad window of the second floor study, and he felt some relief as the tension lifted.

'He is awake, then. Thank you.'

They began to climb the winding path which led to the place given the representative from Delphi. The property had with it a sizable plot of land which kept the house somewhat back and away from the other homes. There was a guesthouse to their right as they approached and a coach house beside it.

The people of Delphi maintained a certain dignity about them, a dignity which Jordan Carder had always allowed to bear upon his lifestyle and conduct.

He was a tall, slender man with a long face and pale skin. His ever bright eyes were an orangey-brown, as his silvery hair had once been. He wore his hair in the traditional style and just long enough to cover the tops of his ears. He had a thin mustache which dropped neatly to either side of his mouth and a short strip of beard covering his chin beneath. He dressed very elegantly in the traditional style of the northeast, not too unlike the dress which Webber himself wore, though Jordan had a tendency to be a bit more overstated than his friend was. He wore his shirts with puffy sleeves of finer material and detail, longer coats trimmed with more vibrant patterns, and the like. Still, he was a modest and magnanimous man who never lived outside his means or in excess, and even the house itself was built just large enough for himself and his family to live comfortably while entertaining guests and the guesthouse was, itself, a necessary part of his office.

There was a group of soldiers patrolling the area of the household who caught sight of them as they came near the porch.

"Halt!" a man with a spear called out as the small company of men rushed to surround them. "Who goes there? State your business!"

Webber looked at the men, assessing their uniforms. *'These aren't Zephyr's men, which is fortunate. Likely, they're local militia assigned to keep the property and protect Jordan. Even so, to identify ourselves would not be in anyone's best interest.'*

"Please, sir," he said, exaggerating his northeastern accent, "I am a stranger from Damascus. I have come to see Mr. Carder in need of refuge for myself and my companions."

"Damascus? Why come so late?" the man asked Eliezer with a shrill tone of accusation. "That's not far north of here. Why arrive so long past curfew?"

"We seek shelter, as I told you," Eliezer said again. "We are Kingsmen, come to Elkshire on business." He paused. "We were unable to make proper accommodations because of the sensitive nature of our visit here."

"And what would that be?" the man asked gruffly, raising his spear.

"It involves Ambassador Webber," he said, his words short and concise.

'Presumably, that should be of enough interest to you that you let us go.'

"That's why we're out tonight, sir," the man said. "Men like that, fugitives of the law... terrible, just *terrible!* Webber... men like that are just the kind of men we're looking for - scoundrels!"

He could feel Dorcus as her eyes watched him, and he moved his arm discreetly to the side to calm her. *'Peace, dear lady. All is well.'*

"And what would you do if you were to find such a man as Eliezer Webber?" he diplomatically inquired.

"I would invite him in for tea, of course!" a familiar voice interrupted.

Eliezer smiled. He looked up to see the face of Jordan Carder as he made his way down from the porch wrapped in a burgundy robe.

The guardsmen were slow to speak, appearing to respond to the presence of Jordan and his brash display of friendly exuberance. "Please, please!" Jordan called to them, "Can't you see? These are my friends and their companions!"

"Hold now!" Eliezer said, putting up a hand. "Our friendship may depend upon what type of tea he has."

Jordan let out a mighty laugh. "Whatever! So long as your heart desires it!"

"Ah, a true friend, indeed!" he jokingly declared, dismounting.

"Well, men," Jordan said, addressing the soldiers, "make yourselves useful and stable my companions' horses." He turned to Webber as the others dismounted. "Eliezer," he said, lowering his voice, "I have three spare bedrooms in my house. I think it would be best if you would stay in one of them and," he looked over to check and see who else was present, "Dorcus in another. I don't know who should..." he saw Benjamin and smiled, "Caliphus?"

Eliezer nodded.

"Perhaps you three, then, should stay with me, and the others in the guest house?"

Eliezer nodded in agreement. "Yes, that does sound sensible. Thank you, Jordan."

The two of them showed the majority of their party to the guest house before returning with Benjamin and Dorcus to the house where Jordan stayed.

"You'll forgive me for not having been more accommodating," he said as he brought them in through the main door which opened into a small greeting area with stairs in front of them and a living room to their right, "but it is late, and Phia is in bed already. I consider it a stroke of divine planning that I was still up going over documents. Although, I *hadn't* beforehand."

"Not at all, Jordan! We have come entirely unannounced and that rather intentionally. You have been *more* than accommodating," Dorcus insisted.

"We do have two others coming tomorrow with a supply wagon," Eliezer informed him somewhat apologetically, "we didn't want to burden you or your household."

"We *are* in deep appreciation of your kindness," Benjamin added with his usual courtesy.

"Well," Jordan laughed, "suffice it to say that this is not the way I would have envisioned entertaining a king." He paused, turning his face towards Benjamin. "And one so humble."

He took them to the upstairs where the bedrooms were. Upon reaching the small second story landing, they went right down a short hallway, passing a door to their right. There was a door on their left, which Jordan opened. "Prince Caliphus, I think this would be best for you. It was the bedroom of our eldest, and you should find it comfortable."

"Yes, of course," Benjamin said, stepping into the large, fully accommodated room with a bow. "It's *fine*, thank you!"

"I'm glad you think so," Jordan said before moving on down the hallway. "Dorcus," he said, opening a door on their right once they had progressed farther down the hall.

She stepped forward with a thankful smile.

"This will be yours," Jordan continued hospitably. "It's a bit smaller, but I think you'll find it comfortable."

"Thank you, Jordan. It's *lovely*," she assured him.

"Now, for you, my friend," he concluded, beckoning Eliezer back down the hall to the door which they had passed at first, "we have this."

He opened the door, revealing a room almost identical to the one which he had given Dorcus but mirrored, and Eliezer began to go in, but Jordan grabbed his arm, preventing him.

"We're right over here, if you ever are in need of anything," Jordan told him, pointing to the door of the master bedroom on the other side of the stairs. "I like to keep you within arm's reach," he joked, still keeping hold of his friend's arm.

Eliezer smiled humorously. "I appreciate your great hospitality, Jordan," he told him, genuinely thankful.

"You know," Jordan teased, "we *would* have another room if..."

"Stop it, Jordan," Eliezer smiled with red-faced embarrassment.

"Just thought I'd mention," he said. "You do still have it, don't you?"

"I do, but I would need two for your proposal."

"Oh?" Jordan's face cracked into a grin. "Were you planning to propose to me, as well, then?" He laughed.

Eliezer shook his head laughing. "Stop it, Jordan! I've not come for your humor, not this time."

"Right," Jordan said, his tone changing to one more serious. "You'll see the Council, then?"

"Yes," Eliezer told him, "if you would be so kind as to arrange a meeting."

"Of course," Jordan said, giving his assurances. "I will speak on your behalf tomorrow and arrange a meeting for the following day."

"I would be most grateful." He paused, setting his sack on the bed beside him. "Who is on the Council these days?"

"Well, let's see. There's... Ivan Falls of Euphess, whom you know. Gregory McFarland of Asrymn, whom I think you'll like. Tory Starver of Pergum; he's an interesting chap, but we're not quite on the same page. Tyra sent us Laura Stickland. They're having trouble with some strange teaching there, as well..." his words trailed off and he paused. "Who else?"

"Laoce?"

"Oh.... yes. Demetrius DelMont."

"You don't seem too happy."

Jordan shook his head and sighed. "You'd have to meet him."

"I see," Eliezer chuckled. "And is Alfaunz still the representative from Sa'ar?"

"*No...* he's been replaced," Jordan told him. "Regrettably. I'm sorry. I know you liked him."

"Well... who's the replacement?" Eliezer asked him with some concern.

"A man named Timothy Garner."

'Oh, God, why?' A look of horror spread across his happy countenance. *'Timothy...'*

"Do you know him?" Jordan asked, responding to the grave reaction from his friend.

"I *might*," Eliezer told him, taking pause.

"He's a curious sort of person, has a great reputation, but I'm afraid I really *can't* recommend him," Jordan confessed to him.

"Well... suffice it to say that *if* I *do* know him, he spit on me when last we met."

Jordan laughed, "Didn't like your preaching much, did he?"

"More of he didn't like *me*."

Chapter 51: Council

It was early in the afternoon when Mira and Ellis arrived in the wagon filled with supplies which everyone helped them to unpack at the direction of the kindly Phia Carder, who saw to it that all were properly settled and appropriately cared for, and all was now at peace as they approached the evening meal.

Jordan had left for the Council meeting that morning, as was usual, determined to arrange a meeting between the Council and their Ambassador, but he had not yet arrived back, though it was near evening.

"Phia," Eliezer asked with some concern, "what time does Jordan generally arrive home?"

"About mid-afternoon," she told him, stirring a pot for supper.

"I thought so," he said, recalling his conversation with Jordan from the previous evening.

"Oh, don't fret, Eliezer!" she told him, waving a wooden spoon with some soup on it. "He's just been delayed is all."

He smiled, "Surely."

'I hope that's the case, but I am concerned that it may be something more personal. It's been twenty years since I last appeared before the Council; many of these representatives have never even met me, and, from a Pyrean governmental prospective, not only am I a man without a position, I am a fugitive wanted for treason. If they don't take seriously their own governmental power or my continued responsibility to them, they may be hesitant to see me, especially now... and with Timothy...'

The door opened, and Eliezer hurried from the kitchen through the dining room to the main entry way. "Jordan!" he said at the sight of his friend.

"Well, Eliezer, we did it," he told him breathily as he leaned tiredly against the door to push it shut behind him.

"Jordan..." Eliezer said, "are you alright?"

"Fine, fine," he said, moving forward with long stumbling steps before falling back into a comfortable living room armchair. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Just a long day is all, Eliezer, but it's all been arranged," he assured him. "They'll see you tomorrow."

'Poor Jordan...'

"Was it difficult for you to arrange?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

'Yes... it was very hard fought, clearly, but I am very grateful for his persistence.'

"*Ohhh*, was it?" He sighed, pushing his head back and taking a breath again. He opened his eyes, addressing his friend. "Eliezer, I..." he paused, his face turned towards him. "I've been here for thirty-five years. I'm an old man now, and my wife is old, and our children are grown. You know, times have changed, and the people have changed, and the Council has changed. I've tried, Eliezer, really I have, but... I'm sorry; I don't know how the Council will receive you." He stopped, his eyes sad. "*But*," he said again, "they *will* see you."

"However it is, Jordan, we *must* try," Eliezer steadfastly reminded him, "and we shall face the day together..."

"With a firm reliance upon the benevolence of our Supreme King," Jordan smiled, finishing the familiar phrase. "Thank you for that." He paused, considering their present situation. "You know, Eliezer, perseverance *has* always been one of my better traits. So, *any*time you are in need of *any*thing, *please*..." he said, leaning back in the chair wearily, "I'm right here. Please know that. I'm right here."

"Jordan, I..." Eliezer stopped, taking a deep bow to show his appreciation. "Thank you."

***

The next morning, Eliezer and Jordan departed together for the Kingsmen Council Building. There, Eliezer would present his case for the necessity of war to the seven delegates, who would in turn review the proposal and ask questions of their Ambassador.

The Kingsmen Council Building was not particularly large; housing only the front lobby, a single office, a meeting room, and the council room, it was about the size of an average courthouse. The council room itself was circular, having high ceilings and a loft with seven compartments where sat each of the representatives of the Kingsmen throughout the seven centers of influence, each Council member having his own seat and his own door behind him through which he may be free to enter or exit at will. On the ground below them, there was a humble platform built from which the man or woman bringing an appeal may present it to the delegation.

The Chairman of the Council oversaw all of the proceedings and points of order, conducting business as he deemed appropriate. The representative who held this position was indicated by means of a sash of scarlet braid which was tied to his chair and set to hang over the wooden banister of the loft that his authority may be easily recognized. At this time, the office was occupied by the representative from Delphi, as was indicated by the sash which hung from the sixth chair and extended far down over the edge, its ends drawing near to the ground below it.

Eliezer stood on the platform as he watched the loft intently, staring at the scarlet strand as he waited for the representatives to enter.

'Jordan didn't tell me that he is the Council's Chairman... and that, I suppose, since Alfaunz left. That means that that long day yesterday was his doing, even more so than I had imagined it to be. He

wouldn't call the meeting to adjournment without their agreement to see me here today, and thus... this may be more difficult than I had hoped.'

He watched as the delegates entered, each to their seat, and he rubbed his thumb nervously along the tips of his fingers.

'Lord, help me. I am in need of support.'

He looked to their faces, taking each of them into account individually. In the first chair of Euphess, there sat Ivan, as Jordan had said, white haired with bushy eyebrows and a carefully trimmed handlebar mustache against his light skinned face. His wavy hair was combed back and fell down past his broad shoulders. He wore a dark blue double breasted tunic decorated with polished buttons and gold braid. Eliezer smiled thoughtfully.

'There is the only other man who sent me. And would he see me now? And shall he send me still? Again, I should certainly hope so.'

In the second chair of Asrymn sat a younger man with short hair of strawberry blond, brushed back, carefully cut and fashioned about the ears. He had light blue eyes, peachy skin, side burns, and a thin, finely combed mustache. He seemed a fit man and comely. He wore a knit white shirt with a single small gold button at the center of the collar, covered over by long flare coat, the coat being fashioned of a heavy green fabric, patterned with plants in gold, with gold trim and large, exaggerated cuffs.

'That must be McFarland. I'm sure he's a fine young man if Jordan likes him, and I have always enjoyed my visits to Asrymn.'

In the third chair of Pergum sat a man with pointed features and tanned skin. His eyes were dark, his hair messy and black like a raven's. He wore modern street clothes: a tight black shirt with three buttons below the low-cut circular collar, the uppermost of which he had left undone, brown pants which hugged his body, and a simple leather belt.

'Tory Starver... an interesting man, indeed.'

In the fourth seat of Tyra sat a woman who appeared only a few years younger than he was. She had light skin and puffed blond hair which curled out at the shoulders. Her eyes were bright shades of mixed blue behind dark lashes. She was petite in stature with wide shoulders and a round face. She wore noticeable amounts of makeup and ornamented herself with all types of fashionable jewelry. She wore a rose colored blouse with small fabric buttons and delicate fabric work accompanied by loose navy dress pants.

'Miss. Stickland. What a fascinating woman.'

In the fifth seat of Sa'ar sat a man with a familiar face, and Eliezer felt his blood turn cold as his heart turned inside of him.

'Timothy...'

He swallowed as his eyes met the man who stared at him from behind a pair of small, round glasses with thick black frames, his disapproving eyes a steely blue and penetrating. His face was long and pointed, as were his features. His dark brown hair was short and neat. He wore a tidy dress shirt of a dusty pale green with tiny buttons up the front, tight cuffs, and a buttoned collar which rose a quarter inch above his neck. He wore over the shirt a material vest of lightly faded brown which showed itself entirely unremarkable.

Eliezer watched with humble timidity as Timothy kept his glaring gaze, his long nose curled in disgust.

'Oh, Timothy...'

His eyes lingered before moving on to the seat of the sixth delegate, the man from Delphi.

Next was Jordan who had the scarlet chord, a fact for which Eliezer was most grateful.

'I thank you. This may be a hard fought battle, but it is reassuring to know I have an ally here.'

He smiled up at his friend before moving on to the seat of the seventh.

The seventh seat of the Kingsmen Council was that held by the representative from Laoce, a merchant city and center of industry where the western plains met the mineral-rich foothills of the south. Its proximity to the maurium mines had caused great economic growth, new vitality, and urban renewal in recent years to impact and expand the already thriving city. It was a common stop for soldiers, workmen, state officials, and travelers alike.

Eliezer looked now upon the man they had sent to Elkshire as the region's representative. He was lean and well above the average height. He was young, ruddy, and handsome. His skin was nicely tanned with reddish hue. His dark hair was short and fashionably styled. He wore a gaudy white tunic with gold trim accompanied by pants and shoes to match it, along with dark glasses which wrapped his narrow face and covered his eyes with reflections of gold.

'Imitation pyrite. I regret the knowledge that such a thing exists. Surely, this must be DelMont. Now I see why Jordan is so vexed by him. What are they doing in Laoce? Himmel, help me; this may take more convincing than I had previously thought possible.'

Chapter 52: Declaration

Jordan Carder called the meeting to order and, once they had finished the formalities, they were ready to begin.

"Well, Ambassador, say what you will," Jordan said, smiling. "The floor is yours."

"Thank you, Chairman Carder," Webber said courteously with a short bow, taking a step forward. "Members of the Council, I come before you in need of your help. Twenty-three years ago, I was chosen by the members of this Council and sent to Pyre to fulfill a position as the Ambassador of the Kingsmen to the state. As the Kingsmen representative in Pyre, I have lived my life peaceably and with honor until this time.

"I was recently arrested and subjected to a trial which was nothing more than a malicious mockery of justice, my execution having been both prearranged and predetermined. It is only by the benevolent grace and manifold mercies of our King that I am able to stand before you this day a free man, my life continually and jealously guarded for the work yet given me.

"But I have come before you not on behalf of myself or with concern for my own life, knowing with all confidence that my God is more than able to keep me from destruction and preserve me unharmed unto the day of redemption. No, but it is with regard to the life of every man and woman in Altruon, be they in Pyre or throughout the four realms of the kingdom.

"King Zephyr Almast, who was armor bearer to Prince Casper Caliphus before the death of King Stephan Caliphus by his own murderous hand, has deemed that a Kingsmen reform is necessary for the subjugation of the people, and is determined that all should acknowledge him as supreme king and ruler over us.

"His demand for nothing less than complete loyalty and unquestioning obedience to him and his governmental right draws us into the realm of idolatry and treason against the crown. The very one who has given us this land, the same is he whom Zephyr seeks to dethrone, raising his head to Himmel and saying he will raise himself higher, yet higher, ever higher, until he sits high above every name, every creed, every king, every throne, every dominion, and every kingdom. That puts us, gentlemen and lady, in a rather precarious situation, because to fulfill this order is to abdicate the responsibility of every man - that his heart belongs to our King! How much more so to you who hold this office!

"The responsibility you hold is that much higher, being not only to yourselves but also to your fellows, and I along with you! We have a unique privilege to represent the people of this land faithful to the crown, and we have a unique responsibility before our King to zealously guard their souls. There will be suffering, pain, and horrific violence as you have never seen it. This will come upon them, and how much more so will it come upon you who are responsible as

watchers over the King's flock should you allow them to be torn and sacrificed upon the altar of derision!

"Neither we nor they will escape the persecution which is to come, should you refuse to act. My arrest, the arrest of an ambassador, an ambassador *you* sent as a representative of the members of *this Council* and the Kingsmen throughout the empire, *cannot* and must not be taken as anything less than an act of war against our King and his people.

"So, it is my humble *request* that you should ratify a Declaration of War against this illegitimate, corrupt, and hostile government."

There was a stunned silence followed by a slow, deliberate clapping from the gallery above. All eyes turned to the representative from Sa'ar as he continued his vain assertion of noise and self-effort.

Eliezer took a step back, looking up at Timothy Garner as he continued his solitary applause, on his face a cynical smile.

"Well done, Ambassador," he said at last, "quite a good speech with plenty of inflammatory words to get us all riled up. Did you practice it long?"

Eliezer blinked. His mouth fell open. *'My Lord, this man...'*

"Mr. Garner," he said, taking a breath to steel himself, "all I say is of a truth."

"A bit self-serving, though, isn't it?" Timothy replied. "What, don't you think? Coming to us after all this time and pawning on us all *your* problems." He raised an eyebrow with a sly, satisfied smile.

Webber stopped, his heart pounding as he felt the heat of anger. *'Don't... speak.'*

The room sat in a stunned silence for a sliver of time which seemed more like an eternity. Jordan was leaning forward in his chair, staring at Timothy in disbelief. He turned his head over to Webber with a shocked and questioning glance.

He returned the look, pretending not to notice his friend's obvious dismay, and he clenched his teeth in irritation. *'I know, Jordan. It really is incredible to hear him when he speaks like this, but this is the man I knew and now with years more time to perfect his artful accusation.'*

"Hold now, Mr. Garner," McFarland said, at last breaking the silence with disgust, "if there is a threat to our people, we should certainly know about it and respond wisely in accordance with our charge. This man is right to come to us."

Eliezer smiled. *'Ah, a friend, indeed.'*

"Mr. Webber," the man said, softening his tone as he turned to address him, "my people have suffered much at the hand of this government and its laws. What is this coming persecution that it is yet greater, and is there yet a hope of liberation for us?"

Eliezer looked to the man from Asrymn, his eyes gleaming with intensity brightly burning. "Mr. McFarland, I know the tears of Asrymn," the Ambassador began as McFarland watched him with curious interest. "I am well aware of your struggles that you have suffered at the hands of an unjust king as you have held steadfast to the word of our own, having the knowledge of his great works and faithfulness towards us and I laud you your faithfulness that it may endure forever.

"I would encourage you, also. Fear for nothing as you delight in the knowledge that there is a just judge and righteous ruler over all who would endure with you the trials and liberally reward your right conduct with truth in believing." He paused, scanning the room before he began again to address the delegates.

"Zephyr seeks to overthrow the kingdom entirely, and now on a much grander scale. He will look to the Kingsmen and call it a reform, and he will appear very understanding. He will say there is no enmity between him and the King's servants, but the enmity which exists is that in the heart of every man - that he is at enmity with him whom he should serve and those who are faithful to his service. The persecution ever increases as the stakes are ever increasing. Zephyr is determined to war against Himmel. As the representatives of that kingdom, we may surrender or we may stand, but there is no middle ground."

"All that may be well for Asrymn, but we in Laoce have enjoyed a time of great prosperity under the reign of Almast," DelMont contested. "Why should we make war against a man with whom we have such peace? We are established in our cities, we have good relations with our neighbors, and we are rich by the blessing of our King. My people do not suffer, nor do they hurt, but they are settled in their homes. Tell me, Ambassador, why should I deprive them?"

"Mr. DelMont, if that be the case, you have deprived them already," Webber replied dryly.

Jordan held himself back from laughing while Timothy cracked an amused grin and the others retained a look of shock.

"How do you suppose?" DelMont protested.

"Because while the man who acts wisely is delivered, it is he who acts cowardly who is without trouble, and you, sir, have neglected your charge. Else you *would* have trial, as they do in Asrymn and Delphi and Euphess. Your works are not genuine and your riches are rust. Thus, I would advocate that you be earnest in turning back your heart to your King. There are garments of white and gold tried by fire, these at a cost. Your money cannot buy all that the King affords his people. Still, there is a cost, an exchange which must go forth and that of a life: each man to give his life, each man to serve his King. Would you rule, Mr. DelMont, and would your people rule, also? Then let every man serve his brother and every man his King."

Before DelMont could answer Webber a word, there came the charming voice of Laura Stickland. "*Supposing* this were a war, as you have said, and *supposing* that Almast were to be

defeated with the help of our King, *then* who would reign over us?" she asked in light, measured tones.

"The Prince, Benjamin Caliphus, grandson of the late King Stephan, and a descendant of Palmier, to whom the throne was promised according to the word of our most generous King," Webber earnestly expressed.

"There are reports from Pyre that Caliphus is dead," Starver dubiously stated.

"Sir, I assure you," Webber quietly insisted, "he, being very much alive, is here and with me now."

"Then let him be here, also," Stickland curtly suggested. "I should like to hear him."

There were chatters of agreement.

Jordan looked to Eliezer, who nodded. "Very well," he said, addressing the Council, "we shall hear Prince Caliphus tomorrow."

Chapter 53: Times of War

The next morning, Jordan and Eliezer once again departed for the meeting of the Kingsmen Council, this time with Benjamin.

"Members of the Council, may I submit to you yet again Ambassador Webber," Jordan announced as he began the meeting, extending an open hand toward Eliezer, who stood at the edge of the platform, "and may I introduce to you, also, Prince Caliphus," he concluded, moving his hand to the left towards Benjamin. "I remind you that the Ambassador and the Prince are here as our guests for the purpose of our own benefit, and I ask that you should address them appropriately as such. Now, before we begin questioning, Prince Caliphus, you may speak, if you like."

"Thank you, Chairman," Benjamin began humbly with some hesitance.

He wet his lips and shuffled his feet nervously. He opened his mouth to speak, but no noise came. He glanced over to Webber, who watched him with eyes of compassion, on his face a look of surety, and he caught his glance, offering a quick, comforting smile to bolster his courage.

"Gentlemen, I..." he stopped, his eyes scanning the members of the Council nervously. He felt as though he was choking on words.

Failing to speak, he closed his eyes. *'Please... not now. Not here. Now, I admit, this... terrifies me, but... please, I need your help. I have no words when words are all I need. So, please... give me yours.'*

"We find ourselves in a precarious situation which only courage shall cure," he said, his words flooding from his mouth with all eloquence.

He opened his eyes to those who watched him from the balcony, their eyes fixed on him with fascination and speculative interest. He offered a vague smile, his confidence building.

"It is, perhaps, said best that the appeal to call for peace in times of war is that which calls us to compromise and surrender those things which we would otherwise hold dear. We who hold to the words of our King are known to him for the promises which we hold, and these promises of ours are life and peace. Because of this, we know there is no compromise with evil. There is no surrender of the hope of the promises we hold.

"Peace will not come through compromise with wickedness. It will not come through the surrender of our hearts to evil. Peace will come only through the dedication of our souls to that which is good and that word of our hearts which is life."

He paused, his eyes surveying the delegates. Some seemed skeptical, many uncomfortable, yet others were gratefully comforted, and all were entranced, captivated by the words of his mouth.

'They're listening.' He smiled again, relieved. *'Thank you.'*

"People fear for perishing, but we have life which has overcome death that we might fear for nothing," he told them. "This land was promised to our ancestors, and it was given them through war. It was promised that Pyre should be the place from which the King would reign, and it was given us through war. We have been given great and precious promises, and the willingness we have to receive them is the willingness we have to contend for them." He paused. "And I will take your questions now."

Starver spoke first. "Prince Caliphus, I recognize your concerns and those brought by Ambassador Webber, and I remember the times of trouble when many men died, but we have lived in peace these past years. Why should we revisit the things of the past?" he asked, unconvinced.

"Respectfully, sir, there are things of the past which are present, and this peace we have is unsustained," Benjamin rebutted.

"Perhaps if we were a bit more diplomatic," Starver suggested. "Perhaps then this peace would be more sustainable."

"*Mister* Starver," Jordan cut in with some irritation, "*need* I remind you that the man who *sat* in that *seat* before you was *graphically* and *publicly* executed, and that by government officers not ten years ago, because he *refused* to renounce the name of our King!" He paused, his fiery gaze locked on Starver. "This is not a matter of diplomacy," Jordan stated emphatically, hot faced and serious. "It is a matter of *expulsion.* They squeeze a little and then they squeeze a little more, but can't you see it? *They hate us!*" He stopped, taking his head in his hand as he leaned forward, and he shut his eyes, taking a breath to calm himself. "They will not stop until there is none left to oppose them, none left to tell them that what they do is wrong," he groaningly lamented. "Until then, they will kill every last one of us, and *that,* Mr. Starver, is where your diplomacy will get you."

"Mr. Carder," Starver replied, fumbling over his words, "that matter with Representative Archaeus was some time ago, to your own admission. We have since been established in Pergum, despite the presence of the intelligence bureau and the various government offices. They have become much more understanding. We have had no further incident, and I should like to avoid any, so far as is possible."

Benjamin's eyes were stayed on Carder who appeared grieved by his fellows. *'At least one man believes this, but... he cares so much. Their callousness is what devastates him.'*

"Mr. Starver," Webber appealed, taking the opportunity to speak as Benjamin continued to watch the representative from Delphi with interest, "it may be of note that no matter how dark the night, the light of a lamp is not diminished. Howbeit, if the man who holds the lamp, in negotiating with the darkness, should choose to dim the light of his lamp, he has done the one thing which the darkness could never do. To compromise with evil is to empower the darkness

which flees from this light which we hold. When trouble comes, it must shine ever brighter. Therefore, let us shed our light abroad that by it men may see."

Benjamin looked to Starver. His face held a look of contemplative shock. He opened his mouth, but no words came. Then again, and again a third time.

Benjamin smiled. *'Well done, old friend; you've rendered him speechless.'*

"Aye," sighed the man from Euphess, his eyes glazed with indifference. "Ye dim th' lamp a bawherr... an' then a bawherr mair an' afore ye knew, 'tis oot," he said. His voice was aged and coarse. "I hate that."

"Prince Caliphus," DelMont broke in, adjusting the conversation back to the topic at hand, "what makes *you* more fit to rule than Zephyr, or I?"

Benjamin's head shot over to the seat of the seventh, his eyes settling on the handsome face of the young marketeer. "Mister..." he began hesitantly, having forgotten his name.

"DelMont," the man from Laoce quickly informed him.

"DelMont," Benjamin nodded.

'Of course.'

"Sir," he continued humbly, "there was a promise made by our King to Palmiere, my ancestor, that the one who sits upon the throne in Pyre should be his descendent and that the kingdom should be established *through him*. From thenceforth have sat upon the throne the ones called Caliphus after our forefather, to occupy until the day of the coming of our King, which is the promise of our hope.

"Almast has sought to extinguish the fires of that hope. He has scattered the promise to ashes through the blood which he shed. My grandfather sat upon the throne in Pyre, but my father never did. Instead, he was forced to flee because of the death of his father by the hand of Ramus. He fled with my mother and many of our brethren to the mountains, to the Royal City, which is hidden from us now, and Almast sought my life, also... killing many for my sake, because he knows that the promise of the kingdom is to me and my descendants.

"So long as we live, there is no security for him; for he knows that one day his kingdom will fall and his reign be brought to an inglorious resolution. All that he has stolen, he shall surely repay, but, as for now, we are as embers, the fire of which continues to burn and the light of which is not extinguished."

"And is this war not with you, then, rather than with us?" DelMont accusatorially inquired.

"The kingdom belongs to our King. It is not mine, but it is given me by his virtuous hand. If Almast wishes to overthrow that which the King has delight to establish, then his war is not with me, but it is with he whom he has set his heart to supplant, and as for this King of Himmel

whom the King of Pyre has desired to depose, is he not your King as well as mine?" Benjamin replied, speaking with the wisdom of the ages.

Eliezer smiled, as did Jordan.

"Prince Caliphus," Laura Stickland broke in curiously, "what do you say of the reports of your death?"

"Well..." Ben said, becoming a little uncomfortable, "you see, ma'am, I had, in fact, been killed, but, as you can see, I am very much alive."

"Ah... so, you were dead but now you are not? Are there any witnesses to this which we may call on your behalf, sir?" she asked.

"Whit's it ye'r getting at thare, Stickland?" Ivan asked, addressing the delegate from Tyra with his usual curtness.

"*Mister Falls*," Laura began huffily, exaggerating the name, "I am merely suggesting that before we accept this man as Caliphus we should first collect some *proof* of the matter."

"Oh, *right!*" Timothy said, cutting in with biting sarcasm. "Like you do with all of your relics."

"Why you!" Laura gasped. "Those are *sacred relics*, *holy instruments* of our King! And would you *mock*, sir?"

"*Mock?* How could I, when no man can touch it but he could kiss it for a penny? Forgive me as I indulge myself with a copper for my hand and a silver for my soul," Timothy quipped, his words edged in bitterness. "But who could say a word against Tyra?"

"Mr. Garner, you have overstepped your bounds, even for you!" the lady protested.

"Stickland, stoap yer bickerin'!" Ivan shouted over the ongoing controversy of the interpretive squabble. "Juist look at the lad; he's th' spittin' image of his *faither*! You'd 'ave ta convince me that he *isn't* Caliphus! Noo, baith o' ya calm doon, an' let's hear th' lad oot!"

"Prince Caliphus, why don't you tell us how it is that you survived the tragedy," Jordan politely suggested, silencing his fellows.

"Chairman Carder," Benjamin began slowly, with some hesitance, "I was shot by a man in Pyre, and I heard the words of a prophecy," he said, thinking back. "I was raised by the might and mercies of our King, that his word might be established which he promised me. Adrien Blackridge was there, also. He is a witness to these things, as are others," he told them.

Eliezer has urged him not to share much of the strength of their party or their identities, and the Prince was fully determined to make every effort to fulfill the Ambassador's request.

"Lord Blackridge is with you?" Stickland asked, the surprise in her voice matching that on the faces of the others, save Carder, who smiled.

"Uhm..." Ben stammered, his mind racing for an acceptable response.

"Yes," Eliezer said, answering for him. "He has resigned his position as Archmage, given up magic, and cut all ties to Zephyr and his forces. He is presently and forevermore, I trust, in the service of Himmel's most gracious King. He was, also, instrumental in Prince Caliphus's current state of wellness."

Benjamin smirked. It was quite a diplomatic statement. *'Yes, that is a way to say it, but Eliezer is much more familiar with their quirks and personal foibles than I am, so... it is easier for him to negotiate these things than it is for me.'*

"The wayward son, back again," Timothy commented dryly, Jordan passing him a glance of curious contemplation. "Fascinating."

'Who is this man that he speaks so freely and with such condescension?'

"What are you saying, Mr. Garner?" Jordan asked him.

"Nothing, Chairman. Nothing at all," Garner replied in his usual pious tone. "Just that... we'll see if it lasts, is all." He paused, looking directly at Benjamin. "Young man," he said, his eyes shifting to Webber behind him, "who raised you?"

"I'm sorry," Benjamin replied, taken off guard and not understanding.

'Everything this man does is quite on purpose. So, what in Hölle is it he wants?'

"You have testified that your parents fled the kingdom when you were young. Obviously, they left you here," the man from Sa'ar stated. "So, you see, the *question* is simple, really. Tell me, Prince Caliphus, who raised you?"

He looked to Eliezer, whose eyes fell aside when they met his.

'I don't understand what is happening. He could ask anything. Why is he asking me this? What is it he's truly inquiring?'

"Answer him, Ben," Eliezer softly entreated in a voice too low for the others to hear.

Benjamin raised his head again to Garner and squeaked, choking on his words. He paused, taking a breath to calm himself. "I was raised by the Seer, primarily, and the Ambassador, also, to a considerable degree," Benjamin told him, and he watched as the man's eyes narrowed, his countenance changing.

'He is looking with such intensity and ire, but... not at me.'

Benjamin followed the delegate's gaze back over his shoulder towards Eliezer.

'But... why?'

"You have a seer with you?" Stickland excitedly inquired.

"We *do...*" Eliezer responded, still avoiding eye contact with anyone.

"I should certainly like to hear him!" Stickland enthusiastically announced.

"*Her...*" the Ambassador quietly corrected.

"That *could* be arranged," Carder told the delegation. "Say... tomorrow?" he casually suggested.

There were scattered comments of varied systems of thought, but it seemed that the Council was in agreement... all but one.

"No," Timothy said sternly, already packing up his bag, "I absolutely will not hear her."

"What, Mr. Garner," Stickland prodded in protest, "because she is a prophet or because she is a prophet*ess*?"

"Both," he said with furrowed brow as he picked up his satchel to depart. He turned and grabbed the knob of the door behind him, looking back with a glaring glance towards Webber before he went. "Among other things."

Chapter 54: Timothy Garner

'Among other things...' His mind was filled with thoughts and memories of all those "other things" as he walked out of the meeting accompanied by Benjamin and Jordan.

It seemed to be a pleasant conversation Jordan was having with him, but very one-sided by virtue of the fact that he hadn't heard a word of it. Benjamin would chime in on occasion, but he hadn't heard that, either. His mind was in another place, another time, and old words echoed in his ears.

'What is it you think you're doing? ...Look! Now you've gone and broken Marcus. He's even begun to act like you - silly! ... You're charlatans, nothing but charlatans! As far as I'm concerned, the Seer shouldn't have an office! ... Who do you think you are asking to marry my sister as if you had a right to her? ... You have no place here! Stay out of my life - the two of you! I will have nothing to do with you.'

He shook his head, trying to rid himself of the memories of far gone days, then stopped, his eyes fixed on something which he could not see. "Timothy," he muttered.

Jordan stopped, having gone a pace ahead. "What?" he asked, turning back to him with his eyes a gentle question.

Eliezer's eyes lightened as his face lifted, and he blinked, recognizing Jordan for the first time in minutes. "What?" he replied as a man caught out of a daze.

Jordan's face shifted with concern as he carefully examined his friend. "Are you alright?" he asked, moving closer.

"Quite alright, but I think I've thought too much," Eliezer responded, offering a friendly smile.

Jordan watched him with quiet love and skepticism.

"I'm sorry, Jordan," Eliezer said, "I should have told you, but I must talk to Timothy. You two go on ahead of me."

"Timothy? Yes, of course..." Jordan replied with hesitance. It seemed that he had wanted to ask something more, but he restrained himself, something which Eliezer supposed to be because he didn't think it his place to do so.

"Thank you, Jordan," he said, cordially patting his arm with an amiable smile. "Ben," he added, beckoning the young man closer.

Benjamin watched him, his eyes fixed on him with interest, and Eliezer smiled at him as his heart filled with affectionate pride.

'What a wonderful child.'

"Well done!" he told the boy emphatically, his words brimming with cheerful enthusiasm.

Benjamin grinned, his face lightened. "Thank you, Ambassador," he said with a bow.

Eliezer looked on him with fondness.

'And this, the king, you sent to us. Do you delight in him as I do? Tell me, young man, who raised you?'

He sighed.

'He is so very much like us...'

"I'll meet you both home," he said with a pat of Jordan's arm before turning back again towards town.

***

He found Timothy Garner still near the Council Building. He stood alone next to the hitching post where his horse was tethered, securing his pack to the back of the saddle of the chestnut steed.

"Timothy," he called out when he was still some distance away, "you always were the last to leave."

Timothy froze, his fingers no longer fidgeting with the string he used to tie his things. "Eliezer," he said with mild agitation, then sighed. "I thought I told you to stay out of my life."

"A request which you should have known I couldn't well honor," Eliezer replied, moving slowly towards him. "You know that as the Ambassador I am responsible to the Council. If you hadn't wanted to see me, you shouldn't have accepted the position."

"Ah, yes! The *Ambassador!*" Timothy said with falsified enthusiasm, turning on his heels to face him. "The *Ambassador* who always had the answers! The *Ambassador* who was always so well loved!" He paused, his countenance changing as his celebratory, mocking tone became serious, almost accusatory. "The Ambassador who allowed the kingdom to be burned. The Ambassador who allowed my father's land to be taken and our cities to be pillaged. The Ambassador who allowed Stephan to be murdered, Sebastian slain, and Casper chased from the kingdom."

"Timothy, I'm sorry! I know you've hurt, but there was nothing more I could have done. Ramus had his mind made up. He would have killed me with the rest of them."

"Then, Eliezer, what *is* your doing? What about the Ambassador who published a storybook in a time of crisis and then no one saw for twenty years? Am I supposed to expect to see him, that he should suddenly turn up because I take a post in Elkshire? Or how about the Ambassador who asked to marry my sister but, *evidently*, never did? What *have* you done, Eliezer? You've ruined her life. That's what you've done. You've *ruined her life*. No. Wait. You've... *deprived* her of it. You have deprived her of *life* and of *love* and of *happiness*. She will never have a child. She will never have a family. She will never have a home, and it's all thanks to *you*, Ambassador," he sneered. "So, thanks again for- *interfering* in- *my* life when- *you* don't even have one."

Eliezer felt the pain course through him. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, but the breath seemed shallow in his lungs. He opened his eyes again, his soft, sorrowful glance meeting the cold hatred of the man from Sa'ar.

"Well," he said shortly, his heart aching. "So, you hate me, perhaps even rightly, but *at least speak* to your sister."

"I *have no sister*, Eliezer. You *took her* from me. And now you've gone and gotten Marcus killed. All I have is Sam left. Or would you take him, also? Well if you do. I still have *my* wife, *my* children, *my* life, Eliezer. What do you have? *Nothing*, because *divinity* judged *me right*. The armorials are dead, and *you*, Eliezer, are childless. All the while, *I* am both very much alive *and* by no means childless."

"No, Timothy," Eliezer said, his voice a heartfelt lament, "you are *not* very much alive. It's all *facade*, and, despite all of its outward trappings with its fine ornamentation and the care with which you've kept it, that facade is merely a distraction from the grave reality that *you*, Timothy Garner, are *dead*, and a dead man is still dead no matter how great his reputation of excellence."

"My reputation is in truth, and what is yours? *Look* at my life!" Timothy shouted, decreasing the negligible distance between them as his anger rose. "I am a representative of the Council, an emissary of the people and a servant of our King! For all that I am, Eliezer, I have lived well. I have not wandered. I have not strayed. I have not dirtied my hands, nor have I by any means done anything which may tarnish my reputation!"

"I happen to remember that it is the tendency of men to judge by appearances but the practice of our King to judge the hearts of men in truth," Eliezer reminded him, his words filled with a fiery conviction. "Tell me, Timothy, how is it you live? A dead man is still dead, regardless of what others may say about him. If there is no life in him, he cannot live, no matter how well. Howbeit, if there is life in him, he cannot die, no matter how horribly."

"I have life more than you ever had!" Timothy snapped at him angrily, his body lightly shaking as his irritation grew. "People look to *me* for guidance, Eliezer - *not* to you! Not anymore. Your own life is proof enough that your advise is *horrible!*"

Eliezer stood, looking up at him with pained eyes and sorrowful expression, then uttered the words, a soft rebuke, his voice not wavering, "I have found your works unfinished in the sight of my King."

Timothy recoiled at the unexpected phrase. "What is it you *want?*" he demanded in words not much more than a whisper.

"*You,* Timothy," Eliezer told him, matching his tone. "*Alive*. I want you to *wake up*, Timothy!" he said, his voice elevating. "I don't *care* who says what. Can't you see? There's nothing but *death* inside of you. I want you to *live!* I... want you to live," he said again, his words fading.

Timothy stood shaking, a mix of ire and contemplation swirling in his cold, calculating eyes. "Why don't you just leave me alone, and stay out of my life!" he demanded, striking him on the cheek with a swift swing of his tightly clenched fist.

Eliezer felt the numbness and stinging of his cheek which followed the unpleasant impact of Timothy's knuckles.

'Well... so it ever was.' He frowned, his heart like waters. *'Perhaps, another time. Perhaps, some other day. But, as for now, I'm sorry.'*

Timothy looked at him in frightened desperation, his eyes wide and his hand still lightly trembling. He seemed to have shocked himself, appalled by his own violent action. "Eliezer," he said, the harshness of his voice depleting as waters covered his steely gaze, "I told you... to stay out of my life."

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He sat on the edge of the bed in the room which the Carders had graciously afforded him, his face still sore and hurting. Dorcus had pulled up a small wooden stool and sat now in front of him, only a few inches away. He kept his eyes turned down, unwilling to look at her.

She watched him intently as he stayed sadly still and uncharacteristically quiet, his face swollen and bruising.

'I can't very well tell her what happened. I couldn't bear to see her hurt by it. She doesn't even know he's here, and... given his performance today, that may be for the best.'

He felt a tinge of pain course through his cheek, the stinging sensation still fresh beneath his aching skin. *'Ouch!'* He winced.

There was the sound of footsteps in the hall followed by the emergence of the familiar face of the lovely Phia Carder. "I've brought some ice for you, Ambassador," she said, trying to cheer him. "I must admit," she chuckled, "I wasn't expecting the Council meeting to go so badly for you."

He put up a smile, which hurt his already stinging skin, but he considered it only proper to show his appreciation to his kindhearted hostess. "Thank you, Phia," he said, looking to the shapely woman dressed in colorful garb.

Dorcus took the ice, which had been neatly wrapped and carefully packed away in a soft rose colored handkerchief by their hostess.

"I'll go make us some supper," Phia pleasantly informed them before turning to address Dorcus with a teasing grin. "Help this poor man, would you?" she jokingly requested.

"*Ah!*" Dorcus sighed as if beset upon. "He's hopeless, I'm afraid," she said despairingly. "*But*, I will do my best," she added, a laughing grin breaking through her false facade.

"*Hmm...*" Phia glanced over at Eliezer. "Yes, I see what you mean. Well, do what you can," she said, politely chuckling as she turned and left the room, the pink frills of her elegant gown whirling as she went.

Dorcus's eyes followed her, watching as far as she could down the Carder's brightly lit hallway. "Eliezer, what happened?" she asked, once content that they were alone.

"Just, um... one of the Council members, the man from Sa'ar, I happened to know him, and he isn't particularly fond of me, I'm afraid," he answered hesitantly, moving his eyes to the side to avoid her gaze.

"Eliezer..." she said as if to go on, but she dropped it, the two of them given instead to silence. "Here," she said again softly, "take your hand off and let me."

He cooperatively removed his hand from his face, and she replaced it gently with her own, pressing the cool cloth against his aching skin.

"Why won't you tell me?" she asked him. Her words were soft and delicate as her pained eyes met the sadness of his own.

"They sent someone new in place of Alfaunz," he quietly confessed to her, "and it happened to have been someone I knew, and he happens not to like me very much."

"But, Eliezer," she said, not understanding his strange reluctance to tell her, "Jordan said they've called for me tomorrow. I was raised in Sa'ar, and my family still lives there. I could certainly speak to him on your behalf."

'Dorcus...' He closed his eyes and took a breath to steady himself. *'How is it you still care for me, even after all of this? Is there not enough insufficiency in me that you should have long forgotten it?'*

He opened his eyes, considering her lovely visage. "Dorcus, I'm sorry..." he said apologetically, "he won't hear you."

She looked at him with eyes like questions, as if gathering some right to protest.

"He told me he wouldn't," Eliezer said again by way of explanation.

She watched him speculatively, as if trying hard to understand.

He sighed, unable to avoid the topic. "Timothy Garner is the man they sent as their representative," Eliezer quietly admitted, his eyes slipped downwards. "He hates me."

"My brother?" she said, surprised. "Well," she breathed, tipping her head back, "that certainly does change things, doesn't it?" She sighed, turning her eyes back to Eliezer, "No, I suppose he wouldn't hear me, then, would he?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid not, dear lady."

"Goodness..." she thought out loud, removing the cloth for a moment as she carefully considered his broken face, "if this is how he considers you, I would hate to think how he must consider me."

"Much the same, I'm afraid," Eliezer muttered, his eyes brought again to her.

"Well," she said softly with a familiar smile, "that rather goes without saying, being as you are as I am and we are very much the same."

He watched her eyes, a kind and caring blue, and blushed at the unexpected phrase, his heart melting within him. "Dorcus..." he said softly before pausing a moment when he felt the vague relief of the cool cloth return as she held it gently against his hurting skin.

'I'm sorry.'

He swallowed, his heart beating lightly. "I am so incredibly sorry to you," he said, his words soft and tearful. "If I... have caused you pain in life or by any means deprived you... *please*, know I have never intended it."

"Eliezer..." she breathed, her eyes pondering the pained sadness in his own.

"But if I have deprived you," he continued on sorrowfully as he wept, "please, forgive me. Be it of life or of love or of happiness, or be it of family and future and home..." he inhaled sharply, his eyes fixed briefly upward. "I want nothing..." he shook his head lightly, looking into depths of her sweet eyes, "*nothing* but the very, *very* best for you, my *dear*, *sweet* friend."

"Eliezer, I *told* you..." she said again, her kind words filled with tender affections, "I am as you are." She smiled, her pale cheeks turning to a gentle rose. "My *life* is with you. My *mirth* is with you. My *love* is with you. My family and future and home," she shook her head smiling, "it's *with you*, Eliezer. None other," she whispered the end phrase with such quiet tenderness that it made his heart melt all over.

He smiled, his sadness erased by the sweet delicacies of love. "Good, then," he said, placing his own hand gently on top of hers, his words softly spun with like affection and tenderness. "May it ever be that I am as you are and we are very much the same."

Chapter 55: The Seer

'Oh, Timothy...'

She strolled thoughtfully along, several steps behind them, pondering his state and hers.

'Funny how our lives change. Funny how time marches onwards. Funny how...' she looked over to Eliezer and smiled, *'life isn't always as simple as we might anticipate, but... there is this longing in our hearts, a longing for more: more of your likeness, more of your purpose, and the revealing of that purpose brings us closer; closer to the people we were meant to be, closer to that for which we were made... closer to you. That's why, he has to understand, it's more than just discipline in believing; it's what we hold to in our hearts and that which we will never let go.'*

She put her thoughts aside, turning her attention to the conversation going on ahead of her as they traveled down the broad dirt road to the Council Building.

"Still," Jordan was saying, "you didn't tell me he was your brother-in-law."

"That's because he *isn't*," Eliezer said, embarrassed.

Dorcus laughed at them quietly. *'Poor Eliezer. I know how Jordan likes to tease him, but I'm not sure how much of it he can withstand.'*

"Well, *he* thinks he is. That's why he punched you," Jordan confidently conjectured.

"Oh, did he now?" Eliezer said, unconvinced.

"Yes!" Jordan said, laughing. "Don't you get it? Timothy Garner has such concern for his own reputation that he could never stomach a real man of character. He can't believe that anyone could possibly be any more sincere than he is, or... *isn't*. You see, Eliezer, the trouble is that he knows you well enough to know that *you are*, and his conscience won't have it... that or his ego. That's why he's always trying so hard to upset you; he has set out to prove that you're just as much of a sham as he is. Any success of yours, he views as a personal failure, a robbery of his eminence."

"Well," Eliezer said, considering, "when you frame it that way, I suppose..."

Dorcus smiled, impressed by Jordan's concise assessment of Timothy and his motives.

'That does sound an awful lot like my brother.'

She walked up between them, purposely bumping into Eliezer gently as she moved in beside the two men, interrupting their ongoing discussion.

Eliezer grinned, looking her way with laughing amusement. "Miss Garner," he said, considering her with playful mirth, "it's lovely bumping into you, but awfully unexpected."

"Hm... do you really think so?" she asked, toying with him.

Eliezer was going to say something, his eyes intently locked on hers, but she was quickly shoved into him with a firm push from Jordan, and he never had the chance to speak a word. Instead, she fell suddenly on top of him, the two being thrown off balance and toppling to the ground in an inglorious heap of laughter.

"Jordan Carder!" she said, barely able to speak from laughing.

Jordan stood above them, grinning, and clearly self-satisfied as he looked down on the sight of the two of them collapsed on the ground together in a shared fit of laughter in the street.

"Hm... yes, but Timothy's not your brother-in-law, is he?" Jordan quipped to make his point.

"No, he *isn't!*" Eliezer laughed afresh, shaking his head at him.

"Well, no matter," Jordan said, his eyes fixed on his friend. "The two of you dust yourselves off, enjoy your walk, and meet me at the council meeting," he added, turning to go.

"You're *leaving!*" Dorcus exclaimed, astonished.

Jordan shrugged. "Of course. After all, I can't have them know I'm harboring fugitives," he said with a joking smile. "Besides, you'll have more fun without me."

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They walked together to the doors of the council room, she and Eliezer, to present themselves to the representatives for statement and questioning at the direction of Chairman Carder, who had gone on before them.

Eliezer hurried on ahead to hold the door for her, grabbing onto the handle with an inviting smile as he patiently awaited her coming.

Dorcus watched him as he waited. The right side of his face was noticeably discolored and visibly wounded, the sight of it invoking a great pain in her heart. She sighed.

'Why, Timothy? How could you hurt me like this?'

She halted her pace in front of him and placed her hand lightly on the side of his face, sharing his pain.

'Timothy, Timothy, oh, Timothy... what have you done to hurt me so? And what have you done to hurt him all the more that he should think himself lacking in his care towards me, when all he ever had for me was love?'

He closed his eyes, placing his hand on hers, and his breathing lightened.

'Eliezer...'

He opened his eyes, seeming to understand.

"We should go in," he told her softly. "I know what they say about being fashionably late, but I fear that after much longer our tardiness may no longer be in fashion."

She nodded, and she felt his hand affectionately squeeze her own before it slipped away.

"We need a unanimous vote," he said, keeping his voice low. "Whether Timothy is there or not, speak as our King directs and all will be well with us, I assure you."

"Very well, Ambassador," she said, smiling.

He pulled the door open, revealing the council room with the delegates from their various regions already seated and patiently awaiting their arrival. They entered, stepping up onto the platform, and Eliezer directed her to the center as he took his place beside her. After all, she was the one they had asked to see.

"Representatives of the Council," Jordan began, opening the meeting, "it is my pleasure to present to you Ambassador Webber here again today with Seer Garner, as per your request."

"Chairman," Timothy said in hardly any time, "I ask that you please note my disapproval of the day's proceedings."

'Oh? And was his disapproval not adequately expressed yesterday when he struck Eliezer?'

Jordan sighed, his eyebrows raised and eyes widened with astonishment. "Noted," he said simply as he scribbled something down on the paper at his desk.

Dorcus kept herself back from laughing as an amused smile crossed her face.

'Poor Jordan.'

She looked to Timothy, but he turned his face to the side as she did.

'He won't even look at me now.'

"Well, that being done with," Jordan said as he sought to offer her the floor.

"Just a moment, please, Chairman," interrupted the lady from Tyra.

"Of... course. Miss Stickland," Jordan courteously allowed, though he seemed a touch uncertain.

"Thank you," she said kindly before continuing on, leaning forward with intrinsic curiosity. "Ambassador, what happened to your face?"

Dorcus frowned, and she felt her heart turn with unhappy concern as her stomach twisted at the question.

Eliezer took a half-step forward and bowed himself humbly before he spoke to answer her. "Nothing, Madam, which cannot be overlooked," he said diplomatically, turning his sights to Timothy, who averted his gaze at once.

"A run in, perhaps, with some unwelcoming citizen?" the lady from Tyra suggested.

"Perhaps," he replied meekly, "but the matter is a personal one. It would not be right of me to speak of it here, and I would much rather the thing be forgotten."

"I see," she said thoughtfully. "That's very noble of you, sir. I will respect your wishes."

"I thank you," he said, stepping back with a bow.

"Alright. Then, if there is nothing further," Jordan instructed, still seemingly bothered, "Seer Garner, you may address the Council."

'Poor Jordan... this is a difficult time for him.' She thought of how he had teased Eliezer on their walk into town. *'I'm afraid this business with my brother has vexed him more than he is willing to let on.'* She looked to Timothy and closed her eyes in petition. *'Give me your speech, Lord... even for him.'*

She opened her mouth and began to speak eloquently.

"To each man is allocated the number of his days, and in those days are we given times and seasons. We have been afforded our time that we might use it for the purpose of our King. In this season of our discontent, we find ourselves wanting, not because of a lack of our King's willingness to provide but because of a lack in our own willingness to obey.

"What servants are we who do not give our lives in service to our master? What people are we who do not hear him when he calls? Our conviction is of him who sent us. Our lives we have given over to his charge.

"Call on your King! If we do not call on him, if we do not count him capable, if we do not consider him strong, how can we trust in him? And if we have not confidence in our King and if we have not trust, that we should freely give to him our lives and our hearts without withholding, who is it we serve? Do we not have confidence in ourselves and trust in our own strength and power and might? And do we not serve ourselves in all our vain imaginings? But if we serve the King, then let us serve him, and let us not call upon another besides. The cowardly will show themselves cowardly, but the Lord has called you to *strength.*

"And to the man from Euphess, you have said, 'Give me a *reason,* and I will love,' but he who loves is without reason. Speak and tell me I am wrong. I will speak and tell you something more, you who say, 'If he would speak, I would hear him and I would do whatever he says.' I tell you, he has spoken and you have not heard him, neither have you done the words of his mouth. Therefore, turn again and do those things which you did at the first when at first you loved him."

The delegates turned their gaze to the man at their right, looking with some great astonishment towards Ivan. All eyes watched him but those of Timothy and Jordan; Jordan, who kept his eyes on Dorcus with a smile of deep appreciation, as though she had done him some great service, and Timothy, who sat with furrowed brow, his eyes fixed on her with the same contempt as that which he held towards her companion.

'Still, he will not hear me.'

Ivan said nothing, but he sat in silence with his eyes stayed on Dorcus as though he had not heard.

Jordan moved his eyes over to the representative from Euphess. "Yes," he said, "as I recall, that was told me in the conference room this morning."

She looked over to Eliezer, who was smiling at her with a distinct look of approval, and her heart became lighter.

Timothy sighed. "Have we concluded with this ungodly spectacle?" he asked the others dryly.

"Not at all," Stickland rebutted. "And I, for one, would *applaud*," she added with three short claps of her hands. "You did that the other day for Ambassador Webber, did you not? Come, Mr. Garner, will you not clap again?"

"Not for her," Timothy shortly responded.

"Such animosities," Stickland murmured. "Well, no matter. Madam Seer, how is it you came to this position?"

"It is given to the Seer to choose his successor," Dorcus told her. "I studied under Sebastian Trimble, who was the Seer before me. He came to Rivdul, where I lived at the time, and selected me for service."

"I see. Then you are, yourself, from Sa'ar?"

"Originally, yes," Dorcus agreed.

"I see," Stickland muttered with a skeptical glance towards Timothy. "Do you know this man?" she asked her.

Dorcus swallowed, becoming nervous. "Yes," she sheepishly admitted. "He is my brother."

Stickland's eyes widened as her fury fixed on the representative from Sa'ar. "You dastardly dragon mouth!" she snapped with open hostility. "How dare you sit on the seat of the Council and treat them with such vile vitriol? Your own *sister!* You lash your tongue about and never put a word of it to practice! Well, I'm glad to see that your own family is not exempt from your religious indigence!"

Timothy stayed eerily still, his eyes stayed on his sister as with a disapproving deadness. "Are you done?" he asked coldly once Stickland had finished her say.

Stickland flinched, taken aback by him.

"You don't know her, Laura," Timothy stated in deadpan monotone.

"Then, let us hear her," Stickland revised. "Miss Garner, I'm sorry. Kindly continue. Please, tell us what happened after you left your family in Rivdul."

"Yes, of course," Dorcus humbly consented. "I moved to Elkshire with Sebastian when I was sixteen, and I have spent a number of years in Pyre since that time with the Ambassador and others."

"I see," Stickland thoughtfully considered. "Miss Garner, we have a seer of our own back in Tyra, a woman who tells us many things. She reveals deep secrets and brings us hidden enlightenment. Do you speak of such things, also?"

'I don't know anything about a prophet in Tyra, but you do, and, I admit, the language of the question is such that I am not entirely comfortable to answer on my own.' She could feel Eliezer's eyes as he silently watched her, and she smiled. *'However, if you would speak, as he said, all will be well with us, as you have like promised.'*

Dorcus closed her eyes to shut out the world around her, and she felt her spirit lighten. "There is a prophet in Tyra," she said, the words flowing from her lips, "but none shall hear him for your fascination with idle wanderings. You marry yourselves to the world and do not keep the sacrifice of your God. You do well to do good, but you turn then and do noxious evil in the sight of your King and all those around you. When will you hear? When will you emerge again from the depths of the sea of the knowledge of wickedness and look again to your King? Forsake secret knowledge and turn again to the one who searches out the hidden things of the heart and knows our thoughts, for he shall give to each according to his works."

The room was shocked, but Eliezer was smiling. She knew he was smiling, because she felt him, and not just him but every one of the members. She knew the hearts of every one of them, and all that they felt, she felt, also.

She knew the depths of Timothy's hardness and the deadness which remained living inside of him.

She knew the shock of Stickland's dismay and astonishment which left her off put and trembling.

She knew of Ivan's depleting interest and his heart's indifference, how he had let himself slip from his place.

She felt the wonder of McFarland's awestruck interest and his deep desire to know more of this.

She felt Starver's great fascination and withholding, how he would admire such a thing for his advantage, so long as it would not cost him.

Then, there was DelMont's scheming duplicity, as he continued to devise a path of triumph for his personal advancement.

After these was Jordan's gladsome appreciation, the pure, unfiltered joy of which she happily accepted.

Then, at last, was Eliezer, whose soul was filled with loving admiration, and she smiled softly as her heart found rest in his.

Chapter 56: The Invitation

It was near evening when there came a knock on the door of the guest house, and she turned her head curiously to look when Ellis went to open the door.

"Benji!" he happily exclaimed, grabbing Benjamin and holding him aloft.

Avera chuckled. *'Some things never change.'*

"Hello, Ellis," Benjamin said, greeting him gladly. "Is Avera here, and may I speak with her, please?" he asked, fixing his glassing after returning to the ground.

"Aye, my boy! Right over here!" Ellis enthusiastically replied, showing him in and down the couple of steps to the den area.

The room was decorated in blue, and she was sitting on one of the couches, the very couch on which she had spent the past three nights sleeping. It was comfortable, *more* than comfortable, actually, and *entirely* her own decision.

They had tried to give her one of the beds, despite having every reason not to, and she had steadfastly declined until they at last permitted that she should be allowed to sleep on one of the sofas.

There were three bedrooms, one of which had been given to Mira and Ellis, another which had been adopted by Vanguard, and the third which was occupied by Blackridge. It was Blackridge who had tried to insist upon her comfort and security in having a room of her own, and it was Blackridge who had eventually allowed for her decision to sleep on the couch instead, accepting the room with both gracious and overwhelming gratitude.

There was a second couch and a large padded chair in the den where she slept. Those were kept by Justice and Kypher, Justice having taken the chair and Kypher the sofa. Justice had insisted that he didn't mind the chair one bit, noting that he had slept just fine for some hours on the wooden chair in Webber's room only the day before, a comment which led to no less than the usual dose of Kypher's teasing harassment.

"Ah, Avera!" Benjamin said gladly, making a welcoming gesture.

"Prince Benjamin," she said with a smile, standing to her feet with a slight bow.

"Oh, please!" he said, throwing his head back and turning his eyes upward. "Such formalities are *quite* unnecessary!" he said, looking back at her and shaking his head with a smile. "However, I do have a request to make of you."

"Oh, really? A request?" she asked with interest.

'It's hard for me to believe that I would be of much use...'

"Yes," he stated, smiling. "You see, I have received an invitation to dine tonight at the house of Demetrius DelMont. I hope you don't mind if I ask you to join me?"

"Not at all!" she told him happily. "But... I don't understand. Is this Mr. DelMont one of the council members?"

Benjamin nodded. "He is a man from Laoce and their representative."

"Then, why invite me? I mean, I'm glad to go, but... I really don't know a lot about these things."

"It is important that I go," Benjamin explained, watching her kindly, "but Dorcus and Eliezer would feel better about it if I were not to go alone, and *you*, Avera, seemed the logical choice to go with me."

"I see," she said. "I'd be honored. I mean, I *would love* to go. I haven't gotten to go see much of the town."

"Good, then!" he said happily as he turned back towards the door. "I'll report back to the others and then we'll go. Thank you, Avera! I do appreciate your help."

"Of course," she smiled.

'Besides, after listening to all of Adrien's stories he's been telling these past few days, it would be nice to have an adventure of my own.'

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Benjamin returned some short time later and the two of them went on their way to the place where DelMont dwelled.

"Jordan said that it's a sizable mansion a ways farther down the road," Benjamin told her after they had traveled some distance through town. "He assured me that it won't be difficult to find."

"Then, Ben..." she said curiously, "I like the Carders, but if this Mr. DelMont has such a big house, why are we not staying with him?"

"The Carders are long time friends of Eliezer's," Benjamin informed her. "He used to stay with them often when he would come to Elkshire for meetings. I know them, Avera. They're trustworthy people, and they're happy to have us stay. I don't know Mr. DelMont, and this is the first that he has extended an invitation. Besides, Jordan says that DelMont would sell us out for the promise of a favor in a heartbeat, and I have no reason to doubt him."

"But, Ben, if the man is so disloyal, why go see him?" she asked him, becoming nervous.

"In order to ratify a Wartime Declaration, the entirety of the Council must be in agreement," Benjamin said, patiently explaining the process. "If the vote is to succeed, we will need Mr. DelMont's favor."

'Oh, I see. The Council... if even one of them dissents, then... this trip is all for nothing.'

"How many votes do you have?" she asked him.

"Five. Though," he said pensively, turning his eyes upward as if considering things, "that may be a stretch. It may be only three or four. Two we know for certain - Delphi and Asrymn. We seem to have Euphess, as well, and Jordan is convinced we have swayed Pergum. I am..." he frowned, his brow furrowed, "*uncertain* as to where we stand with Tyra. Sa'ar and Laoce are the known holdouts, and... though it is my hope that Mr. Garner should choose to do right even in spite of himself, Eliezer has voiced his opinion that he may be relied upon to reflect the votes of those who go before him."

"Would he hold his decision until then?" she asked with interest.

"I believe he would," Benjamin told her, "as does Dorcus, and she's the best to know." He paused, on his face a small, confident smile. "He is the fifth to vote. If he sees it is fashionable among the Kingsmen to do right, he shall surely do so."

"When is the vote?" she asked him.

"Tomorrow," he said, a serious look beginning to spread over his face. "It's closed chambers."

"I see," she muttered.

'That doesn't leave us a lot of time, but... if they're right about Garner responding to the votes of those who go before him and they truly do have five votes beside, then... the only concern would be...'

"I'd say this is it," Benjamin said, pointing out the large house to their right.

It was a grand multistory structure with high ceilings and a porch which stretched the length of the building. The carefully crafted wooden exterior of the house was fully equipped with the frequent appearance of tall supporting columns and small windows with shutters trimmed in white. The house sat on a sizable plot of flat land with the forest cut out from around it and a long, straight path leading to the entrance door.

"It certainly *is* grand," she said with some amazement as they approached the impressive structure.

"Perhaps, a bit *over*done," Benjamin remarked as he stepped onto the dried clay of the broad pathway.

The sunlight was fading as they approached the house, and she noticed a dim light coming from the porch and windows, not the light of fire or candles but the distinct luminescence of maurium.

'*Maurium.*'

She looked with some astonishment at the eerie purple glow.

'I haven't seen any since we left Pyre.'

"Maurium, I see," he said with a look of disappointment. "Well, that's not reassuring, is it?"

"It... isn't," she reluctantly agreed.

They stepped up onto the porch, and Benjamin looked up at the hard geometric angles of the ornately carved crystalline light above them.

"I don't like it," he said with obvious dismay.

"Can't you change it?" she asked him.

"Perhaps," he said with a smile.

He muttered to himself softly. Then, with a grin, he touched his palm to his chin and began to blow. Tiny sparks began to appear in his hand. They swirled and glowed with the soft light of newborn flames. They began to lift upwards, taking the form of a small whirlwind of colorful sparks of wondrous light. The flames went up, penetrating the maurium, and disappeared with a bright, momentary flash of light which left the lamplight a shimmering, radiant gold.

"*Ah*, yes," he said happily, "that *is* better, isn't it?"

"It is," she said, smiling.

'Amazing how they do that.'

"Will it stay like that?" she asked him.

"No," he sighed with the voice of some lament. "Pyrite must be maintained. The same is not true of maurium. Maurium is the natural state of planetyroid's *decay,* whereas pyrite is the restoration of its original *intent*. We inhabit a world which lends itself to decay rather than intention and maurium more than pyrite."

'So, it is all just a return to the original intent of things. There's an old Kingsmen principle to that effect. Still, armorials intrigue me. They dispel the darkness of oppression with a mere gentle liberty, and for all of this power, they credit themselves with none of it.'

Benjamin turned to her, his eyes alight with fire as she had seen them in times past. "It is a wonder, isn't it," he said as if he heard her thoughts, "that one so much more mighty could be so much more meek?" He paused, his eyes watching her, and she had the distinct feeling that his gaze could penetrate her soul. "But... such is the nature of our King: kindness, gentleness, *weight*iness."

"It is all him, then?" she asked aloud, being as it seemed her wondering could not be held in private. "Truly?"

He smiled. "Every bit of it."

Chapter 57: Once More

He knocked on the door a second time, having received no answer, and waited, but again no answer came.

'Once more.'

He knocked again. Nothing. He frowned.

"This *is* DelMont's house, isn't it?" Avera asked with puzzled concern.

He eased away from the door, turning his face to his friend. "Yes, I'm certain of it. It's just as Mr. Carder described."

'Besides, who else in Elkshire would have maurium?'

There was the faint sound of music and merriment coming from inside the house, and he paused.

'At least we know he's home.'

He moved away from the door to one of the windows where the light shined through. He looked carefully in as he stood on the porch and peered through the glass. What could be seen was a luxurious dining hall with a long table decorated and fully set with more than a dozen guests and several servers. There was a band there, playing on their instruments to accompany their merriment as the guests drank and ate and danced. Demetrius DelMont was among them, sitting at the table with a chalice in his hand, lost in careless laughter and reclining at the head.

"DelMont!" Benjamin called as he knocked against the glass, desperate to attract the man's attention.

Still, there was no sign that Mr. DelMont or any of his guests could be the least bit bothered by him.

"*DelMont!*" he cried again, this time louder, as he slammed his curled hand against the window in frustration.

"Ben..." Avera said hesitantly, "I'm starting to get the impression that they don't really want us here."

Benjamin lifted his sad eyes and nodded, pained in agreement as he acknowledged her rightness. He walked slowly to the door again and leaned his back against it, sinking down. He sighed. "Yes, Avera, as am I."

"I'm sorry, Ben," she said softly.

"All's well," he told her. "I've done my part. If DelMont sees fit to shut me out, so be it. The consequences of those works belong to our King, and he will not leave me lacking."

He closed his eyes, and there was silence between them, the music of the house still seeping through its walls, penetrating the night and mixing sweetly with the sound of a symphony of insects in the cool air of the faint evening breeze.

'God, I wish this man would hear us. I wish that he would see. I wish that...'

"Ben..." she said, recapturing his thoughts as she called back his attention.

"Hm?" he said, looking up at her with interest.

"What happens if they don't pass the War Declaration?"

'If they don't?'

He was surprised by the question. He hadn't given much consideration to what might happen if it failed.

'What does happen?'

He closed his eyes. "If that were to happen, then... nothing changes," he told her, a smile spreading over his distraught countenance.

'No, but you bless us. Regardless of them, you bless us. For, as we do right, we will be not forsaken.'

"We would still be at war. Only, the Council would have declined to acknowledge it. It would be more difficult for us to rally the Kingsmen without their backing, but we would do it all the same; because, the truth remains that we are still at war, and no less than victory will ever stop that truth. So, nothing changes. Not for us."

He paused, his eyes considering invisible things which found their home in the emptiness of the air in front of him.

'It's funny how little some men can give when others have given of their lives so completely. I swear, I'll make it up to them... to you... and to all.'

"They want Eliezer dead..." he said, breaking through the silence of his contemplations, "and Dorcus, I'm sure, and my life... was never free from peril." He wore on his face a small smile, almost sad as he addressed his thoughts. "We should go," he told her, standing slowly to his feet. "It's past curfew, and we're on a strange man's property."

"Right," she said, and they began on their way back down the road towards town.

They weren't chatting or talking at all. His mind was too full of other things. In it swirled thoughts of everything, and the incident with DelMont had left him feeling ill at ease.

'God, I thought I knew what I was doing when I asked Avera to come with me! I couldn't jeopardize another's safety, and it would have sent the wrong message if I had brought a guard to a diplomatic

meeting, but now I am concerned for the both of us! What's the point of inviting me if only to keep me out? Was it a trap they set for me? Will the guardsmen be waiting or the militia there to meet me on the way? Or was this all mere foolishness? That a rich man should have no place for a prince.'

"If they catch us, we snuck out to meet each other," he told her, speaking suddenly and without the greater context of his thoughts.

"*What?*" Avera said, her voice reflecting her surprise as she looked at him skeptically.

"The guards," he said, clarifying. "If they should happen to prevent us as we go and question us as to why we are out of doors so long past curfew, then we will tell them that our parents are disapproving of our love and we have snuck out to be together."

She raised an eyebrow at him and gave him a peculiar glance. "Where do you get these ideas?" she laughingly asked him.

"Is that not something lovers do - sneak away?" he asked, considering her strange reaction to what he had thought a more than adequate momentary plan of action.

She laughed. "I suppose they do, but I wouldn't know that, personally. "Although..." she said, seemingly caught up in her own thoughts, "it would be nice to *have* parents to disapprove of things." Her eyes turned sad, and her face filled with longing.

'Avera...'

He frowned, his heart feeling her pain and mirroring the concern she surely felt.

'Oh, Lord... how could I forget? How could I have been so inconsiderate?'

"I... understand," he muttered, feeling sorely embarrassed to have brought about the topic of their torment. "Avera," he added, "it will be alright." His words were broken and apologetic, but he hoped that she could understand him. "I promise you. Your father... he's alright. He's alive. He's somewhere. We'll find him. I'll go with you. We'll find him, and... we'll bring him back. I promise you."

Avera smiled softly as she considered the sentiment. "Would you really do that, Ben?" she asked him.

"Yes," he said, nodding and determined. "Yes, of course."

Avera stopped dead in her tracks and watched the ground, eyes wandering. She paused for a moment, becoming deafly silent, and he kept his eyes on her as he patiently waited for her to speak.

"And what of your parents, Ben?" she asked him, her utterance breaking through the night.

'My... parents?'

"Do you think of them often?" she earnestly inquired, her heart still clearly hurting.

"I do," he confessed with all honesty. "I think of them quite a lot, actually. I have an old photograph, *and*... *I* wonder how they might look now. I wonder how their voices sound, *since* I've never really met them. And *then*..." he said with tears in his eyes, his voice changing, "I wonder sometimes... what they would think of me if they were to meet me, *and*... I *wonder* how different things would be if they had never gone."

He stopped to wipe the tears from his eyes, pushing his glasses upwards as he did before carefully replacing them against his nose.

"I wonder if they would have lived here as I did. I wonder if Ramus would have reigned as he did, *and*..." his voice cracked as the waters sprang afresh, the sorrow welling up inside of him, "I *wonder* if all of those people would have died." He stopped, tears streaming down his face, and he could no longer bear the sight of another person. He looked quickly away, sobbing as he fought to hold back the fountain of his misery, plagued by the pain of past regrets and wondering. "I wonder if they would have died, if not for us." He forced out the words through gasping tears and wept. His vision was clouded with sorrow and a familiar stinging filled his eyes.

"It isn't your fault, Ben," Avera said, putting a hand on his shoulder in a futile attempt to comfort him.

"No," he said, lamenting as he turned back to her with tear-stained eyes, "but it could have been so easily avoided."

"Ben..." she said, as if to make an appeal of him.

"Oh, Avera, don't you understand?" he asked her sorrowfully. "They *knew* he was evil. He was *poisoning* my mother!"

"*What?*" she gasped, surprised by the statement.

"She was sick once," Benjamin explained. "He gave her a tonic, and when she drank it, she began to revive. My mother was not a well person, and it came to be that every time she fell ill, Ramus would supply her with medicine. One day, Eliezer saw him mixing the elixir for her, but it wasn't just medicine. Ramus had been mixing a widely used stomach sedative with some herbal components used to induce birth. Those same herbs in the early stages of pregnancy would destroy the child and cause a woman to miscarry. Eliezer mixed my mother's medicine for her after that."

"But... why wasn't anything done? Didn't Eliezer tell your father, or the King? Didn't they know about it?"

Benjamin lowered his eyes and his voice followed. "My father knew," he told her. "All he did was ask that Eliezer mix the medicine for them. The incident was... poorly handled."

"But I don't understand," Avera insisted. "Why would he poison your mother when he had your favor in the eyes of the Prince?"

Benjamin sighed, shaking his head. "Ramus had... *everything* a man could have. Still, he wanted more of it. Ramus was the man who would be king. Any child of my father's would be a threat to his ambitions. If my father died childless, the throne would be abdicated. In the event of his death, there would be nothing to prevent Ramus from stepping into his desired role as King, and so would end my family's reign."

"Then-" Avera stopped herself, shaking her head as her voice fell silent.

"Why didn't they stop him?" Benjamin surmised, his eyes shifting to his friend.

Avera nodded. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "I didn't mean to be inconsiderate. This is still your family."

"I know," he said. "But it's a fair question. I wish I knew, but..." he shook his head, "I don't know what happened after that."

She looked at him curiously and nodded.

"Anyway, we'll set things right," he said as they continued on down the road towards Jordan's. "We'll make the kingdom shine again, and we *will* find your father..." he assured her with a gentle smile of confidence, "and mine."

Chapter 58: Death's Arrow

It was a week ago that he had stood over the body of a dead prince as Zahaynei removed the arrow from his chest.

"Here," the Captain of the King's armies had said as he handed him the bloodied arrow, "for your troubles."

He had even been congratulated by the King himself and received honors. Still, something was wrong. It wasn't something that he had ever felt proud or happy about. Just... different.

For the past week, whenever it was night and he was in his chambers, he would sit up on his bed and twist the arrow in his fingers as he considered things.

It was strange to watch a man die. Caliphus had been so very much alive until he wasn't. The image had haunted him. He hadn't ever killed someone before that. He hadn't even *harmed* someone before that.

He thought of the arrow's release, its flight, its impact... how he watched Caliphus fall, how the blood poured out and covered him, how the light faded from his eyes and the fire flickered and died and the room became dark. He thought it strange that he had shot so easily, that he had been so quick to kill, and he wasn't sure he liked what he saw of himself that day.

Now he stood with Kallida before the King as they gathered in the intelligence room to discuss their plan of strategy. Captain Zahaynei had returned from yet another outing with his hands empty, but he had requested a meeting, reporting that he had information which may be of interest to them. The room was dark and sizable with diverse tech of various uses and stations throughout. Zahaynei had been delayed, and they waited for him in silence.

'It is a wonder that Colonel Garner didn't destroy this place, too... but the guardsmen may have stopped him before he had the chance. The blood storage was a significant loss to us, but it can be redone. Still, it's a shame. We could have used that to track Webber. Since he did work in the city, we must have had his blood on file. Kallida's magic works wonders, but its use is limited.

'It was good to kill Caliphus, but... he was just collateral damage. That wasn't our objective. The King may have been happy to hear of his challenger's death, but, in truth, our mission was a failure. The King was very clear.

"'Kallida, preform a summoning. Track Webber. He will lead us to Garner. And send two birds: one at the front and another behind. Then, when they stop the one, we will take them with the other."

'Our mission was clear. Follow the ravens. Track Webber. Find Garner. Apprehend them. Present them to the King for the purpose of open humiliation and public execution. Then would begin the reforms.

'But... Caliphus got in the way. There's no other way to see it. He got in our way, and we failed the mission because of him.

'Anyway, I do wonder why Zahaynei called this. He certainly doesn't have them, either, but he may know where they are.'

Kelvin heard the sound of the door as it slid open and the heavy footsteps of booted feet as they approached from behind him. He and Kallida looked back towards the door.

'Zahaynei. At last.'

"Captain Zahaynei," Zephyr said, greeting his commander with deliberate intention, "you bring news of my adversaries?"

"I do, O King. May they be cursed and few," Zahaynei said, taking a knee before he continued on. "I have news of the Kingsmen Representatives of Caliphus's Court, Ambassador Webber and Seer Garner by name. It seems they are in Elkshire."

"Well done, Captain," Zephyr applauded. "You've found them. I feared we had lost them again, but I suppose they're desperate now."

"So it seems," Zahaynei agreed. "The ambassador has appeared before the Council of the Kingsmen and requested a Declaration of War be passed."

"Oh, really?" Zephyr smirked as if amused by the sentiment. "And what is it he's citing as the justifiable grounds whereby they might pass said declaration?" he asked with interest.

"It is in light of his recent arrest, and they, also, have knowledge of the intended reforms," Zahaynei quickly informed him.

"I have little doubt that Blackridge is with them, then," Zephyr said, contemplating the matter. "I do hope you understand now *why* I hadn't invited him to that meeting."

"Yes, King," Zahaynei replied somewhat sheepishly, "my apologies." He paused, hesitating. "There *is* another matter," Zahaynei told him, his eyes straying to Kallida for a moment. "There are reports that Caliphus is *alive*."

'Alive?'

Kelvin's eyes widened.

'No. No, he couldn't be.'

"Alive?" Kallida said, startled.

"Yes, I see..." Zephyr said, considering things. "Is there anything else, Captain?"

"Yes, my Lord," Zahaynei told him, preparing to go on with his report. "Additionally..." he paused, hesitant, "Kallida's little stunt at last week's trial seems to have struck a nerve with some

of the Kingsmen. Many of the citizens have not been very forthcoming with information for me."

"Yes, well..." Zephyr said, his head turned down and his eyes gleaming with intensity, "a few more days and the Kingdom Learning Program will be back online. I will then send out an order, and we won't have to worry about such defiance any longer.

"As for the matter in Elkshire, I am certain Lord Blackridge is with them. He must have anticipated our moves and advised them to respond accordingly. Well done on his part, but even so, we have them now. So, what is it really? It makes no difference if we take them yesterday or tomorrow, so long as it's done.

"Captain, get me the Ambassador and the Seer. I want them alive. Well..." Zephyr smirked cruelly, "*mostly*."

"And what of the others?" Zahaynei asked him.

"Kill them," Zephyr said coldly without a second's thought. "Every last one of them, Blackridge especially."

"And Caliphus?" Zahaynei inquired.

"I have no doubt that he's alive," Zephyr told him as if it wasn't even a matter worthy of consideration, "but see that he's not."

"He's *dead!*" Kelvin broke in, suddenly unable to contain himself. "I *killed* him! I saw the arrow pierce his heart and *watched* him die."

"Everyone dies," Zephyr told him, his voice cold, "some more than others. You shot him. That's good. Shoot him again, Mr. Dehnhardt, and this time, *bring me the body*."

"But how could he live?" Kelvin demanded.

"Ah, Mr. Dehnhardt," Zephyr sighed, "you're not accustomed to Armorials, are you?"

"I..." he stopped, surprised by his own willingness to speak so openly in spite of the King's presence. He felt a fear suddenly grip him, and his words were caught within himself.

'Come on, Kelvin, are you trying to get yourself killed?'

"Uh... no, sir," he said at last. "My apologies," he added with a bow.

Zephyr smiled at him, an unsettling show of affection which made his stomach turn. "You do so remind me of Blackridge," he told him. "I really did like him, you know?"

Kelvin watched nervously as the monarch walked slowly towards him, looking him up and down.

"But the man had a Kingsmen's heart, and he never had the strength to overcome it. He was always so hesitant to kill anyone. But *you*..." Zephyr came close, breathing the words in his ear,

"are something else entirely." He backed away, beginning to circle around him as he continued to speak. "You, Mr. Dehnhardt, kill without any reservation whatsoever. Perhaps you should be the one to kill him for me. The man who does so will receive also his office," Zephyr added, seeking to entice him.

"I have no skill in spell casting," Kelvin said simply, not wanting to come off as argumentative while declining the King's invitation.

"That's no matter," Zephyr said, "neither does Blackridge. I haven't seen him use magic in years. That's likely when we lost him, really. Only, I allowed my own affinity for him to prevent me from seeing it. But *you* don't share in his weaknesses, do you, Mr. Dehnhardt? Only in his *strengths*." He circled back around to Zahaynei, his words smooth and cunning. "So, killing him should be nothing to you. After all, what are friendships but a temporary means of influence?" Zephyr added, his eyes a piercing frost of blackened despair which penetrated the young man's heart.

Kelvin was paralyzed by fear and discomfort.

'He's challenging me... that I as the apprentice should kill my master to prove my loyalty to my King. He offers me position, but...' he looked to Kallida, *'it's a position which I know Kallida desires to have for himself, and one which I would prefer to leave in the hands of another mage. I have no interest in magic, and I have no malice towards Blackridge, either.'* He paused his mind, considering things. *'But Kallida hates him, so let him kill him and take his place. Perhaps, then... if I were to cooperate with him, that would be enough to please the King. Then, perhaps, I may also be awarded the Inquisitor's position. I do desire a place, though... I have little interest in being killed for it.'*

"The Armorials have their own sort of power that is separate from ours," Kallida said, bringing the conversation back to its original point of address. "*Death* is ours. They have life which overcomes it."

"So they say," Zahaynei commented, as if annoyed by the phrasing.

"So I've *seen!*" Kallida corrected sharply. "That's why we destroyed them as we did! We said abandonment of principles or death, and they chose death, so death conquers all. Still... there is a cost to each. As for Caliphus, I have as much certainty he is alive now as I do that he was dead when you left him. So, we kill him again, as our Lord said. And *what*," he said, turning his attentions to Zephyr, "would you have us to do with Elkshire?"

Zephyr smiled, placing his hand on his hip. "Burn it," he said coolly, a look of wicked satisfaction and unrestrained cruelty covering his loveless face. "Burn it to the ground. Take the army, take the guardsmen, take the magicians corps... stinging locusts, poison asps, thought wanderers, shadow beasts, and all the terrors of night... whatsoever you desire, Lord Kallida, to strike *terror* in their hearts."

"And what, my Lord, shall be our saying to them who tremble before the might of your majesty?" Kallida inquired, his face strong and determined, brimming with dark intention.

"That Death reigns in Pyre."

Chapter 59: Peace When There Is None

Eliezer knelt beside the bed in his room with his head down and his face buried in the blankets. His elbows rested comfortably on the mattress and his hands pressed together with interlocked fingers.

It was late and long past the time he would have normally slept, but his mind was set on other things. The room was dark with the exception of the soft and gentle moonlight which flooded through the window, the curtains of which he had pulled back to welcome the newness of the quiet air at even.

"Will you not sleep?" a gentle voice asked from behind him.

He smiled, raising his head without opening his eyes. "You, my dear, are awake, are you not? So, tell me, why not I?"

"You, Mr. Webber, do not take proper care of yourself," she quietly scolded him. "You have tried and labored these past days. You should rest now, while you're able."

"*Ah*, and *you*, Miss Garner? Will you rest, also?" he asked, discreetly glancing over at her, unmoving.

She stood in the doorway, her arms crossed, on her face a bemused and considerate smile. She was wearing the cloak which she often wore, blue like midnight, with a gold pendant and a cotton dress.

He paused, perplexed by her. "Are you going out?"

"I often do go out near morning," she told him. "It's quiet then, and people are *sleeping*." She raised an eyebrow and leaned forward, giving him a look of implication.

He grinned, amused by her.

'Ah, lovely lady.'

His heart smiled.

"Well, I'm sorry to have altered that reality for you. Shall I shut the door?" he teased.

"*Hiding* isn't the same as *resting*, Eliezer," she quickly stated. "You'll still be awake, regardless... *and* I'll know it!"

"So the door shall remain open..." he quietly commented. "Are you coming in, then?" he asked, closing his eyes again.

"Are you *inviting* me in?" she replied with some surprise and mild skepticism.

"Certainly not," he jokingly replied. "But if you *were* to come in, perhaps you would join me. My spirit is burdened and my heart heavy. Thus, have I spent the night in supplication for us."

"You shouldn't be so concerned," she told him, speaking softly through the night. "All is well, as you would generally assure us."

He raised his head, parting his arms, and looked at her, blinking. "*Generally?*"

"Yes, *generally*," she grinned, visibly amused by him. "What is it that has you so vexed, then? Is it this matter with DelMont?"

"Among other things, but *yes*," he muttered as he readily confessed. "If DelMont were tea, he would be utterly *un*drinkable. The man is *entirely* room temperature. But... it's not just *him*, it's all of Laoce that concerns me. Then, there is the other matter. I am thankful for Delphi and Asrymn, but what of the others? Those whom they've sent are hardly representative of our King and his servants. What's happened to the Kingsmen, Dorcus? Have they lost all conviction?"

"*Peace*, Ambassador. All is well," she wholeheartedly assured him with the pleasant delicacies of kindness. "Such matters are not all solved at once."

He sighed. "But there is so much left undone."

"*Rest* now, Eliezer," she implored him, "and we'll meet the day tomorrow."

He smiled, standing to his feet, and met her in the doorway. "Where ever did you hear such a thing?" he asked with feigned inquisition, smiling helplessly, his face marked with tender affections and heartfelt interest.

"From my most favored friend," she softly assured him. She smiled as his eyes met hers and her cheeks turned to rose. "I always have so greatly admired him."

His face quickly flushed with love and embarrassment, and his eyes became soft as he looked upon her. He touched her cheek, gently brushing her silvery hair back behind her ear.

"Will you sleep if I do?" he asked her, his voice low.

She smiled bashfully and nodded.

"Very well," he said with a distinct expression of fondness. "Go to sleep, my dear, and I will rest, also."

She nodded again, still smiling up at him, her cheeks soft and her eyes gleaming. "Very well," she said. "Goodnight, Eliezer."

He sighed, his heart softly beating, and he stroked her hair gently.

'How is it that you are so sweet and lovely?'

"Goodnight, Dorcus," he said, his voice a heartfelt whisper. He withdrew his hand, taking hold of the doorframe and swallowed. "You should go now," he gently reminded her.

She nodded, her eyes turning to the side, away from his. "I know," she muttered.

"I'll um... shut the door, then," he assured her, grabbing the edge of the door and pulling it half-closed behind him, his eyes glancing down the hall to her room by means of suggestion.

"Of course," she said, lightly laughing. "Mm... Eliezer..." she began with some hesitance.

"Yes, Dorcus?" he breathed his warm-hearted reply, ever ready to hear her.

"Thank you," she said, and she kissed his cheek as a means of parting before hurrying back to her room.

His heart quickened and he watched her as she went before closing himself in his room as he had promised to do. He pushed the door gently shut in front of him, leaning his weight against it, and began to breathe again. He stood, his hand still flatly pressed against the inside of the door near the latch and his head bowed, his eyes contemplating the wooden floor below him.

'My dear, sweet lady... you are always most welcome, as you know.'

***

Jordan Carder returned from the next day's Council meeting with a deeply contemplative look on his face as he thoughtfully made his way into his home. He walked into the living room, setting his bag down by the chair wherein he often sat without the slightest acknowledgement of any of them. He took a few steps into the living room, lifting his hand as if to speak only to drop it with the thought again. He repeated this process several times, occasionally opening his mouth but never offering a word, until at last he sat down on the edge of the familiar armchair, his arms drooped over his legs.

He sighed, ringing his hands together. "Eliezer," he said at last, looking to his friend, his eyes soulful and earnest, "before I tell you about the vote, I find it important to note what it was that I walked into this morning. As it turns out, Mr. DelMont had arranged a breakfast for the Council members prior to the meeting, but he didn't invite me. So, by the time I got there, everyone smacked of his mealy-mouthed gibberish already."

Eliezer frowned, his face reflecting his concern.

"Well, he wants the Chairmanship," Jordan told him, his voice low. "But I knew that," he muttered softly. "Every year it's the same. Whenever the chairmanship is up for a vote, I receive a nomination, as does DelMont. He does his campaigning whilst I do my work, and the representatives vote after having reflected on it throughout the week. It's been nearer a split in recent times, but always does my Lord sustain me. Though, it is getting closer to that time again... that Demetrius DelMont is in a constant state of vision casting.

"When I arrived today, he came and greeted me.

"'Have some food, Jordan. Isn't it good? Enjoy the fruits of our land!'

And, Eliezer, you should have seen the table he had set for us. It was *magnificent*. There were fruits and spreads and pies and breads and torts and spice and Turkish delights and lamb and fine cut meats. There was milk and honey, nectar and strong drink, which Stickland and Starver had very much enjoyed. A meal fit for a king. You would have thought he should have served it the day Caliphus came. And, I tell you, Eliezer, I didn't so much as *touch* a drop from the honeypot.

"'I'm sorry, Mr. DelMont,' I told him, 'but I'm making a religious observance.'

"Then Stickland, being a bit more forthright and very loose on account of DelMont's refreshments, which she enjoyed a little too much of, you understand, began to sing praises to the *Queen of Heaven*," Jordan lifted his hand in a lofty sing-song way, putting on his best impression of the lady from Tyra. "And how she *reigns*, and how she *triumphs*, and how she is our... steadfast *hope!*" Jordan threw his hands up as though he'd had his fill of it. "Oh, you should have heard her go *on!* And on and on... to the point of *embarrassment*, and she would have gone on, perhaps, forever were it not for Garner."

He suddenly stood up from the chair, beginning an exasperated pace around the living room.

"God knows I tried to stop her, but I couldn't. Timothy had enough of it. He demanded she stop that nonsense and told her she was making a fool of herself and a mockery of the region she represents. He is often right, you know, but ever the critic, which makes him, also, often wrong. He even railed on DelMont for bringing the stuff in the first place. It was all quite well deserved. Demetrius knows full well how we feel about it. Even so, I can't look at Timothy now without thinking of *you*," he said, his eyes shifting from Dorcus to Eliezer with some distress. "I've never seen him get angry or impassioned about anything," Jordan told them, as if trying to reason himself with his speech. "*Snide*, yes, but never angry. The man has the passion of a corpse. He's always so *careful*. He reasons about everything... and yet he hit you." He sat back down, collapsing again into the chair. "*You*, of all people." Jordan shook his head and breathed as if suffering.

"The meeting itself was a disaster," he told them. "The vote was as split as their hearts. There wasn't a lot of talk beforehand, but there was enough that I grew tired of it rather quickly.

"DelMont spoke at length, calling this a 'time of great peace and wellness for us.'

"McFarland's presence was a saving grace for me. He reminded us all that 'this so called peace is entirely superficial and not at all sustained,' and he presented to us some of the troubles they have there in Asrymn.

"There was some talk of whether or not a war would solve anything and the matter of a Kingsmen's accountability to the ruling governmental authorities was addressed in brief, but

not with honesty. The discussion was entirely centered on the delegates' fleeting whims and selfish desires for a peace which is no greater than a costly illusion.

"At the very last, I spoke, by which time I could scarcely say anything that *hadn't* been said by someone. 'Gentlemen,' I told them," he emotionally recited, his eyes tearing and his voice catching as he spoke, "'I remind you that this vote does not invent the war, it merely recognizes it. There is no question of war. The war is already upon us. The only question that exists is whether we are willing to acknowledge it, and whether we should choose to serve our King in truth with all sincerity of heart, rather than pursuing our own ambitions and self-interests which so often propel us. But let us not count our lives so dear as to do right, nor our worth so much as to escape having put others to harm. For *this day* we choose our kingdom, and *this day* we coronate our king, because *this day* we pledge our allegiance, and *this day* our castles fall.'"

"Well said, Jordan" Eliezer assured him, offering a comforting smile to the distraught chairman and host. "Very well done."

Jordan returned the good will with a fleeting smile. "Yes, well... advice is better when taken. The vote was split right down the middle," he sighed, his eyes sad.

"How many?" Eliezer asked him, the softness of his voice conveying his usual consideration and tact.

"Four," Jordan was quick to inform him, his watering eyes shooting upwards to meet his friend's ever caring countenance. "Three dissenting..." he paused. "Timothy..." he said at last, looking briefly to Dorcus, "voted with us. Stickland and Starver..." he shook his head and sighed. "Well, Starver said that he didn't see the *necessity* of war." He exhaled sharply, his face flushed red with agitation. "The coward..." he breathed, his breath hard and his eyes focused on his thoughts, "he'll have their blood all over him. 'Peace, peace...'" he muttered the familiar phrase with growing irritation, "there is none."

Eliezer watched him intently, his eyes fixed firmly on his friend.

'He always has cared. It bothers him... the things they do, or... don't. Their reluctance to do right, their failure to love, their unwillingness to protect that which is their charge... the lack of heartfelt dedication, the inconsistency of faith, of word, and of action, the continual changing of character... it always has been a deep pain of his regret that they never would repent of it.'

Jordan threw a hand up, his countenance falling and his head turned down. "After that, Stickland said that there was no point in voting knowing that the resolution had failed.

"'Better to be on the right side of history,' she told me. But what happens when history shows us wrong?" he asked in the voice of his earnest lament. "Don't tell me," he added, hanging his head and letting the silence pass through him. "All is well. I know."

"Jordan," Eliezer began, speaking softly to his cherished friend, "what wrong have you done that you should succumb to such sadness? You have done all that I have asked of you and more. You have worked willingly, not withholding anything, and have been faithful." He stopped, looking around and throwing out his hands. "You have opened your *house* to us and *welcomed* us when we were quite without a place. I *am* grateful to you, Jordan. *Please*, I... want you to know how I do sincerely appreciate your having endured with patience all these many years. In fact, in many ways, I have relied upon it."

Chapter 60: Peacetime Proclamation

His words seemed of little help to his friend, and Eliezer struggled to think what could be done for the man from Delphi to comfort him.

'Jordan... please, cheer up. All is not lost.'

There was a knock at the door. He looked to the door and then again to Jordan, who was still quite depressed and entirely despondent.

'I had better be the one to get that.'

Phia was cooking dinner for them, and, given Jordan's present state, he thought it best that he shouldn't be the one to answer, either.

He motioned to Dorcus, silently indicating that she should stay put for the time, and she nodded, seeming to understand.

'So long as she is safe... what is my life?'

Benjamin had gone over to see the others in the guest house, leaving only the four of them together in the residence, and Eliezer was thankful for it. If this visitor was not favorable to them, at the very least he could take comfort in knowing that the life of the prince was not in peril.

He touched Dorcus's arm delicately in passing, and her hand grabbed him. He stopped, and their eyes met as she prevented him. Her grey-blue eyes pleaded with him with a passionate concern, and his heart restrained him.

"All is well, my dear," he whispered as he raised his hand to gently cup her cheek and smiled at her lovingly.

There was another knock at the door, and he turned again anxiously towards it before his attentions returned to the woman who held the arm of his suit jacket.

"Now, I ask, dear lady... let me go," he quietly implored her, his eyes searching her soulful gaze.

Her hand released him, and his smile renewed. There was a warmth in his heart which only she could ignite, and he kindled it, lightly kissing her cheek as he brushed the soft skin of her face with his fingertips.

"Thank you," he told her softly in earnest.

They had taken care not to let anyone know where they were staying or that Jordan Carder was in any way involved, saying only that they had a place and had been duly accommodated.

'It shouldn't be difficult to explain why I'm here, if need be... particularly with the vote having been today and he being the Chairman.'

"Hello," he said, pulling open the door.

"Hell-*oh!* Ambassador Webber!" said the young man with a voice of unexpected happiness.

"Ah," he smiled.

'All's well, indeed.'

"Representative McFarland! What a pleasant surprise. Please, come in," he said, beckoning him into the Carders' Elkshire home.

"Ah, thank you," Gregory replied. "Actually," he went on talking excitedly as he entered into the house, "I am quite glad to see you're here already. I had planned to see you next, and I might have seen you first had I known where to find you."

Eliezer shut the door, and McFarland was turned nearly entirely around talking to him, reticently walking almost backwards into the living room.

"I have an idea, you see!" the representative form Asrymn explained with his usual quiet intensity, his attentions focused solely on the ambassador.

There was a glint of anticipation in his bright blue eyes, and Eliezer smiled, glancing over at Dorcus. She had a look of joyous amusement on her face as her eyes met his with a renewed glimmer of hope.

'Yes, it is refreshing to see such impassioned commitment and service, isn't it, my dear?'

"Won't you come in, Mr. McFarland?" Eliezer said with a smile. "We should all very much like to discuss it, and the living room is only a few feet."

"Ah..." McFarland stopped, his eyes widened, and he turned his head to follow the inviting hand of the man who welcomed him, seeing Dorcus and Jordan for the first time since he had come. "Seer Garner," he said, taking a deep bow of sincerity. "Please, forgive me my rudeness." He rushed a few steps forward, moving quickly towards them. "And Jordan, it is good to see you always," he added with a smile. "Now, as I had begun to tell Ambassador Webber at the door," he enthusiastically continued, picking up almost as if he had not stopped, "being as they have pronounced this a time of peace in Altruon, I suggest that we should issue a Peacetime Proclamation."

"Why, that... may be just the thing," Eliezer said smiling, as he pensively considered the thought.

'A Peacetime Proclamation... yes, that may work very well. Even with Delphi and Asrymn alone, it should be enough to convince the faithful throughout the realms to rally for justice and peace in our long

forsaken land. Yes, it seems my concerns may have been misplaced, but not without reason. This will be a great personal risk to the two of them... though, I don't doubt the conviction of either.'

"Yes!" Jordan said, his countenance changing, and he jumped to his feet. "Gregory, I could kiss you! Why didn't *I* think of it?"

"You can't think of everything, Jordan," Dorcus remarked, smiling quietly beside him. "Well done, Mr. McFarland," she told him.

"Thank you," Gregory said gladly. "You know, I talked this over with Ivan and Timothy as I met with them along the way, and the reaction was quite the opposite."

Their eyes settled on him with interest.

"You spoke to them?" Eliezer asked, intrigued.

"Yes," the man from Asrymn replied plainly.

"What is it they told you?" Jordan inquired.

"Well, Ivan told me that it sounded like something he might have done in his younger days. He said that when he got here he was much like me - brimming with excitement and ready for anything, full of fiery conviction and always taking a stand for the love of the King... but he won't help us. He told me that he hopes it works out for me, but - his opinion - it's not worth the risk. Oh!" he said as if surprised by the remembrance. "And he told me to wish you well for him," he added, turning his gaze to Eliezer. "He always remembers you fondly."

"I see..." Eliezer said softly. His words trailed off and the sadness of his voice reflected his deep seated disappointment.

"It was just yesterday I told him," Jordan reflected, his voice revealing a similar pain and sadness, "that his love had lacked of late, that he doesn't do those things he once did. He used to love so much, but now?" He shook his head. "He would have helped us then. You know that, Eliezer?"

"Yes, I know it," the Ambassador replied.

'But it seems he has lost his intention.'

"He argued about it," Jordan went on, still speaking of Ivan, "but that was cleared up rather quickly. Dorcus, thank you again. That was a demonstration and a half for the glory of the Council or the slashing of their throats."

"May it be the former, but by your reports..." she let her voice fade with her thoughts. "And what of Timothy?" Dorcus inquired softly, addressing McFarland yet again.

Eliezer turned his eyes and his attentions towards her, her words breaking through his troubled thoughts and quiet considerations.

'Dear lady, your concern is ever touching. How he can stand to act so cold towards you, my heart will never know. But now let there be peace within us. For you and I, let there be peace even in war. Let peace remain always within us, never for want or lack of it, but you, o King, will bring us peace in our time, and all will be well for us.

'All is well, because of you... because of your great faithfulness and goodness towards us, upon which I have steadfastly relied. Will you not save? Will you not come? I call upon you, and you hear. Surely, you will answer me. You will not close your ear to the cry of the needy. You listen to the voice of your servant, and you hear me when I call. Because of this, I have great confidence. My soul will rest in you.'

"Yes, your brother," Gregory said, offering a bow of the head as a means of reverential acknowledgement. "Timothy said it was foolish for me to try such a thing, and asked if I had been talking to Webber.

"When I said I hadn't, he said he was surprised, since I've taken such an interest in treason and the Ambassador has chosen to specialize in it.

"He said it was my life I was dealing with and I needed to be more responsible. He said that a man who goes out on a limb is a man who falls off of one.

"I appealed to his senses, that he had voted for the declaration only minutes before.

"He told me it is a far cry from a Council vote to proper, personalized treason. Had the Council approved the war, it would have been another matter, but as it is, he said there is peace, and he will not defy a government which the Council deems lawful.

"He then proceeded to give me a longwinded talk on the divine right of kings and our needful obedience to them.

"He told me that the King would never require us to do anything unwise or unreasonable, that if it were to be it would have been, and we should not take it upon ourselves to make it so, that we are not expected to do that which is without reason.

"'Were it war,' he said, 'it would be another matter, but as it is peace, then peace shall reign. It is not my place to override the will of the Sovereign, nor is it yours. You cast your vote, Mr. McFarland, and I cast mine.

"'Now, were it true that there is war, the Council would have declared it and there would be no need for us to do so on our own. As it is, they did not, and still there is no need of us, because the will of the King is ever accomplished. Do not have such unbridled hubris as to deny him his ability to reign and cast his judgement over us.'

"Oh!" he said, again remembering. "And he told me to tell Ambassador Webber," he went on, redirecting his attentions to Eliezer once again, "something strange, actually. He said to tell you that his wife is well as are his children, and that he is in good health and very happy with his life, and he said he would repent of none of it.

"Then," McFarland added with a perplexed look covering his face, "he said to ask you how your wife is and how your sons are, and he told me to make sure I let you know he asked about them, your wife especially. But, Ambassador, I didn't think you were..."

Gregory stopped himself. As perplexed as he had been by the statement, he was only more so as he looked upon the fallen faces of his kindhearted companions.

Eliezer swallowed. He felt the pressure of the water build as the tears began to form in his eyes, and he felt as though his knees might buckle. All of his strength seemed to evaporate in an instant. His stomach twisted, and he grew cold, a hollow vacancy developing deep within him. His eyes were turned down; they couldn't seem to point in any other direction, and his heart became heavy.

He felt Dorcus as she reached out and grabbed hold of him, latching lovingly onto his arm. She squeezed his arm tightly before loosening her grip, not relinquishing her hold, and he felt his strength returning as her heart flowed into his.

Again, he swallowed.

"My wife is very well, Mr. McFarland," he said after having collected himself enough to speak. "Thank you."

Jordan looked at him and smiled, his anger at Timothy broken by his pleasant surprise at the genuineness of his friend's gracious and humble reply.

"Right..." McFarland said with a hesitant smile and some slight discomfort. "Well, I am glad to hear it."

"All these present things aside," Dorcus said softly, her voice pleasant and kind, "and I do thank you, Mr. McFarland, for your faithfulness in relaying the message and your eagerness to come and help us, a Peacetime Proclamation does sound *wonderful*." She smiled hopefully.

Eliezer looked fondly on his friend as she held his arm and smiled, his heart full of affection. "Yes," he said before turning his attentions back towards Jordan and Gregory. "Although, it will come at great personal risk to you both. The two of you would be signing your names to treason in the eyes of the state, and without the backing of the Council, to do so would be to carry your heart in your hand."

Gregory looked to Jordan, who nodded.

"We have considered the cost and are willing," the man from Asrymn proclaimed. His words were full of sincerity and the same quiet intensity which followed him. "And let us not count our lives so dear as to do right," he added, smiling at Jordan, whose face erupted into a triumphant grin. "Besides, Ambassador, what is it we do that you haven't done already? My only request is that you help us write it."

"I'll do you one better," Eliezer told him smiling. "I'll sign along with you."

Chapter 61: The Message

He had gone to see Adrien primarily, but Avera had caught his ear when he came. She was asking questions about the stories Adrien told and why things happened as they did. Some claimed such things were unknowable, but he knew. He knew as surely as he knew life.

So, Benjamin smiled at her when she asked and said, "Because the world is broken, we see suffering and pain. The heartbreak that we feel is the brokenness of Caldor. The breath that we have is the spirit of our King. Himmel isn't something so fantastic as you think. It is alive within us now, and it reigns above us, drawing us ever upward and closer to our King."

"And who is this King?" she asked him.

"His name? Too wonderful to say, but one day all shall know it." He smiled. "I can tell you, though, he is a good King. He is righteous and benevolent, forgiving and just. Any who will come to him, he will not turn away."

"But, Ben..." she muttered, yearning for acceptance, "I am not like you. I am broken as Caldor and helpless as the dust. I am a hopeless wayfarer without a home, and who would have me?"

Benjamin paused, giving thought to her state. "You've given some thought to this, haven't you?" he asked, searching through depths of her fearful eyes glazed with tears.

Avera nodded. "Every day," she confessed.

Benjamin touched his hand to her cheek, lifting her sorrowful countenance. "Don't you have a place with us?" he asked her.

Avera lifted her eyes to his, and he saw the weight of all her troubles leave her. There was a great fear she had of rejection and past abandonment which had left her drowning in the pits of despair. Her shame, her guilt, her loneliness... all of it faded as her countenance lifted and lightened at his touch, and he knew that she could trust again.

The tears rolled from Avera's mud colored cheeks, and she nodded with a hopeful smile. "What of your King?" she asked him earnestly.

"You, my dear, are specially designed to be with him. We are all as the dust on Caldor, but our wholeness is with him. Whatever it is you want, the freedom and acceptance you seek, the peace and truth that you so desperately long for, the hope that you need... the invitation is there for all who ask, for those willing to receive. You will not be cast aside," he ardently assured her with kind and gentle words of his heart. "None are turned away. The only thing our Lord requires is that you give your life for his."

He searched her soul through her eyes and felt a familiar fire burning within him. There was a precious peace around them, and her countenance glowed with the fresh light of redemption.

He was sure that his ghostly friend must be somewhere near them; such things didn't happen when he wasn't, but he had never been so blessed as to see the spectral figure. He only knew when he had come.

So, Benjamin returned from the guest house after having spent much of the day in conversation with Adrien and Avera, also. He hurried back to the Carders' main place of residence, mindful of the time. He knew that Phia and Jordan would have been sorely disappointed if he wasn't back in time for supper and Eliezer would have given him a Delphian speech on manners.

He chortled at the thought.

'How different this all is from last evening...'

He went inside to find Dorcus helping Phia with the place settings.

"Ah, Ben," Dorcus said smiling, "would you kindly inform Eliezer that dinner is nearly done? He's upstairs in the office. He's been preparing a document with Jordan and Gregory. So, please, also invite Mr. McFarland to stay and eat with us. Phia made plenty."

"And I have a setting here for him!" Phia added, accentuating the point, her kind eyes shining as she pointed her finger upwards matter-of-factly.

"Alright," Benjamin laughed with happy amusement. "I'll go and fetch them for you." He put a foot on the stairs and then paused. "The office is... *past* the bedroom, yes?" he asked them generally.

"*Well*... yes and no," Phia replied sweetly. "Through the door and to the left."

Benjamin nodded. "Thank you, Phia!" he said gladly with a grin, and he hurried up the stairs.

Upon reaching the second story, Benjamin went left and turned the metal knob to open the plain white door of the master bedroom. The walls of the room were light blue trimmed in white, and the room itself was simple yet elegant with stylish wooden furnishings which had clearly been well used and present for some time.

He turned, looking past the room to the open door of the office. The residual light of the sun was streaming in through a broad bay window at the front of the house, filling the room with light.

Benjamin heard the men talking, discussing a final greeting in a line of text, a means of parting for the document which they had so carefully crafted.

"'Sincerely,' isn't sincere *enough*," McFarland told the other two men.

"Yes, but what *should* we say, then?" Carder replied. "'Forever in your service?' or something of the like? Nothing seems to sound right."

"Perhaps if we read it again," Webber suggested.

"Right," said Jordan as they both acquiescenced.

"Alright, here we are," Webber began, clearing his throat.

Benjamin made his way slowly into the room and came close to the door of the office, moving quietly so as to hear and not disturb them as his ears peaked with curiosity.

"Peacetime Proclamation, from the Representatives of Delphi and Asrymn, respectively:

"We, as leading members of the Kingsmen Council and like order, having been sent to Elkshire as Representatives of the people throughout the seven regions, do find it necessary to inform you that this peace we now enjoy is not in truth. It is in order to remain in good conscience and faithfully execute the workings of our office that we find it necessary to write proclaiming peace in a time of war.

"For this we write our peacetime proclamation: to inform you of Zephyr Almast's plans to reform the Kingsmen settled throughout the kingdom of Altruon to the end that he should show himself King.

"Beginning in Pyre and expanding to each of the four realms, there will come upon us a time of great suffering such as we have never known. To any who do not comply with his demands and message, the penalty for their disobedience to the newly crowned and self-appointed Sovereign of this land and its system will be death, seizure of property, violent arrest, and imprisonment.

"We thereby advise with all urgency that you who are faithful to serve the King come to join us in the east as we wage war against this violent and corrupt government which has shown itself unjust and inadequate in its service towards us who believe the word of the promise.

"It has been an expression of some of our colleagues that peace may come through diplomatic means, but the arrest and attempted execution of our Ambassador, who has been our representative in Pyre these past years, has shown without any remaining room for doubt that diplomatic relations have reached an end between the government and the Council.

"It has been an inquiry of many throughout this peacetime process that they have asked who should lead us. It is our belief that the word of the Chronicles is truth. Therefore, we of the Council who are writing this maintain that Prince Caliphus should lead us according to the word of the promise given to Palmier.

"We know that the reports of his death have been widely circulated, but, we assure you, he is alive and here with us even in this present time. He has both appeared before the Council and spoken with us openly. To him is given the kingdom and its rulership, under whose banner we serve.

"Still, there is no peace, for the day of judgement is falling fast upon us. Therefore, let us turn from the vain imaginings of this godless peace which haunts us as we listen in the silent terror of willful ignorance to the sound of the sharpening of the enemy's sword as he prepares himself

for battle and slaughter. Rather, let us serve our King with all diligence and right reverence, our hearts remaining ever true, and peace will come to us who are found righteous in believing." Webber stopped, unable to find an appropriate end to their morbid greeting.

Benjamin took advantage of their pause of considerate silence as he stepped into the room wherein Webber sat with a pen and a single sheet of parchment, the two representatives gathered around the desk, leaning on either side of him.

"Rather, let us serve our King with all diligence and right reverence, our hearts remaining ever true, and peace will come to us who are found righteous in believing," he repeated, then adding, "With All Most Sincerity in the King's Service, Representative Gregory McFarland, Asrymn, Representative Jordan Carder, Delphi, Chairman, and E. H. Webber, Ambassador."

The three men turned their heads his way with broad smiles of fascination.

"Just a suggestion," he said with a grin.

"Ben," Eliezer said, smiling as he looked back on him with fondness.

"Hello, Ambassador," he said with a smile, and his kind eyes reflected the dimming light of the afternoon sun. "It's time for dinner."

"Very well," Eliezer replied pleasantly. "Thanks to you, we've just finished." He straightened himself at the desk, penning something quickly on the sheet of parchment in front of him.

"Yes, that does look right," Jordan remarked, peering over Eliezer's shoulder with interest. "Well done, Ben!" he proclaimed as he took the pen and signed.

Benjamin could feel McFarland's eyes watching him, and he glanced over in his direction.

"Prince Caliphus," the man from Asrymn said at last, "...it is an honor to see you again."

"And will you stay for supper, Mr. McFarland?" Benjamin asked him. "Mrs. Carder already has a place set for you, and there is plenty."

McFarland looked to Eliezer and Jordan. "It's done, isn't it?"

"It is," Eliezer nodded. "All that's left is for you to sign."

McFarland took the pen from him, looking the document over once more. "I'm sorry, Prince Caliphus," he said as he signed his name to the page, "you must give Mrs. Carder my apologies. I won't be staying."

"Oh, come now, Gregory!" Jordan cordially protested. "Why not stay?"

"My apologies, Jordan," he said, turning his face to his friend, "but I'm leaving *with this*," he added, taking up the Proclamation and turning it into a tightly wound cylinder in his hands, "and I must hurry home to pack, as it is my intention to begin on my journey while there's still daylight left for me."

He turned his eyes to Benjamin. "I'm sent, you see," he told him, as if by means of explanation. "*This*," he said, raising the document in his right hand and setting it also upon his left, "I will deliver it. I will perform a circuit throughout the four realms of the empire. To each of the seven regions we've written a letter in addition. I will go first to Pergum, then Euphess, then Laoce. Once I get to Asrymn, I will send men out to carry the message throughout the kingdom. From there, I, myself, will complete the circuit to the north, from Tyra, to Sa'ar, and on to Delphi. Then, God willing, it is my intention that I should see you here again."

"How long, Mr. McFarland?" Ben asked him.

"Give me ten days," McFarland told him. "That should be enough. All will be well once I get to Asrymn. I will have copies made then..."

"All is well, Mr. McFarland," Webber assured him in kind and comforting tones.

"Yes, but should I *not* see you..." he said hesitantly before taking a knee and bowing before Benjamin. "Prince Benjamin, it has long been my desire to serve you. The throne is yours, as is the kingdom. It is already given you. None can prevent it. The one of whose hand you have received it, he will not repent. My lord, I am ever your servant, and may our great King, whom we serve continually, take great delight in you and bring us peace in your day. Until then, I am ever in your service."

"Mr. McFarland..." Benjamin said, pierced to the core by the man and his devotion towards him, "this world is undeserving of such a man as you are." He placed a hand on the man's shoulder with love and gratitude. "Thank you."

Chapter 62: Escape

Fire, ash, smoke, death... the city was in flames, as were its people. Screams pierced the night with the red tones of danger and death which pervaded the seemingly endless darkness. Men and women fled from their homes and scattered families ran panicked through the streets seeking for sanctuary, but there was none to be found from the children of darkness and their monstrous fiends as they assailed what remained of the city in violence. Blackness gripped the night, the moon red like the blood of the streets, and a single word was spoken her: "Escape."

Dorcus woke up in a sweat with her heart beating rapidly and the images of blood and flames still fresh in her mind. The scent and sound of burning wood still haunted her, as real as it had been only moments before her eyes opened. She sat up suddenly, breathing heavily, and leaned herself forward to catch her breath. *'Escape...'*

"Go now. Tell Eliezer what things you have seen. Go up to Damascus. Take Jordan with you," a voice whispered the command.

"Right..." she replied softly, throwing the blankets down off of her and sliding to the edge of the bed. "*Eliezer...*" She placed her hands on her face, covering her eyes, and sighed. Her hands fell together, stretching her skin, and coming together until her chin rested on her thumbs and her index fingers gently crossed her lips. "Why aren't you here?" she breathed in barely a whisper. It was not so much a question as it was a lament.

She arose, lighting an oil lamp to carry with her and grabbing a white satin robe from the closet, tying it around her simple cotton night dress before opening the door. She made her way quietly down the hall, her bare feet landing lightly on the cool wooden floor, and she stopped when she came to the room where the ambassador slept.

The door was closed, and she paused, touching her hand to the finished wood with a soft smile.

'Good of you to close the door for me,' she silently assured him before closing her hand to knock, *'but that also means you're asleep, then, doesn't it?'*

"Eliezer!" she called out delicately, trying to wake him. "Eliezer, *please*, answer me!" she called again with increased urgency as she continued knocking on the door emphatically.

There was a faint sound of rustling she could hear coming from the room, and the door opened to the sight of her friend dressed in cotton garments fit for rest with his hair a mess and weary eyes blinking as they slowly adjusted to the light of the lamp which she held.

"Dorcus... what's the matter? What's wrong?" he asked her.

"Eliezer, there's trouble. Bring Jordan. We *must* go. *Please,* up to Damascus," she told him.

"Trouble..." he said again, still trying to wake up fully. His eyes squinted, trying desperately to focus. "What sort of trouble?"

"*Trouble*, Eliezer!" she said again, stressing the entirety of her statement. "*The* trouble!" She paused, calming herself. Her hand, still clenched from knocking, had pleaded with him, still shaking as if to knock against the air in front of him. "All of it," she said in a much quieter tone, meeting his eyes with hers, and she opened her palm in front of him before collecting it again, dropping her hand to the side.

"Wait just a moment here for me. I know what the trouble is," he told her softly, lightly shaking a finger before disappearing again behind the door. He quickly returned, dressed in one of Jordan's crimson robes and carefully adjusting his newly found glasses. "There," he said with a voice of satisfaction, "now I can see you." He paused as his eyes met hers with an increased clarity of view, and he smiled at her. There was a tender fondness in his expression which caused her to be like affected, and she felt the light smile as it spread across her face before developing into a small grin. "Now, my dear," he spoke to her delicately, his voice soft and caring, "what would this trouble be?"

"Well," she said, her voice hushed and calmed by him, "I saw Elkshire burned, and none escaped. There was blood and ash and smoke. I saw the city burning all around me. The moon was like blood, and the streets were filled with murderous bloodshed. People were screaming..." she shook her head. "They screamed such horrific screams of terror for their lives," she told him concisely. Tears ran down her face like tiny crystal droplets catching the moonlight, and she sat her lamp on the ground beside her. "It was just like it was before," she said, closing her eyes as more tears came flooding down.

"The raids?" he asked her.

She nodded. "Worse, I think," she quietly confessed with some hesitance.

'I remember so well the pain of those far gone yesterdays. There was such grief for us all. It was all so overwhelmingly painful... the screaming and the sadness of the streets, the terror of those left to suffer and those left to die, all those given to endure such great sorrow and such great tragedy. It's not something I ever wanted to see or hear... not again.'

She fell gently forward, still ever mindful of the lamp, though silently grieving, and grabbed hold of him, resting her head on his chest. "Eliezer..." she cried softly, hugging him with whatever force the sapped strength of her sorrowful spirit could muster, "it was everything you said it would be, and *entirely* fearful."

He wrapped his arms around her, placing a hand behind her head and lightly stroking her hair as he did his best to comfort her.

"All is well, my dear," he quietly assured her, then repeating the words again of the familiar phrase. "All is well." He paused, taking a breath, and sighed. She felt the weight of his cheek as

he brought it gently down to rest on her head. "What are we to do?" he asked in the voice of a softly spoken whisper.

She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, resting in the peace of his presence and the security of his arms. "We must go up now to Damascus," she told him, her heart and breathing calmed. She opened her eyes, looking up at him. "You should go and wake Jordan," she told him. "He and Phia... call them up with us, and no harm will come to them," she quietly assured him.

"Very well," he told her, "then you get Benjamin and send him to the others in the guest house." He released her gently, restoring the barrier of air between them, his hand sliding carefully down to rest on her shoulder. "Get yourself dressed and ready for our departure," he graciously instructed, his eyes reflecting the burning light of the lamp, "and have Ben tell the others to do the same. We will escape the city together, and all will be well with us in Damascus by the virtue of our most generous King."

His words were soft as was his touch, and she couldn't escape the tender gaze of his caring eyes. He loved her. She knew that, but...

"Eliezer..." she said softly, "*please,* I..." her voice was hesitant, but she would have gone on had he not stopped her.

"My dear lady," he said delicately, his hand gently brushing her rose colored cheek, "I'm afraid this is rather bad timing." He smiled.

She swallowed, smiling involuntarily, and she bowed her head, turning her eyes to the floor and away from his. She felt the heat of love and embarrassment rush to her face like redness. "Yes, I suppose it is, isn't it?" she said breathily, almost laughing.

Suddenly, his arms were around her again and she was being squeezed, the spontaneity of his actions taking her very much by surprise. "I'm sorry," he told her as he hugged her tighter. His voice was kind and serious. "I was wrong not to have confessed then. I should have told you. When all of this is over, I promise you, I'll..." his voice broke and he began to cry, tears falling from his face and dampening the shoulder of her robe as he continued to pull her in, holding her closer to himself.

"Oh, Eliezer," she sighed, resting her head on his shoulder. "*Eliezer, please...*" she appealed to him lovingly, "all is well." She softly muttered the words of his favorite adage, seeking to remind him of himself. Still, he gripped her, drawing her in nearer to him.

She was unable to focus on little more than feeling as her mind filled with emotion and all the thoughts that she had locked away for so long. Still, he cried, and she along with him. His tears fell silently upon her, she taking on his sorrows as her own. All the agony of the years, all the waters of the well of deeply hidden sorrows, now escaping, being drawn up with the water from her eyes as it ran gently down her cheeks, the tiny droplets catching on her companion's

robe. It seemed that with each tear that fell from her eyes, there was a drop of wetness which landed on her own shoulder, also, the two being merged into one.

"It can wait," she reminded him, quoting his own reply to hers.

The tears stopped, and she felt his breathing calm. Though she couldn't see his face, she knew that he had again regained his composure and would soon return to his usual kindhearted professionalism and quietly assured pleasantness. She felt the delicate touch of his fingers against her head as he began to lightly stroke her hair again, and her heart warmed.

'Eliezer Webber, you are my sweetest friend.' She smiled, her heart lightly beating. *'Please know, even now, I will always have time for you.'*

He raised his head, putting his mouth to her ear. "I am awfully fond of you, Miss Garner," he whispered softly, his words like honey.

She smiled, putting her mouth to his ear as he had done. "Likewise, Mr. Webber," she whispered back to him, her words sweet and delicate. "I must admit, I rather enjoy your company. In fact, I think I prefer it."

She could feel him smiling, and he drew near to say something, then again, but no words ever came. Instead, she felt as he drew nearer until his cheek pressed affectionately against her own, and he held her there for a time in the tender silence of his wholehearted devotion and care for her. Her eyes watched him, anxious to hear him speak, longing to see his face, but thankful to feel him.

He sighed, giving her cheek a gentle kiss as he continued to stroke her hair lightly. "Dear lady," he said at last, resuming his tender address, his eyes alight with fondness, "I think I had best go and wake Jordan."

Chapter 63: Warring Kingdoms

He awakened to a loud knocking at the door, and he jumped up from the bed, frantically grabbing his sword, and throwing open the door of the room. He dashed determinedly out into the hall, running with the blade, and slipping into the den with due caution, his heart racing and adrenaline pumping.

"Well, Blackridge," Kypher said, standing by the door with his sword at his side, "I see you've still got it. You made good time in coming. If we were under attack, I'm sure I would be quite relieved to have you here. But, as it is, it's only Ben. Though, it is good you're up." He turned to face him, his tone serious, "We're leaving."

'Leaving...? But why?'

"What?" Blackridge asked, not understanding the sudden change in plans. "Why would we *leave?*"

"They're going to burn the city," the young prince announced from his place beside Kypher.

"*What!*" Justice interjected, positioned strategically with his sword beside the chair wherein he slept. "*Burn* Elkshire?" he clarified with some disgust, not wanting to believe it.

Benjamin nodded. "I'm afraid so," he muttered softly, a distinct sadness seeping through his voice. "Ambassador Webber has instructed that we each prepare for immediate departure. Representative Carder and his wife will be coming along with us. No one else will."

"I see," Blackridge muttered.

His eyes strayed from his companions, scanning the room. It was only slightly disheveled, though it was obviously in use and clearly slept in, though lightly... well, for the most part. He caught a glimpse of Avera on the couch, and began to silently consider her state.

'She sleeps soundly.' He smiled. *'At least one of us can rest. I'm afraid I've had far too much my fill of terror and bloodshed to sleep with such impunity.'* He smirked. *'It's lucky I can keep my eyes shut at all.'*

"Would they really do that?" Kypher asked with shock and horror.

The question seemed to be directed towards Adrien, and it caught him off guard.

"Need you even ask that?" Justice retorted, lashing out with intense emotion.

"*Ah!*" Kypher looked at him stunned, his eyes wide and frantic. "*But...* the Kingsmen, all of their representatives are here!"

"Mr. McFarland has gone, and Mr. Carder is coming with us," Benjamin corrected. "We appealed to the others at length. They would not hear us."

"Yes, but still..." Kypher said, looking briefly to Benjamin before his eyes locked again on Blackridge. "Would they...?"

'So, it's time, then... they found us.'

He looked past their curious faces and questioning eyes in mindful consideration to the distance beyond them, mulling over lasting memories of age old conversations...

He stood with Ramus alone in the newly furnished throne room following the completion of the reconstruction of the capital. "Tell me, Lord Blackridge," he said to him, the two men standing face to face on even ground before the throne, "how is it in Elkshire?"

"Elkshire?" he asked with surprise, taken aback by the unexpected inquiry. "What would you have to do with Elkshire?"

"I have considered it, Blackridge... that it is mine for the taking, as Pyre was, but I have never been there." He spoke in smooth and even tones as ever he did, his voice ever a song of warning before a siege at dawn.

"But, Ramus... it belongs to the Kingsmen, not the empire," he pleasantly argued, his voice tinged with concern.

"Perhaps," he said, beginning to move freely throughout the broad room with its flashy tones of red and gold, "but it is within our borders, is it not?"

"Yes..." he hesitantly agreed, "but it is not our city. In truth, my lord, it is not even our kingdom."

"Heh," Ramus breathed and stopped, looking over his shoulder to his second behind him. His face was one of vitriol and his voice of indignation. "Is that so? Well, Blackridge, my, my... perhaps we should do something about our little quandary, then. Any suggestions?"

Blackridge kept his peace, careful to avoid remaining in the way of the path of the king's displeasure, his sore admonishment made clear through the thinly veiled anger of his lord.

There was a fearful silence which gripped the atmosphere between them.

"I know..." Ramus sneered, continuing on with a dreadful distain, "perhaps we should burn it. What would you say to that, Blackridge?"

"I don't believe that to be in your interests, my lord," he diplomatically informed him.

"And why is that? We have the KLP now, mind you... we can write it any way we want. None will remember. So... tell me, Lord Blackridge, why should I not have it, just like all of this?" The king extended his arms and spun slowly on his heels back towards Blackridge until again he stood and faced him. "It's all mine now," he said, his arms flopping again to his side, "all of it... and why not Elkshire?"

"My Lord King Ramus," he said, carefully putting forth his speech, "while the Learning Program may work well in Pyre, it is difficult to maintain and enforce its effects in the kingdom's outskirts and rural

regions. To do such a thing would be to promote anarchy and rebellion throughout the four realms when we have only recently begotten peace in our day."

'But now, I suppose... he actually wants the war with Himmel and its citizens. He thinks he can win it. Of course, he's wrong. Still... I don't doubt the fool will try.'

"You haven't seen the extent of everything he's capable of," he told them. His words escaped his thoughts, and his eyes gleamed as dark pools of memory. "You remember the raids - the terror, the bloodshed, the burning... all of which I oversaw. All that was done was under my administration and discretion. All that you saw, it will be all that again and much, *much* worse. The fire will be hotter than anything you've ever seen and the bloodshed will be far greater. As despicable as I once was, he is more. The raids were mitigated by *me*."

"*You?*" Kypher asked, astonished.

"Yes," he readily admitted. "We had a disagreement, Zephyr and I," he paused, considering the distant conversation, long forgotten. "He wanted to kill everyone and burn every house and raze every blade of grass until we found *you*, Prince Benjamin. I convinced him that we should only hunt after the Armorials. Who else would help the Ambassador in hiding him? He was delighted by the thought of their blood spilled out in the streets. He always hated them, anyway. The Ambassador's life was a convenient side point to him then, but it seems that it has become a considerable intention of his lately. And you, Ben..." he added with a grim seriousness, "if Zephyr knows we're here, he knows you're alive, also. He will make your death a priority because of it."

'Of course, I'm certain he would be glad to have my head, also... especially after all that transpired with Charlenade. He must have been furious to discover that Eliezer had escaped, also.'

"I understand, Lord Blackridge," Benjamin said, bowing. "We will exercise all due caution, I assure you."

He smiled. *'He is a good kid. He'll make a great king. They raised him well, in spite of everything, and he'll reign well because of it.'*

"Thank you, Prince Caliphus," he replied, offering a reverential bow.

"Well then," Benjamin said, his eyes filled with fierce determination, "wake the others, clothe yourselves, and collect your things. Do so speedily, and meet us at the carriage house when ready. We will depart from there."

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They had woken up Avera along with Mira, Ellis, and Vanguard, and caused them to stir, alerting them to their necessary departure. Then, their company having collected themselves and their things, the group went up to their point of rendezvous to be joined again to the remainder of their party, accompanied now by their kindhearted and generous hosts.

The simple wooden structure of the carriage house held within its walls stalls for several horses, each having their place. Though, at the present time, they were filled beyond capacity.

As he entered the broad barn-like room with its high ceiling and hay filled loft, he noticed Jordan standing atop the carriage, securing packs and provisions for them as Dorcus and Phia passed them upwards to the wholly dedicated man from Delphi.

'Jordan Carder.' He smiled. *'Ah, I have missed the man considerably these past years of my self-inflicted absence.'*

"*Woah!* Careful there..." he heard a voice cry out from the stables to his left.

Adrien adjusted his gaze and grinned with amusement at the sight of Eliezer desperately attempting to saddle a self-willed stallion. It was a beautiful creature which wore a sleek black coat with white at its muzzle and pastern. He watched as his friend stood and lectured it.

"Now, Mr. Horse," he said, patiently instructing the beast with some insistence, "I'm going to need you to cooperate with me, and it's no good if you don't."

'Ha!' Adrien smiled, his attentions fully enveloped in the strange scene. *'Reminds me of myself a bit. Maybe he'll listen better if I tell him there's no use arguing.'*

"Ambassador!" Adrien heartily addressed, hastening himself to his friend and giving him a firm pat against his shoulder as he rushed to his side.

'The horse will have to wait. It seems I had forgotten just how glad I am to see him.'

"Adrien, what a delight you are!" Eliezer replied cheerily.

"You seem quite vibrant for a man at this hour," his apprentice replied, chuckling at the man's exuberance.

Eliezer laughed. "What, and you're *not*?"

He grinned. *'Yes, I suppose I am.'*

"Yes, but threat of death, warnings, or none, you always slept well, and you know I never did."

"Well, you always did have Ramus and all his shenanigans on your conscience. That couldn't have helped," Eliezer replied pleasantly.

"Ah, true," he humbly admitted.

'Ever the voice of kindness and sincerity, even in truth... what had I ever done to neglect so great a friendship?' He frowned. *'Eliezer, I will have you know...'* he sighed, his heart falling and his dark eyes reflecting his inner sadness, *'how much I have hated the fact that I had ever caused you grief or by any means betrayed you. Those years I had neglected your kindness were years which I wish to amend.'*

Eliezer placed his hand firmly on his friend's shoulder. "Adrien," he said as he smiled softly at him, "I am most grateful that you are here with us. It is a welcome change."

Adrien smiled, the words like warm honey inside of him, dripping down from his friend's hand and covering him, mending his aching heart and bringing peace to his spirit.

"Believe me, I'm happy to be here, also." He paused, a strange feeling of remembrance of some long forgotten hope cascading through him. "So..." he said, "Damascus, then?"

"Yes," Eliezer replied pleasantly, "and home." He paused, his eyes glancing over at Dorcus with some great determination and wonder. "Now, come," with a grin he merrily requested, "and help me saddle the rest of these horses."

Chapter 64: The Burning of Elkshire

'I've never seen so much blood...'

There was a scream, then another, and his ears grew tired of the droning of the locusts' wings as they flew, hopping about and latching on to their victims. The scene was dark, the torment of the people on the blood covered streets only visible by the red light of the blood moon and the orangey glow of the crackling fires all around him.

He breathed in. His nostrils filled with the scent of blood and fire and smoke. He breathed out.

'Why? Why am I here? What is it... hatred? But I don't hate these people. I have no reason to. No, not hatred. Perhaps... indifference. Perhaps.'

He pondered the question.

'But then... perhaps I shouldn't think on this now. The time for self-introspection may be long behind me.'

He twirled his sword and skewered another of the fleeing citizens of the war-torn town, listening to the terror stricken man as he gasped painfully to draw his last breath.

'There...' he said inwardly, looking to Kallida, *'there's another one. No shortage of blood for your spells now, is there?'*

He pulled back his sword, and the man fell lifeless to the ground. He looked down at him, his body lying there limp, and his eyes widened.

'How many is that now I've killed? There was him and the other... and four besides... and the woman and her child. And then there was... no. ...I've lost count.'

There were other men there, soldiers and officers, having been assigned the same task of providing blood to the magicians corps, and he heard the screams as they hunted the citizens and slew them. They rushed through the pools of blood which lined the streets, uncaring to tread upon it as their dark boots became covered in the thick red liquid.

The sound of the screeching of night terrors and the powerful beating of their monstrous wings could be heard from the skies above Elkshire. They were large dragon-like creatures, living shadows born of darkness. Their eyes were black as their bodies, and they moved like arbiters of death through the night, drawing near and raining fire upon the city below them. These creatures would, on occasion, dive down, plummeting towards the earth with a swift and silent descent, and they would fall upon men, tearing them limb from limb as the beasts relentlessly devoured them.

Kelvin looked on, thinking that he saw one drop, a streak of black against the darkness, but he was uncertain of it until he heard the sudden screams of the man in front of him further down the lane. He watched as the monster's teeth sunk into the man's neck, beginning to devour him,

and the blood ran down as the flesh was ripped away. The beast's claws held the man tight, wrapped about his body, tearing his garments and sinking into his skin. He was in the grip of darkness. Kelvin watched wide eyed with horrified fascination, and he felt his stomach flip.

"Gah!" he gagged, throwing himself forward with the sudden onset of repulsion and nausea.

'Kelvin, you...'

He leaned forward with a fresh wave of nausea and gagged again, spitting on the bloody ground between his feet. He stood, his hands on his knees and head down, contemplating his image in the moonlight as it reflected in the pool of blood below him.

'Who... am I?'

He continued to watch the darkness which welled in his pupils as he seemed to look back at himself, considering his own soul and something buried deep within him.

'Is this... really who I am, a murderer? Is this why Lord Blackridge left me? Is this why? He said he'd had enough of the bloodshed. I thought it ironic at the time, but if this... is the bloodshed, then what... is the war?'

He steadied his breathing, his stomach still twisting within him. Nothing was sitting right.

'The least I can do is calm myself and try to maintain my composure... at least for the remainder of this. After all... Kallida is relying on me.'

He continued to breathe, his breaths shallow and measured. Though he tried to breathe deeply, the tension in his lungs and racing of his heart prevented him.

"Dehnhardt!" Kallida called out from behind him, causing him to turn. "Come," he said, breaking rank with the other magicians. "They have them."

Kelvin hurried to the Inquisitor's side, matching his stride as the two moved quickly to the place where Zahaynei had the prisoners assembled.

"A word of advice, Mr. Dehnhardt," Kallida told him once he had drawn near, "it's best to abandon your conscience."

Kelvin looked at him with some astonishment.

"It will only cause you more trouble later," Kallida explained, seeing the questioning concern on the boy's face. "All of this will stay and haunt you otherwise. It did Blackridge," he stopped, turning to face Kelvin with a tone of dire seriousness and an expression of skepticism, "*many* years. Learn from his mistakes, Mr. Dehnhardt. *Don't* let it happen to you."

"Yes, Inquisitor," Kelvin aptly responded.

They made their way in silence through the streets, the sounds of night and all its horrors surrounding them, until at last they reached the Council Building. There were several of

Zahaynei's men guarding the perimeter of the building, and the guardsmen who kept the door saluted the Inquisitor as he approached, opening the door so as not to forestall their entry.

"Right inside. It's the room on the left, sir," one of the officers concisely informed them, the words clearly directed towards Kallida.

"Yes. Thank you," Kallida muttered coolly, continuing past the guards without contact or turning as his dark intensity grew.

Kelvin looked at the men who watched them as they entered before they latched the door again behind them. He watched behind him to see the door close before turning back to Kallida, whose eyes turned briefly towards him.

"They're as much men as you are, are they not?" Kallida asked him. The question was rhetorical and his tone was one of warning. "As you can see, they are not bothered. So, tell me, *why* should you be? I am relying on you to show strength, Mr. Dehnhardt, *not* weakness. Do not disappoint me."

"Yes, sir," he replied quickly. "I understand. I'll get over it. In fact, the thing is already forgotten."

Kallida's eyes watched him, filled with darkened skepticism. He looked him up and down as if to examine him, the intensity of his sharp eyes penetrating. "Is it *really?*"

Kelvin swallowed, and he felt his body stiffen as the tension built within him. *'No, but... I suppose that it will have to be.'*

They entered into a moderately sized boardroom, reasonably accommodated for seven people. There was a door on the back wall to their right which stood open, revealing a turning stairwell leading upward. There was a long wooden table laying on its side near the adjacent wall, and it seemed apparent that Zahaynei had flipped it. There were scattered chairs throughout the room in varying states of disrepair, and Kelvin was sure that they had at one time been arranged round about the table. Zahaynei stood in the center of the room with three other officers who stood off to the side, one at each exit and another nearer the captives.

There were five of them which they had collected, all of them bloodied and battered with varying degrees of wounding. Kelvin looked them over, intrigued to see the faces of the regions under subjugation.

'Amazing how much you can learn about a man by his response. All of the hidden things of doubt and dark... suddenly come into light. But these are our adversaries, I suppose; so, I will learn what I will from them, of their weakness and their strengths.'

Many of the representatives sat trembling in fear or distress and some were even pleading, offering the Captain a variety of favors for the promise of their lives and an end to suffering hardship. Zahaynei himself seemed amused by it, enjoying the opportunity to act to them as

god, holding the power of life and death, pain and relief, suffering, loss, acquittal, and pardon. However, he was also annoyed by it.

"Shut up! Enough of your blathering!" he yelled, displaying his fierce anger towards them and directing the ireful statement at none in particular but seeking to silence them all.

Kelvin glanced at Zahaynei and almost smiled as he let out a breath. *'Intimidation... another key tactic. That's probably why they're all roughed up. I doubt they put up much of a fight given that they're...'* He stopped, his thoughts overtaken by the sight of a man in deep contemplation.

The man sat next to the last, slightly slumped over with his arm resting on his bended knee and his head hanging in disgrace. He had the bloody gash of a sword across his right cheek. His lip was cut and bleeding. His knuckles had the skin scraped off of them, and his fingers were a bloody mess. He sat in silence, unmoving, and it was as if he were alone, unaffected by the immediate gravity of the situation or the panicked concern of those trembling around him.

Kallida moved towards Zahaynei, who greeted him, and the two began to discuss some matters quietly. Zahaynei motioned with his hand, waving a guardsmen over, and the man presented a small stack of papers to them before again retreating to his place by the door.

Kelvin, however, had not yet managed to separate his gaze from this man who wore a brown riding jacket, whose mood seemed so different from the rest. The man looked up at him as if he had somehow known how he had so entirely captured this young man's attention or, perhaps, sensed him staring, and Kelvin noted the glossy coat of water which lingered as their eyes met, the light reflecting off the sorrowful glance of a captive void of life.

'Who... are you?'

The man's eyes dropped again, and he seemed more sorry than he ever had. *'He appears to have been apprehended without much violence or beating. He is in better condition than many of them; yet... still... he is so much more sorrowful. Though, somehow, unafraid. In fact, he vaguely reminds me of...'* He smirked with a strange consideration as he heard the words echo in his head: *"I will not consent."*

"Alright," Zahaynei said, his voice rough and commanding. "Do you see this?" he asked, holding up the stack of papers. "It's the official record of yesterday's proceedings... *and* the war vote." He paused, looking on each of them individually with a fierce intensity which was meant to frighten and subdue them. "Now, we have some questions that we would like to have answered, and the more you *cooperate*, the more likely you are to *leave*. I hope you understand. We can have a good relationship here between us." He paused again and looked to Kallida, who nodded. "Alright! First question: *where* is Carder?"

They looked to each other with baffled glances.

"You mean he isn't *here?*" the woman asked, her words conveying the panicked shock which comes from not knowing.

"If he *were*, you would have seen him!" Zahaynei snapped back.

"Jordan? *Oh, Jordan!* Poor Jordan - he's *gone!*" the woman cried, lamenting.

"Poor Jordan? Ye mean poor *us*, ye senseless wench! " the man with white hair thundered.

"Oh, *God*... it happened!" muttered the frazzled man from between them, pinching the bridge of his nose with his eye squeezed shut.

The woman sniffled, blinking to clear the water from her bright blue eyes. "*What?*" she squeaked, her questioning eyes looking on her fellow representative with tears.

"He's *gone*, Laura," replied the shell-shocked man to her left. His tone was hopelessly depressed.

'I've never seen a man so defeated.'

"He's *left* us," the man continued, his words lingering with his speech. "They *all* have. *All* of them. *Left* us." He looked as though he might cry for agony.

"*None* of you know, then?" Zahaynei cut in, a look of discontented unbelief.

"*Surely*, you'll find them," affirmed the man who had not yet spoken.

"Surely, ye'll *not!*" shot back the man from Euphess, his voice gruff and condemning. "If he wur 'ere fur th' finding, then 'ere wi' us he'd be, an' whit a braw *fankle* that wid be! As it is, we've gotten ourselves intae enough o' a fankle withoot him! *An'* McFarland! Whaur is *he?*"

"Our scouts say he left the city near sundown, heading southwest by dark," Zahaynei replied without much expression. "He was on the road to Pergum, but it seems he's planning to return to Asrymn. He's riding hard." He stopped, his eyes watching them, looking for any hint of recognition or indication of knowing. "Which one of you is Garner?" he asked, his tone changing.

The representatives' eyes moved to the man who had captured Kelvin's interests. He looked up, his gaze set steadfast on the captain of the king's guard.

"*You?*" Zahaynei demanded.

"Yes, sir," the man replied softly.

"And you are the brother of Samuel and Marcus?"

"Yes," he said again.

"Then the Seer is your sister, also."

"That... is correct," the man reluctantly agreed, his voice expressing some irritation.

"You *have* seen you're sister, then," Zahaynei concluded.

"Yes," the man replied as if bothered.

"And so, you've also *spoken* with her!" Zahaynei pronounced, taking on an accusatory tone as he went on the offensive.

"No," Garner darted back, his brow furrowed and eyes sharpened with an icy glare.

"*Where is she!*" Zahaynei violently demanded.

Garner shook his head. "I don't know."

"*Where* is she?" Zahaynei growled. "We *know* she was *here!*"

"She was, but I never spoke with her!" Garner insisted.

"*Where is she!*" Zahaynei barked. His voice was aggressive and harsh. His eyes were fierce and threatening.

"I *told* you - *I don't know!*" Garner replied again, ardent in his response.

"You expect me to believe that your sister was here, she appeared before the Council, she appeared before *you* - and yet you never spoke? Do you take us for *fools?*" he asked, marching forward as he yelled in his rage and furious anger, his voice a hardened accusation.

Zahaynei struck the man he had identified, smacking him across the face with such force it made his head turn. A mighty slap was heard, and the room fell silent.

Garner became deathly still, his face red and sore from Zahaynei's spirited display of might. "He asked me, but I would not see her," he muttered, unmoving, and Kelvin could see the tears as they began again to accumulate, finding their home in the cold blue of his steely eyes.

"*He?* Who's he?" Zahaynei asked with interest.

Garner hesitated as if to decline to answer.

Kallida had stood in silence until that time, evaluating the men and their conversation with Garner and his responses having been of particular interest, but now he spoke, being satisfied that he had acquired information sufficient to his need. "The Ambassador," he said, answering for him and filling in the words which Garner dared not utter. "This man may yet be of *use*," Kallida hissed. "And here, I thought we'd hit an end."

Chapter 65: Damascus

They had dismounted, resting their horses for a time as they sat upon the flat faced rocks of the stony hill crest watching over the darkened trees of the forest below them.

Eliezer sat a short distance away from the rest of them, looking out into the night as he watched the black monsters which circled the skies above Elkshire. He could see the fiery light which flared against the darkness as the city burned, and he looked on sorrowfully as he watched it, his eyes hurting for the solemn scene of flame and death.

He felt a hand touch against the upper part of his arm, gripping gently from behind him, and he turned his head to see.

"Why do you subject yourself to watch this?" the softly melodic voice of his beloved friend asked him, and he smiled as he felt his heart warm. "Come back where the others are and laugh with them," she quietly implored him.

He sighed. "Dorcus," he said softly, setting his gaze again upon the burning city, "look at this. All of this destruction, all of those people, all of them *lost*, and what am I to do for them?"

"Eliezer, you *tried*," she quietly assured him. "You cannot *make* them hear you."

"Perhaps," he said decidedly, continuing to watch the burning.

"*Eliezer...*" she said, and he felt the tug of her at his arm again, but she soon gave up and instead took her place on the rock beside him.

He glanced over at the lady's lovely visage. She sat to his right side near him, and he smiled.

"Dorcus," he said softly, and her eyes met him, twinkling in the moonlight. "Thank you."

She smiled, batting her eyes at him.

The laughter and storytelling of their company could be heard higher up on the hill behind them. Their companions' words fell on their ears mingled with the faint crackling of the small campfire they had kindled while together they watched the fire as it burned in the distance.

Dorcus sighed, some time passing. "Eliezer," she entreated, her countenance ever soft towards him.

He turned his face to her again and blinked.

"How is it in Damascus?" she asked in a voice hardly more than a whisper.

"Well, it's... *small,* wooded, *and*... there is a river which runs by it which floods quite a bit, but the town itself is not so near it that it should be effected much by it.

"That town has the... *loveliest* people there, and, at times, I've rather missed them. I was always well received and treated very kindly in Damascus. I very much enjoyed my time there in the years before this.

"Well, before *you*.." he sighed, his eyes soft with consideration, "and Jordan and Sebastian came to hear me, and *then*..." he shook his head, "that whole *whirlwind* of things, which... led me *here*." He grinned determinedly. "It has been a *marvelous* challenge. Absolutely marvelous, but... one that I would never trade." He paused, smiling at her fondly. "And you, my dear lady, are so *very* lovely," he said, brushing his hand gently against her soft, silvery hair. "You've been such a wonderful part of it all."

"Eliezer..." she muttered softly, putting her hand on his, "where will we go?"

"I have a house there in Damascus, a small cabin which I left in the care of my friend," he told her. "There we can stay until the time is met. But come," he said, standing and offering his hand to elevate her.

She looked to him curiously, and he grinned with courtly kindness.

"You had wanted to join the others, hadn't you?" he explained with gentle encouragement. "I'm certain that Phia will be glad to have you back."

Dorcus smiled, taking his hand with a nod. "Eliezer," she said, effortlessly drawing the whole of his attention as she stood.

"Yes, my dear," he quietly acknowledged, and his eyes set on her with an uniquely affectionate kindness which showed only for her.

She smiled at him, her eyes alight, and shook her head. "Never mind."

"It's not bad timing, is it?" he asked her, smiling at her sweetness.

"Not this time," she assured him. "But it isn't the right time, either."

Eliezer looked at her, helplessly enamored. "No, it isn't, is it?" he agreed, shaking his head with a breathy laugh. "To think of all the times I wished I could have brought you back here with me..." he sighed. "But this isn't the right time, is it?"

Dorcus nodded solemnly.

He cupped her face with his hand, looking on her longingly, his eyes fixed on hers with his heart yearning. "Dorcus, I..."

"Eliezer," she interrupted with the tender whisper of a man's most trusted friend, "for *that* it is bad timing, as you know."

He nodded with a laughing grin. "It can wait," he assured her, half embarrassed. He touched her face again and kissed her cheek, unable to restrain himself entirely from offering some

expression of his great love for her. "How beautiful you are," he breathed, and her face flushed rose as she smiled with gladness.

Satisfied, he grasped her hand, pulling her along, and the two of them went on together to join with their companions in their merriment.

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Damascus was a small town northeast of Elkshire. Located deep in the southernmost forests of Delphi, set on the far side of the river which flows up through Sa'ar to the North Sea from its origin on the Royal Mountain Chain, Damascus was a town of little worldly significance. It was, however, the home of one Eliezer Horatio Webber, the Kingsmen Ambassador who had left his property in the care of his friend, Ignatius Eldstrom, a kindhearted emigrant from Euphess who was, also, a skilled metal worker and devoted Kingsmen.

As they rode vigilantly through the forest, they began to catch glimpses of the small clearings and scattered houses of the motley town ahead of them.

"The first time I came to Damascus," Jordan said, keeping his voice just loud enough to be heard, "I said it was a treasure hidden without a map."

"Yes, but I am glad for our sakes there *isn't* one," Eliezer remarked with a determined smile.

'Of course, an army of Zephyr's men combing the area would surely find it. Though, perhaps, smitten with blindness they would not. Yes... may such a sparing thing be shown us in a great multitude of kindnesses.'

"It's but a little farther on our left," he announced, spotting a familiar cabin in the distance with a few felled trees beside.

As they approached the area of the house and its clearing, he held up his hand, signaling them to stop.

"I will go up to speak with Ignatius ahead of you," he told them, carefully instructing their safety.

The group slowed their horses, bringing them to a halt before the breaking of the line of trees, and Eliezer carefully dismounted, handing his reigns to Dorcus. He smiled at her briefly before his face turned again to the intensity of his concern.

"Stay here until I beckon you to come, and be assured that all is well," he said before turning to make the short trek to his old companion's homestead.

The cabin was a simple structure fashioned roughly from dark wood with some consideration for care. There was a stump with a hatchet and a pile of wood to be split for the fireplace which the house's inhabitants had left outside the door. The features of the architecture which the cabin itself bore were of a traditional Delphian design. There were broad finished planks which

finely accentuated the door, windows, and awnings. The roof was peaked and layered with two small coverings above the door and upper window of the house. Two wood beams met above the curved door with a half-moon top and metal banding. A fine wooden plank jutted out from between them, protruding over the doorway with a lantern hung over it, providing light. Such a manner of house lamp was common in Delphi and expected.

Eliezer took a deep breath, standing in the covered area before the door.

'Pray this is Ignatius's homestead.'

He grabbed the dark metal knocker and hit it thrice against the hard wood of the door with the swirling of its spotted patterns. "Ignatius!" he called out with somewhat of a catch in his voice, mindful of how it may carry.

"Hush! Hush! Juist a m'nut thare!" he heard the man respond as a light lit in the upper chamber.

Eliezer let out a relieved sigh.

'Ignatius.'

He smiled.

"Who's this come knockin' oan m'door so far past even?" his voice was rough, his Rs hard and rolling, the trademarks of a displaced man from Euphess. The door pulled open to the skeptical arctic eyes of a slender white haired giant, now somewhat shrunken with age. "What can I do for ye, trav'ler?" the man asked kindly, looking him over under the burning light of the lamp.

Eliezer froze at the sight of him, his throat tight with a flood of emotion of nervousness. He rubbed his thumb against his forefinger and swallowed. "Ignatius Eldstrom?" he boldly addressed, allowing the beautifully fluctuating tones of his Delphian accent to flow freely with his speech.

"*Aye...*" the man replied, squinting as his eyes carefully considered the stranger who stood before him as if wondering.

"Well..." he said, taking a breath and wetting his lips, "Jordan, Dorcus, and I are in a bit of trouble, you see, and I was *hoping* you might still have the key to my cabin here with you."

"*Eliezer Webber,*" the man breathed, filled with awe.

"Hello, Ignatius," Eliezer replied softly, smiling. "It is good to see you again."

"*My goodness!*" the man breathed gently as tears formed in his soft blue eyes. He reached out his hand to touch Eliezer's face, looking fondly on his friend. "*My goodness...*"

'Ignatius... I'm back now. I'm sorry.'

"*Eliezer*, my old friend..." he tearfully considered, his words trailing off into the darkness. "But ye said that ye had others with you?"

"Yes," he said, waving his arm to beckon them. "Come!" he called out to his friends still standing in the trees.

The others came, joining them at Ignatius's doorstep. Dorcus dismounted, walking the two horses over to the place where Eliezer stood.

"Thank you," he whispered, taking the horse's reigns back from her.

"Jordan Carder!" Ignatius exclaimed, beholding the representative with gladness.

Jordan nodded from his seat at the head of the carriage. "Ignatius," he said with a smile.

"And *Dorcus!*" Ignatius joyously proclaimed, giving her a light hug and a kiss of greeting. "What a d'light!"

"Hello, Ignatius," Dorcus happily replied, her speech kind and gentle. "I hear you have kept our friend's house for him."

"That I have!" Ignatius smiled. "Hold here, and I'll fetch the key for ye!"

"Thank you," Eliezer said, addressing Ignatius with a fond smile of gratitude.

'So, then... here we are. Home... after all this time.'

Chapter 66: Different Sort of People

Avera had wondered how a cabin built for one man with the hopes of an eventual family would properly accommodate all twelve of the people in their growing party. Apparently, that was a question which had entered the minds of some others, also, because Ignatius had run after them, stopping Webber before he had led them far from the old man's humble homestead.

"Eliezer!" Ignatius called after them as he rapidly approached.

Eliezer stopped, turning back to face his friend. "Yes, Ignatius, what is it?" he answered kindly.

"Pard'n!" the man called out with an air of rushed apology. "Pard'n," he said again, catching his breath as he stopped behind them with his hands holding his knees. "Let a few stay at my place, Eliezer, I beg of ye," the man replied breathily, straightening up a bit.

"Ignatius, it is not needed. I would not make such a demand on you," Eliezer answered him.

But Ignatius insisted. "Eliezer," he said, "yer place is small, much too tiny fer twelve. Please, my friend, yer pard'n that I din't offer it sooner. Let some stay with me."

"Very well," Eliezer graciously consented, bowing his head for a moment. "Take with you Dorcus, Benjamin, and the Carders," Eliezer thoughtfully suggested. "Let the others stay with me."

"No, sir," Ignatius replied, and she saw the surprise on Eliezer's face at the unanticipated response. "Give me the married folk. I have extra bedrooms for 'em. And two more. I have more space than you have."

"Very well," Eliezer said again, appearing slightly perplexed, "take those, then, which you request, but take Dorcus and Benjamin with you, also."

"No, sir," Ignatius said again, causing a glint of concern to enter Eliezer's moonlit eyes. "The prince should have a guard. Elsewise, it wouldn't be proper."

"As you wish," Eliezer responded with patience and kindhearted skepticism. "Then let Benjamin come with us and you may take Adrien."

"No, sir," Ignatius said again, and Eliezer's eyes fixed on him intently. "But such a fine swordsman should stay with his prince."

"Would you not have your own guard, then?" Eliezer inquired of him, his eyes lit like burning coals.

"Oh, I would, I would," Ignatius replied. "It's only..." he let his words trail off.

Eliezer's face was somewhere between amusement and displeasure. "*What*, dear sir, would you *suggest?*" he asked, his voice flat and words overly annunciated as a faint smile crossed his face and his eyes slightly softened.

"Well, now... *supposin'*, just supposin', ye were ta take Dorcus," Ignatius said, causing Jordan to burst into a fit of unrestrained laughter.

Eliezer hung his head, clenching his teeth in a grudging grin and let out an exasperated sigh. "*Right.* Right, yes... let's suppose," he muttered quietly with some passing vexation.

"So, then... I'll take Vanguard, Kypher, and the married folks, and ye can keep the rest. How's that?" Ignatius suggested, seeming quite pleased with himself.

"I'm afraid it's unavoidable," Eliezer responded with a faint chuckle and a shake of his head.

"That it is!" Ignatius triumphantly proclaimed, grinning gloriously.

Avera smiled with curious amusement.

'I have heard that Delphians tend to argue over courtesy, but this is a little much. Maybe it's not really a matter of courtesy, then. Maybe it's something else.'

She thought back, remembering the way in which Dorcus had acted when she had returned with Webber to the ruins and the way in which he had zealously guarded her rest to the point of his own embarrassment.

"He loves her," she softly breathed out the words as she came to the sudden and somewhat unexpected realization.

She looked at Dorcus, whose weary eyes were watching Eliezer with gentle consideration; her face was turned on him with a faint and kindly smile.

'She knows, and he must know that; so... why don't they ever mention it?'

"It is well," Dorcus said softly.

The comment seemed to have been a response to Ignatius, though it was spoken towards Webber, and Avera was unsure for whom Dorcus had really intended it.

"Let us be split as you said, then," the lady continued, "and we'll come if there's news. Please, don't hesitate to come to us with anything of importance."

"But of course, ma'am," Ignatius replied smiling.

Eliezer sat on his horse, turned around and watching Dorcus intently. She whispered something to him, and he smiled, his face changing as he patted her hand gently.

'Funny how different they are,' Avera thoughtfully considered, and, as she did, she remembered the words of Vanguard: *'Different sort of people, but good.'*

She smiled, letting out a breath of contemplative laughter. "Different, indeed."

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It was a quaint little house, a well kept cabin in the midst of the forest of trees which surrounded the loosely assembled town. It was clear to her that Ignatius had worked to keep the property and maintain the cabin throughout the many years of Mr. Webber's absence. The interior of the cabin, however, was arrayed in such a way as she had come to expect from the kindly disorganized Ambassador, the only exception being the newly added aspect of a bit of dust over most every item or surface. It was plain to her that Ignatius had been here cleaning the interior of the cabin, also, dusting on occasion but certainly not recently.

It was a cozy residence that Webber had with two floors, the second being a half-loft. There was a steep stairway upward right as the door opened which led to the bedroom and small attic. There was a small eating room which led to an even smaller kitchen area to their left. Continuing clockwise, there was a hall which led to an office and the sitting room to the right of the entryway. The house was homey but cramped, especially for the six of them to be staying, and Avera wondered how they ever would have managed twelve.

There were faded white sheets draped over the furnishings of the old wooden house, which Webber had begun to remove, stirring up the dust. Dorcus rushed to lift the curved metal latches and open the dirtied windows, pushing them open before taking the coverings outside to beat and air them. Avera went with Benjamin to help her shake the sheets while Justice and Adrien continued lighting lamps and candles so they could see by something more than moonlight.

Eliezer opened the door to the closet beneath the stairs and began to pull out blankets for makeshift beds.

"I'm sorry I don't have something better, but I hope that this will do us well for the time," he told them apologetically, holding the neatly folded woolen coverings in arm. "There is a bed upstairs," he added thoughtfully. "I couldn't possibly take it, but certainly someone should."

"It may do us well to spread out a bit given the limited floor space," Justice commented.

"There is the office and the attic upstairs," Blackridge informed him, "we could put one each in there, and that leaves three of us."

"With the chair and the couch, three should be able to fit comfortably here," Justice replied.

"Good," Benjamin said. "Then, Justice, why don't you make use of the chair. Adrien, you have the couch to lie on. Avera, you take some blankets and have the attic. I'll do the same here, and, Mr. Webber," he said, turning to Eliezer as he respectfully suggested, "you could do likewise in the office."

Justice appeared slightly puzzled, a sure result of the lack of sleep. "Who is in the bedroom, then?" he asked wearily.

"Dorcus," Eliezer said, smiling as he put a thankful hand on Benjamin's shoulder. "And I think that suits us all fine," he said again, his voice softened towards the young prince.

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It was late the following evening when Avera thought to talk with Mr. Webber, seeking some explanation for the strange behavior of her newfound host towards the woman whom she was now convinced he cared for more than either of them were willing to admit, though they had, nevertheless, displayed.

She found the two of them together in the office, Webber having the lamp lit to assist him in the writing of some letter or script which he carefully penned on the page of parchment he had set against the fine wooden desk in front of him. Dorcus stood watching over his left shoulder, reading silently as he wrote, her lips lightly quavering. She had one hand set on the edge of the desk and the other resting gently atop of her companion's shoulder.

"I think you mean hidden there more than secret," she quietly commented, pointing her finger to a word on the page. "He would understand that better."

He turned his face to hers and blinked. "Really?" he softly reconfirmed.

"Yes," she said, her voice kind and tender towards him.

Avera smiled. *'They are sweet together.'*

"Mr. Webber," she said, gently knocking on the open door as she respectfully addressed the kindhearted gentleman. "I'd like to talk with you, if I may... provided you have the time."

"Avera," he smiled, looking up at her, his warm brown eyes soft with consideration. "Yes, of course. Whatever. Come," he added, motioning with his pen-filled hand towards the chair on the other side of his desk.

Dorcus smiled. "He'll always have time, dear," she pleasantly assured her before turning her attentions back to Webber. "I'll leave you two alone," she quietly informed him, squeezing his shoulder gently as she went.

He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, seeming almost pained. "Shut the door, please," he softly requested.

"Of course," Dorcus said, gently smiling.

The door closed as she exited, and Avera took the seat which Mr. Webber had offered her.

"Well, Avera," he said, putting the pen down on the paper in front of him and offering a friendly smile, "what can I do for you?"

"I had a question," she told him, confessing the truth of her endless curiosity. "That ring that you have," she said, barreling into it, "it's an engagement ring... for Dorcus, isn't it?"

He nodded slowly. "Yes, Avera, it is," he graciously admitted.

"Well, I..." Avera began again, trying not to show herself rude or inconsiderate, "don't understand *why* you've never asked her."

He smiled a pained smile and let out a small sigh. "Avera," he said, removing his glasses, "you see, *love* would never force a person, and there is a part of the nature of love that it is willing to endure with patience and suffer for the beloved one's cause. Love *waits* for a person." He paused, taking a deep breath and letting out a deeper sigh. "I went to go see Dorcus the day the raids began," he said, tears beginning to form in his naked eyes as he recited the tale. "I had already spoken to Sebastian about it, and the Carders were very kind to afford me a week's lodging in their guesthouse, where I often stayed when in Elkshire. Ignatius knew where I had gone. He fashioned the ring for me. He used to peddle in Pyre. But when I arrived at Sebastian's cottage, I found Dorcus much too busy to talk."

"What! *Why?*" Avera asked, distressed.

"She was making preparations for our later departure," Eliezer told her, offering a sad smile. "She has always been so devoted to a task. She would arrange it all so neatly, and you must know by now how proper she is. She said it was bad timing, and I told her it could wait, because *love waits*." He exhaled sharply. "That night Sebastian was killed and our lives were all upended, those of us who remained. If I had spoken to her *before*, it would have been one thing, but *now*..." he shook his head. "It would not have been right of me to make such personal demands on her. She was in such distress, and we had Benjamin to care for. I couldn't have possibly subjected her to any further emotional obligation." He replaced his glasses, wiping a tear from his cheek.

"But..." Avera sputtered, "why not ask her *now?* You still love her, don't you?"

"Yes," he said, smiling with a rush of involuntary gladness. "Oh, goodness, *yes*. But, again, we're so in the middle of it all at the moment. How could I ask her to promise me things that I, myself, could not promise? My life is in a precarious place for the time being, and I would not have her joined to it in the eyes of our enemies. I would not have her suffer any greater threat for my sake, even for my aching heart." He watched her, his eyes softly determined. "Can you understand that?" he asked her with a quiet curiosity.

She watched the man, intrigued by his peculiar speech and heartfelt reason. "I'll try," she said with a small smile, having given the most affirmative reply she possibly could have.

"Good, then," he said with rosy cheeks and a broad smile. "Don't mention it, *hm?*" he merrily requested, raising an eyebrow at her.

She laughed, humored by his unexpected antics. "Not a word," she promised, a toothy grin spread across her joy-filled countenance.

He folded his hands in front of him, resting his elbows on the desk, and nodded. "Good."

Chapter 67: Deliver Us

He had gone out into the woods away from the cabin alone, seeking some form of solitude, some room to think and straighten his mind. The events of the past month and particularly the last week had been a bit much to handle, and he was having trouble internalizing it.

'They tell a story in Pyre of the man who said too much. He walked into the city, marched in through the palace doors, and went before the king proclaiming himself to be the heir. He thought the people would rally to his call... but he was wrong. Zephyr had him beaten and dragged him through the streets until he was within an inch of his life. Then, he took him to the public for display and dismembered him. His execution was violent and gruesome. It was also a warning.

"'This is what we say of Caliphus! Whoever stands against us will be as this man is."

'It must have been an awful sight... but no one remembers that now. It was another part of the history which Zephyr erased.

'He thought the people would save him, but they were tired of fighting, tired of war, and unsympathetic to his cause. He was no more than a rebel without anything to fight for but his own claim, and that he knew to be false. So, why try at all? He wasn't even my age.

'Still... is that all that I am - a rebel against the government, an insurgent against the king, a traitor to my own land? Eliezer would blessedly assure me that this government is illegitimate and the throne is mine to be had. So, then, they are the traitors, and we are the right. I know that the scepter was promised to me and the kingship was my father's before me. Howbeit, I wonder... what will the people do now that the Council has come against us?'

He stretched his hand out in front of him, putting it between his face and the sun so the light would shine through it.

'And what of you? What is your view on all of this? Is it treason, then? And if it be treason, would you not deliver your people, if even by my own treacherous hand?'

He heard a twig snap behind him, and he spun around, nearly falling from the log on which he was standing carefully balanced as he watched the sun set through the trees.

"Avera!" he said, surprised to see that anyone had found him.

She laughed at his ungraceful recovery of balance. "Ben, what are you doing?"

"Standing," he told her with a grin, "or... trying to be."

"I can see that," she laughed again, "but why *here?*"

"Ah! *Alas*, you've caught me clearing my mind," he glanced over his shoulder at her, hoping for some reaction to his jest.

"And when your mind is cleared, what's left in it?" Avera inquired with interest.

He shook his head. "Lineage, destiny, propriety, promise..." he paused, turning his face towards her, "*love*." He shut his eyes, hanging his head, and began to laugh quietly to himself. "A king is married to his people, and mine are held in the harsh chains of invisible bonds." He paused, opening his eyes and setting them on the young woman standing on the forest floor beside him. "Tell me, Avera, is it treason to save them?"

Her eyes watched him and a bolt of surprise ran through them as her ears received the question. "*Ben...*" she muttered as a gentle means of protest.

"You asked what I was considering," he reminded her intensely. "This is it. So, tell me, is it treason?"

"Wasn't the treason already committed?" she asked him in such a way as was more of a fact than a question.

His eyes watched her with the intensity of fire, and he saw the light of an idea enter the swirling of her blue-green eyes. A faint smile crossed his face. *'She has it.'*

"And are you not the ransoming king?" she asked intently, moving towards him as she wagged her finger at him. "A *king!*" she excitedly proclaimed, and a smile lit her face. "*Born* in tragedy, *raised* in adversity, and *destined* to reign, to *rescue* the people!"

His serious face morphed into a small grin. *'Yes, Avera... well done. You have it now.'*

"And what of you?" he asked her. "What is left when your mind has cleared?"

"Questions," she told him honestly, shaking her head. "Questions *of identity* and *purpose* and *life*. *And*, when there's nothing else there, I wonder... who I am and who I'm meant to be."

"And did you find it?" he asked her.

She looked at him, surprised by the question. "The answers?" she asked, and he nodded. She thought for a moment. "I think I'm beginning to."

It was enough. He smiled, again watching the sun as it set through the forest of trees.

"Come," he told her, breaking through the silence, "let's go back to the house."

***

It was after dark when they returned again to the cabin, and Avera went up to her room to pass the night in slumber with Benjamin wishing her well and a good night's rest.

'She seemed tired. I am glad she feels comfortable with us, that is able to rest here.'

He searched around the cabin, which he found to be unusually empty, evaluating the present condition of the house and the whereabouts of its inhabitants. Dorcus had gone for an evening

stroll, which he knew only because they had met her on the way and spoken with her briefly; Justice was, presumably, still out on his wood gathering errand at Ignatius's house, and Adrien had been sent with a letter to Rivdul.

He glanced around the darkened rooms, spotting the familiar glow of the flickering flame of lamplight, and he smiled. He walked over to the open door of the office and knocked, lightly wrapping his knuckles against the doorframe.

"Ambassador," he said, leaning forward and sticking his head into the room with its fiery illumination.

Eliezer looked up at him and smiled, setting his pen down on the letter which he had been writing. "Ben," he said, standing to his feet to greet him. "Come here, child," he softly requested with open arms.

Benjamin quickly rushed to accommodate him and was immediately enraptured in a hug. He wrapped his arms around his friend and laid his head upon his shoulder.

"I am so very proud of you, Ben," Eliezer told him. "You have handled all of this with such unparalleled grace, and you have clothed yourself with dignity and strength."

Eliezer paused, taking in breath, and Benjamin felt the warm air touch his cheek and float down softly on the skin of his neck as it was expelled from the nostrils of the kind sage.

"I know that I am not your father, Ben, but you have always been a son to me, and I love you as my own flesh." Eliezer spoke the words softly, assuring him with the gentle love and acceptance of a father he had never known. "I love you so very, *very* much, and I am *sorry* that I haven't always told you how very precious you are to me."

Benjamin closed his eyes, crying, and gripped the patterned suit jacket. "Eliezer," he said, fighting to maintain some form of composure, "thank you. I love you, too. Truly. You and Dorcus have been..." he shook his head, pressing his face into his friend's shoulder, "as good to me as any family, and better than my parents could have hoped. I have never been so loved as I am by you, if only by the love of our King."

Eliezer was glad, kissing his cheek as he squeezed him a moment. "Ben," he said, "you know that all is well. There is no need to fear for any of this."

"Yes, Eliezer," Benjamin replied, his teary voice muffled by the fabric.

"Child, you shall not fear destiny," he told him. "You shall not fear for anything, because all that is is worked together for us and that for our good," he steadfastly assured him, his voice kind and caring, "and you will not be harmed."

Benjamin steadied his breathing. "How did you know?" he asked softly.

Eliezer sighed, still seeking to comfort him. "Dorcus told me she thought you seemed a little tense and out of sorts," he quietly admitted. "She asked me to take some time to talk with you once you had come back, and I thought that hugs were rather in order."

Benjamin smiled, breathing deeply and feeling very much at home in the arms of his friend. There was a security there which he had missed.

"Was there anything else?" Eliezer asked, his voice soft and tender towards him.

Benjamin shook his head. "Nothing. All is well," he told him, his heart tied to his words, "and I thank you."

'Avera was right. This isn't treason. It's right, and goodness shall follow us as we walk in the way that is right. I will not fear destiny, but their deliverance will come by my hand. It is well with me, as it is in Altruon, and defeat is not an option, nor was it meant to be.'

Chapter 68: The Prisoner

Kallida slapped the pale faced man again, a quick correction for another smart remark from the sharp tongue of the prisoner, and Kelvin watched astonished as the man touched with his tongue the blood of his lip. There were mere seconds of silence as the thin lips of the man, cut and bleeding, curled tightly into a contemptible sneer.

'Five days of this... Kallida's been beating him ever since we got here. It's incredible to me, but he keeps making these snide comments anyway. The man can't seem to control his tongue. Well, no. He does control it. He controls it well and bitter.'

"Once more!" Kallida commanded. "Where is the Ambassador hiding?"

"Did it ever occur to you that if I *had* known I would have *told* you a few hundred blows ago? Or has all the magic corrupted your mind so far that you can no longer reason?" Garner answered coldly.

"You said you spoke with him!" Kallida contemptuously contended.

"*Please!*" Garner said, disgusted. "It wasn't a *pleasant* discussion for either of us."

"But he must have said *something!*" Kallida insisted, becoming increasingly annoyed.

"Look, *Mister Inquisitor,* I *punched* the man," Timothy spat back with bitter vitriol. "I wasn't exactly *helping* to *plan* his *escape!* In fact, I would have almost preferred that he didn't."

"Don't you care at all?" Kallida asked, intrigued. "He *is* your ambassador."

"No," Timothy laughed scornfully, shaking his head. "No. *Not* as far as I'm concerned. No, Eliezer Webber is a two bit snake oil salesman with a silver tongue and a sorcerer's touch, and my loathsome sister is like him. Well, then. They can *both rot.*"

"You hate them..." Kallida considered, turning away from the man and placing his hand over his face with a sigh of frustration, "*why?*"

"*Hate* is a very strong word, Master Kallida," Garner replied with his usual exactness and cunning. "No, no. *Hatred* is a terrible wrong. What I practice is a willful neglect of our association. They've gone, and I've not, you see? Such is the nature of our relationship."

"You would prefer to remain here as a prisoner rather than join them?" Kallida asked, surely seeking to process the man's thinking.

"I would *prefer* to live my life free of their interference, of which this is surely a part," Garner replied dryly.

Kallida shot him a startled glance, turning quickly in his direction as he looked the man over with his dark hollowed eyes.

Timothy smirked. "Or why would I be here if not for their departure?" he asked sardonically.

Kelvin watched, and his eyes widened at Garner's remarkable freshness. He felt his stomach twist, beginning to turn, and he shuffled his feet, taking a step back, away from the two men and their conversation.

'I've never known a Kingsman to act so indignant,' he marveled, awkwardly appalled.

He heard the doors as they opened behind him, and there was a familiar clacking of boots against the marvel floor which followed, though this time somewhat less rhythmic than he had come to expect. He turned from the platform where he stood behind Kallida to face the man who entered, and his gaze was met with the sight of Alhor Zahaynei dragging a man behind him.

"Captain," Kallida stiffly acknowledged.

"Master Kallida," Zahaynei replied dryly. "I come bearing gifts. Here I have a man very much in need of your *talents,* Inquisitor."

Zahaynei brought the man in, throwing his damaged body violently on the floor in front of them. The man's countenance appeared battered, and he was covered in dust from a long journey. He fell forward, his body hitting hard against the ground upon which he was thrust. Zahaynei pressed his boot against him, causing a light sound of the man's discomfort.

He was a handsome man with strawberry blonde hair, and he wore a nice mustache. He was clothed in a sullied white shirt with puffed sleeves, a tight green buttoned vest with gold pinstripes at the front, and short length pants fastened at the knee with long woolen socks. His shoes were short and rounded with distinctly squared heels and a large metal buckle atop of them, the gold of the latch a sharp contrast to the black of the shoe.

Kelvin watched him. *'A westerner... from Asrymn!'* His eyes widened.

"Gregory McFarland," Zahaynei announced, "and a satchel of papers with him." He removed the bag from his arm and poured it out over the man from Asrymn, covering him in a pile of written words. "The message is the same as that which was sent to us by the people at the Intelligence Bureau: a Peacetime Proclamation warning of the coming reforms and urging the people to war. The document bears three signatures; those of Webber and Carder accompany his," the Captain informed them, giving a swift kick to McFarland and eliciting the sound of a faint groaning.

"So I see," Kallida said, his eyes fixed on their newfound captive.

Timothy laughed scornfully. "Gregory!" he called out, mocking him. "How's that branch holding out for you?"

"Timothy..." McFarland painfully acknowledged, "how is it that you always have just the right words to cut a man's heart?"

"Delivered my message did you? I must thank you for that later. As for now, I see that Webber's gone and Carder along with him. Snapped the branch and ran, did he? Hiding somewhere safely, I'm sure, while he leaves you alone to suffer for it. But that's just the sort of man he is," Timothy remarked bitterly. "About time you saw it."

McFarland breathed pained and shallow breaths from his bruised and broken body. "Let us not count our lives so dear as to do right," he muttered before opening his eyes and turning them wearily on Garner with a determined smile. "You're wrong, Timothy," he earnestly corrected. "He isn't like that. He doesn't *leave* people. You just never cared to know him. You still don't."

"Do you still defend him? Even after hope has failed and the limb snapped from beneath your feet, leaving you to plummet hopeless to the ground with only pain and trouble for it? *Please!* Only a fool would defend Eliezer and his half-baked schemes," Timothy remanded.

"Do as you will, Timothy," McFarland told him, dismissing the matter. His words were measured and calm. "You never listened. He spoke to you, and you would not hear him. As for me, I will give my service."

"You shall do it from Hölle, then," Timothy said, responding to his colleague as he challenged his conviction.

"May I ever," McFarland replied simply, letting his eyes close. "But Himmel is watching, and I think that I had better be resigned to its cause."

Kelvin watched in horror and Kallida smiled as Zahaynei kicked the man again, this time harder, propelling him slightly upward, and there was a great thud as his broken body fell against the base of the few large steps leading up to the platform upon which they stood.

"*Watch your mouth!*" Zahaynei warned him. "I will not tolerate your pious ramblings."

"Right," McFarland answered breathily. "My apologies." He struggled to lift himself with his arms, his side pressed hard against the lip of the bottom stair where he fell, and he quickly collapsed again into a motionless heap upon the floor.

Kelvin silently watched him, but he could feel his heart hurting. He wanted so badly to help the man, but he stopped himself.

'Forget it.'

He looked to Kallida, who was considering the Asrymnian lustfully with murder in his eyes, and swallowed nervously before turning his attentions back on McFarland.

'It would appear he is in worse shape than any of them, but he is much more gracious about it, and he seems much more together.'

Again, he felt a tug at his heart and stopped himself from caring... or, at least, he tried to, but he couldn't turn his eyes away from the man and all his faithfulness. As he watched McFarland, he

saw something familiar in him, something strange which he could not forget. There was something about the man that reminded him of Marcus: he was both resigned and resolved, yet not consenting.

'Well... as together as a man so decidedly faithful to his treason can be.'

Chapter 69: Come See Us

Eliezer and Dorcus sent for Samuel by letter, and Adrien carried it faithfully to Rivdul for them, placing the sealed letter into the hands of the friendly farmer.

It was nearly a decade ago that Samuel Garner had gone to Pyre to visit his brother at High Palace, and it was during his trip that he had stopped in at the North Pyre Kingsmen Congregation for a service. There, Eliezer had renewed acquaintance and befriended him under the guise of his false identity. Eliezer wasn't sure how much Samuel knew or whether he had recognized him at the time. Still, he had insisted on taking him to his favorite flower shop, and Samuel cried when he saw his sister. So, they had spoken through letters since that day.

Through the letters, they had learned that Sam had passed the years as a farmer in their family's hometown. He had repurchased his father's land and spent his time there growing wheat, among other things. Samuel's letters had a tendency to be long, addressing many of life's questions and happenings in great detail.

The return letters were often considerably shorter and lacking in detail outside of matters of theology Pyrean business practices. Certainly, they never said a word of their lives outside the city, but this last letter was different. They wrote in great detail of what had happened in Elkshire and of their delight at his continued communications throughout the many years. The final portion of the letter was an invitation, one which they had finished with a long awaited phrase: *come see us.*

Eliezer was working in the office with Dorcus again watching over his shoulder late one afternoon as the golden light streamed through the window behind them. He was deep in thought, mulling over the product of a finished chapter when there came a knocking at the door.

He looked up, startled, and set the papers down on the desk.

Dorcus was watching him. "Do you suppose that's Sam?" she asked him.

"That is who I would hope it to be, yes, *but*, supposing it's *not*," he said, looking over at her with soft and caring eyes, "I would prefer that you stay here while I go check."

Dorcus came closer and wrapped her arms around her companion's neck, pressing her face into his hair. "Very well," she said, still holding onto him.

Eliezer tilted his head back, looking up into her beautiful blue eyes with a grin. The love in her eyes rivaled that of his own, and his heart surged with the consideration of her affections.

"My dear, sweet lady," he said, "your brother is waiting for me."

She smiled, landing on his cheek a gentle kiss. "Better let him in, then," she said, releasing him to go.

At the door stood a brown haired man with emerald green eyes and a short cut beard. He was dressed in a simple cotton shirt and worn out trousers.

"Eliezer Webber!" the man said as if amazed, and he offered a friendly smile.

"Sam!" Eliezer said with a grin.

"I'll tell you. I never thought I'd see you go grey before I did," Sam said with a soft chuckle.

"Yes, well... the years have been hard," he muttered, embarrassed.

"As I understand," his guest replied, bowing his head. "But you have my sister here with you; so, how hard could they have really been?" Samuel went on, raising his cheery face with a grin.

"Sam, you should know I haven't-" he stopped himself short, Sam waving his hand in dismissal.

"I know. Silly of you, though," he pondered. "You know you have my blessing just as you had my father's. You could have asked her."

Eliezer shook his head. "I couldn't have imposed, not as things were."

"Is it such an imposition?" Samuel asked him. "She was always so fond of you. I would have thought she'd be delighted."

Eliezer felt his heart aching in his chest. "It was hard," he said. "All of this was so very hard for us. I didn't want her to feel any obligation, and I didn't want to take advantage of her hurt. Losing Sebastian, losing your father, the threat our lives were under, having a child to care for..." he paused contemplatively. "It would have been too much for me to ask of her then, and now..." he shook his head, "it isn't time."

Samuel looked at him with admiring eyes and put his hand on the younger man's shoulder. "My God, it's good to see you!" he proclaimed with a smile. "But I've come a long way. So, how about some tea?"

Eliezer welcomed him, calling for Dorcus, and she came and greeted her brother before leaving again to help Eliezer with the tea.

Dorcus stopped as she picked up a warm cup and saucer he had filled to kiss her companion's cheek.

Eliezer stopped what he was doing, setting the kettle back on the stove and looking at her with surprise. All of this affection she was showing him was nice but so very uncommon.

"Here, my dear," he said, taking hold of her head and stroking her silver hair. "What has gotten into you?"

A strip of pink appeared on Dorcus's face, crossing over her nose with embarrassment. "I'm sorry, Eliezer. I suppose that I'm just happy to finally be here with you," she confessed sheepishly.

"Are you?" he asked, considering her.

She nodded. "Yes," she told him honestly.

His heart warmed. *'Always I have wished to have you here, and now that you are, would you share in my happiness?'*

"Very well," he said, moving his hand around to her face and kissing her cheek. "So am I."

Dorcus grinned involuntary, her face radiating with happiness. "We have Sam waiting," she reminded him.

"Yes, and who am I to deprive a man of tea?" he quipped, kissing her cheek again lightly before letting her go to take her brother his drink.

Samuel sat in the armchair, and Eliezer took his place across from him on the couch, leaving plenty of room for Dorcus to sit comfortably beside him. He held the delicate handle of his teacup in one hand and his saucer in the other as he carefully blew the steam from the surface of the creamy brown liquid with hopeful expectation.

Dorcus presented Samuel with his cup and hurried back to the kitchen to retrieve her own before taking her seat next to Eliezer on the brown cushioned sofa.

Eliezer took a sip of his steaming tea, delighted as the heat of the hot drink flowed welcomely down his throat into his stomach.

When Dorcus returned with her cup of tea and a fond smile, she came to join her companion on the sofa, plopping herself down next to him. In fact, she sat so unexpectedly close that it startled him. She had lowered herself nearly on top of him. Her left leg clipped his right thigh as she sat and caused his tea to jump up out of the cup, splashing a little on the porcelain saucer.

His head shot up and he looked at her with his eyes full of alarm. "You nearly spilled my tea," he said with a hurt look.

"I'm sorry," Dorcus said, unable to hold back from laughing.

"What are you doing?" he asked, still full of shock at her uncharacteristic action.

"Sitting," Dorcus replied with a smile, taking a sip of her tea.

Eliezer let out a faint sound of desperation, remembering Sam. *'My God, he'll think as poorly of me as Timothy does.'*

His eyes darted frantically between the two siblings as he desperately searched for an explanation, but none came. "I- I'm sorry," he stammered, looking to Sam with wild eyes

racing. He was badly flustered. "We- we haven't, that is... I- I don't know what's come over her."

Samuel laughed. "Oh, Eliezer," he said, unable to control his laughter, "don't worry! I know you're a gentleman and all, but I'm not my brother, you know? And I'm not bothered. I just think she likes you."

Eliezer smiled, and his face flushed with embarrassment as he turned his eyes back to Dorcus.

"I do," she said, grabbing his arm and laying her head on his shoulder.

"Oh," he sighed, overcome by love for her. He would have done something to express the great affection he had bursting in his heart, but he wasn't at all accustomed to these public displays of tenderness.

"Oh, come now, Eliezer!" Samuel prodded, noting his hesitance. "It's not that bad, is it?"

"No," Eliezer said, petting her head gently, "I suppose it isn't."

He touched his nose to the soft, silvery strands of hair which topped the head of his beloved companion, closing his eyes as he returned her tender passions.

"We're very pleased to have you here," Eliezer told him, his eyes briefly departing from Dorcus as he addressed her brother.

Sam had a broad grin on his face as he watched them. "Believe me," he said, "there is almost *nothing* that could make me happier."

Eliezer closed his eyes again, gently nuzzling his beloved one's hair. He loved the scent of it and the feel. He loved everything about her. He had never drunk alcohol, but he imagined that it couldn't be near so intoxicating as she was.

"Nor I," he whispered happily, and he felt her smile.

Chapter 70: The Cartographer

Avera came with Benjamin back into the living room of Eliezer's home, having finished their jaunt through the woods together, to find their host and his companion sitting, chatting, and sipping on tea along with another man.

"Hello, sir," Avera said sheepishly.

"Hello," the man replied with a well-humored grin.

He was a built man with weathered skin and he spoke like a man from the northern regions.

'Perhaps this is Sam, then...'

"Would you like some tea?" he added, holding up his porcelain cup.

Eliezer laughed. "Aren't I the one who should ask?"

"Pardon," Ben said with his usual quiet insistence, "but some introductions may be in order." His voice was kind and unobtrusive.

"Of course, dear," Dorcus replied pleasantly. "Benjamin, Avera, this is my brother, Samuel."

"How do you do," their visitor said with a smile and a quick wave of his hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Benjamin replied with a bow of reverential courtesy.

"Sir," Avera said with a quick bow of her head.

"Ehm... *would* you like some tea?" Eliezer asked them with his arm wrapped around Dorcus's shoulders, an unusual sight but sweet.

Ben shook his head, putting his hands up to stay him. "No, no. We're quite fine, thank you. We wouldn't move you from your comfort, anyway," he said, declining on behalf of them both.

Eliezer smiled. "Alright, well... if you change your mind..." he offered, indicating that he would gladly accommodate them.

"Hey..." Sam interjected, trying not to interrupt. "Avera, right?"

Avera looked at him with surprise. "Yes?"

"They were telling me a little about you. Tyberion's daughter, aren't you?"

She blinked, and her chest tightened, some mixture of hope and dread welling within her all at once. "Yes."

Samuel smiled. "I have a letter for you from your father," he told her, taking another sip of his tea before setting it down and beginning to rummage through his sack.

'A letter...'

She could scarcely believe it. The hope of seeing her father or even learning what had happened to him had become a lost dream that she held at a distance. Even now, her heart would hardly be compelled to lift to the hope of the expectation of the letter because of its great hurt, turned to sickness by all of her past hopes, so many times deferred.

Samuel quickly presented her with a small, lightly crumpled envelope marked "*Avera*" in her father's writing, and she held it, trembling.

"It's unopened," Samuel assured her with a smile. "He left it for you, and I wouldn't pry. So... I can't tell you what's in it, either."

Avera nodded. "Thank you," she muttered, staring down at the worn paper in her hands.

Benjamin came and put his hands on her arms, bolstering her spirit. "Avera," he whispered softly in her ear, "no matter what is in that letter, no matter what it might say of your father, we're here for you, and that will never change."

"But, Ben, I'm scared," Avera confessed, crying.

His voice and his hands were comforting, but the pain and hurt of all the years was swirling within her. It turned her stomach and made the tears to run down her taupe skin from her eyes like streams of water on barren lands.

"Fear for nothing, my dear," he quietly assured her. "All is well. You always have a place here with us, regardless of everything."

She smiled, feeling the strength building inside of her as he spoke and imparted to her the boldness to open the letter her father had written her.

"Thank you, Ben," she whispered, her thumb breaking through the sealed envelope.

She pulled from it a folded sheet of weathered parchment upon which was written her father's address and opened it as she began to read.

'Avera,

'I pray one day this letter finds you, my little lieutenant, and if it does, that means you must have met my friends from the old kingdom. Aren't they a delight?

'When I was young, I used to work in the palace. Adrien Blackridge was a dear friend, and Ambassador Webber was always a great advocate of mine before the King.

'Through the years, things changed, as I'm sure by now you know. We were betrayed by Almast and his men. The kingdom was in turmoil and great need of those who would stand, and I committed a terrible wrong. Adrien told me of the coming governmental reforms, and I did not report it. Instead, I ran. Avera, I ran. I feared, and I left.

'It was selfish of my, I know, but I was scared and unbelieving. I thought that I could live a life in the rural lands without the past coming to visit me, but I was wrong. The world was different because of my choices, because of my cowardice. I know that you, my little lion, would never run, but I did, and that is why I am running now. Only now, I am running for a new cause.

'When Adrien wrote me asked me to return to Pyre, I was skeptical at first, but when I spoke to him there, he told me I would work for Eliezer, passing messages between them to secure the Prince's safety. To say no would have been to turn my back again, and how could I deny all of the Ambassador's kindness?

'If you wonder why I ran again without a word and left you on your own, it is because I could not risk your life... or the lives of all these others I'm saving. It is by fate that we are given a second chance, and mine has come with great consequence.'

"I was working on a project," she began to read out loud, her eyes darting curiously across the page, "a project so secret that only the Inquisitor, the Captain, and I knew it outside of the King. Kallida had found a way to use his magic, along with Zahaynei's military expertise and my knowledge of map making, to recreate a map detailing the path to the mountain stronghold of the Royal City."

The room fell into a stunned silence.

"They were going to march on the city, to go and fight Casper, to kill all of those people..." Eliezer considered with his eyes full of horror.

"Does it say more?" Ben asked, his heart more fully invested than it ever had been.

'He must be worried about his parents.'

"Um, yes," she said, returning her eyes to the page. "As the project has come to completion, I have made up my mind that I will run again, this time for good. I have taken the map as my guide, and I go to the city to warn them. Those who escaped in former times, I will see that they are ready for the onslaught when it comes. I will have no more blood on my hands, but I will be clean, as I pray you are, also."

Her eyes continued to scan the page, the rest again returning to a message of more personal things.

'Please know that it breaks my heart to be away from you like this and so much more so with the knowledge that I must have broken yours, as well. Avera, I'm sorry. You should have had a better life than this.

'I almost wonder if Adrien had hoped I would have reported the plan to Stephan, knowing that death is better than treason. I could have saved us all a lot of pain. But those things are past us. What happens now is marked by your decisions.

'One day, I will see you when the kingdom comes, and I will hold you in my arms. Always be aware of how very loved you are and that you have a home. I'm always proud of you, Avera. Until we meet, you have my prayers, and you have my blessings.

'All My Love,

'Dad'

'Dad...' She touched the name and swallowed, trying to keep her composure. The letter had ended, and Avera felt the tears come streaming down her cheeks.

She cleared her throat. "That's all," she squeaked.

Ben turned her around and gave her a hug. "It's alright," he told her. "We'll bring him back. When all of this is over, I promise... I'll take you personally to see him. Alright?" he asked, looking down at her with a considerate smile.

Avera lifted her eyes to his. They were like warm amber sparks, always ready to care. She felt the warmth of his eyes come like a furnace inside of her as her wounded heart mended and the brokenness healed. She smiled as the pleasantness of the fuzzy sensation expanded in her breast and began to flow through her.

"Yes," she said, her face lightening to a grin as it glowed with the radiance inside. "Yes. Thank you, Ben."

"Good," he said, inspecting her kindly as he gently wiped the last of the tears from her face.

Chapter 71: Messengers

He stood out by the edge of the woods watching for the men to come, but they never came. It was a relief not to be running, but, even so, he wondered why they hadn't followed them.

'Perhaps, it is providence. God has stricken them with blindness; that or they're planning.'

He caught a glimpse of a rider on a horse with two other men following him, each man riding his own animal, and his eyes turned to Justice beside him.

"This doesn't look good, does it?" Justice remarked.

"They aren't Zephyr's men," Adrien assured him.

"Are you sure?" Justice asked, skeptical.

'He always was careful.'

"Yes," Adrien said again. "Completely."

"Well," Justice replied, "this may be in our favor, then."

"It may be," Adrien replied. "Down, then?"

Justice nodded, and the two men descended the rocky slope of scattered trees with swords drawn.

"Aye!" Adrien said, flagging the first man down.

He was a worn out rider on a well worked chestnut stallion, both of whom seemed to be suffering exhaustion.

"Rider, from where do you come?" Adrien asked, inspecting the sorry sight of the dust covered foreigner.

"From Asrymn, sir," the man replied, keeping tight hold of the reigns as he slumped in the saddle.

"These are your companions?" he asked, giving a nod towards the other horsemen as they approached.

The man looked back wearily over his shoulder and nodded. "Yes, sir," he said. "That's them." He paused, inhaling deeply to catch his breath again. Clearly, he was tired long past comfort. "We have others coming, also. They're maybe a day behind us. Not far back, and many more coming with them."

"Are you Kingsmen?" Adrien asked, sheeting his sword as he became satisfied by the man and his tale.

The man nodded, his eyes half closed from the troublesome journey. "We're delivering these," he said, taking a paper from his satchel and presenting it with trembling hands to the hooded figure standing before him.

Adrien looked at it and smiled with mild amusement and heartfelt gratitude.

'A Peacetime Proclamation.'

"Where is McFarland?" he asked him, suddenly pierced with concern at the representative's absence.

The man dropped his gaze, hanging his head in sadness, and the other men did the same as they came near and overheard the question. They were all of them silent, faint and sorrowful spirits all of grieving countenance.

Adrien's heart dropped with them. *'Don't tell me he's dead. I've seen far too much pain to let another man die.'*

"Is he dead?" Justice asked, speaking to them directly with his usual professional coldness.

The first man shook his head in momentary dismissal. "He isn't that we know," he said, and Adrien felt a brief hope enter into his heart. "But they did take him."

"Zahaynei?" Adrien asked him.

The front man nodded. "Zephyr's folks. There were a hundred of us when we started. Now we're down to a little less than thirty, last I knew. They caught McFarland with a lot of us, but they took special interest in him. Carried him back to High Palace."

"Where?" Adrien asked him, his eyes tearing as his heart tore to pieces for them.

"East of Tyra, on our way up to Sa'ar," the weary man informed him.

Adrien looked over to Justice, who nodded. "Come with us."

They led the men up through the woods to the cabin where Ignatius stayed, and Adrien asked Kypher to go and watch the road again with Justice. "There may be more yet coming," he told him. "See that they come here."

In the warmth and safety of the home, the travelers ate and drank long and happy until they were satisfied, and Adrien bade the man with whom he had spoken before to come up and speak with Benjamin and Eliezer, also.

He opened the cabin door to a room unexpectedly filled with people. "Sam!" he said with surprise.

"Adrien," replied the happy farmer who sat sipping on his tea. "Thank you for the letter."

"Did you know it was me at the time?" Adrien asked, remembering his presentation. He had worn a hooded cloak to shadow his face and spoke barely a word as he gave it.

"Only after I saw the address," Samuel admitted. "No one else writes like my sister."

Eliezer smiled at Dorcus, kissing her cheek, and Adrien watched them gladly. There was some great relief he took from seeing the two of them so unusually expressive and happy.

'I had hoped they might find some time to relax here and enjoy each other as they should have so very long ago.' "I wouldn't dare to contradict you," Adrien replied, smiling. "But I do have news for you all," he went on, his tone becoming a bit more serious, though he deeply regretted the need to inform them of the visitors. He would have just as gladly left the mater until the following day to afford the group another day of tranquil rest and peaceful solace. "This man is Rupert Hartman, and he is from Asrymn," he said, presenting the man to the room full of people. "He rode with McFarland, and he brings with him some news I thought you all should hear."

He motioned for the man to step forward and coming into the living room, passing him the floor. The straggly haired foreigner took his floppy taupe hat in his hand, now battered from the weather, and slowly walked his way to the center.

"Well," he said, nervously gripping his way around the brim of his hat, "ladies and gentlemen, it's my regret to be the one to inform ya that Representative McFarland won't be joinin' ya here. See, he was captured by Captain Zahaynei when we was not too far to north country, and when they caught him, they caught a few of our men. Now, most of 'em, they just got shot, but him they treated especially badly. They beat him off the horse he rode and bound his wrists and tied him to the animal. Then, they rode the horse and ordered him to follow. He walked so long as he could, then ran, and they dragged him when he could not run. We followed him as long as we were able, but there came a time we had go or run the risk of being taken. He told us when we volunteered that this would be a dangerous business, that a lot of us wouldn't make the route. He told us that when one gets caught, the rest go on, and he told us, 'Even if it's me, you still keep going on and deliver the message.' So, on we went til ya found us here."

"Good man," Eliezer muttered, closing his eyes with pained expression.

Dorcus's eyes dropped in sadness, and the atmosphere of the room changed with the news of the representative's capture.

"You delivered the message. Are there many more to come, then?" Benjamin asked him, his voice betraying his hidden concern. "Did the people receive you gladly?"

"Oh, yes. We had very good reception. You should see them coming out by the droves. The remnant from Sa'ar and from Tyra, from Pergum and from Euphess. Why, even some of the folks from Laoce seemed repentant enough when we read them the letter the Ambassador sent them. I wouldn't be surprised to see 'em. Delphi gave us the finest reception of anybody. Got the whole town in such an uproar over it that I'd be surprised to see a man still on the street, and then, of course, you have us, or... what's left of us, anyway," Rupert added with a proud and determined smile.

Adrien let out a breath, thankful for the good news as Benjamin smiled, relieved.

'He's kept a great deal of concern over this, hasn't he? Well... now he can see how truly we come to his aid. May it be a balm to his spirit as the people gather to serve him, and may we see the day that all of this is finally over and our suffering ended. Until that day, to you, O King be our lives... and our hearts.'

Chapter 72. The Pledge

The scent of death was in the air, carried by a gentle breeze from Elkshire as they approached the crest of the hill which overlooked the damaged city. Avera felt her body tense, and she noticed that everyone had become uncharacteristically quiet.

'Out of respect for the dead,' she pondered.

Her mind could not fathom the destruction which was surely waiting on the other side of that hill top, and she swallowed, steeling herself for the gruesome sight.

The messengers from Asrymn had told them that when the people inquired as to where they might assemble to serve their King and his prince, McFarland had directed them back to Elkshire prior to his capture, and they all had done so after him. So, the group had decided to travel again to Elkshire, bringing with them only light accommodations for the journey.

Avera's feet reached the top of the hill and stopped, looking down upon the remnants of Elkshire and scorched earth. Soot and ash covered the ground below in the circle of the black and barren wood. Bodies laid red and rotting all throughout the streets of the razed city. Avera looked on with horror, and she felt her stomach turn as the smell of human decomposition filled her nostrils.

'How could they do this?'

Benjamin stood beside her, and she saw his eyes close in pain and anger as he hung his head and cried. His fists and teeth were clenched as the tears fell softly from his princely face.

'His heart is torn. These are his people and his heart is broken with them, but weren't they Zephyr's citizens, also? And yet he slaughtered them...'

"I could have saved them," Benjamin muttered as the tears rolled down his cheeks.

She looked at him, alarmed. "Ben..." she breathed, trying to console him, but she didn't have the words.

As the others came up to the hill top, they paused in the same shock and horror. Jordan's eyes dropped, welling with tears, and he grabbed his wife and held her tightly as he silently wept. Ignatius was speechless, his eyes wide with astonishment at the godless sight of an above ground cemetery without any stones. Justice and Kypher kept their eyes fixed on the remnants of the city, and she saw the anger burning in their fiery gaze. The messengers from Asrymn removed their hats and held them, their heads bowed in a woeful reverence while the others stayed in saddened silence.

"Reminds me of the raids," Vanguard quietly noted, his face fallen like the evening sun.

"You were right," Eliezer said, his eyes shifting over to Dorcus beside him, "this is worse... far worse than what we had seen before."

Dorcus turned her eyes over to him, glazed with dark shadows of long gone memories. "It is, isn't it?" she despondently responded.

He nodded sadly in acknowledgment of all the hurt the years had rent tearing at her heart. "My dear, all *shall* be well," he assured her, reaching to touch her face.

She turned away, still clearly grieving. "Will it, though?" she asked him, despairing.

"*Dorcus...*" he appealed to her gently, seemingly hurt by the doubtful remark.

"Yes!" Sam said, lifting his head and looking past them. "Look!" he cried, encouraged with his sights set on the city before them.

Avera turned her eyes ahead as the others lifted their heads to the marvelous sight of a growing multitude. There came people from every region and tongue as they journeyed from north and south and west to gather there before their king.

"*What?*" Benjamin breathed, wiping his eyes on his sleeve, amazed.

Adrien smiled. "Your citizens, my lord," he said, placing an encouraging hand on Benjamin's shoulder. "It seems you have an army."

Benjamin broke down again to tears with water flooding from his eyes. He held his head in his hands, and he said, "If my Lord has pleasure in his servant and delights himself to honor him, though I am lowly and a youth, lightly esteemed among men, then let the gates of Hölle arise and swallow up my enemies, because they have raised their heads against my Lord and his servants to war with them, let Himmel cast them down into the depths of utter darkness and unending fires beneath."

Avera looked at him, astounded. There was a certain power which accompanied his words, a power with which she was relatively unfamiliar, and, when she raised her eyes, she saw a ghostly figure like a translucent specter wrapped in light with light radiating out of him. She was amazed by him and trembled at his majesty for there was a mighty force surrounding him. When he appeared, it was as if he had come from nowhere, his body fading into view as walked up the grassy slope to meet them. The closer he came, the more she feared for his holiness, because she knew that he was different than she was, glorious and right.

She stepped back as she felt the weight of his presence, and he paused in his progression to look at her with his empty face.

'*Who are you?*' she asked in wonder.

"Don't you know?" was the reply, spoken in silence to some place deep within her. *"I am the one sent from Himmel to help you, the promise of the King to His people. As they have called me, so I come."*

His words were gentle and pleasant to her inner being, and she smiled at him, finding some strange attraction to the man.

'Were you the one at the library before?' she asked again.

He nodded.

She returned the gesture with thoughtful consideration. *'You're the reason I'm here, then.'*

Again, he nodded.

'Thank you.'

She felt him smile, and he placed a hand on her shoulder, causing a love like warm liquid honey to flow softly through her. He was so very kind that she felt a great comforting relief under the weight of his gentle touch.

Then, he turned to Benjamin and placed his hand over the prince's heart as he raised the other in a pledge. *"I, your Lord, have promised, and I will not change my mind. I will give you strength and help you in the fight. Therefore, let your heart take courage. I will deliver the kingdom into your hands and strike down your enemies before you."*

He spoke the words over his prince and a smile appeared on Benjamin's face as he spoke it, the young man given to glowing countenance in the glory of his splendor. Then, just as suddenly as he appeared, he vanished in a brilliant flash of sparkling white light.

Avera blinked, amazed, and looked on Ben with wonder. "You'll win," she said, smiling at him.

He looked at her with a questioning glance, intrigued. "Oh?"

She nodded.

"Hm... fascinating," Eliezer said, watching her.

Dorcus's eyes moved to Avera with an inquiring gaze. "You see him, too, dear, don't you?" she asked her.

Avera looked at her, surprised. "Yes, ma'am," she said, feeling as though she was being examined. "Do you, then?" she asked, returning the question in an attempt to remove herself as the object of their consideration.

Dorcus nodded. "I do."

"But so does she," Eliezer remarked, his eyes moving over to Dorcus as he touched a finger to his mouth in silent contemplation. "How interesting."

Dorcus smiled, studying Avera with careful examination and deep thought. "Interesting indeed."

Chapter 73. For Our Sakes

'Surely, it is for the dead we find ourselves silent here before our King as we march onward into fate.'

Her despair had evaporated at the spirit's presence, but the fact that Avera had seen him also intrigued her. Knowing him was one thing, but *seeing* their spectral friend was entirely another, and to *hear* him... that was something very rare, indeed.

'Perhaps, she is a seer, as well, then. Though, she may not know it. He did lead her to us, and she did speak with him as I do. I saw and heard it. Eliezer cannot see; he merely senses, but he knows him when he comes.'

She stopped in her stride and turned to her friend. "Eliezer," she said, admiringly.

He paused, turning to her with an affectionate smile and inquiring eyes. "Yes, my dear?"

She smiled back at him, her heart filled with a loving warmth. "I'm sorry... about before," she said, addressing him with a heartfelt apology for her prior response to his comforting reassurance of good.

He shook his head with a sigh. "Miss Garner," he said, standing in the ashy field of burned down trees and remnants of grass, "you know that the thing is already forgiven you and the matter I have very much forgotten. You know my feelings. How could I ever hold a scrap against you?"

Her face flushed. She would have hugged him were it not for the public nature of the setting.

"I um..." she bashfully replied.

He grinned broadly, delighted. "Come along," he said, taking hold of her arm, "to the city we must march."

She smiled. *'Eliezer...'*

Her heart was full of affection for him.

'Even here, all is well.'

It had always been a wonder to her how much brighter any situation seemed when she had him to partner in it. Her heart fluttered happily as they walked together through the dust of fallen ash towards the city and its desolation.

She saw the bodies lying on the ground and frowned, a chilling though crossing her innocent mind.

"Do you suppose Timothy made it?" she asked him, remembering her brother.

He looked at her with eyes of concern as they both travelled on. He continued to pull her along with his hand wrapped around her arm.

"I don't know," he told her honestly, unwilling to lie to her, even for her comfort.

Her eyes dropped as her heart sank, and he saw her sadness.

"We'll look for him," he promised her. "If he *is* here, we'll find him and bury him properly."

"Alright," she nodded.

She was always very thankful for his tenderness and care towards her. His face had only recently recovered from the pain her brother had caused him, and that was only the outward injury, which surely could not compare to the hurt he which had inflicted to her companion's heart, yet here he showed compassion for her concern and promised to honor the memory of a man who hated him.

"Eliezer," she said, her heart brimming with loving admiration.

His eyes moved back to her as he went.

"Thank you," she said softly.

"Dorcus, my dear," he said, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath in, "you are making it awfully hard for me not to make a public spectacle of my affections."

"Oh, am I, Mr. Webber?" she asked, amused.

"*Yes*," he replied emphatically, "*very much*."

"And why would that be?" she asked, teasing him.

Eliezer shook his head with his eyes tightly closed and a look of comical vexation. "*Dorcus...*" he grumbled before breaking helplessly into laughter. "Alright. You know why, but you know that I shouldn't tell you now, either."

Dorcus nodded. "Understood. It's bad timing."

"Precisely," Eliezer responded, then stopped, peering into her eyes with sincerity. "I am so very thankful for you," he told her.

His eyes were like lights, gazing into her heart with love, and she fluttered her eyes, smiling at him as her face turned rose. She hugged him, pressing her face into his chest. For a moment, she didn't care about the others and their thoughts; she just wanted to be near him, to let him know she loved him, even if she couldn't say it now. He nuzzled the top of her head, running his fingers through her hair.

"Dorcus..." he whispered. "Oh, my dear... my *dear*, sweet lady, I promise you, I *promise* you, one day, I will love you as my own flesh."

Dorcus smiled, looking up at him. His eyes were filled with affectionate tears, and she noticed that Jordan was watching them with an approving smile. He nodded when he saw her eye catch him, and she broke away from Eliezer's grasp, embarrassed.

"Jordan's watching," she said with a shy laugh, bowing her head and moving the ash with her shoe.

"I know," he said, removing a strand of hair from her face. He tucked the silver strand behind her ear and smiled at her as he skimmed the perimeter of her face with his fingers. "It's alright. He loves his wife, also. So, I'm sure he'll understand me."

Dorcus was stunned. She looked up at him with wide eyes and saw the streak of red settle on his lightly tanned skin.

Eliezer let out a breath of laughter, shaking his head as he lowered it in total embarrassment. "I uh... I'm sorry," he sputtered softly through laughter.

Dorcus shook her head, unsure of what to say. "Ah..."

He laughed, raising his head with a grin. "Come on," he said, "forget my silly sayings and ill-timed manner, and let's see about your brother's welfare, shall we?"

She nodded, glad to be excused from the conversation, and he kissed her cheek lightly.

"Good," he said with a smile, taking hold of her arm and pulling her along.

The city was razed except for the Council Building, which was somewhat charred but nevertheless standing. As they passed through the remnants of Elkshire, they kept their eyes open, scanning the decaying, lifeless forms which scattered the city streets and houses. None of them were Timothy.

'It's incredible what evil people are capable of, given the chance...'

"Eliezer..." she addressed softly.

"He may not be here," her friend suggested.

She smiled a sad, hopeful smile. "Yes. Perhaps if we check the Council building," she suggested.

Eliezer smiled, patting her hand with a touch of gentle comfort. "Of course," he said, obliging.

The two of them walked together into the wooden hall along with Sam and Jordan, who were helping them with their search. The interior of the building was cold, dark, and eerie.

The building's insides were in shambles, and Eliezer pulled her towards him with an insistent tug as a charred board fell down from the ceiling to the place where she had been standing only a short moment prior. He gave her a tight squeeze before releasing her again, grateful for her safety.

"I'll find your brother," he told her, "but I won't lose you in the process."

She smiled. *'So it ever was.'*

She stuck near him after that, hanging on his arm and keeping close to his side. She knew that would help to calm his nerves and constant concern for her safety and wellbeing.

"Eliezer, should you have really brought a lady on a mission for the dead?" Jordan asked.

"Actually, I haven't brought her. This isn't my mission at all;" Eliezer replied, ducking between two planks which blocked the doorway to the boardroom chambers, "it's hers, and she's brought us."

Jordan chuckled mightily. "All right, then," he laughed, amused.

Eliezer entered the dreary room and froze, and Dorcus followed close behind him.

"Oh, goodness..." he muttered.

Dorcus ducked into the room through the wooden beams and hurried beside him. There in the room were the bodies of four of the council members - Ivan, Starver, Laura, and DelMont all lined in a row with their throats slit and their discolored flesh stretched from rot. Still, Timothy was absent.

"We should bury them," Jordan said, coming in after them.

Eliezer nodded, "Yes, of course."

"Still, where's Timmy?" Sam asked, eyes closed. "He must have been here. Did they take him?"

Eliezer's eyes widened, shifting with horror at the sight. "They must have," he said, "but I couldn't say why, unless..."

"For our sakes," Dorcus suggested, finishing his sentence for him.

"Yes," Eliezer responded, turning his eyes to meet with hers, "for our sakes."

Chapter 74. The Caravan

She had never seen so many people from so many diverse regions, paths, and occupations. Even in Pyre, there had never been such unity among the people, despite the government's efforts to make everyone the same. Here, it was different. There was something more genuine, and Avera knew that she liked it much better than Zephyr's form of unity among men.

There was work going on to bury the dead there in Elkshire, which Jordan oversaw. Together, many of the men labored to dig the graves and transport the bodies of the people. For the most part, there was a communal grave prepared for all of them, but the bodies of the representatives were laid aside and each was given its own place out of reverence for the regions.

Benjamin went out to meet the people as they came from north and south and west to gather in the far east of the kingdom, and Avera had gone out with him, watching as he welcomed the weary travelers with love and warmth. After some time of this, she had noticed a significant lack of people from Laoce when a caravan from the southwest came with horses and carts so full of such generous supplies that it would put even the people of Tyra to shame, though all the kingdom knew of their great charity and readiness in service.

They came and laid a multitude of maurium raiment down before their prince, removing their own cloaks of maurium, also, and laying them on the ground before Benjamin.

"My lord," said the man who led them with sorrowful eyes, "forgive us, all we have are these, but, perhaps, you have more fitting garments that you may count us for your service."

Benjamin looked on them in their humility and smiled. "I'll take care of it for you," he mercifully assured them, and he called for Eliezer to assist him.

Then, the two men cast fire down upon the plentiful piles of silver garments; Avera watched in awe and the men from Laoce marveled as the maurium they which they had brought was transformed before their eyes to the pure and glistening white of pyrite.

The men from Laoce bowed themselves with their heads brought low, and again their headman said, "My lord, if it be pleasing to you, let these be taken and given to others, also. For, we have brought many garments out of our great abundance of maurium that your people may be clothed in white and we be relieved of our lack."

Benjamin nodded, agreeing to the request of of the men from Laoce. "Avera," he said, "would you help us unload?"

She nodded with a smile. "Yes, of course," she said, and the three of them assisted the people of the caravan in their unpacking of linens and goods to be committed to the King's service.

Still, she wondered how he could accept them so freely.

'After all that Mr. DelMont did to subvert and offend us, would he welcome these people from Laoce with open arms and gladness? Might they not turn also and offend us in the fight?'

Benjamin looked at her with knowing eyes as he grabbed a pack of garments from the cart as they unloaded. "You're awfully quiet," he commented, casually observing her mood.

"Am I?" she answered blankly. He already knew if he was asking, but she tried to put him off anyway.

"*Yes,*" he said, giving her a look of suspicion. "Is everything alright?" he asked again.

'Why does he always have to leave me room to answer things he already knows? No, Ben. It's not okay? Alright? I'm bothered. I'm scared and I'm offended, but you know that. So, why do you have to ask me?'

"Yes, fine," she lied to cover her feelings, though she knew it was futile to attempt.

He dropped the ream of fabrics back on the wooden oxcart with a bang, pressing it down with his hand, and gave her a serious glance with his amber eyes.

"These people aren't DelMont," he told her sternly. "Did you not see them when they came?" he asked. His words were filled with a passionate care. "Did DelMont kneel before me? Did he bow when I came? Did he lend a thing for my care or levy my cause? Did he give a scrap to my need of his abundance? No, but these people have. They have bowed themselves down before me. They have come in humility and rallied to my cause. They have taken all they have and presented it before me to be committed to my service as an offering and to supply for the needs of my people. If DelMont had opened the door, I would have gone in and supped with him as surely as I would Jordan, but he didn't. These people have. They've come a long way to help us, and I will not turn them away."

Avera nodded slowly with consideration, her eyes falling as his words cut her heart with the knowledge of right. "Ben, I..." she tried to speak but couldn't. The weight of his gaze was too heavy for her tender spirit.

"*Hey,* Avera..." he said softly, his countenance changing to one more light and comfortingly as he moved to touch her face, "I don't mean that as a condemnation." He smiled, lifting her head with an affectionate gaze. "I take you the same," he told her, "and every part of you is lovely."

She looked at him, her sadness disappearing, and her face broke into a small grin as she caught his amber eyes glowing with a loving concern. She thought back on the time since they had met and realized that he had showed her the same merciful patience.

'How is he always so kind to me? Even when I ran, he came to save me at the risk of his own life. Still, I...'

"Ben, why do you care?" she asked him, overwhelmed by the love he had exhibited.

"It's my job to care," he said, "but, more than that, it is my *heart* to care. I think you are most *definitely* to be desired."

Avera watched his eyes closely, almost not believing him, but she knew his words were genuine. "I ran from you, but you came after me," she reminded him, trying to make sense of the reason.

"Of course," he said with a smile. "You're worth chasing after... and so are they," he added, giving a nod to the people as they laid down their maurium to be changed. "Do you understand me?" he asked her. His manner was soft and delicate towards her as he spoke.

"I do," she said, her eyes straying to the gentle touch of his fingers as they lightly stroked her tender skin.

Benjamin nodded. "Good," he said. "Then, help me unpack the rest of these fabrics."

Avera nodded. "Ben," she said, calling his attention back away from the supplies of the wagon. "Thank you," she added, wanting to convey her gratitude in feeling.

He smiled at her fondly, "Of course."

Chapter 75. The Fires and the Candlesticks

Benjamin stood at the height of the hill above Elkshire giving to the men who came pure white garments of sparkling pyrite which he and Eliezer had made from the materials which the men from Laoce offered. They had received a steady stream of travelers there throughout the days of their renewed presence in Elkshire, and the later they came, the more ragged they appeared.

Then came some men from Asrymn on the second day, they having decided to tarry three in accordance with Representative McFarland's original timeline, and approached their prince with a humble weariness. These men were among the last of the riders who had ridden with McFarland to deliver the message of his coming to the people. Their bodies were beaten and bruised, their countenance weary for the distance they had traveled and the constancy of their labour, and they fell down on their knees before him, dressed in their tattered, dust covered clothes.

"My lord," said the man who spoke for them, lifting his wounded eyes to the beautiful face of his glorious prince, "how long? How long must we wait for the ending of trials and the coming of your justice for us? For our enemies are great and they have by every means reviled us."

Benjamin looked on him, his eyes filled with the fires of compassion, and he looked on his brothers, also. "Peace now, my friends," he answered with a smile, "and rest a little longer until the number is fulfilled of your brethren here who have borne the message as you have to the regions, but be assured, soon... *soon* is the day of our triumph, and the blood of the righteous I *shall* avenge."

And he gave them clean garments of pure fabric like white snow-covered lilies.

"Your servants, my lord," they said as they put on the illustrious garments, "and thank you. May our King restore that which was stolen and reward gladness for the days of our lord's affliction."

Benjamin smiled, his breast filled with love for his people and a great gratitude for their steadfast loyalty to him.

'These men have come so far to fight. Please, do not allow their sacrifice to go in vain again, and help us in the strife, O Lord; for, who am I to bow before?'

He offered them a slight bow of humble reception. "And may our Lord avenge the blood of his martyrs on the necks of his enemies," he replied with sincerity and politeness.

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It was on that evening that he found Eliezer standing in the scorched room of the Council Building wherein they had presented their case and appealed to the ambassadors of the regions to hear them. The room was dark but for the seven candles which the people had lit on golden

stands of pyrite as a memorial, and Benjamin paused as he entered. Both men were wearing their ceremonial tunics, the golden crest and accents of which caught the movement of the flames and became alive, glowing with the light from the candles.

Eliezer stood staring into the fire and did not turn to greet him.

"The lamp for Euphess keeps going out," he said and sniggered, his voice tearful and mourning. "I can't seem to keep it lit, which is... *appropriate*, I suppose."

Eliezer closed his eyes, and Benjamin caught a glimpse of the tears as they fell from his face and captured the light from the flickering flames on their way to splatter against the ground.

"Ivan never came to see me," his friend went on, continuing his tragic tale, "the whole of the time we were in Elkshire, he never spared the time for so much as a conversation."

"Eliezer, I'm sorry," Ben told him, offering his sympathies as a form of comfort. "I know that Mr. Falls was a friend of yours."

"*Once*," Eliezer corrected, "but no longer. He proved that, I suppose... *regrettably*."

"And what of the others?" Benjamin queried, probing his mind.

Eliezer let out a gracious sigh. "I never knew them, but they didn't give me much of a chance to, either, Ben. You know that. Of course, it's no less tragic." He turned to Benjamin, his eyes leaving the mesmerizing warmth of the fire as it burned. "I was supposed to be the Council's advocate in Pyre when I hadn't even met half of them, and when we did meet, we butted heads."

"They made their own decisions, Eliezer," the young prince reminded him. "You couldn't have forced them."

Eliezer nodded, putting his hand over his mouth and pulling thoughtfully at his beard. "Perhaps," he muttered. "Yes, of course, you're right," he said, shaking his head to focus his scattered mind. "But still, I couldn't do a blessed thing to help them."

Benjamin blinked, amazed by his faithful friend's despondence. "Maybe, *but* there is still someone you can help."

"And who would that be?" Eliezer's voice caught as he asked him.

"Timothy."

Eliezer closed his eyes and cried, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"That's why I came," Benjamin went on, "to make a request of you."

"Ben, you know that I would..."

Benjamin stopped him.

'He is always so willing to hear my requests and so anxious to lend to me his service, but this time... I want him to be sure of it. More than he ever has. He has given me so much, but I come asking ever more.'

"I know you aren't a man of war, but ride with me to battle," he asked him, making known his desires to his friend. "I understand you're very gifted with a sword."

Eliezer snickered, shaking his head at him, "Metaphorically, maybe, but I never had much mettle for the blade."

Benjamin smiled, thankfully amused. *'If I could hold a conversation without a joke from him, I would be sorely disappointed.'*

"You won't need one," Benjamin assured him. "I have a different task in mind."

Eliezer's eyes shifted, glancing over him with careful interest.

"I want you to come with me to High Palace. I need a man to find the lost representatives. Ramus's men may seek to slay them if they see the battle is turning."

"Ben, I don't know..." Eliezer said, shaking his head at the thought.

"Who better than you?" Ben asked him.

"Ben..." Eliezer began to softly protest.

"*Please*," Benjamin adjured him, "all I'm asking is that you save them, if at all able."

"There is no guarantee that they are even still alive," Eliezer reminded him, warning of what possible tragedy they may find.

"But supposing they are," Benjamin steadfastly responded, "would you leave them there to die without trying?"

Eliezer smiled, letting out a breath of laughter as he shook his head again. "Of course not, Ben," he said. "I will go, but only because you are asking."

Benjamin grinned, triumphant, and bowed himself in humble courtesy. "Thank you, Ambassador."

"Ben," Eliezer chuckled, looking on him with fondness. "I am so very proud of the man you are and of the king you will become."

Benjamin lifted his eyes to meet the orange sparks of his friend's, and his face became entirely determined. "I promise, Eliezer, I will not fail you," he said, the words sworn from the depths of himself.

"I never thought you might," Eliezer assured him, wrapping the young prince in his arms as a father would his child. "I have always believed, and now I know, that in all things you will live well, Benjamin. For, as our hearts are dedicated, so are our lives, also, dedicated."

Chapter 76. Love and Death

"No! *Absolutely* not!"

It was morning, and Eliezer was not the least bit amused by the stubbornness of his companion as she looked at him with those soft blue eyes swirling with a harbor mist which penetrated him, piercing straight to his heart, and blinked.

"*No!* You are *absolutely not* coming with me!" he repeated, warring against her silent resolution.

"But, Eliezer, I thought that you liked it when I follow you," Dorcus contested, fastening her pyrite shawl. The tiny gold button at the center of the latch suited her kindly.

"Yes, but..." Eliezer softened his tone as he felt his heart tugging at him, "I didn't take you last time, did I?"

Dorcus smiled, her eyes glancing over at him as she paused briefly from adjusting the pure white fabric. "You weren't planning on getting arrested again, were you?"

Eliezer's lips turned to a small smile as their eyes locked on one another's, and a fierce determination consumed him that he should not lose this game of wits. "*No*," he said, "I can assure you, I am *not... but*, High Palace is no place for *you*, dear lady. It is dark and treacherous... filled with horrors, and... no place for someone so sweet."

A small grin appeared on Dorcus's face, and he caught a glint of happiness in her eyes as they dropped and her face lit with the glow quiet flattery. "But Eliezer," she said, "it's my brother you're looking for. We don't even know if he's alive. After all of this, would you really disallow me from seeing him?"

Eliezer felt his heart melting, and he knew that he wouldn't be able to deny her much longer.

'Oh, my dear... you have much too sweet a heart.'

He took a step towards her, closing the distance between them, and lifted her face to his. He rubbed his thumb across her jawbone gently. "My dear, sweet lady," he said, gazing into her blue eyes with his heart full of affection, "you must know that I would *very much* prefer it if you were to stay here, where you are safe from fear and harm. Even so, I will not prevent you. If you are determined to join me, then so be it. We will go together; but it is a dark journey and one from which I would have gladly spared you."

Dorcus was smiling, happily content, and she nodded. "We will go together, then."

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It was still early when they readied the horses to go, and Eliezer helped Dorcus into her saddle as he often did.

"Promise me you'll be safe," he softly requested, reluctant to relinquish his hold of her hand once she had successfully mounted.

"I doubt you would let anything happen to me," she replied with a playful smile.

"Yes, well..." he grinned. "All is well, then."

Benjamin came riding across the brow of the hill up above them, surveying the great multitude of the army assembled. He nodded, catching sight of them, and turned his horse aside, trotting down the grassy slope to meet with his royal delegates before their eventual departure.

"Prince Caliphus," Eliezer said, giving a brief bow of courtesy.

"Prince Benjamin," Dorcus stated, offering a similar display of reverence.

"Ambassador Webber, Seer Garner," the cheerful prince addressed from his noble steed white as his raiment. "I am blessed to see you well this fine day of our Lord's deliverance. I trust you are both prepared for the battle which is before us?"

"Yes, my lord," they both replied at once, casting each other a quick glance of amusement at their oneness in response.

Benjamin smiled with a curious satisfaction. "Ambassador," he said, "am I to take it that Seer Garner will be joining us at High Palace?"

Eliezer smiled awkwardly, unable to stop himself as his face flushed red and he began to feel the heat of love and embarrassment. "Yes, my lord... *regrettably*," he said with a humble bow. His eyes shot over to Dorcus, "Unless, that is, you are able to be more convincing than I was. The lady is steadfastly determined to accompany us."

Benjamin let out a laugh.

'It is good to see him with such a happy confidence. Perhaps, then, our worries are at last behind us.'

"I never meant for Dorcus not to come with us," Ben said, shaking his head at him with unusual joy-filled merriment.

Eliezer blinked, aghast at the response of the young royal. "What?" he asked, astounded.

"Eliezer," Benjamin replied, still laughing, "when I asked, I asked for you both. You didn't really think that I would expect you to join me without her, did you? Come now, when I call one, I call both. You're practically the same person."

Eliezer smiled sheepishly and bowed himself at the waist, his heart full of appreciation. "Perhaps, one is still a little prettier than the other?" he suggested, raising his countenance to his prince. "Perchance you were having troubles telling us apart. Though, which of us it may be, who can say?"

Dorcus chuckled at his silly jokes, something which she, doubtless, had come to expect from him, and Benjamin grinned as his eyes lightened with fondness.

Eliezer smiled, satisfied with the results of his jest. *'Good. So long as they're laughing.'*

"Has Avera made up her mind about coming?" Eliezer asked him, venturing to what he perceived to be a similar subject.

Benjamin nodded, becoming a bit more serious. "Yes," he informed them happily, "she says that she has had her fill of running. She has made up her mind, and, leaving former things, she has decided to fight alongside us."

Dorcus nodded. "That's good," she stated softly.

Eliezer looked on her with interest. "Yes, it is, isn't it?"

Dorcus nodded again in agreement. "Yes, *very* good."

"I have instructed her to remain with Adrien, Justice, and Alexander," he told them. "No sense in her following us into High Palace. Her presence will be greater on the field, and she'll be safer there, as well... certainly more so than she would be with us. We three are Zephyr's execration. We call his sins to remembrance, that he should know there is a recompense for evil. The time has come that he should see he is a man and no god, and death is not greater than the one who overcame it. So shall we set our eyes for his throne and take it, because this, our King, has overcome Death, and he along with it."

Eliezer nodded, impressed by his wisdom in speech. "So, as we die with him, so are we glorified, also," he quoted.

Benjamin grinned, "Precisely."

"But *love* is *stronger* than death," Dorcus added, her eyes smiling down at him.

"And jealousy as *cruel* as the grave," he replied as he finished the thought, returning her gaze with a gladsome smile of affection.

'Oh, Lord... how I love her. If you would grant me this one request: that I may have her, also, to wife. For my heart for her is good and to her it is wholly cleft. Here I am again, so close. I pray, dear King, do not deprive me; for I am a poor man to be pitied and a blessed man to be praised. But all in time.'

Chapter 77. The Wall

The light kissed the earth with its golden excellence and comforting warmth as the army marched on from Elkshire towards Pyre. Avera stood among the ranks, walking on alongside the people in their steady march onward into battle with Benjamin at their head. The clouds began to gather and the light dimmed as they approached the maurium capital. The dark haze which overshadowed the city began to impede her view, and she wondered how they would fight when they could barely see.

"We're losing visibility," Kypher commented, and she could sense the tension in his voice.

"It's the maurium," Adrien informed them. "They treat it with magic to enhance the darkness. If the magic is removed, the maurium collapses."

"*Collapses!*" Kypher said, astounded. "Is that why it turns to ash when it comes into contact with pyrite, then?"

Adrien nodded. "Maurium is nothing more than the decayed remnants of planetyroid held together by the particles of residual magic. It is exposed to exceptionally high levels of entropy, which makes it extremely unstable."

"I see," Kypher considered, grabbing his chin with interest.

"That's incredible," Avera said, shaking her head at the thought. "Ben told me some about the maurium, but I never realized it was quite so manufactured. It's a wonder that... no one ever noticed."

Adrien lowered his eyes, seeming to become uncomfortable. "Well, there is the KLP to be considered."

Avera's face twisted with discomfort. "Yes, of course," she muttered shyly, sneaking another glance over at Adrien.

'It must be hard for him... all of this. Not to march on the city but to think on all the times he came against it. Now he fights another world, a world he helped create, and he fights against the works of his hands. To think that he would bring the light to deliver the people he himself had set in bondage and that he would war against his life's work and give it all to a king he had helped to dethrone... it is quite a remarkable story, one almost too remarkable to believe, but... I know his heart is turned, that he has received pardon as I have.'

The sky grew darker as they approached the city's eastern gate, the looming grey storm clouds pregnant with rain. Avera looked up the the city before her and took a deep breath of resolve, reminding herself of the promise she made.

'Alright... like I told you, I'm done. There's no more running now. No more letting fear control me. I'm going to face this battle head on, and I know that you'll help me beat it... please? Please, help. I need it. I really do. I need you.'

She felt a confidence building in her breast as she addressed the King with a newfound trust and boldness. She had always thought him too cold to care, too far to hear her, but now... now it was different. She knew that he did care. He heard her prayer and answered with more than she could ever ask. Himmel was not so far in the end, but it was near enough to touch her, close enough to make an impact on her solitary life and the aching world around her. She knew that now. She felt it somewhere deep inside, some part of her she never knew. It was a part of her that was dead, but it had come alive in his word. At first, she had found it hard to believe, but not anymore; that nagging of doubt which gnawed at her core had gone and finally left her. So, now she knew... she found a love in his heart she never knew.

The rain began to fall from the clouds and there was thunder heard in the heavens as the darkness overshadowed them. The rain began to pour down harder as they approached the city wall, pummeling them with a dark heaviness.

Adrien held out his palm, catching in his hand some of the murky black liquid which fell from the sky on top of them, and he lifted his head, staring up into the clouds.

"It's not natural," he muttered, dropping his hand and letting the water plummet to the ground beside him.

"What isn't?" Avera asked him, curious.

"The rain," he said, frantically rushing forward. "Eliezer!" he cried, running through the crowded ranks of the army in pyrite, "Eliezer, this isn't a storm; it's a spell!"

'A spell! Then, this is a magic rain meant to harm us... and how can we escape? The trees are behind us. There's no cover here!'

Eliezer looked back at him with his eyes full of concern and he nodded. "Of what sort?"

"Black waters," Adrien replied. "It's a Draconian ritual."

"And what does it do?" his old friend asked him.

By this time, Adrien had made his way to the ground beside the ambassador's horse and walked alongside him, conveying the message with a zealous fervor.

"The water is filled with dragon's breath," he told him. "Listen and you'll hear it screaming. They mean to summon the ancient beast and raise up warriors from the earth."

'What? Hear it?'

Avera listened closely, tuning her ears to the sound of the rain as it fell. There was a faint screaming like a piercing, desperate cry which hit her eardrums from afar. She caught some

water in her hand as she had seen Adrien do and waited for the pool of black liquid to accumulate in her hand, watching as it did. There, before her eyes, she watched tiny dragons form and swim through the water. They may have been in every drop but it was only those which landed safely in the water who lived to open their wings and raise their blackened forms like unfinished molds of softened clay without detail. They made the most horrible roaring and screeching as they raised their heads above the water and ducked back under it, thrashing their tales and teeth.

'Incredible,' Avera thought as she considered them and dropped them. *'Such monstrosities should not live.'* Again, there was the screaming as the water struck against the ground and the tiny dragons were swallowed up by the earth beneath them.

"What do you want us to do, Ben?" the Ambassador asked him, turning his face to his prince.

"Then what do you suggest?" Benjamin replied with a question to Adrien as he brought his horse back around towards the knight and his ambassador.

"Keep marching," Adrien urged him. "We have to make it to the wall, but march on knowing that we are already in the midst of battle. This storm marks the resistance, but once we make it to the wall and breach it then we can contact Kallida and the magicians to put an end to this madness. Besides, our only hope for victory is you, O Prince. You must defeat Zephyr in battle and slay him. Once that is done, there will be nothing left but victory."

"And the only way is through that wall," Benjamin murmured, contemplating the thought with earnest intensity. "Very well," he said, turning his horse again to the front and urging it forward at a hurried rate. "Continue onward!" he ordered, his voice ringing out through the ranks of soldiers, and the men began to run together at the wall.

Chapter 78. Find Me

Adrien raised his head to the sound of the black waters ritual as the unending voice of the tiny, minuscule dragons berated him. To the others there, it was a sound like a high pitched scream, but to him it was the words of the dragon tongue which led to the creature's summoning.

"Dezu draco mortek, dominus mundus, dominus coelum. Dezu exsindo haxikus vestris mortek. Detraxis amarte portentik glaukxis. Exuros pux hominus exis fazik malumi provenias," the voice of the dragons repeated in the harsh tones of their dark melody, and it drained in his ears continuously, maddening him.

Adrien drew his sword and swung it out into the rain, splattering the drops and, for a moment, disrupting the magicians' song.

"Well, if it isn't Lord Blackridge," a voice came from behind him, snide and condescending.

'Kallida.'

He turned to the sight of the dark shadowy figure which was built up and formed before his eyes from the tarry black liquid which covered the ground. Together, the droplets were pulled up from the earth and assembled into the likeness of the Inquisitor, his body molded out of utter darkness.

"You know, the king isn't very happy with you ever since that little stunt you pulled with Charlenade." Kallida smirked. "Don't look so startled, Blackridge. You've seen this all before. You've done it yourself."

The people continued to rush by them as Adrien stood silent before the Inquisitor and the large drops of magic rain splattered on his face, stinging his skin with the tiny bites of nipping dragons as their bodies deteriorated.

"If you're wondering why they're not stopping, it's because they can't see me, Blackridge - only you. These people? They're not familiar with magic as you are. They don't know what to look for to see it."

"What is it you want?" Adrien asked, becoming annoyed by the dark presence of his rival.

Kallida laughed, his lips parting into an evil grin. "I just want to know one thing, Blackridge - *why?* Why would you turn and serve Caliphus after everything you have done to destroy him?"

Blackridge looked the magician's copy in the eyes, and he said, "There is no power, Kallida, no position, no magic, no gain which will ever change a man's soul or ease his conscience. Death is something we're born with. Life is a gift, one which is received by far too few a people," he shook his head, "but I will not be a casualty of my Lord's denial."

"Pity," the mage replied. "You could have had what you wanted, but now it's your life that's demanded. You know, *treason* is a serious offense."

Adrien watched him closely, trying to discern his true intentions. *'He wants something. What is it? What is he truly trying to accomplish?'*

"You still don't get it do you, Blackridge? It's *you* I want. I want your position, and for that, I'll take your life. So, come and find me, Blackridge. Come and stop the dragon's summoning. Come find me, or I'll find you. We'll have a duel for old times, only *this* time, I'll kill you... just like every one of your friends."

Adrien took his sword and thrust it through the body of the apparition with a cry of attack.

Kallida laughed as the shadowy figure of his specter moved to fit his blade. "You can't kill me, Blackridge," he said, his voice brimming with a mocking confidence. "You know as well as I do, you're still the same old man with the same old weakness."

"You *will* die, Kallida, and I *will* stop you," Blackridge promised.

The specter laughed, amused. "Will I, Blackridge? Do you *really* think so?"

"Yes," the knight replied fiercely.

"Then, find me," Kallida challenged, and he left, the waters falling as a pool of blackness back upon the earth.

'This may well be a trap, but I don't have much choice in this, do I?'

He set his eyes upwards and studied the swirling clouds of the dragon's storm. The skies were becoming darker as the clouds thickened and began to turn from grey to black and bright purple sparks began to appear and spread through the gathering clouds like the lightning of a spider's web.

'No, not at all.'

Adrien heard a man scream and lowered his gaze to look on the battlefield. The water had begun to be pulled up from the earth and formed into the likeness of warriors, their bodies hardening like clay. The eyes of the warriors glowed red as they became animated and the blood red particles of residual magic hovered around them, falling softly to the ground below as they looked on the armies of the Lord with vengeance, and smoke came spewing from their nostrils as they charged at the people in pyrite. The men froze at the sight of the creatures and the army began to stall, horrified by the appearance of the dark earthen warriors.

'Blast! There isn't much time.'

He rushed forward into the crowd of cowering men, thrust his sword into the heart of one of the warriors, and watched as it began to shake and turn to rubble. The warrior lifted a gloved hand to its face and watched as its fingers began to break and fall to pieces, a process which

continued up its arms and across its entire body until nothing but a black dust remained on the muddy ground below Adrien.

The men stood with gaping mouths as they with wondering eyes beheld the monster turn to dust at the force of his strike, and he turned his head back to address them.

"If you see a warrior, slash it," he told them. "The pyrite will cut right through its armor."

The men answered him nothing, but continued in their place, unmoving.

"Keep going!" he earnestly exhorted them. "If we stop here, we lose. There's plenty of rain here for many more of them, and the only way to stop them from making more is to break through that wall," he said, pointing to the great stones of the seemingly endless barrier before them. "Now," he called, urging them on, "who is with me?"

"I am," Jordan announced pleasantly as he rode up from the rear with his horse at a gallop.

"Jordan," Adrien said as he turned to greet him.

"Came to see what the trouble was," he said with a smile. "What is this fear which so grips you, gentlemen?" he asked, addressing the shell-shocked soldiers.

"Sir," one of the men replied, "our enemies are mighty. They are sorcerers. We have not seen them, and already they plague us with warriors and dragons. How are we to live?"

"Sure," Jordan chuckled, "that and the sea can't open."

Adrien smirked. *'Thank you, Mr. Carder.'*

"Hear, gentlemen," Jordan continued after a brief pause, "if I may suggest you check your doubting at the door and grab ahold of faith, because you're not going to make it through this battle without it. Soon you will see the warriors crumble, the dragons collapse, and the wall fall before us, but, until then, we must charge," Jordan said, exhorting them with his arm extended and finger pointing at the wall. "*Keep moving forward.*" His eyes turned to his friend's spirited apprentice. "Well, Adrien?" he asked, inviting him.

Adrien pulled his arm up and clenched his first with a smile. "Come, men, to the wall! We will bridge the gap and cut down their defenses! We move *forward this day*, and *nothing* will stop us from *victory!*' He turned on his heels and rushed at the line of men in front of him as they charged at the wall.

"*Go!*' Jordan shouted, urging his companions onward, and the men who stalled drew they swords and quickly followed after Blackridge.

Adrien ran faster than he had ever run that day, dashing in between the drops of rain as they fell and landed with the sound of their infernal screaming.

'I built this wall...'

He found the ranks of men in front of him and went on until he had even surpassed the men on horses at the front.

'...and I will tear it down!'

"*Zephyr!*" he cried out loudly with a newfound zeal as he drew his sword back at the wall and lunged it forward, having surpassed even Benjamin in his stride, "You're through!"

He plunged his sword into the wall, the pyrite blade striking deep into the maurium stone, causing it to crack, and there was a sound like crumbling as the wall began to shake.

Chapter 79. Dead in Shackles

The sirens blared and the halls convulsed with magic as the mages prepared a defense and the guardsmen ran off to battle. An announcement rang out through the stone walls around him, and the voice of the man from the intelligence corps came seemingly from all around him, yet remained as clear in his head as were his own thoughts.

"The enemies have broken through the walls, and are now approaching the eastern lawn. They are not to reach the palace under any circumstances. All members of the army, intelligence, and magicians' corps are to report to their battle placements immediately. If you have been given a special assignment, please carry it out at once."

Kelvin's eyes widened. *'They're already through? But how? I know that pyrite is powerful, but...'*

Kelvin felt his blood run cold. There was a part of him that had hoped they would not make it past the eastern gate of the city, that they would have surrendered in the forest or been killed long before this time. He hadn't wanted a piece of this war. He had hoped to be able to say that he was not involved, but now that wouldn't be possible.

'Blackridge is with them... and Webber.' He frowned. *'I would be ashamed to even look them in the eyes, and now may I be expected to kill them? At the very least, I have a hand in their deaths.'* He clenched his teeth in inward pain and closed his eyes tight. *'And Avera? Is she there, also... with Caliphus? I killed him once; I'll do it again if I have to, but... could I ever kill her? If I were to see her when the smoke lifts and the war is over, the rebellion squashed, if I were to see her lying in the lawn, her corpse among the dead... would I care? Would I mourn, or is my heart become so hard that I would even cry for her? I wonder how I could forgive myself my role in her departure, but when my love is finally gone, then maybe my conscience will die, also.'*

"Take care of it," Kallida said, interrupting his thoughts and breaking through the background noise of useless sounds.

Kelvin looked at the vampiric man with a surprised glance and hesitated to answer.

"It doesn't bother you, does it?" the Inquisitor inquired, examining the boy with a dark skepticism.

"Bother me, sir?" Kelvin replied, keeping his voice monotone as his body vibrated with the stress of the king's request.

"That he's your representative," Kallida clarified. He paused, watching the soldier from Sa'ar. "You don't strike me as the kind of person to have strong Kingsmen loyalties, but I understand that it is sentimental to some."

Kelvin shook his head, his eyes turned down. "No, it's alright," he told him. "I won't have any trouble with it."

"Good," Kallida replied, "then go and take care of them. The two have outlived their usefulness. Besides, we wouldn't want to find that they had somehow managed to escape. I'd like to see someone die, and I would prefer it very much if they would *stay dead*."

"And once it's finished," Kelvin asked, "should I report back to you?"

"Stay a while," the magician instructed. "Doubtless, someone will come looking for them, and when they do, see that they all go together. Show these servants of Himmel the reward for their service."

"Of course, sir," Kelvin replied. "I'll see to it that it's take care of."

'At least then I'll be kept away from the action. A couple of executions are a fair price for avoiding the deaths of my friends.'

He turned to go, but Kallida stopped him, making one last request of the young knight apprentice.

"Meet me in the field when you're through," Kallida instructed. "I have a plan to be rid of Blackridge, but it will require your cooperation. You wouldn't be opposed to such a task, would you, Mr. Dehnhardt?"

"No, sir," Kelvin replied dutifully, clenching his teeth.

"Good," Kallida said with a wicked sneer. "The deed will come with ample compensation, I assure you."

'Compensation?' Kelvin closed his eyes at the thought. *'If there is compensation enough to kill a man, then what is the worth of a man's life, anyway? And should I be so opposed? No. Zephyr was right... what is friendship but a momentary means of selfish influence over another's life. I served Blackridge once, but I serve Kallida now. Such is better for me now.'*

He rushed through the halls to the dungeons where the prisoners were held. The sight was cold and dark and the air damp as he strode down the unfinished halls of the underground. It was a cruel thing to put such dignified guests in a room with such shoddy conditions, but such was Zephyr's way and none would dare to question their king.

There were, however, a few cells which the workmen had built better than the rest, the floors and walls having been fashioned in stone. These rooms were more spacious than the rest, rooms without bars and only shackles to chain the men to the walls. The lighting there was a cold blue with a purple hue like magic mixed with maurium. There were kept the representatives to whom Kelvin had been given a special task.

'This is it, then... my last shred of dignity.'

He left the door open as he entered the room, inviting his enemies into his trap, and he drew his steel saber from the sheath at his side.

'But I hear that it stops bothering a man after a while... after his conscience dies and he becomes hard as the stone floors beneath him,' he considered as he stepped, his boots clacking against the silver stones.

McFarland looked up at him from the wall near to his right with his eyes like the light of wounded stars and said, "Is it time, then?"

Kelvin paused and shot the man from Asrymn a questioning glance. "What?" he muttered foolishly.

The representative smiled faintly. "They're here now, aren't they?" he asked, wetting his lips.

Kelvin nodded. "Yes," he said. "It's time."

The man from Asrymn nodded wearily, closing his eyes as he took a laborious breath. "Unchain me, please," the man requested. "I should like to die a free man."

"Such requests!" Garner scoffed. "What does it matter whether our bodies lie chainless on the ground or dead in shackles?"

Kelvin turned to look at the man from Sa'ar who knelt, bound in chains, hanging from the western wall. There was a bitterness about him which never left Kelvin with anything more than a bad taste on his tongue and a dark cynicism. So, he turned his wandering eyes back to the suffering man from Asrymn, and he smiled at him.

"I will do it," he promised him, sheathing his sword and kneeling to unlock the cold shackles from his wrists.

The first of the shackles fell away, and McFarland brought his hand before his face to examine it, staring at the bruised and fragile skin covered in the dirt and dust from the ground on which he lived.

"It's coming to an end, you know," he said, addressing Kelvin without moving his eyes away from his tender wrist.

Kelvin paused, his eyes glancing over at him as his fingers worked the second lock, releasing the shackle of his other hand. "What is?" he asked him.

McFarland pulled his right arm in, smiling at his newfound freedom as he waited for the bonds to be removed from his ankles. "This kingdom," he told him, his voice filled with assurance of right. "Caliphus is coming, and he is King. He will reign in Pyre, and all of this world's forces, all of Zephyr's wiles, and the powers that have been could never stop him, because he *is king*, and he *will rule* justly."

"You won't see it," Kelvin replied simply, unlatching his leg from the hard metal cuff.

The man from Asrymn chuckled. "Perhaps," he said, "but I am his servant, and I shall be known to him as such."

Kelvin released the final shackle and stood again to his feet as he wondered at his words, being quick to expel them from his mind.

"Are you ready?" he asked, taking his saber back in his hand to slay him.

"Just a moment," the man from Asrymn replied breathily as he pulled himself to his feet, standing shakily before his executioner, and he smiled. "Now," he said with an incomprehensible gladness, "I'm ready now."

Chapter 80. Last Request

They ran together through the vacant halls of High Palace, and he took her hand in his, keeping her close to his side as he led her through the dark interior of hidden stairwells to the dungeon depths below the castle.

They had infiltrated Zephyr's fortress, having left the others to strive with his forces in the field, and parted with Benjamin, wishing him well in his confrontation with the wicked King who ruled over Pyre.

"The kingdom is yours. All shall be well, and we will see you soon after this," Eliezer had steadfastly assured him as they parted paths.

Still, he was cautious, not wishing any evil to befall them, close as they were to the long awaited promise of a better world.

"Eliezer," Dorcus said softly, "are you sure this is the way?"

"Yes," he said, not missing a stride. "I couldn't forget it if I tried, and we mustn't hesitate. I don't know how much time we have."

"Right," Dorcus muttered, and her voice betrayed her sadness.

Eliezer's eyes turned swiftly back on his companion with concern as they scuttled down the spiral stairs.

'Oh, my dear...'

"*Dorcus,*" he addressed softly, slowing his pace as they reached the bottom of the stairs. His heart was full of care for her, and he kissed her cheek at the landing. "All is well," he righteously assured her.

She smiled at him with flushed cheeks, returning the favor.

"We've not much farther now to go," he told her before opening the door to the underground corridor.

He pushed the door slowly, careful to keep her concealed safely behind him as he looked out anxiously for any guards who might have remained in the fortress to secure the prisoners, but there were none.

"There is a door open up ahead," he whispered quietly to inform her. "Presumably, that's where they are. Though, it may be a trap. Perhaps you should better stay here," he said, turning his head back to her.

Dorcus shook her head determinedly. "I'm not leaving," she replied, echoing his quiet tone but just as certain.

"But, Dorcus..."

"Eliezer, it's a waste of time you trying to argue with me. You must know by now I will not leave you. Now, please..." she nodded towards the door, silently requesting their advancement, "open the door."

He swallowed, his heart touched but also grieving. *'Why does she always follow me? Oh, Lord, protect us!'*

"Very well," he said, opening the door wide for them and leading her out with a tight grip of her delicate hand.

He closed his eyes tight for a moment.

'Why is it that every part of me wants to say the one thing that I cannot at this time so readily admit?'

He opened his eyes as he felt her hand squeeze his, offering some affectionate reassurance. He smiled, still painfully aware of his surroundings. His senses were on high alert and keenly aware of even the slightest sound or change in light. Each shifting shadow of a flickering lamp was at the peak of his mind and the faintest howl of a windy draft was enough to put his heart on edge.

He glanced over at Dorcus with his nerves shot and his heart beating rapidly, and he hoped she wouldn't notice his distress. These were not the sort of tasks which he enjoyed, and much less with a partner, someone whose life was in his hand and whose care was entrusted to his own watchfulness. Still, he loved her, and he was thankful to have her with him, even in the dark depths of the mighty fortress where they strode.

The door which was left open led into a large room, spacious and plain with stone-cut floors and finished walls without patrician. There laid two men dead and dying, one from Asrymn and the other from Sa'ar, each on opposing sides of the room.

Eliezer rushed in quickly, he and Dorcus parting ways as she ran to her brother and he to McFarland.

"Gregory!" he said, falling to his knees beside the body of his friend.

The man opened his eyes and smiled at him. "Eliezer," he said, lifting his hand to greet him. He voice was weak and faint. "I knew you'd come," he muttered, rolling his head back and blinking as he took a pained breath in. "I told them... I told them that you would, but, Eliezer, you have to get out of here," he said, lifting his fading eyes to his.

"I'd like to see you live first," he told him.

Gregory shook his head with the faintest laugh. "Not this time, friend," he said. "Sorry, but I've had quite enough of this, you see?" He smiled up at him, squeezing the hand which he held, and he closed his eyes tight with pain, his breathing labored. "They don't say that Asrymn has

troubles for nothing. Besides, I got my last request and everything." He chuckled, and Eliezer saw the pain on his face as he did.

"Gregory..." he said.

"It's alright, Eliezer," he said, smiling up at him with eyes fixed on Himmel's skies. "I know you would like me to stay, but... this time, I think I'll choose the better part. It is much more glorious elsewhere, after all, and better for me that I go. Of course... not so for you, as I recall." He chuckled.

"Very well," Eliezer answered, teary eyed. "It is so."

"It is," McFarland replied, raising his eyebrows with a grin. He took a deep breath and groaned, muttering an unintelligible prayer. "It's not my best death to be run through," he said, lifting a bloodstained hand from his pierced abdomen.

"Not at all," Eliezer said, choking on his words as his heart was torn for the pain of his friend. "I would have preferred something much more dignified for you."

Gregory laughed. "Yes, well... thank you," he said, taking another breath in as he looked into the caring eyes of the Ambassador.

Eliezer nodded as his eyes became blurry with tears. "Of course," he muttered with heartfelt courtesy.

"Thank you," he whispered again, and his face faded to a wanton pale as the light left him and his eyes glazed over with deadness.

Gregory's head fell lifeless to the stony ground at the time when Eliezer felt his hand go limp, and he shut the eyes of the dead man gently with tears falling as he cried.

'Why? Gregory, why?'

He heard the faint sound of Dorcus's voice pleading, and remembered her at once, his concern pulling at him. So, he forced himself back together, regaining his composure, and he rushed to her side to comfort her.

"*Timothy, please*, say *something!*" she pleaded, kneeling before her bleeding brother who hung shackled to the western wall.

Eliezer slowed his pace, approaching the pair with caution. He didn't want to scuttle the possibility of their reconciliation when the man was clearly dying.

'Even so...'

He came softly beside her, placing a hand of assurance on the small of her back.

She looked at him and smiled, her eyes filled with tears.

Timothy opened his eyes and looked at him with a scowl. "Eliezer..." he said, "*look* at me."

"Timothy, I could help," he offered, quick to reply to the call of the man.

"Help?" Timothy sniggered. "You want to help?" he sneered. "Well, Eliezer, I don't want your *help*. I don't want your magic. I don't want you here." He paused, passing a despising glance at his sister. "And why in Hölle did you bring her here? Did you hope that I might apologize? I won't."

"Timothy, *please...*" Eliezer pleaded, his heart longing for the man and his life. "You're *dying*. For Himmel's sake, you're dying!" His eyes began to tear again as his voice echoed his earnestness and sincerity of heart.

"*Timothy...*" Dorcus said, appealing to him as she reached out and touched his face gently with tears streaming from her eyes. "Timothy, *please*, let us help you," she entreated softly.

He closed his eyes a moment, his forehead wrinkled with disgust, and he breathed in deeply. "*Don't... touch... me*," he warned. His words were long, measured, and harsh as he opened his eyes with an icy glare.

He pulled his head away from his sister's touch, and she retracted her hand reluctantly with hurt.

He laughed. "Do you know what I hope?" he asked her, not intending for an answer other than his own. "I hope that he dies here," he said, his cold gaze piercing to their tender hearts. "Maybe then you'll see what a fool he's made you... you and your ridiculous waste of a life. You could have been so much more, but here you are with nothing - all because you trusted this fool and his magic."

Dorcus hung her head and cried, weeping bitterly for him.

Eliezer felt his heart break, and he threw himself on top of her, covering her in his love and wrapping his arms around her. "*Dorcus...*" he whispered, "I'm sorry."

"*Eliezer...*" she sobbed, clearly heartbroken, and she turned her body back towards him, taking comfort in his care of her.

"Eliezer," Timothy said with a hideous sneer.

He lifted his head to look on the man from Sa'ar as he held his sister in his arms; her head laid on his breast, and his fingers explored the softness of her hair.

"How dare you touch her," Timothy contemptuously derided with failing breath, and he shook his head and in sighing disapproval said, "Even in death, you haunt me," and he hung his head and died.

'The last words of a dying man,' Eliezer considered sadly as he watched Timothy's sunken face sink into dark. *'I would have hoped that might have changed before this.'*

A new pain pricked his heart, and he closed his eyes as he felt it. It was well that he should feel such lament for the unrepentant dead, but for now, he refocused his attentions on Dorcus, whose heart he knew was breaking. He reigned her in tighter against him and held her, his one hand wrapped around her torso and the other holding her head gently against his beating heart as she cried.

"Oh, *Dorcus,* I'm sorry," he muttered, embracing her again with tears, "I am so *terribly sorry*."

'If there had been anything I could have done, I swear, I would have done it gladly. To spare you this hurt and Timothy... oh, Dorcus...'

"Dear lady, it *shall* be well," he promised in a whisper. "All shall be well."

Chapter 81. Is It Well?

There was a faint noise like footsteps coming from the hall, and Eliezer heard it, so he left her there alone with a sweet kiss of her cheek.

"Stay here," he requested softly with a brush of her hair and a loving squeeze of her neck. "I'll go and scout it out. I want you safe."

Dorcus offered a short nod and an appreciative smile. "Alright," she said, her head dully aching from crying.

Her eyes were red from tears which stained her humble cheeks and stung from sadness. She looked up at him longingly and reached out a hand as a silent request for favor. Eliezer took it and helped her as she stood shakily to her feet with her strength sapped from sorrow.

"Eliezer," she addressed quietly, not relinquishing his hand.

"Yes?" he anxiously acknowledged with loving eyes and furrowed brow.

"Please be careful," she requested softly as she rested her head on his shoulder and pressed her watering eyes to his neck.

Eliezer closed his eyes and breathed in deeply as he wrapped his arms loosely around her, his fingers gently brushing against the back of her shoulder, and he was silent for a moment as he held her.

"I will," he whispered, kissing her neck.

"Good," Dorcus said, raising her head with a small smile.

Eliezer looked at her, and she could see the concern building in his eyes as he watched her.

'Eliezer, please... don't fear for anything. It is well with me. I promise you.'

He slowly raised his hand to the heated skin of her flushed face and gently cupped her cheek as he amorously considered her tender countenance before he left. "I won't be long," he promised her with a glowing smile which she found to be contagious.

"Alright," she nodded, turning her eyes back to her brother, her heart ripped with sadness.

'Oh, Timothy, why...'

She hadn't the time to finish the thought when there came a pained cry from behind her. Dorcus turned quickly from the pale body of her dead brother to the open room at her back and caught the sight of her companion writhing in agony with a sword thrust through his middle. She watched in horror as the bloody blade which ran him through was pulled violently back from his abdomen with a final twist of the steel saber and he crumpled to the ground.

"Eliezer!" she shouted, rushing towards him, but the swordsman prevented her, raising his bloodstained saber with the same promise of the cold metal which had pierced her companion's skin.

She watched helplessly from a little more than a sword's length away as Eliezer's blood spilled out, and her heart rent as her body numbed with pain which spilled from her heart out to her fingertips.

"Eliezer," she said again, overwhelmed with compassion for him.

She heightened her gaze to the young man standing in front of her fully clothed in the uniform of the Royal Guard with his sword at the ready. He was slender and determined, his blue eyes filled with a cold, desolate sadness.

He took a step towards her, his sword a threatening sight, and she gave him a puzzled glance.

'What is he waiting for? Surely, he would not have me to watch Eliezer's death only to kill me. It would be much worse for us both to die at once.'

He took another step towards her, raising his sword to her neck, and she remained fearfully still.

'God, please...'

Her eyes turned to Eliezer, and her heart dropped at the sight of his blood on the stone covered ground.

"No, please," Eliezer implored him, stopping the man in his tracks. "Have mercy, I beg you. The woman is my wife. I cannot bear to see her harmed. *Please*, let her go."

The man held his position for a moment, frozen in place. Then, lowering his sword, he turned and ran from the room, and Dorcus listened to the sound of his footsteps as they began to dissipate. She rushed to her friend, sparing no time, and dropped to her knees beside him. His hand pressed against his bloodstained clothes, covering his wound in the front as the blood spilled out on the stone floor beneath him, creating a crimson pool in which she knelt.

"Eliezer... oh, Eliezer," she muttered, taking his free hand in hers and touching his face with affectionate care.

"Dorcus, I am sorry," he told her, his voice quavering in pain and weakness.

"Eliezer, please... you *must live*," she told him, eyes watering as tears fell from her face.

He smiled at her and sighed. "Dear lady," he affectionately addressed, putting his hand to her cheek, "know that I would never hurt you, but here, it seems, I have caused you a great deal of pain. I *am* so very sorry for it."

She felt the sticky warmth as he gently stroked her face with his blood covered hand, and she closed her eyes tight, sniffling.

'Eliezer... no. No. Don't leave me. You can't.'

"Eliezer, you *must* live," she implored him, crying desperately.

He closed his eyes tightly, wincing back in pain, and, when he opened them, he cried also. "My sweet lady," he spoke in pained and breathy tones as he labored for air, “please know that I would. Truly, I would, but... for this trouble with the red stuff." He let out a short breath of amusement and his face changed to a faint joking grin. "You see?" he asked her, taking his hand from her face and placing it again over the hole in his abdomen, "I can't seem to keep it in."

He watched her hopefully with the same blissful light in his eyes that he always had when he looked on her, and she could not escape his loving kindness.

She smiled at him, her heart full of sentimental affection, and she shook her head softly. "Don't go," she whispered.

He sighed. "I don't know it's my decision. I've found myself in quite a fix," he said, groaning as he doubled over in pain. "Apologies," he muttered, gasping for air, and he clenched his teeth as his face turned again to pain.

'Eliezer, please, don't hurt...'

Her heart felt as if it were being torn, and she stroked his hair gently to comfort him. He closed his eyes sweetly, his breathing labored as he fought to keep the air in his lungs, and he smiled softly. Some time passed, and he opened his eyes slightly, looking up on her with fondness, and she smiled at him.

"I love you," he told her, teary eyed and lips quavering.

She began to sob, her hand pressed over her mouth as she collapsed into tears.

"Oh, Dorcus..." he sighed, forcing himself upward and taking hold of her, nuzzling her hair. "I love you," he whispered to her ear. "*Please,* know that I love you."

"*Eliezer*," she sobbed.

'Please...'

She heard him cry out again in pain, though she knew that he was trying to hide it, wishing to spare her the knowledge of his hurt. She felt his body slip as he began to fall backwards, grabbing hold of her arm to catch himself, and Dorcus opened her eyes, staring down into the pool of blood in front of her as it continued to steadily increase.

'No...'

She turned abruptly and hugged him.

'Lord, please, help us. It's not right for him to die like this.'

She heard footsteps coming again from the hall, and she felt her chest tighten, gripped by a sudden fear, but still, she would not leave him.

"Let me down now," he whispered.

She stopped and turned her eyes to him, filled with questions of concern. He leaned his head back, his breathing faint and his eyes glossed over.

"I'm sorry," he said. His voice was weak and waning. "This is all very difficult for me, but... I am feeling rather lightheaded."

She lowered him back to the ground gradually, keeping her hand under his head for support until she brought it gently to rest.

"Thank you," he muttered.

He was watching her, and she saw the light slowly fading from his eyes as the color drained from his skin and his face turned deathly pale.

Dorcus shook her head emphatically, "*No, no, no! Eliezer!*"

He looked at her, moving his head slightly, and it seemed he was attempting to speak, though no words came past his lips.

"*Eliezer, please... I love you*," she said, bending over him. "Eliezer, I love you," she repeated, desperate for him to hear her.

A small smile crossed his face, and his eyes closed with an expression of peace.

Dorcus shook her head again, biting her lip with watering eyes. "Please, stay," she cried.

The footsteps came closer until she heard them at the door, and she turned her head rapidly to look. There stood a ghostly figure like a man without features, his translucent form vaguely discernible but nevertheless seen.

"It's you!" she breathed in awe and great relief.

"Hello, Dorcus," the man replied, his kind voice speaking to her aching heart.

"Please, help him," she asked in desperation.

She felt his love as the man smiled at her.

"Dorcus, don't fret. I'm here to help you."

Her heart was brought to peace at his word, and she smiled. The man came near to her and wiped the tears from her eyes, touching his hand to her cheek as Eliezer had done and removing the blood from her face.

"All is well, child," he assured her, and she knew that it was. *"I will not give him over to Death."* He then turned his face to the man. *"Come, Eliezer,"* he said, *"I will sustain you."*

The spirit waved his hand over the Ambassador's body and the blood began to dissipate as the color returned to her companion's cheeks. He then placed his hand on the man's wound and blew on him.

"Live," the spirit breathed, and the wound vanished as the man's breath returned to him.

Dorcus smiled, considering the health of her beloved friend. "Thank you," she told the visitor softly.

Eliezer lifted his head, his eyes having brightened and become clear. He blinked, leaning forward as he used his arms to support the weight of his body.

"You," the Ambassador breathed, looking into the face of the translucent specter hovering over him.

"Do me a service, Ambassador," the spirit requested. *"Stay a while longer."* He turned his face again to Dorcus. *"Is it well?"* he asked her.

She smiled, teary eyed, and nodded. "*Yes*," she told him, "it is well."

"Good," he said, and she felt the pleasure he had in them.

Then, as quickly as he had appeared, he vanished, leaving the two of them alone again together in the room.

She looked to Eliezer with a thankful smile and threw herself down on top of him, wrapping her arms around him and forcing him back to the ground. Eliezer laughed and embraced her, his heart filled with mirth as he wrapped her tightly in his arms.

"I love you," he whispered, touching the bridge of his nose to the top of her head with great affection.

She nuzzled against his chest.

"I love you," he whispered again, kissing her head.

She smiled, her heart melting as he spoke, and she raised her head, looking into his orangey-brown eyes.

"I love you," he whispered as his eyes stared into hers.

"And I you," she replied softly, touching her face to his.

She sighed. *'Eliezer... thank you for staying.'*

She laid her head down again on his tunic, her body crossed over him and her hands keeping firm hold of his garments. She felt his touch, his fingers gently running through her hair, and she closed her eyes, smiling.

"All is well, my love," he quietly assured her, his words pronouncing his gladness. "All is well," he said again, gently caressing her back and shoulders, his hand running lightly down her spine as he held her within the safety and comfort of his arms with the tender embrace of his affections.

She nuzzled into him, letting out a soft sigh as she felt her heart melt within her, satisfied by his touch.

'Yes, Eliezer, do me this service, and stay a while longer.'

She listened to his heart beat happily in his chest, and she smiled at the rhythmic sound as her own heart moved to match it.

'I love you.'