

Content Warning

In this story there are scenes and mentions of:

Specific Violence

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

There are implication of

Homophobic Slurs

Parental Abuse

In some circumstances, characters use the word

Crazy

If knowing about these things beforehand annoys you

Well...

Sorry.

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Prologue

It rains on nights like these; in part, as a matter of good taste, and in part because it's always raining in Lleywa. When it isn't raining, it's drizzling; when neither raining nor drizzling, it opts to storm; when storm, rain and drizzle aren't an option, in the depths of winter, it makes to sleet. It is a nation without a winter, its people proudly proclaim, unless you count the sixteen or so hours during which it grows cold enough to snow and the rain gets out of the way. Similarly, it's a nation without much of a summer, either. Whether out of habit or for dramatic purpose, though, it rained on this night, on the mountain passes of Lleywa.

From time to time, people who meet with the Lleywa nobility wonder why the castles are always constructed on high edges of mountains, overlooking valleys, and they are usually given the simple answer of "Piss off and mind your own business," showing the typical Lleywan level of aristocracy. The more dignified amongst them, the *old money*, however, are kind enough to accord a better reason, or at least one more likely to continue the conversation: "The first Thane of Lleywa was a shepherd, who stood behind his people, and watched over them in the night."

That conversation typically ends when someone reasonably points out that that's creepy.

The narrow ways down the mountainsides, however, were built out of stone, not dirt, which meant that during the rain – which, to reiterate, was always – they didn't turn to churning, wet slurry that turned downwards travel into slow-acting death sentence. Dangerous, yes, but a surefooted horse could manage them, if slow.

The rider was not endowed with time. The rider was not endowed with immortality either, but it was a compromise they'd manage as best they could.

Thunder tore holes in the sky, and lightning showed them. The rain sheeted down, a vertical river that seemed to hit the stone hard enough to make it wince. The Rider pushed on, bundle tucked under one arm. Warm lights in a dark outline of the castle behind spoke of a household too, too awake for the hour of the morning; the village below lay dark and silent. Perhaps the mother's screams of anguish, the father's yells of joy and the servants' exasperated sighs of relief, could have broken the thunder's bellowing. Perhaps the rider could hear some of it being lost in the thunder. Perhaps the rider could feel some of those tears being lost in the rain.

In the vast, interconnected web of powers and favours that nobles weave to separate themselves from the lessers, and to determine who is right – for now – and who is legally dead – for now – thick, clean lines are necessary, no, mandatory, to keep from civil wars and bloodstained ambitions. The Lleywan nobility had made a practice of having a single child whenever they could, and a nation of shepherds found remarkable ways to be resourceful about keeping breeding numbers low. The people outside of Lleywa joked about it having something to do with the sheep. The people inside Lleywa, particularly the witches and midwives (who so often were the same thing) preferred herbed roots, teas and careful applications of oils, which put the control of such things in the hands of the women, rather than the men, and also happened to *work*.

Lleywa was not a large nation, and the castle did not oversee a large part of it. A second child could ruin everything, and they knew it – two lions born in the same litter rarely ever ended up well. And

the rider did what was asked, and committed a great, dark sin in the name of a noble lord who would, with all of the strength in his arms, kill the rider the second it became an option.

The rider reflected on this much: A flight in rain, a terrible duty, and a noble bloodline: There was destiny afoot, this night. And the rider showed Lleywa the back of a horse that would never be so fortunate as to return to the rich stables to which it had been accustomed.

Tucked in tight against the saddle, made as comfortable as possible, the baby hid under the rider's shadow and was, at the least, spared the rain.

In any circumstance such as these, there seem to be a great number of simpler solutions. The nastiest is to kill a child, to declare it stillborn and show it as evidence. There's a problem with that plan, though, aside from it being dreadfully immoral and massively traumatising to the people involved. To kill a nobleman's son isn't just murder, though. It's not even just murder of the son of an influential man, a man who owns property and a big sword and has deep enough pockets to employ steady, mean people who are experts in finding people or ending them. No, killing a noble's son is dangerous because of what it means to *be* a noble. How those people are set apart from the people, in Lleywa, that they look over, or more often, overlook. A noble traces their bloodlines, messy and stained as they are, back to a King (and it is always a King). The King is special. The King is chosen by God. Sometimes, if you reach back far enough, the King is painted like the sun and *is* God, or as close to as any might imagine.

To kill a noble is to reach up through that line and to tug at the beard of God himself – and it is always *himself*. Killing a noble is, in part, killing a king, and that, for some reason, is set aside as a special kind of evil.

That there are people out there who think killing an infant can be made measurably more horrible should tell you everything you need to know about nobility.

And so, the rider rides. A long-lost brother is not the worst of all things. And who knows – perhaps, some day, in the future, something will break, and the kingdom would be glad of having a spare.

Down in the valleys of Lleywa, the sheep kept their heads down and under leaves. They didn't know much about the path or movement of riders, or the turning and moving of kingdoms – but so much of the kingdom relied on them to keep moving around. Years passed, and with them, many, many sheep. Yet, there were still enough sheep, still grazing, and they knew as much about the rider and the baby as the sheep that had seen them.

Chapter 1

“Eryn! G’mawning to you!”

“Good morning, Mister Bauer,” Lady Aderyn DuThane responded, her voice like a silvery charm, pronouncing every letter clearly, while she stepped down the stalls and stands of the braying hawkers of the Parcel Street markets.

“Never forget a name, do y’, lassy?” called the barn-wide man, pushing back his battered blue cap with one huge callused hand. His stall was mostly grains, small sacks and stacks designed to be purchased by inner-city businesses that did not need volume. The main value at Mr Bauer’s stall was the ledger underneath the counter, where he took account of the givings and takings of every farmer between the walls of Timoritia and the North Sea, easily a hundred fifty kayem span of land.

“Inasmuch as befits a young lady!” Aderyn responded, ensuring her voice had that crisp chirp and turning slightly as she went, wearing a proper smile. Smooth leggings underneath her skirt and her knee-high boots made a deft little dance, a bounce in her step as she skirted around his stall.

Mr Bauer’s powerful yell-laugh-snort combination faded into the loudness of the Market. Like a great living beast, the market’s voice swelled and roared around her while she walked, her hands tucked behind her back politely, her platinum blonde hair in a braid that just reached between her shoulder blades. When she passed a stall keeper she recognised, she smiled, and nodded her head – and she recognised *everyone*. Each step was carefully before the next, while she laughed and nodded and did not let any polite banter, any call for her attention from one of the stall keepers slow her walk.

Beautiful young ladies were, as always, in fashion, though that was really the only concession towards fashion that Aderyn had bothered to make. While other Young Ladies favoured skirts that reached the floor as a sign of status, she never felt it wise to leave her quarters like that. Smooth brown suede pants hugged her legs, contrasting in colour with a sensible pair of grey, flat boots. She wore a blouse of apron style, with a small skirt from the front and back, a wide belt, but wore the neck high, the sleeves snug down to her elbows, leaving her forearms free. It was not particularly high fashion, but it was practical for a lovely walk, fresh and clean of a morning.

“Final exams today, isn’t it?” asked Mrs Sepper, who hadn’t been turning much profit this week, but she didn’t really need much money from her sales of bottles and jars, thanks to her four sons who had all established businesses and were quite happy to do some work to take care of their mam, and one of them was still single, if Aderyn wanted to meet him, he was a real dusky beauty compared to her, took after his father, don’t you know. She raised one of her glasses, glinting with what wasn’t likely apple juice this time of the morning, and cast a smile Aderyn’s way while she gave that half-turn without slowing.

“Oh yes!” Aderyn said, smiling in turn, a veritable *beam*. Hands clasped behind herself, she raised her shoulders. “Just a little bit of study this afternoon and then it’s off to the Examination Hall!”

“Well good luck, young lady!” cawed the old woman. “I’ll be sayin’ a little prayer for you!”

“Thank you!” called Aderyn. Smoothed down her blouse, stepped out of Parcel street, her purchases of fresh bread and butter tucked under one arm, and turned sharply back towards the boarding

house. It was a busy, busy day, after all – there was still plenty of study to be done for her theory topics at the Guild of Assassins.

*

When wise men sit down to steal the notes of the wise women who did all the research, they speak of the universal forces that bind everything together. The smallest objects are bound by their own force, then another force binds them together in another way and onwards and onwards upwards to gravity, which gets to do all sorts of interesting stuff like pull drifting packets of gas in the cosmos together into single locations, pile them up together until the piling itself generates heat, which generates light and *then*, all sorts of fun things happen.

The knowing of it, that gathering things together brings about side effects, informs the eye when it looks at the world.

Consider the city of Timoritia. Everywhere has a city like it, eventually. A city of two million people, (or more, depending on one's view of the poor). Pile enough people in one place and some things naturally occur, as side effects. People devise ways to solve the problems that come about from too many people. They create sewage systems (though not as quickly as you'd hope), they create roads, they create buildings and eventually, *eventually*, they get around to creating writing and taxation. What follows swift upon that is money.

Money's a mysterious thing. It has a gravity all of its own. When you gather enough money together in one space, it starts to warp even people's perceptions of value, of time, and then, most strangely, money itself.

While gravity is what allows fun things to happen, time is what those fun things happen *in*. Time is the currency that a mushroom spends to drive its soft, spongy nothingness up through a concrete slab. Time is how a species of monkeys tumble out of trees and wind up at chartered accountancy without ever having their brains *quite* adjust to the difference.

Consider the word *Assassin*.

Somewhere originally, the name of a drug - *hashish* - became attached to the act of killing someone for political gain. In time, laws got involved, and the task of *assassination* became *killing another human being for political and not personal aims*. Then, it slowly turned and the smooth bits wore off it and it became *killing another person for professional reasons*, because lawyers could make much mileage out of that. And as with the candle makers and butchers and bakers and wyre-drawers and saltiers, a coalition of people with this particular trade took it upon themselves to handle the business at a professional level. Professional killers, after all, needed to be as professional as possible.

Therefore, an Assassin was to be a Professional in the most pure sense of that term. Just as the Thieves' Guild created a smaller, more publically acceptable guild – Accountancy – the Assassins' Guild grew up from the places known as the Black Books. Nobles began to send their sons there, to learn the ways of the knife, which also meant they became better at *avoiding* knives. More and more young men – and yes, women – came to join the Guild, because even if you never intended to

stab anyone, being a Professional Professional was a great opportunity, not to mention the networking potential that it presented.

That's how the term *Assassin* came to mean *Intimidating and Stylish Person of Noble Birth*. It barely ever involved any killing at all, these days.

Barely ever.

*

Draftfane prison, known by the guards as The Fane, stood in the outskirts of Timoritia's central districts, built in part out of the walls that had once been the border between the city and the surrounding landscape. Three storeys tall and one storey deep into the ground, the stone held no windows, shared no sound, and had no neighbours proud of where they lived. The prisoners in Draftfane were thrown in cells and given food regularly enough to ensure that they didn't die.

The Fane was a place you dropped people when you had no intention of ever pulling them out again.

"Dare say you're wasting your time, Father," the guard said, as she pulled the heavy iron grille aside, stepping into the small chamber. Arm to the wheel, she braced for a moment, before putting her weight behind it, starting the long, rattling song of the chains that opened the next security door.

"I've heard that before – ah, and, it's Brother, actually."

The guard smiled at him, but it wasn't a particularly thoughtful smile. It never paid to be mean to a priest, as any guard could tell you. If nothing else, letting priests visit prisoners was a good way to keep prisoners calm. Dead prisoners were an irritation, required paperwork, sometimes made a mess. Better to have them hopeless and faithful, a combination that the church had been using for generations.

"Brother, huh?" she said, unlooping a key from her belt and casting her eye over the priest. It was that surname – *Fratarelli* – that had tripped her up. *Father Fratarelli*, just rolled off the tongue – and he sure looked like a father. He looked like the sort of priest you saw in children's books full of adventure and fun, the sort who rode on the cart behind the hero and gave acts of good-natured mischief some air of legitimacy. She wasn't the tallest guard in the world, but she still *loomed* over the priest. Couple his shortness with his near-spherical waistline, and Brother Fratarelli gave the impression of a much larger priest who had been at some point accidentally *squashed*. Still, he had the unremarkable face, brown hair- bald on top – and brown eyes of a man who would never stand out if not for his short stature.

The key mechanism finally clicked, and the second door slid open, interrupting her pointless staring. "Yes, brother," said the priest, gesturing for her to proceed. "A father oversees a whole parish – it's a term of some respect. Alas, I have not done my proper time as a deacon."

The guard didn't say the words *I don't care* but it was remarkably easy to hear it when she spoke. "You got a particular reason to speak to this one?" she asked, leading him down the centre of the hall, past cell after cell. Blank stone walls, into which were set stout wooden doors, reinforced with

steel, a thin grille in the door, rolled past them in ranks. The walls heard nothing, the door said nothing. Nobody would cry out, because in Drafftane, there was nobody to hear.

“Well, it was something the judge said sentencing him.” Brother Fratarella began – only to be cut off with a barking yell.

“Let me guess – the worst murderer in Timoritia?”

“Ah, yes!” the priest said, his steps a little quicker than hers, in order to keep up with her longer legs. “The bills presented quite a lurid story – three murders, quite terrible.”

“You only read the newsbill’s story, right, Father?”

“Brother. Yes?”

“Seems you didn’t quite get the whole of the tale. The judge *did* say he was the worst murderer in Timoritia, but he didn’t mean what you think.”

“Three murders isn’t terrible...?”

“Oh, it’s pretty bad!” the guard laughed. For all the fear there was of criminals in the courts, a criminal with multiple murders to his name was a rare thing, since those people rarely were caught. Mostly, they were killed, in the nastier types of bar, for the pettiest of reasons. “But the judge meant he was incompetent.”

“I-incompetent? Did the victims not die, or something...?”

With a swing in her step, the guard held up three fingers. “Follow along with me here-”

“I don’t have much option, officer.”

“First, the burglary victim. Some drunk lad in his home, killed him with a kitchen knife. See, that tells us he wasn’t planning. Grabbed someone else’s knife and used it in a desperate moment – then stabbed his victim twelve times. Twelve! Don’t mind telling you, brother, but when you kill a man, you work it out pretty quick when they’re dead. Tells us that our murderer panicked. Bolted out of the house, too! So he tries to be a burglar, becomes a murderer, then fails to make any take. That’s a bad business, that is.”

Brother Fratarella blanched at that. “Yes, it... it was quite a fearsome crime.”

“Nah, it was a crap crime. Kid didn’t know what he was doing, messed up, and became a murderer in a panic. Next crime? Two nights later, he tries to catch a businessman on his way out of the city for his ticket on a train out of town. Completely messes it up – steals the ticket, kills the man and dumps him in the river. Panic, again, right? Most of the time killers get a taste for it, work out how to do it better the second time. Not this one,” she all-but-snickered. “Gets rid of the body, sure, gets caught with his ticket on him out of the city – name on it and all!”

“I... see. That was part of the evidence?”

“Damn straight. Then – with the guard hunting him for a murder, and a businessman’s ticket in his pocket, this jackass went to a church to... I dunno, confess?” she laughed again, shrugging. Gallows humour was a necessity in her job. “Heads down to Father Grenouille, by the fourteenth church, takes silver candlesticks from the reliquary. Apparently, didn’t like what Father had to say in confession, so he chases him out of the confessional, up the damn stairs to the clock tower, and almost loses a fight with him.”

“Is that... is that not normal?”

“This kid’s maybe nineteen years old. Father Grenouille was *sixty*. You expect young men to lose fights with old guys like that?”

“Ah...” Brother Fratarelli hesitated, counting his own years in his head. “I suppose not.”

“It’s bad business to kill a priest, m’sure you know,” the guard said, waving her hand. “It’s far worse business to kill one on a roof, and fall off with him and land in the snow in front of two watch patrols having a smoke break near the church. Panicky and stupid but...” she shrugged. “That, that’s just bad luck.”

Finally, at the end of a hall, by a corner, another door. Another set of keys, and she had the door opened, her smile broad. “Ey, Raff!” she called into the cell, at the sullen mound in the corner. “We’ve got a priest here for your confession.” Turning to look down at the rounder man, she gestured into the cell with her thumb. “You need me to stay in there with you, Father?”

Brother Fratarelli shook his head. “No, no... it sounds to me like I’m quite safe. I shouldn’t be long – how will I signal you when I’m done?”

“Just tap on the door and call through it. You might have to holler,” she said, stepping out and closing the door behind her.

The cell was small, maybe four long steps on each side. A stool sat in the centre of the room, a pile of straw mounded in one corner, a bucket in the other. No window, but another metal grill, full of holes no wider than a finger, sat in a recess in the ceiling, the only option for light and air. Moving carefully through the grime and pulling the stool over to sit on it, Brother Fratarelli smiled, sitting down, his hands on his knees.

“Good morning, Rafe,” he said, pronouncing the name correctly. “Now, then. Before we get to your confession, I have a question.”

The lump in the corner did not stir. In the grim darkness of the prison, it was hard to see anything but basic shapes. He was the sort of young man who’d be called ‘boy’ until he was thirty. ‘The Worst Murderer in Timoritia,’ for all of his fearsome title’s weight, sat with his slender limbs gripping legs pulled up to his chest, dark prison clothes designed to hide dirt and scrubby brown hair that looked like it’d been cut with a knife. Only one eye visible, he glared at the sitting priest. That long silence was finally broken by a long, drawn breath, punctuated by a single, moist cough.

Smoothing down his robes, Brother Fratarelli inclined his head. “Why did you lie about those murders?”

*

The city of Timoritia was no island. It was *on* an island, but a very big island, an island so large it had multiple countries on it. Timoritia was the capital city of the Kingdom of Tiber, which was itself the prime nation on the Island of Arat. Arat had, depending on the weather, at least two other countries within its borders, including the ever-rainy Lleywa to the western coast, and the eternal warfront of Hadrian to the north. Technically, there were other small principalities, baronies, and remote kingdoms on the main island, but as time had moved on, all but the most active of revolutionaries had accepted the local word for 'king' just meant the same thing as the Tiberan word for 'baron,' lest it suddenly come to mean the same thing as the Tiberan word for 'target.'

But Tiber did not end at the edge of the island! For across both sides of Tiber's shores there were islands whose people sent coin back to Timoritia. They held docks, where ships broke harbour and made for the wide and open lands of other nations, claimed and constructed in the wilderness in the name of Tiber!

Thus Timoritia was the city at the heart of a nation, most important to an island, at the centre of a trade network, which itself held an empire, which controlled, by coin or by gun, roughly a third of the *entire world*.

The Tiberan empire was large, and the further one travelled from Timoritia, the less stability one could find. Out around the crests of far-off lands, towards the Jeru Salem, there were cities that called themselves Tiberan. There were people there, born on desert shores, who wore silks and ate dates and figs, and who had never felt rain that lasted from sunrise to sunset, who traded in Tiberan coin and spoke the Tiberan tongue, and considered themselves Tiberan citizens. Strung like beads on a necklace, these cities defended themselves against invasion, fought back, claimed territory, fell again, in an ever-increasing, elaborate dance, a cycle that constantly called brave warriors and generals from Timoritia's military colleges and training yards to come, a single Tiberan penny on a loop around their throats, to these far-off places, to make war to defend borders of their homeland – some ten thousand kayem from where they were born.

*

"Be not sorrowed, those that pass me by," rose a lilting, gentle voice, in the quiet solace of the trench. The worst of the day's sun had passed, and now the criss-crossing zigzagging trench had some shape to it that lent a shadow down, in where the troops could walk and stand and wait, somewhere out of scorching sun that made the metal buckles of a uniform feel like little bullets too-near the skin. Someplace to sit and drink water cooled on the pan on the floor, in the dark, check who had made it through the day, and sing the songs that spoke of heather and holly, rather than deserts and death.

"Oh shut the hell up."

Well, some wanted to sing those songs.

Vince adjusted his cap and sat on his gunny – a sack stuffed carefully with everything he owned on the journey in a way to make a decent pillow-or-seat – with a sour expression. His had been the song, and he had been quite intent on soaring on those words – but politeness was baked deep into

his bones, and when someone told him to shut up, he did it without thinking. Then, in the quiet and polite way of a young man, he *fumed* at Leigh for telling him to be quiet. His seat was still partly in the sun, while the smaller woman, uniform sleeves rolled down despite the heat, pressed herself against wooden slats next to him trying to avoid the viper like sting of the sky.

“You’re not bothered by the sun? You goddamn reptile,” spat his compatriot, scrubbing her hand through her white hair. Leigh barely had made the height to sign up, but she’d fought for every cim she could in the training. White-blonde hair, cut short in a military style bob, she was the kind of young woman who’d spent most of her life overhearing someone saying, ‘if only she’d stop scowling.’ It hadn’t improved her disposition any, and now here she was, in the middle of the desert, firing long guns against entrenched enemies and hoping for some sort of conclusion. “I’m from the north, we don’t handle the sun well.”

Vince considered that, but immediately his expression betrayed a discrepancy. “Aren’t you from Brighaven? That’s barely a half-day north of Timoritia.”

“It’s north of Timoritia!” Leigh shot back.

“Yes, but there are *other* things that are *more* north.”

“Like *what*?”

“Well, just off the top of my head, there’s half of Tiber and all of Hadrian.”

“That’s just a technicality. Also, I hate you.”

Vince considered that, and shrugged his shoulder. The tin cup in his hand was warm, too warm, but the water within it was marginally less so. Everything was about hot fluids these days. Once upon a time, he’d signed up because it was a nice sounding job in an office that involved tracing paths for mines and machines. When ‘Royal Engineers’ had been commissioned to start *placing* those mines and machines, everything about the job had become immediately less desirable. A trace of islander blood in him had given him a tolerance for the sun and an olive complexion, further contributing to his paler compatriot’s belief that he was some sort of reptile capable of living on sunlight.

“They hate us.”

Vince and Leigh both looked up at that voice. She’d come over the top, dragging a chain and a gun back from the Land of None twice in the day, and when she’d landed the second time, it was still and silent. Vince had checked on her, found her unconscious, and *probably* not dying, and let her be. Better unconscious, really – if she’d gone over the top twice, that was twice more than most soldiers were willing to go. Sometime after the fighting had died down, she’d hunkered down next to the heavy gun, which cast its shadow with the wall’s, and hid there like a feral cat.

“Hello,” Vince said, “Are you okay?”

The woman dragged in a ragged breath and planted one hand on her gun, pulling herself up to standing with a rattle of chains. “I’m out in the middle of nowhere being shot at and spat on by people who don’t like dogs,” she said, as if that made some sort of coherent sense. “I’m fucking dandy.”

Leigh narrowed her eyes as the redhead stood, and quietly cursed her for being taller – and for having shoulders, and a stylish scar, and a bigger gun. Leigh thumped her shoulders back against the wood. “You think they hate us?” she asked, gesturing with the tip of her rifle to the edge of the trench.

The redhead squinted over at Leigh – a white outline in the gloom of the shadow, with her bright hair and pale skin – and seemed about to speak before all the wind in the world was sucked away.

“They don’t hate us, me law,” came a monstrous bellow, “they’re fighting us because we’re over here, and we’re fighting them because they’re over there.” It wasn’t even *a* bellow. To every soldier in that trench, it was *the* bellow.

General Yull Bachthane, the Mad Qisar of Timoritia, was walking the trench.

Easily two hundred cim tall and eighty-five wide at the shoulder, Yull stood like he was waiting for the world to blink. Half the generals of the Tiberan army were hundreds of kayem away, communicating via rolled cables to the front, but here he was, leading every charge and going over the top like he was made of mere flesh and bone just like everyone else. Over the Top? Quite appropriate really – everything about the man was over the top. Vince remembered being taught very carefully as a child to use his ‘inside voice,’ but in the time he’d been serving under General Yull, he’d become convinced that Yull hadn’t even *heard* of inside. Lords knows he’d never been *seen* there – always out on porches, or near tents, with a gun nearby. Hell, Yull still wore his *sword*, and he *used* it. Even his head seemed to be perpetually in the middle of a vast war with outdoors – he didn’t seem to sheen or sweat even in the heat. With nothing but his skin to protect him, Yull protected himself with his uniform, sometimes a brace, never a helmet, and an enormous black, bushy black beard, which right now he had tied up and soaked in water.

Water!

Water he was carrying in a large, heavy milk can one-handed. A can that had been in officer’s storage, built into one of the bunkers, *underground*, in the cool, closed air, until the battle broke. Water that was *cold*. Water that he was-

“Cups up now, law, I don’t want you spilling the good shit,” the general of a dozen wars laughed, tipping the can out into Vince’s cup. “You two, got a – that’ll do,” he laughed, as the pair frantically hauled out their cups. You didn’t look good fortune in the face, as he poured out water.

Leigh was halfway through her cup in one gulp when she looked up at the general, briefly resented him for having far too much height for any one person to *ever* need, then let gratitude at the taste cold water well up in its place. “We doing well, General?”

Yull leant to the side and peered at the top of the trenches. “Truth be told? It’s a pig’s arse out there. They’re confused, think they lost a general. I don’t like a panicky enemy like that – hard to get a surrender out of ‘em.”

“Surrender?” Leigh coughed in her water. “I thought we were here for the Holy Land, sir.”

Yull set the milk can down in the shade, rubbing the backs of his hands and adjusting his gloves – expensive, hard leather ones, made by some Timoritian shop for a general’s son who would, in turn

become a general, then hand them on to *his* son who would become a general, and stand in this trench, in this time, in this place. “No, that’s why I’m here, law. I’m here because there’s a push and there are nobles and knights. You’re here,” he said, pointing over the trenches, away from the front. “Because ten kayem back there, there’s the city of Bartholomew and there’re fourteen thousand souls there.” Then he pointed the other way. “Five kayem there, they’ve got the city of Bre’Tush, and last count I heard, eight thousand souls.”

A hollow laugh from the redhead interrupted.

Yull adjusted his tunic, then reached down to pick up the milk can. “Remember, the other bastard’s here because we’re here. We’re not trying to wipe them out. We’re trying to hit them hard enough that they don’t want us to hit them any more, y’hear?” He punctuated the hopelessness with a loud laugh that somehow made what he said sound hopeful.

Just as the general was about to continue his long walk along the trenches, though, a hammering of feet came from behind him. Hard shoes on pressed earth, jingling of keys and cables – it was a messenger, not a soldier.

“General Yull!”

The massive man turned, stroking his beard with one hand while he waited for the messenger to catch up. A few moments to breathe, in the impossible heat, before he raised his chin to the messenger. “Report.”

The messenger held out a metal tube, “Express path, General Yull, all the way from Timoritia. It’s the Vox Coronate – sir, they’re calling you back. They’re calling *us* back.” And it was impossible to hide the hope in his voice. Valiant and true, stout and brave, whatever terms a soldier wanted to earn, they all seemed earned enough the second morning he woke up in mud that was more blood than water.

Three soldiers and a messenger stood silent while they watched their General, their commander, the Lion of Timoritia, holding the thin film of paper in his hand. Not a one of them was old enough to remember a military that wasn’t defined by General Yull, the Mad Lion of the North Rush. They learned in basic training, techniques with a rifle and a trench that he had *invented*.

Yull was a man they all knew to stand at the front of a charge, and to never retreat. In the burning sunset of a nation they’d never known, though, it was awful hard to care about the glory of the Tiberan Empire, and more about the hopes a soldier could have for a cold drink, fresh socks, and a soft bed.

Yull scratched at his beard, finger vanishing into it, while he folded up the paper and tucked it away. Then, his decision made like a crack in the earth, he wheeled one arm, and *bellowed*, voice fit to tear the sky. “For *fucks’ sake!* Alright, law! Drag up! Fall back!” he turned and his crimson cloak, tattered at the edges and burned at the bottom, swirled about him with great drama. “Every sword, back to the line!” massive metal feet *thundered* through the mud, sending waves that boomed. “We’re falling back to Bartholomew!”

There wasn't any hesitation from the four standing with him, running to fall in step behind him, following in the trenches. "Are we waiting on reinforcements, General?"

"Arse to that," the massive Lleywan roared. "You soldiers? Grab your gunnysacks! The Coronate wants me back in Timoritia personally, and we'll move faster without the army. The swords here will hold just fine – hell, under Casten, they'll probably just siege up and be done in a few weeks anyway." Spitting fire, his fists clenched, he pointed at the messenger. "You. How far'd you come?"

"Um, me, sir? I've been riding four days—"

"Good! Then you've the best path out of here. Come on, me law, we're on the move!"

*

It was very important to hold these meetings during the day. Night was the time when scoundrels and varlets drew together, when burglaries happened and when *the poors* drank themselves into loud, sloppy messes so they could best contend with the woes of the next morning. In the dusk after a good meal, perhaps then it could be discussed, because that made it *business*, something to be spoken of with some sherry and a good cigar. Of course, that was time best reserved to *actually* discuss business, which meant *this* business had to wait. One couldn't do this work during the afternoons before dinner, because one was expected to be near home for such things, and to ensure the servants had something to *do*. Mornings were out, too – because really, who was up and working before the ninth hour? Madness. These considerations where why at one in the afternoon, Marko Fiver walked down Upping Lane with the midday rain pattering off his helmet.

Marko's official job title, penned carefully on a script that also included some very satisfying coinage changing hands on a monthly basis, was *Estate Safety Manager*. His duty, therefore, was to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the estate he worked. It sounded more important, more graceful, and more palatable to the high-brow ear of the Gorange family noble who signed that paper than *bodyguard*. Still, it was evident if you looked at him – Marko had the air of a professional hard man, someone who had found a way to purpose a gift for violence.

The helmet he wore was grilled in front, and blended in easily with hundreds of other guards in the City. It served to have something of a uniform, at least amongst the Major Noble Houses, so as to ensure that they could go about their business unhindered. Without it, he would be too distinctive for this task – he had a shock of ink-black hair that fell down to his neck, bright blue eyes, and his clear, tanned skin was stained by a broad, cross-shaped scar on his right cheek.

The rain picked up, and Marko turned a corner, down to the small town-house and rapped on the door, and waited. Moments standing still and considering what he was doing here, considering the nature of this meeting, were moments Marko did not want nor need – they were time when he could stew about how he'd been sent here. No passwords. No special codes. No *official* secrecy. That would make this something *criminal*. Marko seethed inwardly.

The door opened, and suddenly Marko wasn't alone with his thoughts. "Wardell." He said, raising his chin in a salute.

"Whom may I say is calling?"

"It's me, Wardell, for god's sake. It's Marko." As if timed perfectly, the rain doubled down, turning from a shower to more of a vertical bath.

"Oh! Oh yes," Wardell said, stepping back, spreading his arm and holding the door open. "Come in!"

"Know what this is about, Wardell?" Marko asked, pulling off his cloak and unbuckling his helm as he stepped out of the rain.

"Not really my place to say, Fiver," Wardell said. Wardell was tall enough to look Marko in the eye, and pointedly didn't. Blonde haired, brown eyed, and consistently unctuous, Wardell treated Marko as if he was somehow *noble* and more than any direct insult could, that implication rubbed Marko the wrong way. What bothered him even more was how easily people like Wardell melted into the area around him. It was as if somehow he stood between the world of the noble and common, and that notion did not make him feel comfortable at all.

"Come on," Marko grunted, setting his helm down by the door. "I know you listen-"

"Do follow me, Fiver." Wardell said, pulling the door closed, and locking it. It wasn't 'Mr Fiver,' or 'Sir,' but it was still his surname. Of course, as far as Marko knew, Wardell was the servant's first name.

But servant wasn't quite the right word, was it? A servant didn't have shoulders like that, didn't wear those fine, well-tailored leather gloves that protected his palms and left his fingertips free for fine work. Marko may have worn scars and armour, but he could tell in Wardell's step that he was not the only soldier here.

The room had no windows, and an oil lantern in the centre of the room provided the only illumination. On Wardell's direction, he moved to stand by the lamp, looking into the gloom. An old trick, one Marko knew, and one guards liked to exploit on outposts. The closer you were to light, the harder it was to see into darkness.

In the murk around him, figures shifted, and a white face appeared; a mask, obviously, featureless and smooth, without eyes and mouth. Then another, in the other corner of the room. Then another, and another.

"Hello, Marko," said one voice. Low, gravelly, but possibly a woman's voice? Hard to tell. The room must have been otherwise empty, too, which made the voice echo off the ceiling and walls.

"We would like to know what you know about General Yull Bachthane."

Chapter 2

'Young man' wasn't a term most lecturers at the Old Ford could wear. The school was five centuries old, *at least*, and some of the records about which piece of paper marked the *beginning* of the university were highly contentious. Highly contentious historical papers were Koel Pushanti's favourite *kind* of papers, and he, against the odds, could wear the title of 'young man' quite well. Barely twenty-three years old and an accomplished scholar of history and nobility, he was just accomplished *enough* that tenured, older professors positioned him as their assistant.

For the most part, that meant he marked papers for them.

All the other professors treated marking work as a dreadful thing, like they had to look into boxes full of spiders. Sometimes, Koel wondered if that was an exposure problem – years of the students producing subpar work resulting in a trained response against even trying to read it. For now, however, Koel was vital and full of energy and was not so bothered by the work of obnoxious students.

Rubbing his fingertips against his beard, he twirled his brush and tapped the paper. It wasn't a *bad* student paper, at least, not in an absolute sense. It just ... didn't have the proper form of an essay. There were problems.

Tiber has a Monarchy Absentia political structure. This structure derived its authority from a King, whose power was divine, and the City. With no king available, the power and authority of managing the city falls to the Noble families, based on their territory and where those territories overlap. Thanks to what most Nobles referred to as the Unpleasantness, however, the position of king is permanently empty.

Many nobles want the throne – quite a few too many. This leads to an environment of contest between the major noble houses where they keep getting in each others' ways. At any given point in history, those noble families and their names had grown and wilted in prominence, but so far a full century has passed with the throne empty.

Koel twirled the brush again. Soothing, simple gestures. The brush wasn't *really* typical as a tool for marking essays, but it was how he had learned to write, and now he was a professor and an academic, so he could use it if he wanted to. Dipping the brush in his inkwell, he scrawled the note in the margin.

Too personal a tone.

The Vox Coronate, the Voice of the King, stands in formal authority over the city of Timoritia. It was not literally the orders of the king, but words written and given the authority as if the king had said it. An office originally founded during times of war, the Vox Coronate was designed to allow military orders to be issued to deal with political threats represented by generals. No general liked orders from Vox Coronate – they spoke either of a king trying to oversee strategy without awareness, or a member of the noble class with ambition.

Koel flipped the brush in his hand and tapped the paragraph with the dry end. Hm hm hm.

Well it wasn't *too* bad, if a little poorly referenced.

The noble houses came in four basic flavours, much like food: The Goranges (sticky and weighty and make you regret it later), the Dulfs (spicy and eye watering), the Rangsts (excessively sweet and prone to inducing headaches) and the Chilvers (old, watery and mouldy).

Someone sighed in the room, and Koel had to assume it was himself. Gosh, this was ... just *not* the right tone of voice for a work essay. A swirl down the margin of the page: **Inappropriate tone.**

The Goranges are money-lenders first and foremost. They always loan you plenty of rope, and you'd be expected to use all of it when the time comes to hang yourself. You wouldn't realise you'd angered the Goranges until the morning you wake up with an incredible officious and meticulously penned letter that ends with 'Lord Gorange is quite annoyed.'

The Dulf family is recognised, largely, as 'the young' family, because their official history stretches back twenty years less than anyone else.

Koel circled *less* and drew a line to the margin: **fewer**

Dulf reputation tends to claim both 'young' and 'militarily qualified' which they mostly do by hiring mercenaries en masse and financing them well. Since Dulfs don't like actually doing the task of war, the mercenaries are usually directed by the Tiberan military, allowing the Dulfs to cover themselves with others' glory.

The Rangst family consider themselves social and innovators, and explain their unpopularity by claiming that people are jealous of their success. Many Rangst innovations have become common components of life in Timoritia, but mostly associated with other families.

Lastly, the Chilvers. Thanks to having the last king, the Chilvers characterise themselves as the only and final victim of regicide, as if they'd be ruling the whole empire by default if not for the actions of a few mad Hadrians.

These are the major Noble houses, after whom trail the affairs of kings and queens, and the century-empty throne of the Timoritia rests. Through endless political manoeuvring every major figure in every major family has in some fashion or another been declared excluded from the possibility of the Kingship – at least until someone else's possible legitimacy has been dealt with. It's a house of cards, except all the cards are glued in place by spite.

Alright, that last line was decent.

Turning the pieces of paper over in his hand, Koel pulled the report slip close, sighing again. It wasn't that the student was *wrong* about anything in particular, just... simplistic. And needlessly showy. Essays weren't about *impressing* anyone, really. There were also technical problems.

No Mention Of The Minor Noble Houses?

What about Thanes/Emralt Nobility?

V. Meanspirited.

Then, patiently, Koel reached for the next essay from the towering stack by his desk, and continued to work.

*

There's a peculiar kind of corkscrew brain that enjoys studying for an exam. One must be able to sink into the words and the concepts, touching on things already known to be true, and feel some sort of satisfaction in reconnecting them to the memory. It's also important to maintain the illusion that information for passing the test is for some higher purpose than just passing the test – a lie that most people who experience exams fail to internalise. For Aderyn DuThane, the experience was further amplified in its enjoyment by an adulation of teasing her bunkmate.

Lady Quynn Lyzbyth Wyndsr had a heritage that spoke of nothing but the finest of china and the most polite, mannerly behaviour. Wyndsr Estates were extensive and reached from the northern edge of Hadrian all the way down to the heart of Timoritia. Compared to Aderyn – whose family owned what was, ultimately, a farming valley near a highway – she was practically royal. She'd have deserved a shot at the throne, really, if not for the unfortunate dalliance with The Wrong Religion a few generations back that had rendered her *legally dead*, or that she was technically both a Dulf and a Chilver by several removed relations – at least one of whom had been removed around the neck height and quite publically, at that.

Quynn was known to her friends as Queeny, and to everyone else, 'that terrifying Wyndsyrruffian.'

Queeny never sat up at her desk when Aderyn was studying, and Aderyn had no idea at all what Queeny did when *she* was studying, because she never studied. Instead, she was on her bunk – the top one – on her back, her head hanging off the side, her mop of frizzy, golden curls hanging upside down. Queeny had dyed half of her hair hot pink to further stand out in a crowd and look confrontational, a form of personal expression she scarcely needed given the way her lower jaw was in perpetual jut. With her hair a tangled mess of jangling colours, and a stark black star painted on one cheek, she looked like a particularly exotic form of iced treat.

Aderyn looked back down to her books, double-checking the answer she'd been given, running the stone in her hand against the dagger on the desk parallel to the handle, up by the tip. "No, Queeny, the Royal Palace is not defended by Corgis."

"Should be." Queeny snorted – then, in her inverted position, spat, across the room, into the disused inkwell on her own desk. "Corgis are like, fairy knight horses."

"I rather think you're making that up," Aderyn said, turning the page with her left hand. "And while I may just be taking a guess here, I'm reasonably certain that it's not going to be anywhere on one of the tests."

"Could be under culture." Queeny said, rolling over and over, face first into her pillow.

"I don't see why you're even bothering, though." Queeny grunted, her voice mostly muffled by pillow. Fortunately, Aderyn had had two years to learn to speak that particular language. "You could do what the smart kids are doing."

Aderyn turned the page in her notebook and cleared her throat – pinning the inference of *smart kids* against the page and giving another low, metallic grating sound to the room with the stroke of her stone against the knife. "And what, exactly, is that?"

“Fiiiiinally! A quiz question worth th’answerin’!”

“Then answer it.”

“I spen’ th’ thirty an’ now ‘m’ loaded up with th’exam questions an’ answers. Gunna saaaaail on through at this walk.”

Aderyn opened her eyes wide, took a breath, then leant forwards over her desk. “Where did you get *those*?”

“Ahah!” Queeny said, swinging her legs over the side of the bed, and sitting up, holding up a finger threateningly. “I did a favour for a favour an’ another favour – an’ now, I have th’ear of DuColome – *Th’ Black Dove*.” The accent slipped away when Queeny correctly pronounced the surname, and crashed right back as soon as she was done. “Y’know, th’gel that runs our floor.”

Aderyn turned through her notes, looking for an entry labelled *DuColome*. “Oh, yes. DuColome,” she said, correcting Queeny’s pronunciation. “You know something about her?” she asked, lifting up a single piece of notepaper, upon which a swirl of red text tried to connect pieces of well-hidden information.

“I know they call her,” Queeny paused dramatically, lowering her voice, “The Colome.”

“That’s not what that means.”

“So what?” she asked, flouncing backwards onto the bed again. “Thanks to her, I got what I paid for, and I figger that I spit half th’ answers right, that’s a pass, yeh?”

“Wait, you have all the answers – *all* of them – and you’re planning on *only* trying for a pass mark?”

“Well, I dun’ want the markers t’get suspicious.”

The logic there was ironclad, at least. The nature of cheating in the Assassins’ Guild was that it was tacitly accepted, thanks to the fundamentally untrustworthy history the school had. After all, it was hard to train an entire generation of students how to climb walls, breach windows, pick locks, memorise text, and extract themselves leaving no trace of their presence, and *not* expect at least one or two of them to think about turning those skills on their educators when the time came for examinations. Pragmatically, the solution was that cheating was graded.

Just this year, the exam had been broken into seven parts, with two dummy parts that would not be part of the greater exam, and each part had been hidden around the city. Not on the Guild’s Campus, but out, in the city itself. There had been combination locks and barrel locks and one water lock, each a practical exam. What’s more, thanks to the methods of storage, none of the passages could easily be removed from their location – they had to be copied or memorised.

Aderyn turned a page. Honest study seemed much easier, in her mind. Another scrape against her knife, another passage of reading. “Are you prepared at least for the practical exam?”

Queeny grinned. “Oh, come *on*.” In response, she swung one hand down to the edge of her bunk, and swung her legs out, holding them straight. Gripping with her left hand, she then lifted – and

hauled her entire body's weight up off the bed's surface, keeping her legs ramrod straight. "You think," breath, "climb-and-kill work is going," breath, "to slow this powerhouse," breath, "down?"

Aderyn looked up at the back of her roommate's legs. She could hardly deny what Queeny was capable of. "And if it's a flat assignment? What if you've got a crowd to work with?"

Queeny had been a spot of contention during camouflage classes, where other students mocked her for being very, very easily spotted – not just because of her hair but also her fashion. Longer dresses than normal, rolled up sleeves, all of the ways she conducted herself were counter to conventional fashion. Nobody had been surprised that Queeny had scored in the bottom half of that class. Aderyn's own marks had been a fairly unimpressive average – perfectly placed in the middle.

"Then I'll bust out," breath, "a secret weapon," Queeny said, leaning forwards on the edge of the bed. "I'll wear a damn hat."

"Ah." Aderyn considered that for a moment. "Why didn't you ever wear a hat before?"

"Because it wasn't exams," breath, "before. Besides, who cares," breath, "about grades?" She shrugged. "Plus, it's not like this," breath, "target's going to be able to run."

"Do you know that back in the day, the targets used to be live?" Aderyn asked, her tone hushed.

"I heard they used to be," breath "volunteers from the," breath, "big families. You weren't expected," breath, "to die because young," breath, "Assassins were so awful." Breath. "Not like me." Queeny's face split in a cocky grin.

"I heard that it used to be how the big families made people disappear. Let an amateur stab them, then shuttle them off and claim they were killed while they went about to work," she lowered her voice, "from the shadows."

"Dun DUN DUN!" Queeny said, raising her hand dramatically – and lowering herself back down to the bed with the other. "You really think there are hidden nobles around, though? I mean, I got thirty-two cousins, according to the paperwork, and we know where they all live. Seems hard to hide anything when we're paying attention to minor stuff like *me*. Let alone minor stuff like *you*." Queeny said, leaning forwards, thumping her knuckles together.

"You know," Aderyn said, looking back down to her knife, as she ran the stone over it again. "You lean forward a great deal. I daresay if you do it much more, you'll fall off your bunk."

*

Brother Fratarelli had only ministered to a few in Draftfane. Every time, though, he'd brought his chess set, a lovely collection of softwood pieces that had worn finger marks and damaged velvet; too fragile to use as anything but as a game set, something that never worried a warden. It served to occupy the hands, and focus the mind. Hard to keep secrets when you were looking at a game; harder to act innocent when you avoided a simple game to pass the time. Boredom set up his partners, and the game showed who they truly were.

“You’re not like many priests I’ve met,” Rafe said, running his fingertips over the pieces on the board, sliding one forwards just a space.

It was hard for Fratarelli to not look upon Rafe as *The Boy*. Maybe eighteen, seventeen years old – hard to tell with the industrial grime on his fingertips that suggested he might be stunted or worked young – and wiry. That face of his was young alright, lacking in scars and even a telltale crook in the nose suggesting a break at some point, common sights on boys that grew up on the streets. He had scars on his hands, on his forearms, on his shoulders – all exposed here in the prison, clad in a simple sack shirt and trousers to give him a modicum of presentability.

“I’d hope not. I’m alive.” The priest slid a piece in response, watching Rafe’s game. It was hard to dissect. Harder still to plan around. All those lost opportunities – all those times when he could have claimed great advantage, and chose not to. “Tell me what happened on the rooftop, Rafe.”

“I murdered a priest, slipped on the snow and sledded his body into prison.” Rafe said, tapping another piece in place, giving a dismissive shrug.

“Why are you lying to me?”

Rafe shrugged one shoulder, moving his knight with fingertips that fairly made the piece dance.

Another few moments, another set of moves. The boy looked at the board, kept his eyes on it. Normally, that made the Brother expect a novice, but Rafe had known the rules without any explanation. It made sense – chess was a fairly common thing to pick up in some prisons – and the boy clearly wasn’t *stupid*.

“What do you think of the city, o-o-of Timoritia, Rafe?” A different tack.

“I live here.” Another move.

“Do you really have an alternative?” An aggressive push.

“No.” And a piece came down, blocking the push, but *not* punishing it.

“That doesn’t make it much of an endorsement.”

“Know anyone who wants my endorsement, Brother?” Rafe asked, raising his head and looking the priest in his eyes. The boy seemed to be determined to live his life permanently scowling, and every expression was an attempt to hide it.

“About the murders you’re accused of,” Brother Fratarelli began.

“The murders I committed,” Rafe said, raising his gaze and looking the priest square-on, clear defiance in his eyes.

“Liar.” Brother Fratarelli shot back.

“Prove it.”

Brother Fratarelli shifted in his chair, resting his hand on the seat. To no surprise, seats in a prison like Draftfane weren't particularly nice. When he came here, he'd wanted to prove something to be true and make a decision based on that information. Still... the Church *did* honour the value of faith.

Perhaps it was worth the risk.

"I'd like you to come with me." The priest said, even as his back creaked in protest at having sat for so many hours.

"I've heard that from priests before." Rafe shot back, eyes flaring with anger.

"I assure you, no such thing." The Brother raised his hands, waving them reassuringly. "I wish to take you out of Draftfane. I'm a believer, you see, in the church as an engine for social good. When my congregation is joined, I look upon my flock and see who can help who. A bricklayer has lost his job? Well, a plasterer in my congregation may well be able to help him find work. A florist's windows have been smashed? Why, I look to my flock's glazier." The round-faced little priest gave the boy with the tangled brown hair a smile.

"And me? What do you want a murderer for?"

"Murder, of course."

*

When Brother Fratarelli returned with a guard, he was glad to see Rafe had managed to mask his glare to some extent. When they finished the paperwork, returning Rafe's meagre possessions to him, and signed the orders releasing the boy into the care of the Church, that mask slipped, just a touch.

The guards were laughing at Rafe as an incompetent, part of what had made it easy to convince them that the church could care for him. He wasn't dangerous – He was an idiot.

If looks could kill, Rafe would have been a sevenfold murderer before they left that building.

*

When Rafe's toes hit cobbles, the transformation in his movement was startling and absolute – he was *down*. Instead of the sullen, resentful, slumping motion of a barely house-trained teenager, he had the decisive movement of an urban predator. Soft shoes deformed around his toes as all the power in his legs bunched up and practically *threw* him down the street.

Rafe had his head lowered and shoulders in, and loosed like a bullet from a gun, one arm hanging down lower than the other. At the t-junction next to Brother Fratarelli, instead of darting down the street away from him, into the construction work, he darted *past* the round man. One hand grabbed at Brother Fratarelli's cabled belt and pulled as he ran – yanking the knot at the right angle to untether it, releasing the big man's bigger pants into a mess of tangled fabric down at his ankles.

"Rafe! Stop!" yelled the priest, as Rafe put fifty ems between them, weaving between the people on the street. "You'll hurt yourself!"

Rafe may have considered himself an expert in this kind of evasion, but the concern in the old man's voice was so sincere and so utterly inappropriate, he almost let it flag his movement. Almost.

Stepping between two people like a cat through a fence, Rafe had the determined cast of a man who wasn't going to stop moving at a run until his lungs started to burn. He swung one hand out to grab the edge of a cart and vault himself over it.

When a person is moving at a dead run, the brain doesn't really pay attention to everything around it. There's a certain freedom that comes from dropping responsibility and fleeing. Adrenalin floods the system, and wide-eyed and heart-pounding moments melt all but the most important of details away. Things that take moments of time seem to stretch out like soft dough, drawn thinner and thinner until that crucial moment when everything *snaps*, and reality reasserts itself.

A steel-clad fist arced over the side of the cart, and suddenly, Rafe wasn't flinging his body over an obstacle, he was using his upper body strength to crash his face into the unyielding metal wall of a fist that was *having none of this nonsense*.

That tightly-wound spring of muscle and bone collapsed in an undignified heap, the back of Rafe's head thudding off the cobblestones, his whole body *bouncing* with the impact. Barely a moment of scrabbling put him up on his knees while his hands nursed his face, trying to feel if he'd been given a permanent *dent*. His nose, miraculously unbroken, still sat in the same place as it always had, but he felt like the rest of his face had been relocated.

Then a pair of metal-shod feet pounded into the cobblestones next to Rafe, fairly hard enough to make him imagine the stones cracking and breaking, while he swept his head to look up and down the figure that had just replaced his pain with pain. Those heavy boots showed a feather pattern around the edges, up to metal-plated thighs and a heavy, side-slung belt. Hanging from that belt was a longsword with a hilt similarly designed to show feathers of a polished brass style. Then a breastplate, shoulder guards with a brown cape behind it, and a helmet that looked nothing less than a bird attempting to be covert in a filigree factory. The figure looked down at him, adjusting its gauntleted fist, and raised one, commanding finger, wagging it back and forth, before turning to the cart owner. Coins changed hands.

"Ah, um, yes, Rafe!" Brother Fratarelli said, stumbling up behind the scene. "I'm so glad you're not too badly hurt!" putting one hand on Rafe's shoulder, the portly priest strained, leaning back like a counterweight, to help him up to his feet, even as Rafe tried to deal with the dizzying swirl of stars that encased his head. It was further complicated by the priest having one hand stuck at his belly, holding his pants up through his outer robe. "This would be Lady Kivis Athene, your ... bodyguard, I suppose? Or parole officer. I'm not sure what she would prefer."

Rafe nursed his face and blinked frantically, trying to turn the mess of crystal confusion before him into normal vision, trying to make the three images of the knight before him stop wobbling side-to-side and focus into one person. The slits in her helm were deep and angled inwards, giving her metal 'face' a predatory, implacable air. Someone in there was watching him, but Rafe couldn't tell a damn thing about her. That made him uncomfortable. The worst combination he could hope for at this point was to find she was humourless and principled.

"It's very strange!" Brother Fratarelli said, looking up at the woman. She didn't *loom*, being barely taller than Rafe even with her armour and boots, but there was this strange air of preparedness about her. As if she was waiting for the right opportunity before towering over a terrified party. A sort of *loom-in-potentia*. "Like you said, he ran left, instead of right – right past me! How *did* you know that?"

Rafe opened his mouth to answer, then shut it straight away. Don't interrupt people making assumptions.

"He thinks he's clever." The knight said. The helmet hid her features, but it couldn't hide the voice; perhaps in the middle of the night, drunk, or when she was yelling, one could mistake her voice for a man's. In the armour, which had a breastplate that was designed to be more plate than breast, she could probably be mistaken as totally androgynous, otherwise. "Clever people like doing clever things."

Brother Fratarelli looked up at Rafe, giving him a shiny smile, sweat sheening him thanks to the exertion of chasing down the boy. "Ah, yes, well, um, well, he *is* pretty clever! That trick with my belt-

Kivis swung one hand down and smacked Brother Fratarelli's hand, prompting his pants to fall down again, before turning to press one finger against Rafe's chest, like she was nailing him down. No words, she just *stood*, staring at him from those pitiless slits in the helm.

Brother Fratarelli managed to get his pants back in order, before clearing his throat and continuing. "You remember how you said that nobody gave a whit about you living or dying? Well, good news! Lady Kivis here is obligated by *law* to give a whit!"

"Two whits," her voice just barely scraped away from being an outright snarl. Clamped metal fist tilted, and she extended her left hand, palm raised. "To whom?" she asked, an opportunity to introduce himself.

"Rafe, you're glaring." Brother Fratarelli said, reaching out to take his hand, guiding it into an awkward shaking position with Kivis. "Kivis! This is Rafe, the boy I told you about. He's the worst murderer in all of Timoritia!"

"... Charmed." Kivis said, gesturing with her right hand as Rafe shook her left. "The coins?"

Rafe tilted his head back. God damnit, she was a thief-taker. Holding out his right hand, he dropped the coins she'd given the cart-holder into her hand. A momentary lapse of attention, when she turned to check if the cart was still near, and she turned back to see the coins in her hand, in a neat stack.

Rafe didn't need to see her eyes to know she was narrowing them.

"Ah, Lady Athene?" Brother Fratarelli cleared his throat. "Can you release Rafe's throat? I think he needs that."

Slowly, metal fingers uncurled from Rafe's throat and he gave her a winning smile in return. Really, more of a pyrrhic victory of a smile, considered. "Well," he croaked, rubbing his throat and looking

down to the priest. "Where now? Chance of a meal and some warm clothes?" he asked, pushing his luck already. "Or we on business 'ready?"

"Oh! Just one last piece of business before we return to the church!" Brother Fratarelli said, smiling and patting Rafe's arm. "We're just going to hire an assassin!"

*

The Assassins' Guild was an old institution, and with that age came a certain implied respect. Old families could trace their lineage and find in far points in history, famous names that even then, attended the Old School, and learned how to avoid poisons and knives there. Nobility was much like pixie dust, scattering in the path of those who had it, touching everything around them and making things they used a little bit more special. Other schools had teachers; the Assassins' Guild had Teachers, but it also had Examiners and Beadles and Invigilators.

Exam Invigilators were teachers who wanted a small bonus for the extra work and had a tolerance for boredom most adults never developed outside of bureaucracy. Exams, even in a school where knives were office supplies, were dull and slow. Any examination of students who had been taught how to move silently rarely needed much controlling. To invigilate the practical exams was a totally different business.

The Invigilator smiled as he kissed his wife's cheek, hugging her around the shoulder. "Just leave my dinner in the oven," he said. "Some of these students can take forrrrever," he said, moustache wiggling side-to-side as he rolled his eyes and his *rs*. Oh, those children. Not like him back when he became an Assassin, then finished post-graduate studies to become a teacher, then became an illustrious senior member of the school.

His home was a teacher's home, with soft carpets and small windows, and an extra room that, since his daughter had moved out to work at a drapier's, was now full of fishing and sewing equipment. Of course, attempting to open those windows from the outside ran the risk of a very nasty encounter with a hidden razor blade, and those carpets hid an array of creaking boards that could signal to the man every movement in his living room from any part of the house, but those things aside, it was as normal as any other teacher's home.

By the door, he stopped, adjusting his jacket. When he'd lectured, he'd been proud to say that clothes made the man – and was a bit more careful saying that after a few female students had made fun of him for it. A thick, woollen jacket that hung down over his hips hid his pocket tops, protecting them from pickpockets, and also hung heavy. Heavy clothing was a good place to hide small things like blades and extra coinage. Thick boots with thin soles, letting him feel the way of the city as he walked, and a pair of pants dyed dark blue. Anywhere in the city, he'd look like someone just on their way to something – a teamster hauling goods at the palace, or a sailor leaving dock by the river. The finishing touch, A short, blue cap with a stout metal lining in the brim, and he was off.

Normally, he just went down Pastel street, followed the river until he hit Lane Lane, and walked with the bakery boys the rest of the way to the Guild. This was an evening walk, though, and the bakery boys had finished their routes hours ago. Chances are they were already in bed! Oh, the strange schedules people kept in a city. Instead, he kept walking past Lane Lane, and tracked the river, moving amongst other men in dark blue jackets and caps, laughing and grunting as they bumped one

another. It was so easy to just fall in with a group like this – people eager to talk but not *about* anything.

It was a short skip across a back alleyway to the servant's quarters at the Guild, and from there, a walk across the quad. Even there, he carried a loop of rope from the servants', scratching his bare scalp as he went. Students could still spot him, after all, and if they did, that could give them an edge during the exam. That sort of attention to detail was laudable, but there was no reason to make it *easier* on them.

In the foyer he passed three non-threats and the secretary on the way to the examiner's meeting room. He nodded at the fat priest and the knight, who were both emblems of respectable, useful social scenery. Priests didn't move quickly, and often congregated in groups – standing and listening to a priest was one of the best disguises he could use. The knight, less so, but the armour drew the eye. If you were standing next to a knight, people would remember them, and not *you*. The bratty thief with them was barely worth noticing. He nursed his wrists like he was recovering from shackles. Maybe the priest was trying to arrange the boy a scholarship, put him to some use. A short trip upstairs, rope dropped in a closet, and he sat across from the examiner, smoothing down his thick brown hair.

"Evening, Terry," said the Examiner, as he sat down, resting his hands on the table. "Only one, today," she said, turning the paperwork over. "The morning staff worked through a few more students than we expected, and the two Ds scheduled for tonight have filed out of the exams." The silver-haired woman had the smile of a thrown axe, but Terry knew it wasn't directed at him in particular. You just developed a certain temperament dealing with *students* for too long.

She slid the paper across to him. "Duthane," she mispronounced it. "Aderyn. Slender thing, decent marks. Shouldn't be a long one, but we're not likely to set any record times."

"Never do, these days," Terry said, picking up the sheet of notes. No infractions, average marks, homework in on time. Pale blonde hair, which was *never* useful – most students had learned to dye theirs, or cut it short, at least. The girl's sketch had a elegant braid – a mark of vanity that was probably going to count against her in the examination. Still – what kind of thing was he expecting? The girl was probably heading home after she graduated to spend her life organising the distribution of sheep. "No, not like back-"

"Let me stop you there. We've got one exam to do and I've a christening tomorrow morning. Let's make this quick, shall we?"

Terry laughed, scratching his chest. "Alright." He folded the paper, tucking it away. "Blind testing her?"

"Yes. She has a name and a quarter of the city."

"I miss when we used to at least give them an address."

"Yes, but *finding* opportunity is an important skill. If we just tell them 'go here,' they do it, and then knock off early to go get drunk. They *are* students, after all."

Terry shook his head, scratching his thumb against his moustache. Students really were the problem in his tidy view of the school. "Alright, then," he said, standing up and tucking his hands into his pockets, double-checking for his tools. "I'll be waiting for her."

*

A few minutes later, Aderyn knocked on the door with the modesty of a church mouse. Most of the rest of her class had taken this opportunity to dress in their 'assassin gear' – outfits designed to give them an edge in the exam. There were so many lucky coins and boots, and a few of her classmates doing their exams that night had emerged from their dormitory rooms looking like they'd fallen into black paint. Black was dreadfully fashionable, after all!

Aderyn's clothing was much simpler, though. She wore a heavy sweater, striped across with dark blue and pale blue, the neck high but loose. The whole thing was thick and soft, folding over and forming a pile around her throat, which emphasised how small Aderyn seemed. A daring assassin could hide a wire in all of that, but it was risky to keep any choking weapon near your own throat. No dress today, because that would be dreadfully impractical. She wore breeches, tucked into boots at the knee, folded over at the top. The breeches were stitch-tight against her, nowhere to grab or become caught on things, and the boots had more in common with ballet shoes than with the hard stomping things she'd been wearing to the store. Atop the *ensemble* was a dark blue cap, a little bit too large for her, but which fell a little over her eyes, which did not help her image of harmlessness. While everyone around her was projecting the image of lethal vitality, Aderyn looked like a painting that should be holding a puppy in some noble's gallery.

Every last one of these judgmental detail flew through the Examiner's mind as she spoke to Aderyn. As she told her her examination area, as she told her her timetable, as she told her her expected outcomes, and not a single word of it stayed in the Examiner's mind more than a moment after the door closed. The student was assigned her task – it wasn't her business until the Invigilator and student returned to sign their work.

*

Terry stood out by the windy corner of the Cathedral, idly turning a water-butt and examining it as if for cracks. The still surface of the water gave him a mirror to watch the rooftops closest to the Guild, and his position on the ground, checking around him from time to time, gave him a clear view of the other route from the school. Finding the student was never hard – they didn't have to hide on the way to the area, and because students were students, they *didn't*. Instead they'd put in no effort on the way into the zone, then infinite effort once they were there.

A cat landed behind him. He didn't turn his head. Noticing a cat was suspicious, and reacting to a sound when you were 'working' was also suspicious. Instead he lowered his head, looking into his barrel, checking behind him under the lee of his arm. Nobody he could spot – cat probably moved back into the alleyway, into the darkness. It was a blind alleyway – the cat would come out eventually.

A few moments later, he spotted her, coming down the street parallel to him. Aderyn was easy to pick out. She'd at least avoided dressing like a black hatpin, which was good – most of the other students had to do their entire job on the rooftops, because nothing stood out in the crowd like a

nervous student wearing nothing but black silk. Worse were the ones who'd tried to make a fashion of it. Still, that bright shock of white-blond hair stood out, bright and bold and he'd picked it out easily. Then, her sweater – a striped pattern? That didn't blend either.

Technically, it wasn't her job to avoid the invigilator. The job was to find the target based on hidden clues, then reach them and take them out, and the invigilator was to see if they made mistakes. The Guild's only option when the invigilator lost track of a student was to assume they could *at least* avoid one excellent observer, which would have to count as a pass mark, if the target wound up 'dead.'

Aderyn moved from point to point in the crowd, but with a very patient manner. Most students were nervous; he'd seen that plenty of times. They tried to pick out the invigilator in a crowd, then sought to impress them, which rarely worked. This girl – and he did think of her as a girl, not a young lady – moved from group to group, from stall to stall, making her way down the street slowly, like she was idle. Not a bad strategy, really. Of course, finding all the clues to the target would be difficult at that pace – some were time-sensitive, after all.

His jacket flapped around him as he left the alleyway, moving on to the next water-but, a good excuse working well a second time, keeping his peripheral vision on Aderyn. Timing his steps alongside her, he turned just a moment to look down into the barrel, checking the skyline for anything unexpected, and then glanced back up.

The white hair was lost as it passed into the crowd, but that sweater was unmistakable, moving along beside the crowd. It'd lost that patience, which made sense – she'd know the clues were time-sensitive, too. His hands turned the barrel while he turned himself, miming as a man trying to find something lost. The sweater picked up – then stepped down the alleyway opposite him, on the far side of the road.

He crossed quickly, pulling his coat around him as he went, protecting him from the wind while he melted into the crowd again, watching down the blind alleyway, looking up at the walls for a climbing young woman. There wasn't any other way out of it, after all.

A prickle of something ran through his shoulders and into his scalp, like the cold wind had found its way down the back of his collar. A moment of itchiness passed, and Terry only reacted to it by scratching his moustache with one hand, running his fingers across the top of his head and then rubbing his bare hair-

Hang on.

Terry turned around sharply, looking behind him, the sudden realisation that something had slipped his mind breaking years of training.

*

Aderyn's bare shoulders flexed while she climbed the church tower. The wind whipped around her at a dreadful pace, but thankfully, that heavy cap kept her hair under control. Why targets had to be hidden in high towers seemed foolish to her. Towers were a place people were cornered. A more meanspirited thought than normal crossed her mind that these parts of the test were designed to

simply keep people below a minimal level of athleticism from succeeding, but couldn't that be done with a footrace, as well? After all, pursuing a target could be dreadfully tiring, if they were actually mobile, and maybe in a cart, rather than simply sitting in a tower, imagining they were safe because they couldn't think of any way into that same tower.

Underneath her sweater, she'd worn wrist guards with simple hooks on them, to aid in climbing, and a narrow-shouldered top that gave her arms plenty of freedom. Closing fingers in tight clamps on the irregularities of the church tower, she made progress one foot, one hand, at a time. From up this high, she probably blended in decently enough with the darker tiles of the tower – allowing her to focus on her task.

Reminding herself she'd need to head back and find that sweater, Aderyn pulled her weight up onto the sill, and slipped into the relatively small room, with its sleeping occupant. Not an atypical garret – the kind of places stories began. A church bell hung nearby overhead, and a locked and barred door on the floor showed the expected and obvious way up that wouldn't work.

Aderyn slipped from the framing light of the window and moved, catlike, towards the edge of the bed. Reaching to her belt, she unsheathed the one knife she'd brought with her, and drew to the form.

Amateurs stabbed through the blanket. That had been in the exam notes. It made it look like a crime of passion, or fear, where the killer couldn't bear to see the target honestly. Aderyn slid back the blanket, and looked down at... well, the *body*.

It was an exquisitely crafted body, shaped like a young man in the later parts of his youth. Perhaps a little fey and pretty by her reckoning, not that that was bad at all, and possessing an attractive pair of collar bones. His – its – skin had been tempered together with a mix of wax and unguents to betray fingers that touched it, but also with a small clockwork set to the chest, which made the figure's chest softly rise, softly fall.

Aderyn counted, drew a large breath, then plunged her knife upwards, stabbing up under the ribcage, trying to strike at the heart but knowing she wanted to tear the stomach as much she could, to ensure trauma and bleeding. One, single stab – and the engine stopped. She counted, drawing back – then looked down at her knife, decorated with red paint. She stabbed it back in again, then yanked the blade out, wiping it clean on a rag from her belt, and slipped it into its sheathe, where it sat unevenly.

Aderyn huffed, pouting and blowing her cheeks out, crossing her arms across her belly, squeezing herself momentarily. Then, she looked down at the door, and the window. Crawling up over the windowsill, Aderyn took a markedly slower pace, breathing slowly and steadily. Over the windowsill, onto the tower wall – and she was on her way back to school.

*

Terry stood in the garret, his hands on his hips, looking at the examiner. "Not a word of a lie. Basic trick, but it worked. Girl made me figure she was a student." He shrugged. "Ditched her sweater onto someone else, didn't even notice it'd happened."

The Examiner was barely listening to him. Instead, she held the device from the fake body's chest in her hands, fishing away at its leathery surface with a pair of tweezers.

"Not sure how she found this place – none of the clues were disturbed. 'Course, possible she bought answers ahead of time." Terry went on, as he dismantled the trap that had been set underneath the door, but now rested on a bench, gingerly moving sharp blades aside.

Tink.

"Ah," the Examiner said, as she lifted with her hands. Between the tweezer's tines was a single snared, triangular piece of metal. Terry turned at that sound. That was a rare sound, the sound of relieved satisfaction from an examiner. "Broken knife," she said, setting down the blade. "Lack of confidence – probably stabbed twice. Probably wasn't expecting it to all look so real." She said, taking down notes, her voice like a paper list pinned to the air.

Terry peered down at the flat-based triangle, the tiny blades on both sides. "Makes sense. Girl's not cut out for the killing part of this, even if she does move like smoke." he said, looking up at her. "Say we lock this place up, and get home early?"

The Examiner looked at Terry, down at his jacket, then at his pants, at the cap on his head, narrowing her eyes momentarily. When he'd left her office, there'd been a peeking triangle of white at one pocket. And now..."As for how she knew the way here, without the clues... Terry, do you still have the paper with *this location* in your pocket?"

*

Aderyn loosed out her braid as she walked back through the foyer. Smiling sweetly at the priest, she adjusted the sleeveless shirt she wore. "Hello," she began. "I'm Lady Aderyn DuThane, and I understand you wanted to meet with me?"

Brother Fratarelli smiled, and nudged Athene as he dropped off his seat to stand up. "See? It was only a few hours of waiting. Why, hello, young lady! I'd like to hire you as an Assassin, if I could."

The secretary looked up from his desk, his expression confused. "Wait, her?" he asked, clearly not caring that he was invading a conversation.

"Why, of course!" Brother Fratarelli said, clasping his hands together. "She's the best Assassin for the job in the guild, after all!"

Aderyn blushed, looking over at the secretary, "Um, I don't mean to be unladylike, but I do think I-uh, I don't think this conversation should be had here."

"Oh, of course, of course," Brother Fratarelli said, turning to Rafe. "Rafe, come help the lady with her bags. We'll talk more at the church."

"I don't have any bags, I'm afraid." Aderyn apologised.

"Well, help her with something."

Rafe grumbled and stopped perching on his chair. Three hours waiting in one spot with no conversation and nowhere to go. It was like prison all over again.

Chapter 3

With the meeting concluded, Marko sat on the bench in the kitchen. Even while his mind whirled with what he'd been asked, he sat stoically and watched Wardell weave his way between class barriers and brew tea.

"So you don't actually know who any of them are?" Marko asked, his elbows on the table, hands tucked into his elbows. Outside, rain sheeted down, but here in the town house, with its high roof and second storey, it just sounded as a muffled march of owls somewhere above.

"Well, even if I did, Fiver, is it really my place to say?"

There it was, again. Wardell didn't call him *Marko*, which was his name, and which Wardell *knew*, and he didn't call him *Mister Fiver*, which is what a typical servant would know to do. Mister served as a useful, all-purpose title these days, since *having money* had supplanted *my dad had some money* as the paramount way to earn respect.

"Are any of them your employer, Wardell?" Marko's question had a bone in it – he *was* a professional personal guard, after all, these were questions that could save a man's life. Typically, he wasn't used to anyone obscuring who they were.

"Ah, no," Wardell shook his head. "I would believe at this point in my life I am performing some public charity work, while collecting the remnants of a military pension."

Marko squinted at that. Wardell was no older than he was – possibly younger. "Pension, Wardell?"

"Yes, Fiver." Wardell gestured at his shoulder with one hand, as the other set out a pair of cups. "Wounded Serviceman award. I took two rounds in the shoulder and ah, tripped and fell under a cannon." He nodded.

Marko sat up at that. "You don't show it."

"It has been a number of years," said Wardell evasively. "And while it has prevented me from a more *energetic* pastime or two, it has not impeded me as much as I feared."

"But it stopped you being a soldier." Marko added, watching the teakettle rattle on the stovetop. Underneath it, blue flames shivered at a tiny fluctuation, while the kettle began to jig.

"I daresay if not for the injury, the campaign end would have done that just fine, Fiver."

Marko rubbed his neck with one hand. While part of him was still sitting in that room, listening to four masks asking him about past campaigns, about his time serving at the side of Yull Bachthane, some idly-ignored part of his own memory fell into place and started turning a very dusty cog.

"... *That's* where we met, isn't it Wardell?" Marko asked. The name wasn't particularly exceptional – he'd met a Wardell or two, and he'd met a Marko or five in his time. When he'd been told to meet with Wardell at the town house, it had been just another generic name to slide into his memory, a nobody. When he was inside the townhouse, Wardell was just another one of those people who worked for Nobles, just like Marko. Now, however, the man shuffling around between the

cupboards, picking the sugar out of there, the milk out of the icebox, and slicing up a lemon – because someone wanted that – had about him the mien of a soldier.

It was something about the way the man stood. Wardell didn't look you in the eye, but he did look where you were looking. It was something that held a *rifle* and –

Marko shook his head, literally, and looked at Wardell all anew. "Wardell!" he said, his memory finally turning to an old page.

It was not a page that made Marko comfortable at the best of times. It was a page that was stained with sand and salt water, and with too, too much blood. It was back when they tried to do cavalry charges against stolen cannons, at the northern ridges of the Southern Continent, in the Djansk provinces.

"A bloody little struggle that didn't really matter," Wardell's voice drifted into Marko's ears, from a thousand kayem away, on the other side of the kitchen table, "Except to the few that remained."

And *that* was why he was Fiver. He wasn't Marko Fiver, the Hero of the Charge of Heltskruet. He was Fiver, a sergeant amongst corporals and privates, looking at thirty men nervously fingering second-hand rifles that didn't handle the sand well. The natives had revolted against the Djansk colonists, and that seemed a perfect time, according to high command, to strike amongst the mess. There was confusion, after all – the Djansk soldiers wouldn't know Tiberans from their own men. The optimistic idea failed to perhaps recognise that to the locals of the villages around Heltskruet, particularly those who had worked silver mines, whether they were using stolen guns and cannons to shoot at Djansk or Tiberan was a linguistic hair they had no personal reason to split. Certainly not when you considered how easily Djansk and Tiberan *bodies* split.

Two sides, no retreat, a completely idiotic charge that lost eight swords out of every ten. Marko had been one of the lucky ones. Clearly, Wardell had been, too, but not nearly so lucky as Marko.

He'd mentioned it to the masks, in the room, but they hadn't been very interested. They didn't care when he *met* Yull Bachthane, they cared about what he'd *done* alongside Yull. They wanted to talk about Yull as a General, Yull as a Leader. They wanted to feel his booming voice in the room and size the man up. Marko was not happy – it put him in mind of prewar councils, of nobles discussing invasions and whether or not generals could *manage it*. What next? Across the channel, to start another war of suppression with the damn –

"Fiver?" Wardell's voice echoed and Marko realised he'd been there again, in the sand and the blood.

"Ah, sorry, Wardell... what was it? Sergeant?"

"Private." Wardell said, sliding a cup of tea across the table to him. A wan, apologetic smile on his lips as he sat down. "I was injured before the fighting really broke out. It's why I came back home on a donkey, not in a box."

Marko Fiver looked down at the tea, smiling. "I have it-"

"Something like six sugars, right?"

Lifting the sweet, milky tea to breathe in the scent, Marko couldn't help but laugh and nod. "Good memory?"

"No," Wardell said, standing and shuffling over to the tray, to set out the other cups of tea. "Just a good guess."

Marko sipped his tea once, then once again, as she nursed the cup between her hands. "You think they're seeking a war?"

"Asking after Yull Bachthane?" Wardell asked, dropping a slice of lemon into a cup. "I don't fancy it, Fiver. If they wanted a war they'd just point him at it. I don't much know why they want to understand the man unless he's done something *wrong*."

Marko nursed his chin with a fingertip. It was nice, knowing that Wardell and he had fought alongside each other – in as much as they had – because it meant that the surnames was a sign of *relief*, not disrespect. *We are no longer privates and sergeants*, it said. *We can just be men*. It was like a private schoolboy's familiarity that followed well after school was ended, just far less likely to be glassed after a late-night binge.

"If Yull's done anything wrong, I doubt he'd ever hide it." Marko said, both hands holding the cup, his mind still kneeling around a campfire on a desert beach. "Man's got the hide of an elephant and all the social grace."

"I've heard," Wardell said, diplomatically. "Figured that sort of thing was allowed for an officer."

"I wasn't an officer long."

Wardell nodded, quietly, as he picked up the tray in both hands. "But you were a hero twice, Fiver. And even *you* think of Yull as a hero."

Wardell made it to the doorframe before Marko called after him.

"I'm sorry I didn't recognise you, Wardell. "

"Don't blame you, Fiver," he said, in the doorframe. "Some nights I wake up and I'm still under a cannon. Can't imagine it's any better for you for anything that reminds you of Heltskruet."

Marko rubbed his cheek, trying not to feel traces of blood under his fingers, the dull roar of an ocean in the rain. "You mind if I walk home, Wardell? I feel a bit like being outside."

"By all means, Fiver. Let yourself out and leave it unlatched when you go?"

Marko plucked his helmet by the door and stepped out into the rain, straight into a puddle. The gutters swelled and foamed, the swelling river-run of the higher streets hammered on by the raindrops from above. A few steps and he was in the middle of the street, far from the quiet, dry, warm little room, and the memories.

He had duties to begin, and damned if he'd let a fight he'd already *won* impede him any. His head forwards, nose against the rain, he stomped onwards, seething between his teeth.

Back inside the townhouse, Wardell slid the cups off the tray, to masked individuals with their white mask slid up to reveal an array of fine, strong, noble jaws and clean, white, well-kept teeth.

“It’s suspicious,” one said.

“Suspicious? If he was more perfect I’d say it was providence.”

“And for those of us who don’t believe in miracles?”

“We accept it. The task of killing a man changes you – quite frankly, I think I’d rather him a little damaged if he can do the job.”

*

The city Timoritia hosted dozens of churches, from the great and old Cathedrals that studded the walls of the Old City, down to the tiny halls where the Sandmen washed one another’s feet. There were large churches and small churches, and rich churches and poor churches, and it was really just coincidence and the providence of God that meant most of the poor churches tended to be small, and also in areas where a walk home too late after evensong might result in an impromptu withdrawal from the Bank of Your Wallet and a deposit in the Bump On The Back Of Your Head account. The rich churches just coincidentally were in on the wide open streets by the wealthy portions of town, with lamps that rarely went unlit and where guards just happened to like patrolling more. Maybe guards liked churches. Maybe that was it.

The richer churches just happened to belong to the factions of the church that espoused ideas like social order, the way God rewarded the worthy, the importance of destiny, and of God’s plan for people’s lives. The poorer churches spoke some of things like charity and peacefulness and again, God’s plan, but with a little more hopelessness when they said it.

Rafe had been in many kind of churches. Churches were a good place to get out of the rain, and since this was Timoritia, it rained more nights than it didn’t. He’d stood in cheap little Colwen churches where the dirt-poor people in their dyed-black clothing that still stank of coalminer piss consoled themselves by asserting how much they *liked* being poor and grubby and hated, because that indicated they were right. He’d run across rafters like a squirrel in the St Benedict’s High Royal Cathedral, and listened to a sermon that told the fat, rich assholes sitting in the pews that really, if the poors were more righteous, they wouldn’t even *be* poor any more.

Rafe had not, hitherto, been at any churches where planning a murder was typical.

“His name is Elian Praefoco,” said Brother Fratarelli, and his words bounced off the ceiling and floor, even half-whispered as they were.

The church was a small one; barely room for seven rows of pews, ranked two to the room. The windows were narrow and high, with candles perched halfway between each one. The windows were white, pasted over and barred on the outside. From the outside, even the belltower hunkered down amongst the industrial buildings – it could have been, once upon a time, a warehouse resection. The only sign that Brother Fratarelli’s domain was anything *but* another space to store spuds or coal or some other fancy dickhead’s surplus stuff was also its most brilliant feature – a bright, beautiful stained glass design in the door. Shards of red, green, blue and yellow, arrayed in

the guise of a man, clad in a white robe, with a red sash across his chest, walking on a green hill, with bright yellow arcs of light streaming about his head. It was beautiful, but also hard to steal, and sat behind a stout metal grille when the church was closed for the evening.

Perhaps respect kept the window safe, through the night. Perhaps retribution from an armour-plated lunatic who had all the conversational grace of a thrown axe was to credit. Either way, Rafe was only half paying attention to the priest, while he tried to look at every angle and exit the church had. Of course, he couldn't look at *that* too closely while he was reasonably sure that Kivis, with her hawklike helmet and unseen eyes, was looking at him.

"What'd he do?" Rafe said, interjecting in something the Brother was saying.

"I'm sorry, what?" the young lady asked, turning from her seat on the pew to look up at Rafe.

They were seated at the front of the church, near a low wooden counter that the priest had set up. Sitting on it in a circle of metal rings was a communion tray – over two dozen little shotglasses, filled with dashes of wine, which the priest was quietly emptying while he arranged the papers in a pile next to them.

The girl – Aderyn Duthane, Rafe had been told – was agonisingly pretty and immensely boring. The girl seemed to have an outline to her that made her look drawn, like the impression from some bright children's book. White hair, or, well, blonde, but really, *close enough* to white hair, all nicely done up, with a braid and everything. Rafe had tried a braid once. It'd been cut off.

"Wot?" he shot back, trying to still the sneer. Be nice. It wasn't her choice to be born right. She was probably only a bit younger than him, but without time on the street, she couldn't possibly know what life was really like.

"Well, I am here on an agreement to kill this gentleman – and I understand you came from Draftfane prison on the same expectation. You particularly care about the personal behaviour of a target?"

"Well, yeh." Rafe said, shrugging. "You don't?"

"Well, it hardly seems an appropriate question for a young lady to ask."

Rafe stopped holding the sneer back.

Brother Fratarelli cleared his throat, rapping his knuckles on the metal tray. "Ah, ah, well. The issue with Elian is his business arrangements, and the power he's consolidating."

The two assassins sat, silently, looking at the priest. Brother Fratarelli at least looked like he was sweating nervously. "How familiar are you with the medical properties of Wifeless Nettle, Rafe?"

"What?"

"Alright, then." Brother Fratarelli rubbed his throat, wiping it with his handkerchief. "Well, it's a very important thing for the poor ladies of Timoritia, and Elian has been making business cutting off access to it. There used to be several businesses that sold and distributed Wifeless Nettle – it was very easy to acquire. Very cheap..."

“... Riiiiight?” Rafe tried to resist the boredom that swelled above his eyes, threatening to crush downwards.

“And now, Elian has been working with Lord Cameo Tully – who controls many Gorange dockland interests. If that business alliance works – it seems likely that Wifeless Nettle will become a luxury commodity, controlled by only one pair of men who have their own reasons to stop its use.”

“Seriously? This is...” Rafe squinted. “Why the *hell* – I mean... this is it? This is why you?”

“Perhaps a simpler explanation, Mister Rafe, is that you are being paid?”

“I’m being paid?”

“Ah, well,” Brother Fratarelli said, adjusting his robe. “You’ll be quartered and dressed, and uh...”

“Paid?” Rafe asked, one eyebrow raising. “I mean, you’re giving me money to hurt people?”

“No.” Brother Fratarelli stood, suddenly, his belly bouncing the edge of the counter, the glasses all a-rattle. “No, no, no. This is *very important* Rafe.” Leaning forwards, he slammed both his hands into the counter, the sleeves billowing around them while that round white face flashed red with indignation. “You have been chosen, I feel, through prayer and fasting, to enact an act of *righteous violence* in the name of our City and God.”

“... Seriously.” Rafe managed. Squinting at Brother Fratarelli, he shifted along the pew, even as he crawled up onto the back of it. “You seriously want me to think this is something *good*?”

Aderyn had, throughout the exchange, reached out to the desk, plucking up a roll of almost transparent paper and turned it over, looking at both sides, her fine white eyebrows knitting together as she surveyed the map of an estate she would definitely claim she’d never visited. “Brother, forgive my temerity, but ah, I cannot help but think Rafe has a point. There’s something in the Books about murder. Also lying.”

“Mmhm,” Brother said, still quivering with rage, unrolling the larger paper, so thin the light shone through it brightly. His fingers stopped along its edges, feeling the little divots in the paper at the edges that spoke of being once bound to a glass desk, pinned down under an architect’s hands. “And coveting, which underpins trade, *and* adultery is important to the games nobility play.”

“Yes, but we – the nobility – are dreadful degenerates.” Aderyn said, smoothing down her absolutely impeccable blouse. “Full of our own self-importance and often in need of the redemptive hand of the church.”

“Is that how you always talk about your mum and dad?” Rafe spat.

“Inasmuch as is appropriate for a young lady.”

Brother Fratarelli rumbled in the depths of his throat and lifted the papers again, trying to keep his eyes focused on the drawings rather than on the two people who could be considered at a bare minimum, quite dangerous. “Let me tell you then, the story of a Judge. His name was Ehud, and when he Judged the Chosen People, they were oppressed by the Moabites. Rafe, stop rolling your eyes.”

"I wasn't," Rafe said, with the defensive tone of someone who was, and really resented being considered predictable.

"Weapons were banned from the Chosen People by the Moabites. The Books say that we should follow the law of the land, that we should not kill, should not lie, should not use our left hands for things, and that we should not touch or interact with, ah, feces. Ehud, who was the Judge, and moral guard for the Chosen People, saved them by strapping a long sword to his inner right thigh, which he wielded with his left hand and, after luring the king of the Moabites into a private meeting, stabbed him in the stomach so deep that his, ah... filth... flooded out, around the blade and Ehud's hand."

"Well, that seems a rather vile little story." Aderyn responded. "You wanted me to consider it, why?"

"Because, young lady, the Books say a lot of things and you can't treat any one of them as the right thing all the time."

"Dangerous words for a priest," Rafe grinned. "I like it."

"You also quite like hurting people who have money, and let me assure you that Praefoco and Tully are both quite wealthy." Aderyn murmured, turning the paperwork over in her hands another time and setting it down.

Rafe sat silently. It was hard to properly respond to that. What bothered him more than the way his heart did quietly leap at that opportunity was the way Aderyn so *perfectly* predicted him.

The brother shuffled around behind his low wooden counter, smilingly rearranging the glasses on their little metal tray. "Now then, do you have any other questions?"

Rafe still hadn't lowered himself from his near spider-like position, perched atop a pew, distrust writ on his furrowed brow. He parted his lips, and made a sound that sounded perhaps like the start of a word, but was followed by nothing else. Another, better, smarter, cleverer question ran up behind it, taking the momentum away from it. Raising a finger, he finally managed, "Why us?"

Fratarelli took one of the small cups of wine and sipped it, nodding seriously. "A good question," he said. "In your case, your crimes and lies speak of a strangeness of character."

"You calling me a liar again?" Rafe asked, gripping the back of the pew and leaning forwards, his whole body like to launch at the priest as an arrow.

"I am," Brother Fratarelli said, quite boldly. "And I am reasonably certain that whatever punishment escape attempts bring, Lady Athene would *revel* in an opportunity to show you what will happen if you attack me."

Aderyn shifted a little along the pew, away from Rafe.

"... Right." Rafe said, flaring nostrils and tense shoulders showing how *hard* it was to not respond to that threat with an action. "A strangeness of character, eh?"

"A strangeness of your *moral* character. It's a strange thing to find a young man – a boy even – who'll send himself to prison for crimes he didn't commit. Stranger still for him to be like you."

“... ‘Like me?’” Rafe said, and the words were like drawing a knife.

Brother Fratarelli wasn’t even looking at Rafe as he spoke, shambling around to pull his chair closer to the counter. “Like you. You’re quite physically fit for a young man who doesn’t have regular meals. You’re quite strong for someone so small. You’re obviously confrontational, too, and that’s an attitude that I imagine would earn a young fellow like yourself an utter *pasting* if you tried it in the wrong part of the city.”

Aderyn visibly leant away from Rafe, but it wasn’t a gesture as if he smelled bad. It was the gesture as if he was about to burst into flame.

“With three murders on your record and my word making you a free man, then, Rafe, you don’t have much *choice*.” The portly priest turned and dropped himself into his chair, his hands folding across his belly. “You’ve very little opportunity in this city. The right word to the wrong guard and you’re back in Draftfane, or worse – and anything that you do under the order of this little operation is probably falling on your head next.”

Rafe’s jaw dropped. The priest had spent every conversation being so earnestly positive and effusively kind that it was a genuine shock to find himself standing over nothing but air. “You brought me on as your *fall*?”

“Oh no, not at all. Well, it was something of a contingency.”

“You miserable fat-” Rafe’s fingers tensed, white on the pew.

“Ah-ah,” Brother Fratarelli said, sipping from his wine glass. “Try to show some courtesy. I have faith in your abilities, young man. Don’t you *dare* try to tell me you’d have respected any limits I set you that weren’t boundaried by chain.”

Rafe’s mouth snapped shut again. His jaw set. “Fine.”

“When are they near one another?” Aderyn asked.

“Sorry?”

“You mention Tully and Praefoco,” Aderyn outlined, looking up at the Brother. “There are two of them, they are both a problem, and there are two of us. I have to assume then that you have some ulterior motive? Or is there to be some form of competition...?”

“Ah...” the Brother nodded. “You’ve seen to the heart of the plan. In two nights’ time, the pair will meet for a dinner – at a ball at Praefoco’s. There, there will be a noble who is willing to sell his daughter, and a man who wants to monopolise the health of women across the city to pay for it.” Slugging down one more of the wine glasses, Brother Fratarelli turned his glass carefully, and looked through the bottom at Aderyn. “Two assassins, two targets, one opportunity.”

*

Buildings in Timoritia were built in classic Tiber style, because they defined classic Tiber style. Enough wealth sluiced around in the city’s pockets that when a trend happened, whole districts could change character for a generation, such as that fad for thick white plaster interspersed with

black wood. Aderyn always loved those houses. They were pretty, and expansive, and had sloped rooves and handholds all over them, and they were designed to try and emulate a style of the nobility four hundred years gone, with only impressions and ideas. The modern throwing on a cloak of the past – it was so very Timoritian, to Aderyn’s eye. Now the row of Tudor homes around the town-house estate mirrored it. They were nice houses, but the Praefoco estate was nicer.

Once, it had been owned by a baron, who had lost it to a lawyer, who had lost it to his own mortality, and the valuable property still showed the signs, under its *nouveaux riche* aspirations. There were spines at the windowsills to discourage climbing, hardy metal juts that sat on the edges of the rooftop like a crown of thorns. It was another contrast with those houses around it – they had balconies and windows and shutters – but they didn’t have *bars* on those windows, didn’t have hard metal frames on their balconies with thick glass to keep even the *sound* of the city from touching its owner.

It was beautiful, beautiful because it showed the lengths to which the rich would go to keep themselves that little bit above, that little bit *detached* from those people who they still considered *lesser*.

“What a fucking shitheap.” Rafe said next to her. Aderyn was still unsure just how to deal with him. Most of the poor people she had interacted with personally had been hard-working, polite, and scrubbed themselves clean enough to make soap blush. Rafe was her first real interaction with someone from *the criminal class*. It was dreadfully awkward the way that none of her studies had prepared her for him. He didn’t even have a cheeky accent.

“You think so?” Aderyn asked, diplomatically as she could, walking along the rooftop, past row after row of tightly packed flower-pot chimney-tops.

“Yeah, look at it.”

“I am.”

“You have there how much of a guy’s money spent buying space to hold shit that doesn’t do anything?”

“Ah.”

“Ah what?” Rafe shot back, turning and squinting at her. Glaring at her, his hands bunched up by his sides, he planted his fists on his hips as if to hide that he *had* formed them into fists. At least he didn’t look so much like he’d been dragged out of a pipe.

Technically, she had not yet graduated from her studies as an Assassin, but this sort of work could be a very useful little extracurricular feather in her cap. In a manner of speaking. Rafe, therefore, was her partner in grades, and as with all such group work, she was determined to rise together – and not let his truculence draw them both down. All she had to do was set him useful, workable tasks, and she could take care of the rest.

Hm, there probably wouldn’t be an essay to write after this one. Aderyn wasn’t sure if that made her pleased or slightly sad.

Rafe had come out of Drafftane prison wearing rags and hadn't been well-washed or fed, three things that the priest and his pet knight had addressed. No blessing had come without a challenge, though; bread and butter were plenty to fill his belly but the water had been tepid and flat, and shortly after feasting he'd had to belch like a pig in mud. The bath was welcome and feeling his hair without knots of blood and mud in it was wonderful, but he *had* had to bathe arse-naked in the room with the knight standing *in the room*, for fear that he escape out a window narrower than his head.

Briefly, he considered she might not have been watching, and he wasn't sure if that was a relief or even more embarrassing.

Then he'd dressed, and Rafe's natural prickliness had a hard time explaining the feeling in his chest for his new gear. They were robes, stout and woollen and grey, in the same style as Brother Fratarelli's. The sash around the waist was a tight red cord, stout and tied not with a knot but with a loop and knot system, fitting in snug and keeping it from sliding down over his hips. The shirt of the robe, when pulled up, folded over in front to cover his chest entirely – and hide the woollen seam – but he'd let that hang undone, down off his hips – which gave his lower body the impression of greater mass than it had. To keep the sleeves from trailing, he'd tied them off at his waist, and his undershirt – a simple black sleeveless with a high neck – sufficed to hide his immodesty. If there was any immodesty in his nipples, he wasn't honestly sure. Around his throat, he'd tied the last vestige of his first clothes – the scarf he'd been allowed to keep in Drafftane. Rafe wore shoes from the priest's own set – almost sandals, with the toes and heels open, leather straps that ran up his calves. With his hair washed, it'd come out to a much cleaner white than the *disgustingly* brown mass it'd become – and he felt the overall effect was more than a little bit dashing.

Nobody would ever hear *that* thought spoken aloud, though.

Aderyn was dressed conservatively by comparison; she had on suede boots that met her leggings and kept going well past that point, a looped belt with a sashed end that hung over one of her hips, a white shirt tucked into her pants with some freedom to leave her chest to the imagination, and long sleeves that tied off at the wrists. Looking at Rafe as he both strutted, and tried to not look like he was strutting, she couldn't help but wonder if the boy had ever worn clothes that fit him before.

"Ah, that's your... genre of... outlook." Aderyn attempted, diplomatically.

Rafe looked like he was about to have A Moment, or possibly An Argument, there, on the rooftop high above the well-lit streets that surrounded the Praefoco estate under an otherwise starlit sky. This high up, the sky was a lovely violet colour – and Rafe and herself stood out against it. Not the best time for him to start shouting – but instead, he just *sagged* at the shoulder.

"Got a knife?" Rafe asked as he walked along the rooftops.

"An Assassin comes prepared," Aderyn responded primly.

"That's not an answer."

"Then yes, Rafe. I have a knife."

Rafe straightened up, rubbing his neck with both hands, walking a little along the rooftop to look across the street at the estate. It was too wide to easily jump – and down at the ground level, there were guards and dogs, not to mention lights. The secret of stealth, Rafe reflected, looking down into the streets, was not in being hard to see. It was going to the places nobody looked. Nobody was looking up. People walked the streets down on the ground, even the barneys whose job it was to watch the rooftops and protect the homes here. People didn't look up. Why would they look up? Nothing they cared about was up.

"Two targets... getting in's a bit of a hassle, but nothing too hard..." he said, mapping his way across the street, the movement of the barneys. Ground level *really* was a risk. Clucking his tongue against the roof of his mouth, he gripped a chimney pot and hoisted himself onto it wholly, balancing on the heels of his feet, knees out, squatting like a frog. "Out again might be hard during the party. I'll need to get in to make the hit."

"The hit?" Aderyn asked, blinking at him with the wide-eyed sincerity of someone who wanted to ensure nobody was being a fool.

"The kill." He grumbled. "What's the word you use for them?"

"Well, typically, the target, the strike, the removal. And anyway, I'm sure I can take care of that."

"What?"

Aderyn's face took on the cast of a student trying to explain things to their stupid task partner.

"Brother Fratarelli did make it quite clear that he knows you haven't killed anyone."

"Where the hell did he get THAT idea?"

"I'm not sure, but he did seem quite confident." Aderyn raised one hand, fingers curled in, a finger timidly half-raised.

"And you're confident YOU can do the hit? You killed many people so far?"

"As many as is appropriate for a young lady."

"... That is...?"

"It isn't polite to say."

Rafe threw his hands in the air. "I cannot believe we're having this conversation. We were hired for an assassination, right?"

"Well, yes, and--"

"Annnnd if we fuck up, I go to jail and you go back to Sheepland."

"Lleywa, but --"

"Right." Rafe drew in one long breath that seemed to make every part of him bigger, which just as quickly whistled out of him in a defeated gasp. He didn't know the word 'asymmetrical,' but if he

had, he'd be spitting it like a swear. Without that erudition he had to make do with a few choice words that hit the floor between him and Aderyn, then biting the knuckles on his left hand.

“Okay!” Rafe finally spat upwards, holding out the gnawed hand, fingers spread wide. “Okay, okay. Fine. So. It's on me. I fuck up, I go to jail. You fuck up, I go to jail. And you've probably never killed anything bigger than a fly.”

“How many people have you killed, Rafe?”

Rafe narrowed his gaze sharply. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“It's a straightforward question.” Aderyn said, coolly, smoothing down her blouse without breaking eye contact. “How many people have you killed? Deliberately or accidentally?”

Rafe met the gaze, but it was of such different type. He could feel his fury boiling around his eyeballs and Aderyn's gaze was just a sheet of glacial ice like the river in the coldest winters.

But then he blinked, and looked back at the Praefoco estate. “In by the roof. That balcony's got a broken snib, you can see how it sits in the frame.”

“Snib?”

“The little metal locks on windows. Y'know? Lock from the inside?”

“You know, that's rather an interesting word.”

Rafe tried to stop his eyes rolling, dropping from the pot and picking up a loose roof tile. “I go in alone. I take care of it. You sit here and don't ruin shit for me.”

Aderyn tried to take what he said in the spirit it was intended – of a young man who had no faith in her ability and knew she had very little to lose if things went dreadfully wrong. On the other hand, the intention didn't stop Rafe from sounding like an arrogant little – ahem.

“That window there, yes? Little off-kilter?” she asked, smoothing down her shirt.

“Yeah..” Rafe murmured. “I might need a rope-” he said, to the empty space where Aderyn wasn't standing any more.

Houses like these had high sloped roofs, and that meant momentum when you ran. You just had to *make a decision*.

Briefly, Aderyn strode across the sky. Rooftop. The rail of a lamp-post as thick as her wrist. The sky again, the other lamp-post, and then, with all that momentum slamming out of her in a gust, the wall, her fingers hooked onto the wooden crossbeam, jutting from the white plaster. Toes found a lower beam and she shimmied immediately sideways towards that 'un-snibbed' window.

She really did *love* this style of house.

Chapter 4

The *snib* – and Aderyn really did like that word, she would have to remember it for the future – yielded easily. Since she'd moved first and slid across the wall, her hands gripping the wood, Aderyn neatly blocked Rafe from whatever method *he* had been planning to use on the window. Instead it was subject to her open palm pressing to the glass, fingers spreading wide and applying pressure in as even a fashion as possible. Tripwires and wax were common in defensive positions – but defensive positions didn't have damaged snibs. Instead, putting her weight on the tips of toes that were holding on an edge maybe three cm, she leant forwards, into her hand, and raised it up. The damaged snib was maybe half-broken, only sitting against the groove, rather than sunk down into it, and that pressure lifted the little catch just a far enough that it caught against the wood. The mechanism resisted, it adjusted... then snapped open.

"Y'got it?" Rafe asked behind her, and his voice lacked something.

With the window no longer held, Aderyn pressed fingertips against the recess of the wood, pulling backwards with one arm. The window, hinged at the top, swung up and out – a short chain on the inside hooked to keep the window from swinging too far out and let the *rabble's* air into the balcony. It swung out... a little.

"Hrm." Aderyn said, pursing her lips.

"Hrm what?" Rafe asked. "It's open, get inside."

"It's well, it's open enough for *me*, but, well, Rafe,"

"Well...?" Rafe asked, as if he wasn't supporting his entire weight on his fingertips and toes.

"It just might be a bit small for your, ah, large head."

"My *what*!?" And there it was, whatever it was that had been missing in Rafe's voice. Something indignant, perhaps?

"Well, not that this is perhaps the best venue for a conversation like this, but your head is somewhat... ah..."

"Get in there for f-" Rafe began

The window creaked at the right moment, and Aderyn swept one arm underneath the black wood and glass, grabbing the edge of the inside sill. Stepping off the wood of the wall, she hoisted herself up, sharply darting on one side of the chain. Lifting with her arm, she tensed her shoulder, and folded in the middle. For one moment, her back end pressed against the glass, pressed flat momentarily, out a little at both sides, and clearly, Rafe had been looking, because he snorted out a laugh.

"That," Aderyn said, as she unfolded herself on the other side of the windowsill, acrobatically dismounting from the windowsill, "is hardly appropriate."

Aderyn stood up, turned, and looked out the window. She looked down at the chain, briefly, giving an expression that Rafe was quickly coming to associate with '*What's this pillock done now.*'

“I think the chain can be-”

Rafe threw himself sideways, a lunge where Aderyn would have made a step. Instead of grabbing the windowsill and pulling himself up, he caught the solid black wood underneath it. Then, without a moment of grace, he pulled himself hand-over-hand up underneath the window. If not for the whiteness of his already-pale knuckles, Aderyn wouldn't believe he was even *trying*. Of course, the boy was pale all over – but who wasn't, who grew up in Timoritia?

Rafe slipped through the window easily, pulling himself hand over hand, but his head didn't hit the floor – instead he caught himself with one hand on the carpeted floor, curling up and rolling to sit on the floor. Barely a breath and he stood up again, reaching over to the window to tug it shut. He pressed his thumb against the snib for barely a moment, and Aderyn saw his thumbnail go whiter for a moment while he *shoved* it out of the track.

“Okay,” Rafe said, turning around, resting his hands on the sash under his folded robe. “We're in. Gotta find Praefoco and Tully...” He rubbed his chin.

They had gone over the plan, in the church, looking at the layout on a desk. Two pairs of hands had pointed out areas in the plan of the building, outlining areas where a suspicious boy expected to see guards, and where a suspicious girl didn't want to reveal she *knew* there were guards. Neither of the pair had been *quite* as forthcoming with one another about their plan as they could have. Rafe, after all, wanted to escape and didn't feel it was wise to reveal more about what he knew, or could do, than was safe. He had no idea *why* Aderyn was so cagey – but she'd clearly been to the estate. It was all in the little signals.

Aderyn rubbed her own chin, and Rafe was sure she was making fun of him. “Split up, perhaps? It's a large estate, and both of us would make more, ah, noise, than one of us.”

Downstairs, champagne was filling glasses, which tinkled against one another as people oh-so-carelessly risked chipping glasses worth more than Rafe's life savings. “You're heading downstairs, aren't you?” he asked.

“Why, I imagine I could blend in reasonably easily,” Aderyn said with a sweet smile. “Your outfit isn't very... ah... festive.”

“I look like a priest.”

“No, you look like a male entertainer trying to evoke a particular priestly fantasy.”

“What.”

Footsteps interrupted the response. Rafe swung a palm out to the wall, then stepped upwards against it, throwing himself up into the air. One foot on the wall, second step up, and then he was up in a light fixture. Rafe hunkered in the shadows up above the lights for a moment. He knew this art – the guard was going to stumble up to Aderyn, who would flash him a smile and make an excuse and-

Aderyn had the window open again, and swung out the window like she was fleeing the scene. The window swung shut again, resting closed. and from his higher vantage point, Rafe could see the tiny outline of Aderyn's fingers, gripping the hard dark wood. That was *odd*...

The guard shuffled on past. The lamp systems were gas; high tech and impressive. Long cables that carried the gas and charge ran up from the bottom of the metal rig around his feet, and then up into the ceiling. Seeing the big-booted flat-foot with a beer gut, Rafe was immediately filled with hope. Guards like that tended to not want to *run*, and that nice fancy uniform he had spoke of a long time in a private guard position – which meant he wasn't likely to take risks. The kind of guard who'd rather report a missing vase than chase whoever was carrying it.

He ambled out of earshot. Rafe swung himself over the edge of the light fitting and opened the window again, reaching down to help Aderyn up.

Hang on, why did he do that again?

If he'd *locked her out*, she wouldn't be able to ruin the hit, which consciously, he'd been telling himself he was expecting. Except here he was, his forearm gripping her pale arm and squeezing as a silent signal she should grip him tight, and pulling her into the enclosed room that was called a balcony. Standing straight, as Aderyn brushed herself off, he adjusted his belt.

“Well,” Aderyn said, with a strange guarded tone. “I think I shall descend into the depths and find myself an invitation,” and Rafe realised *she hadn't been expecting the hand*.

“... I'll stay up here. The quad should have partygoers in there. Don't see signs of many guards here – these two guys don't seem the like to ever think they're in any kind of danger.” With the movement of the one guard, that lazy, slow amble, he probably wasn't expecting much danger, but was expecting to have to keep walking for hours. Then, priorities. “You going for Praefoco, or Tully?”

Aderyn shook her head. “You're not trying for both...?”

Rafe blinked and the question had in it such a stinging rebuke he didn't know why his gut felt like it was suddenly full of mice. “Well... hit 'em both together, hit 'em apart...? The less time between the hits, easier we can escape, right?”

Aderyn tapped him on the nose, her smile brightly lighting up their little hiding spot. “Wonderful idea. Well, Tully is a father and a noble; I imagine he might be an easier target for me to find.”

“Alright. Praefoco's mine, then. Make your hit and get out, fast.” And then Rafe drew a breath, “If you hit before I do, get out. No point us both getting caught...”

Aderyn nodded – and stepped out of the balcony, walking on cat-silent treads. God, the girl was a shadow.

Rafe hoisted himself up into the rafters again, a one-two-step up to the ceiling and a simple crawl along the upper skirting boards, adjusting his undershirt as he went. Rafe didn't think that much as he crept along towards the centre of the building, looking for the windows that faced into the little green courtyard all the way down on the ground. It was only when he slipped through a laundry cupboard – so large it had two doors! – and looked down into the sparkling lights and the bright white linens of tables and dresses that Rafe realised that Aderyn hadn't even *considered* that he might make the hit first.

*

Why had she mentioned that the man was a father?

That thought nagged at Rafe in a very non-specific way. Since she'd thrown herself off a rooftop and popped a window with more care than he would have, he'd been re-evaluating what he thought of the gi-the young la-the woman.

The building had that lovely tudor outside, with its white spaces and black lines, and its inside was all wooden panelling, polished and kept well. Up here on the top storey, rather than run gas pipes through the floor, they'd run them up to the high ceiling, and created a little space of shadow above the gas-lit lamps, a space where an enterprising person of flexible stance and quiet grace could compress themselves and move with relative ease.

Rafe loved these old houses. If every house had space like this he could have treated the secured homes of the four noble houses as a goddamn highway. The snaking gas pipe that ran from one corner of the house rested on a wooden panel that hung from the ceiling on stout metal braces, but also had a thin patina of dust on it. Rafe could imagine servants stuffing a feather duster up through the narrow gap between the centre and the sides – a gap a little wider than one of his feet – until it hit the ceiling above, and wiggle it around until the thing came back dusty. Actually coming up here to clean would be hazardous and irritating and servants, even the most conscientious of servants, were rarely in their job because they *loved* removing dust from homes so large their owners would never notice if they did it or not. When the panels met a light fitting, they spread wider – and that gave Rafe the room to climb up, even if it did leave the light fixture swaying gently.

The gentle bob of the light fitting, the faint groan of the wood as Rafe tested his weight against it wouldn't have caught most guards anyway. Certainly not this retirement-bound dullard. The soft carpets down on the floor, a floor that barely ever creaked, gave a familiar *pwad-pwad-pwad* that fairly announced the guard's location like he was ringing a bell. He talked to himself, too, and Rafe listened for a few moments.

Rafe was not Aderyn; he had no classic education in fiction, no appreciation for the assumption that a man left to his own devices and speaking unobserved was meant to speak at length and usefully about the task any listener was doing. That wasn't what he expected. Rafe was listening for something else. As it happened, the guard was doing what most sane individuals reserved for private walks and the shower: He was winning an argument against someone who had stopped talking to him a few hours ago.

“Don't see why the girl *shouldn't* know how to use a sword,” and such phrases. No confessions of drunken stumblings home. “She's my daughter too,” No mention of a particular favourite meal of the lord's, or convenient locations of keys, “Don't see what she'll learn stitching that she doesn't already know,” just disjointed complaining at someone who wasn't there to listen to it.

Rafe's bare fingers slid along the wood while he moved above the guard. The guard moved in a little puddle of noise, a safe little place. In his time he'd learned one of the fastest ways to move around was in the shadow of a bigger boy.

A corner in the hallway pulled the guard along. Rafe could see him through the narrow slit in the ceiling. If the guard had looked up, he'd have seen nothing, too; not even Rafe's pale face and hands were evident compared to the bright light.

Rafe didn't remember when he learned that trick – when he learned how people who held lights were blind. It was just something the gutters knew and he knew it too. When a guardsman was running around waving a hooded lantern, it showed you nice and clear the *only place* that the guard was even bothering to look. This one had a wide, well lit corridor to patrol around, up and down, up and down, around the corner, and around the other corner, maybe stop and look at that statue of a Pegasus, move on again. The man had the lazy legs of a career guard, ambling along.

When Rafe found a fork in the ceiling's chamber, away from the guard, he didn't hesitate before taking it. The Praefoco estate had a courtyard in the middle, a space some ten meters by ten meters, enormous in a city so tightly packed. You could play a decent game of football there, or cricket, or some other traditional game. Rafe wasn't familiar with traditional games, really – the only one he remembered was 'kick the shit out of the posh kid,' or, failing that, 'the kid that can read.'

The rooms were a different tale to the hallway. Some were glorified closets, he expected a library, maybe a smoking room – things that men of noble birth wanted to do up on stilts away from the cobblestones that had commoners sometimes upon them.

Rafe slowly relaxed his grip on the knife. Praefoco was just a target. While he had to die for the sake of Rafe's freedom, and he was going to die because Rafe was good at his job, Praefoco was not some jumped-up mid-street jackass with soap behind his ears and a sneer over his folded arms, having hired bigger bullies to do his fighting for him. He wasn't the wealthy man with a cane who knew the constables and was vicious enough to come back to give orphans a thrashing. Praefoco was just another nobleman, he wasn't some kind of symbol –

Rafe looked down at the room underneath him and his eyes widened. Nobody in that room – and the fixture sat in the centre of the room nice and clear, giving him the room to slither down onto the ground, to look around the room, to look down at the open book before him. Momentarily paranoid, he darted away, like the book could bite him, to the room's door, and leant down to check the door. A little nudge of his wrist against the doorknob – it was locked. He was secure.

It was not the book that had caught his eye. It was the stand next to it, taller than him and hosting a white robe with a hood that looked like the priest's. While owning a white hooded robe was in no way a remarkable thing, the *mask* hanging from the thing and the prominence it had, in this half-lit room was quite astounding.

Rafe *didn't* murmur to himself, 'what the fuck.' And let the word trail off into nothing. That was amateur burglar shit. The first time you found yourself in a churchman's basement where a leather saddle was hooked to the ceiling underneath some elaborate contraption on chains, you had to lose that instinct because there was nothing that people with money didn't eventually find interesting.

A white robe like a priest's, and a mask, featureless and almost perfectly shaped. It was *creepy* – the only word Rafe had for it. The book, sat next to it, was opened wide, which immediately made Rafe figure it as unimportant. He'd found a way into this room without even trying, and the book wasn't locked – despite having a padlock. A quick look at the page yielded row after row of numbers and other odd symbols, margins in red ink, where math that didn't make sense to him spilled downwards.

What did make sense to him was down the bottom – the smear of black text:

Ulster doesn't want the Wifeless supply cut off – v imp. Check w/Nebrn

Rafe shrugged his shoulders, and looked up at the not-quite ghost of fabric. Normally when he saw a weird thing in a noble's house, it made some sense. The room full of mirrors, the enormous playpen, the leather stuff and the saddles and the buckles? That all made *sense*. Somehow he could look at a noble and figure, *well I know what that's for*.

This?

This just gave him the *willies*.

Rafe looked at the walls, picked his space, and ran up into the ceiling, heading further inwards. A book full of bad mathematics, a phantomlike outfit, and a locked door that wouldn't block anyone who thought in curves was odd. It wasn't a distraction. But maybe it meant Praefoco had something to say – or think – about people in robes with hoods.

Rafe hung over the gas pipe and listened carefully for sounds of the guard. Couldn't hear them – man was probably scoring himself a cigarette on the balcony. Good. Guy deserved it, and it meant he wasn't in the path of danger. Rafe didn't-quite-smile as he made his way forwards, inwards. A corner, another corner – signs he was at the inside ring of the house. Next light fitting, he peeked down, and swung into the room.

The internal walls still had that tudor style, but the black wooden barriers around formed a square frame into open space, with folding shutters and thick woollen curtains, pulled back. The room, well-lit, only served to glimmer up above and provide a warm atmosphere for the green downstairs, where metal ovens, decorated tastefully, sat on wrought-iron legs on the grass, so they could provide warmth to the laughing, giggling nobles.

These arseholes would even insulate themselves against the good honest *wind*. Rafe's sneer wasn't even conscious. Putting his hands on the sill, he peered downwards, looking for a figure – where *was* she. She should have been able to make her way down to the ground level and blend in – unless something had gone wrong.

Ah.

There she was – Aderyn, sliding through the crowd...

Wait, nobody was even *looking* at her?!

*

From the ground, all clouds fly the same. Sage, homespun wisdom from the grassy fields and endlessly sodden skies of Lleywa. It rang in Aderyn's mind as she stepped downstairs, moving light and easy, a simple plucked flower from a passed vase tucked behind one ear all it took to transform her work clothes to unfashionable party wear in the eyes of people who were not well-versed in the utility represented by a double-buckled belt. It was wisdom that Aderyn had felt it unwise to impart upon Rafe, in no small part because he seemed resistant to wisdom of all stripes, but also because she imagined him giving her an unutterably pained look at her wealthy plights. Perhaps he'd run a fingertip down his cheek and exaggeratedly pout.

“My word, look at that ridiculous outfit.”

She'd smiled at a maid as she rounded a corner, offering a wink of explanation that seemed sufficient as she spiralled her hair up onto the top of her head. One long pin, previously positioned to hold her hair close to her neck, repurposed swiftly to hold her hair up atop her head, a coil of braid out of the way in a style that, with the flower adorning the crest, looked quite fetching. Bright purple flower, too, contrasted quite well with her hair.

“Well, look at the girl. Obviously from Lleywa.”

No makeup, and no jewellery, but that was an acceptability, because after all, she was dealing with Timoritia's high society, in a house owned by a man of no noble birth. That meant the people here were here as a curiosity and would expect to see –

“How can you tell?”

There it was. The giggle at the hayseed. How *excellent*.

“Well, she's not painted blue, so she's no Hadrian, and she's not blown up yet, so she's not from the Isle either,”

Aderyn smiled courteously as she weaved past a waiter and through the crowd. Nobody was questioning her, even in that outfit, certainly not the way they would Rafe. Rafe was not the kind of boy who knew how to look purposeful, to *look* like he belonged. Aderyn briefly imagined if they'd chosen alternate routes, smiling at the idea of shadowing a lone guard safely through an unoccupied area, then considered how Rafe would react to *just one* of the looks she was currently receiving.

*“Oh **you** are wicked, aren't you?”*

Best to just keep moving. Move with purpose, and nobody would think anything of it. Her disguise was barely thicker than a breath but it didn't matter, because here, she was surrounded by people so cuddled in privilege, they had never needed to identify someone who *didn't belong* at least when a vichysoise fork wasn't involved. A smile, a nod, a bob of a head, and – crucially – correctly identifying barons and knights and using *sir* and *your grace* and *madam* at the right time let her snake through the crowd like smoke.

“Wasn't there a King from Lleywa?”

Did it much matter that she heard, behind her, the voices idly gossiping? She was barely worth commenting on, so when she heard those words that she knew *had* to be about her, she didn't even feel it. Why should she? They didn't know her mother, her father, know the wonderful soft grass of the fields of Lleywa, or the people there.

“Oh, yes, the Black Thane!” said one of the voices, the conversation having bubbled along quite enough. What a perfect time to interrupt!

“Why, hello there,” Aderyn said, her voice carrying a lilt of enthusiasm, but *not quite* enough to sound as sing-song as she did, back on the streets talking to Mr Bauer. *“Lady E'sparagos!”* Aderyn said, stepping into the circle of conversation, radiating sweet naivete. *“It's me, Queeny's friend,*

Aderyn!” Tilt the head, smile turning into a beam, the girl watched as the older noblewoman, in her white silks decorated with folded blue fabric roses, ran through a swift range of emotions. First, there was the surprise at the voice, the greater surprise that someone had pronounced her name correctly, and then there was the irritation on seeing a young lady wearing such *dowdy* pants, and *then* the realisation that even if she didn't remember Aderyn, she *did* remember the young Quynn Wyndsyrr, whose parents she may even be stirred enough to call *relevant*. The woman did all this with a sequence of eye widenings and nose scrunches. It was a little cute, really, like watching a very old hamster pass complex opinions while chewing onions.

“Ah, yes, young l-ady,” said the senior E'sparagos, turning with a sweep of her arm. Nobody missed the awkward pause hiding in *lady*, as if she was double-checking in her own mind if she was doing the right thing, or perhaps if she could remember Aderyn's name. No matter. “It's been *quite* some time,” she managed, as she looked to the pair talking to her, in their lovely black suits, under the starry sky.

Cameo Tully was a tall man, but he was no broader in the shoulder than Rafe was. The black hair on his head had greyed at the edges, and the whole of it was slicked back. Normally, this made men of his particular expression look like very large, well dressed butler rats, but with his clear blue eyes, and the sincerity of his smile, Aderyn saw nothing of that to him there. Really, he was more like a badger, a large kind looking gentleman who wore his advancing age with some dignity.

Elian Praefoco, on the other hand, had a bit too much of the rodent about him, which Aderyn was careful to file away for the future. That surname was too many letters for a genuinely humble man, so chances are he was a half-noble or someone whose lineage was Legally Dead somewhere back upstream. The man had the polished elbows and gaudy rings that said he knew what poverty was and he never wanted to be associated with it. Brown hair, slightly overlarge ears, and the vaguest hunch forwards, standing next to Tully's side with a closeness that reminded Aderyn of nothing so much as the boy who fancied himself a bully's best friend.

That was a signal worth remembering.

“Oh, oh, Lady E'sparagos, I'm – oh, you're too kind,” Aderyn *gushed*, pressing her hand to her bosom and leaning forwards, all but *prattling* as she smiled up to the older woman. “You needn't pretend that a young lady like me- oh, oh, oh, but where are my manners,” she said, turning and bowing with a bob of her head to the two men, holding their drinks. A little drinking corner, away from the rest of the crowd, discussing... probably nothing with the older woman nearby. After all, she had a pair of sons she was trying to find weddings for, and Tully's daughter was a well-recognised *opportunity*. “Um, Lord – Lord Tully, yes?” she said, biting her lower lip, her hair a-quiver as if she was about to *swoon*. “And M-ister Praefoco?” she asked, looking to Praefoco, mimicking that pause. The effect was *palpable*. Suddenly, Lady E'sparagos and Tully straightened up, smiling the tiniest of smug smiles, and Praefoco's eyes darkened.

You could do more with a pause than with a dagger, sometimes.

“Yes indeed, young lady,” Tully said, his voice low as the earth, the laugh hanging in the back of his throat. “But what of *you*?”

Aderyn smiled coyly, running her finger along her lower lip. Good thing Lady E'sparagos was wearing her heels; standing close to her both drew the eye away from Aderyn's practical clothing *and* made her seem smaller, *younger*. That worked well with, "Oh, well," she giggled as a nervous girl would. "My name is Aderyn DuThane, and I'm an Assassin."

Suddenly, everyone was all smiles. *That* made sense!

"Oh! Oh, and its' *exams* now, isn't it?" Tully asked, turning the glass in his hand with a grin. "Of course, that explains the outfit!"

"Well, *I* thought it was quite daring," said E'sparagos. A minute ago she'd have buried Aderyn in a haystack without a thought. "Did you come straight from...?"

"Oh, oh, well," Aderyn gave a shy little smile. "It's a group assessment – I need to be available if my classmates need me."

"Group assessment," Praefoco said, nodding along with his little ratty way, raising his glass. "Seems wise. You were an Assassin too, weren't you, Tully?"

Tully nodded. "Mm, yes indeed. That was almost forty years ago, though," he laughed, tilting his glass towards Praefoco, a tiny little gesture of acceptance and acknowledgement. "I dare say it's changed quite a bit!" his eye fell back on Aderyn while he put his glass to his lips.

Aderyn gave a shy little dip of her head, hair falling out of its place behind her ear. She used both hands to put it back, smoothing her hair in hand over hand gesture, then back behind her ear again, giving an awkward little giggle. "Oh, I'm sorry – I," she blushed suddenly. "Oh! Oh no, Mr Praefoco, I'm so sorry!"

"What?" Praefoco asked, blurring and straightening up in the same sudden motion. "What did you—"

"I didn't even *think* – of course, if there's an assessment in the area, of course the school would have asked you, since—"

Praefoco grumbled as he looked over Aderyn's shoulder, pointedly blanking her. "I don't believe the school *did*..." Crucially though, he didn't look at her like he knew who she was... or who she wasn't.

Why didn't Praefoco know she wasn't invited?

Was he just that relaxed with the idea of an Assassin just wandering into his party? Well, things were going to get very awkward for him indeed.

"That so, Elian?" Tully asked, and the use of a first name was an olive branch. "Bit of a shame! The Guild is a good school, and it never hurts to have good recruiting prospects on hand. You, young lady – you've a plan after school?"

"Oh, of course," she said, "I'm going back to Lleywa, to help run my parents' estate."

"Oh? No brothers?" Tully asked, and he looked honestly surprised. "I thought everyone in Lleywa came in pairs."

“Ahah, no,” Aderyn offered, “That's the sheep.”

Praefoco gave a wrinkle-nose sneer, tired of the distraction. E'sparagos had pulled his focus and now Aderyn was making it worse. “Mnh, I could use a smoke,” he said, looking up at the tall nobleman. “I've some DuMaurier cigarettes up in the study – fancy one, Tully?”

“Ah, DuMaurier,” Tully offered, smiling wide. Setting his glass down on one of the many small, tall tables, he clasped his hands together. “If you ladies will forgive us – it's definitely a man's taste, no?” He raised one eyebrow, and reached out to Aderyn, taking her hand – meeting her half-way – as she smiled to him, and dipped her head. “Very nice to meet you, young lady.”

“Thank you, my lord.” Aderyn said, dipping at the knee.

The two men filed away, into the building, and Aderyn turned to Lady E'sparagos, drawing her breath with her nostrils flaring. Now this was the *next* challenge to escape.

Chapter 5

Cameo Tully wasn't, in his own mind, a bad man. Almost nobody who went to a school that taught you how to kill a man could be. There were certain mental gymnastics that required you to take on a different outlook. Tully's father had trained at the Assassins for two years, after all, although the senior Tully had not ever completed the final exams. A little fee could often waive those tedious components of the education. In his own days, Tully had been a bully, no less, taking to the fencing classes and the knife use with a dignified pride, feeling the importance of his family station protecting him. Oh, Cameo – 'Cammers' – had never had to be the sort of boy who ran to hide behind his father's name, no. Those were the little bullies, the ones who kicked and punched and shouted because they cried themselves to sleep at night.

No, Cameo Tully was better than everyone he met, and since he could lift other boys out of the swimming pool by their heads, and rode first class on the train and knew how to make another boy's wrist squeak when he grabbed it, he felt there was no reason not to.

Men like Cameo Tully are rare indeed, he reflected. Even at the Assassins' school there were a tiny number of people he had any respect for. A few of the teachers, the ones who had known better than to bother pushing him to try hard. One or two had used the odious word 'prodigy,' which just felt like it was gilding the lily. After all, he knew he was very, very good at everything the school *really* wanted him to do, why be *gauche* about it? It did mean, however, that he very rarely had anything *interesting* to do, and even more rarely could do business with his peers.

Walking through Praefoco's estate was a perfect highlight of this. Praefoco was a decent businessman, and fairly tolerable as an associate went. In his school days, Tully imagined he knew boys like Praefoco, and regarded them as friends-ish. Even with his hands slid behind his back, immaculate white gloves and dark suit and his hair done as *best* he could, though, there was just something about the man that smacked of being a dreadful oik. Like he thought keeping a secret was all it took to be useful.

Not that that *was* all Praefoco had to him. He was utterly shameless, and he was common, which meant there was business *he* could do that no sensible noble would want anything to do with. Particularly this fuss with the Kettleweed. Of course it was disgusting, and of course any good-thinking person wanted nothing to do with things like *that*. Also, the man *could* keep a secret.

Overall, he was certainly worth the trade of a middle daughter. Not an exceptional man, and he'd be an irritating son-in-law, but probably wouldn't need much of an inheritance, and it wasn't like she was worth *that* much either.

"Ah, DuMaurier cigarettes," Praefoco's oily voice broke Tully's quiet contemplation. Another of the man's frailties – silences seemed to bother him. Couldn't just stand and think, had to speak about nothing rather than just wait. "-and silky," he concluded. Not a word between them had mattered.

"Yes, I'm familiar with the brand," Tully said, reaching out to the offered cigar case, stroking one bare finger casually against the soft felt to the side of the cigarettes that didn't quite fill the available space. He held the cigarette up and looked around the study while he waited for the thing to be lit.

It was really a pretty study. This estate was *much* better than he'd imagined when he heard it was being sold. The windows were pleasantly small, too, in this study; they were fixed closed, and just high enough at the shoulder that they could let in some light and show the sky, but not so broad that a wall could be dominated by a view of *other houses* just facing back inwards. Who wanted *that*? Bookshelves on three walls, nicely tended floorboards, fixed and firm so they didn't creak, soft carpets and –

The cigarette was lit, and Tully raised it to his lips and took a long, smooth drag, revelling in that moment of the dusky flavours. Praefoco was a pedestrian little commoner aiming to be something more, but he *did* know where to buy the best of things in life. He tugged the cigarette from his lips, considering again what to say. The decisions were made, but he had no intention of *telling* Praefoco about the agreement until he'd learned everything Praefoco had to tell him. It served well to remind the younger man of his *place*.

"And now, about Christina," Praefoco began.

"Kirsten," Tully corrected him, slightly bored. "I must say, you –"

Tully caught the start in his throat, and another part of his childhood rushed back to him. Games of stealth in the schoolyard, where someone would spot something, and not be *sure*, so they'd continue on, while their mind wandered and the important thing was to be *decisive*.

Cameo Tully whirled around with one hand still holding his cigarette, grabbed the letter opener on the table with the *other* hand, and swung wide behind him, grinning as he loosed the blade towards the door *frame*. It didn't matter, because his throw had been high – *that girl* was moving towards him like a charging cat, shoulders low, her head hiding her body, looking him straight in the eyes, with a *knife* in her hand.

Tully's mind moved like quicksilver. The girl was smaller than him, much smaller than him, and probably lacked for his powerful upper body. That meant she'd aim for his stomach, which is what junior assassins are told to try. Mostly, they'd try for the neck or the head, because that seems vulnerable, but the *stomach* is the route to an eventual death. To strike at the head successfully requires remarkable strength and precision – the stomach is a softer target and the rupture of it almost inevitably leads a man to bleed to death. What's more, she'd have to avert her gaze soon, and when she looked away, he'd see where *she* looked, which would show him where to strike at next. Signals, it was all about signals.

He'd have to work out what the girl was playing at, though, what with this business. If he didn't kill her fending her off, but well, what did he expect? She did start the fight, after all.

Tully's body tensed like a spring in the instant as Aderyn closed in on him, staring her in the eyes, not blinking, refusing to be cowed, as he tried to know which way to *turn*. She was a slip of a girl, and she was young – there was no way she could bring herself to kill him while she looked him in the eyes.

No way at all.

No... way.

Tully blinked and stepped left.

Aderyn streaked past him, one of her hands grabbing his belt momentarily as she used him like a child used a street-pole to whip her momentum around, throwing herself further into the room...

Cameo Tully blinked a second time and wondered why his hands felt so numb. There was no more vigor to him, none of that... *drive* that he'd been nursing just a moment before. All the tension oozed out his feet, and he felt a dreadful weight on his head, pulling his gaze downwards. The immaculate white of his shirt contrasted with the black of his suit... and the drops of dark red down on the floor, between his feet. His hands reached up, to feel at his navel, his chest, and found no wound, none of the heat of blood... until he saw a dribble of dark red wet fall down, past his hands, and into the splash on the floor.

He tried to speak, but all he could taste was blood. So it went to the ages that the final words of one Cameo Tully were, "Mrhghhgh hgh hrrr."

As Cameo Tully tumbled down to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut, the dagger stabbed up through his jawbone, into the roof of his mouth and further still, his last thoughts were of those bright eyes, staring up at his, unblinking and unafraid.

*

Praefoco was huddled up against the wall, under one of the windows as he gripped the walls, his jaw *slack*, his eyes *wide*, staring at Aderyn as she stood on the desk, hoisting herself upwards with the last of the momentum, the now-deceased Cameo Tully as her counterbalance. She stood with a very steady ease, smiling politely as she took Tully's sash from his form and started to wipe the weapon clean, almost as if Praefoco wasn't in the room.

"Wh-wh-what was *that!*!" The businessman blurted, his eyes all-but escaping his head.

"I told you. I'm an assassin." Aderyn said, calmly.

"Yes, but I didn't think you *meant* it!" Praefoco stammered. "W-was this about the Black King's Crown!? I swear, I, I-"

A fist crashed through the window over his head. It was, Aderyn reflected, quite a good window for preventing assassination since it was so secure, but the metal rod that ran up the centre was not *much* of an impediment to someone willing to make noise, and it wasn't like Rafe was a subtle boy. Rafe hauled with all his strength, dragging the man up and out of the window, smashing his face into the jagged glass of his window – before thrusting downwards to stab the sharp, broken spike, once a security feature and now a murder weapon – into the back of the man's neck, punching it up and through his throat.

Must have taken quite some effort. Perhaps Rafe released himself from the wall and dropped down, using all his weight to punch the spike through the man's throat?

Praefoco died without so much as a scream. A heartbeat after, Rafe slithered past him in through the window and held himself high off the ground for a moment, before throwing himself into the room, landing on the desk next to Aderyn.

“Huh.” He managed. Which was something, at least.

“Yes, Rafe?”

He looked down at the crumpled Tully. The bigger target, the harder target. Rafe had imagined he could have maybe managed the same, with a bit more tussling, but it wouldn't have positioned Praefoco so perfectly. “... How'd you do that?”

Aderyn smoothed her knife, then her hair and tucked the former away. “I am sure he just underestimated me, due to my being a slight person compared to him.”

Rafe narrowed his gaze. A moment of watching Aderyn's sweet, bright eyes, and he looked away, stepping off the desk. “Broken glass'll bring maids or someone soon. Sorry couldn't be quieter.”

“It couldn't be helped. It was an excellent opportunity to prevent a scream.”

Rafe looked at Aderyn again, and drew a long breath. “... Okay. Anyway, we should move.” He gestured with his thumb at the window.

“Would you be so kind as to move the body, first?” Aderyn asked. “It would make life easier.”

Grumbling, Rafe walked over to the pinned-to-the-sill Praefoco, and shook his head. “Don't see what's so important with this weed anyway.”

“Oh dear. Um, Rafe, you are aware of where babies come from.” Aderyn said. She didn't *ask*, which was strange, because every word in the sentence *sounded* like it formed a question.

Turning from his grim task, Rafe spared Aderyn his look of burning scorn, dried up slightly, to become withering scorn.

“Alright, good, quite good, well, you are aware then that young ladies have differently structured... plumbing?” Aderyn gestured somewhat mutely to her midsection.

“Why, *no*, Miss Aderyn, why don't you describe it, in detail.” Rafe snarled.

“Oh, *well*,” Aderyn said, raising one finger. “The outer parts of a young woman's sex organs are-”

“Okay, okay, yes, I know what you're talking about. Different plumbing.” Rafe snorted, working Praefoco up off the spike.

“Very well, then. Well, Kettleweed, when it's brewed into a tea, and consumed about once a week, will stop a young lady's plumbing from... leaking.”

Rafe almost dropped the burden. “What do you m – oh god, ew, oh god.”

“... I must say, Rafe, it's a little hypocritical of you to be squeamish about a little blood at a time like this.” Aderyn said, that raised finger pointing at Rafe, whose forearms and navel were quite, quite red.

Rafe gave a flustered gesture. “This, this isn't a little blood! This is lots and lots of blood and I know why it's out there and it's all over my boots! What you're talking about is mysterious and weird.”

Somewhere, that great scale that balanced Rafe's virtues and failings added another weight, and he could feel it. Aderyn adjusted her outfit primly, and looked at the window. "Hm. Just a moment. I need to leave my feather."

"Your what?"

"My feather – a signature. That's how the guild knows this wasn't done by an amateur or a copycat."

Aderyn circled the table, looking for a place that in her mind, would properly represent the murder being done by the owner of the feather, and not try to take credit for both of them.

"... It's a raven's feather, isn't it."

"Ugh, no. Everyone picks a raven's feather in first year. Duh. The teacher tends to let them, then everyone gets graded based on the worst-performing person still using the raven feather."

"And you're...?"

"A kingfisher." She said, setting down the glossy, green feather, which looked like it had most definitely *not* been hidden somewhere on a young lady's person. Rafe briefly wondered about the amount of care Aderyn would have had to take to keep that feather looking so lovely.

The window. The sill. A gymnastic leap to a gaslamp's arm, pulled up arm-over-arm. Rafe catching her hand to make it easier for her. The opposite side of the street, watching the Barneys roaming up and down the road quietly.

As they flit along the rooftops, away from windows and ledges, Rafe mused aloud. "You like kingfishers?"

"Oh, yes. They're very pretty birds. And they're very smart."

"They are?"

"Well, yes – brown kingfishers know how to steal beer."

Rafe shrugged, feeling a tile flick under his foot as he leapt a gulf between two houses. That was as good a proof as any.

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The rooftops of Timoritia were a fine place to watch a rising sun. Off the main streets, towards the river that ran through the city, you could raise your head, and see nothing but the clouds, reflecting from below the bright warm colours of a day that, if Rafe understood it right, had come from a part of the world where maybe things were a bit brighter. Knees up against his chest, feet flat on the slope of the roof, his elbows resting on his knees, cheek on his arms, the worst murderer in Timoritia kept circling a question in his mind.

Next to him, Aderyn sat, far more primly. Feet flat, knees up, her arms tucked in under her chest, looking not up at the clouds, but across at the street. She, unlike Rafe, was looking for a particular detail – picking out the people in the streets. Brown heads, grey and brown and yellow shirts and

tunics, cheap but not too cheap. She'd been watching for minutes, trying to find the bright blue cap of Mr Bauer, as he made his way towards Parcel Street and the first sales of the day.

Normally, Aderyn planned escape routes with some plasticity. Alarms were raised, typically, and it was very strange that Praefoco hadn't begun by yelling for guards. After all, Aderyn had just killed Cameo Tully right in front of him. And she was an Assassin, which meant nobody really *expected* her to kill anyone. After all, Tully was an assassin, too, and he hadn't exactly been known for a body count. Killing them both and escaping was relatively easy, with almost no pursuit from guards.

She knew that wouldn't work twice, though. Anonymity or professionalism were the typical protections of an Assassin, and she only had a limited quantity of either to use.

Still, she did have that question to ask Rafe.

"Y'know-" He started.

"I wonder-" She began.

An awkward pause, and a clearing of throats. "Srry." Rafe grumbled. "You go?" he managed, gesturing with one hand, a circular motion like he was turning a wheel.

"Well, I was wondering... why do they call you the worst murderer in all of Timoritia?"

Nobody with eyes that blue, with a face that pure, should be asking a question like that. Rafe was even more jarred when his memory threw up the image of those exact same eyes, with that same unflinching expression, looked up at a window at him with someone else's blood running down her forehead and over one eye, like some sort of Hadrian warpaint. "B'cause I'm not very good at it." He managed.

"You know, I rather think that's a dreadful lie." Aderyn responded. Why wasn't she blinking?

"Well..." Rafe shuffled a little on the tiles, squirming uncomfortably. "Just got lucky with Praefoco and the window."

"You punched through a window hard enough to break the metal strut in the centre of it and grab a man one-handed, haul him off his feet and impale him through one of the toughest parts of his body on a stout metal spike faster than he could scream. I absolutely have to admire the efficiency."

Rafe blinked, and then, *finally*, Aderyn did, too – with an almost *agonising* slowness.

"And what's more," she continued, "You didn't cut your hand on the way in. That's very rare. Most of the time when people break windows, there are loose shards of glass that fall back, or the pane itself. It seems very strange that you managed that."

Rafe looked down at his hand, and thought about it. Eventually, he spoke. "You have to make your hand small and push with all of y'weight. You break the pane in the middle and hold your hand through it while the glass falls. Do it confidently and tense up th'hand and like, none of the glass cuts you. You do it hard and all the glass is small, you see?"

"And the metal strut?"

"It was pretty old. Looked worn."

"That's an awfully observant thing to see. You notice a lot about windows!" she said, smiling at him. It was a compliment, it was shaped like a compliment, but for some reason Rafe couldn't shake the feeling she was making ever-so-subtle fun of him. "What was your question?"

Rafe drew a breath and leant over to look at her. "Why're you doing this?"

"I'm an Assassin," Aderyn said, unblinking again. Holding his gaze and *this* time he recognised what that meant. In the poorest parts of the street, he'd seen the times when someone got lost down an alleyway with the wrong person, and three or four bigger boys had huddled in the path, shoulder to shoulder, arms folded, heads down and blocked the path. They weren't doing the deed, they weren't giving the beating, but they were sure stopping anyone who wanted to help one side or the other. The feeling of staring up at people who would not let him pass, and who he couldn't make let him pass was too familiar one. Rafe knew a wall when he saw one.

Maybe that's why he liked windows.

"Yeah, but," he said. "You're getting paid by the church for this?"

"I consider this work pro bono."

"So you're just killin' people?"

"In the name of the betterment of the city."

Rafe looked up at the clouds again, with their rolling hues of violet and peach. "That's pretty fucked up." He reached into the folds of his robe. "You think you can make things better by finding the right person to kill?"

"Yes." Aderyn said, now looking at the street again, now that Rafe had given up on his line of questioning. "If there was a bad king, killing the king would remove the power that king held, and force it to transfer to someone else."

"What if the other king was bad, too?"

"Then he could also be killed."

Rafe tilted his head and raised an eyebrow to cast another gaze at Aderyn. "Just keep killing the bad people, eh?"

"In a fair and just world, with power distributed equally, we could consider such morality. But we live in a world where you, a whole person, can be considered a handful of coins on a ledger and a person like me can't, and there are people with more coins and more power than the people over whom they rule, and the souls they own." A flare of delicate white nostrils. "I did not kill a man today, Rafe, I slew a dragon that walked in the shoes of a man." Aderyn didn't blink, even when she was looking at the streets, as she spoke.

Rafe swallowed, wondering why his throat was dry, and very much wanted to end the conversation. His fingers hit a hard wooden shape in his robes, and he remembered something. Fishing it out, he

produced Praefoco's cigar box. "Cigarette?" he offered. "DuMauriers, I hear. From the Gallian, uh, Of Maurier."

Aderyn turned her head to look at him, and burst out in a sweet smile. "Oh, Rafe. That's not what that means."

"It isn't?"

"No. DuMaurier is Gallian. That would mean *The Maurier*."

Rafe looked into the case. "The more the maurier I suppose?" he asked, aloud, wondering if the joke even worked.

"It's a shame we weren't in Lleywa when you said that," she offered, patting his hand. "You could have said, 'The moors, the maurier,' and it would have made some sense."

Rafe gave a weak little smile, trying to hide the hotness in his cheeks that came from being reminded that he could barely read. "Well, um, want one?"

"Oh, goodness no. Cigarettes are dreadful things for the lungs. And you should probably reconsider them, too. They're quite noxious if you need to do a lot of heavy lifting."

Rafe looked into the box. "Really? I thought they were good for you."

"No, that's a common misconception." She shook her head. "One most commonly distributed and supported by nobles who like to sell their cigarettes to poor people. But think about it, how often do you sit by the fire breathing in the smoke to feel better?"

Rafe thought about that for a long moment, staring into the cigarette box. Thinking of warm fires in a communal room, smelling crackling wood and nursing bruises and bloody patches in his hair. The real answer choked back, he shook his head. "Never, really."

"Quite." Aderyn said, slowly standing up. "You know, Rafe," she extended her hand to him, "We should go find Brother Fratarelli again, let him know we're done." She shook her head, braid falling over one shoulder, the first rays of the sun shooting over her head, framing her outline as she held her hand steady. "And I rather think that you're the worst worst murderer I've ever met."

Rafe put both of his hands underneath him, lifting upwards and looked away, rubbing his cheeks with his fingertips, as he looked across the city for the signs of the chapel. "... Yeah."

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Wardell was opening the doors on the town house. He shuffled about as carefully as a man with a bad leg did, in a narrow alleyway. The sun was rising, the streets were slowly filling, and the sounds of a city in wakeful sit could be heard bouncing between the buildings. The sound was broken by the *splish-splish-splish-thud-thud-thud-splish* of someone running, running so hard as to ignore the puddles, then *skid* and round the corner, to plant a hand on the wall, breathing deep and looking up at Wardell.

"This your house, mate?" the messenger asked, gulping in air in huge breaths.

“No, I’m the help. But I work here.”

“Got a message, said it can’t wait.”

Wardell looked up at the building. None of the masks would be here for hours, which was going to give him time to set up and maybe have a spot of breakfast, if the bacon in the icebox was still good, and perhaps a tomato and some fish, too. Shaking his head with a sigh, he put his hand back on the doorknob for balance, his other hand fishing in his pocket. “What is it, mate?” he asked.

“Word from the barneys is that Elian Praefoco’s dead. Been dun *murdered*. They’re saying he was knifed along with Cameo Tully – killed by the assailant coming in.” He finally straightened up, wincing the wince of a man with lungs that felt on fire. “You got that?”

Wardell licked his lower lip, very nervously. “And... they told you to come here, to deliver that message, here...?”

“Yep, mate.”

“How... *something*.” Wardell said, producing a coin and tossing it to the messenger. “Good work, man. Do clear off, though, I’ve got to wash these walls this morning,” he said, trying to laugh easily.

Oh dear.

Chapter 6

Vince, as an engineer, enjoyed the auspicious rank of Lieutenant, which was more of a liability on the front where a sudden and abrupt interruption in the chain of command might have put him in the position of authority over people whose primary interest was not finely designed clockwork but rather putting holes in foreigners, often at range. For the most part, life on the front had been a hectic scrabble to always ensure that in the eternal game of one upmanship that was military rank, he was always losing no matter the room he was in. Travelling with a General was therefore a breathtaking opportunity to attempt relaxing, even if the man tended to eat with his hands and spit bones out at things.

They'd received the message six weeks ago. Six weeks! The first two weeks had been simple, hard riding through the web of interconnected bases and trenches that stretched across the Holy Land between Tiberan cities, and it had, for the best part, been quiet. They were all soldiers here, and when they made it to each new station, the General's momentum just sped them along. Vince was familiar with military acquisitions – the way the general walked into a way station, demanded water, food to eat on the move, and fresh horses made him inwardly turn green. *He'd* waited six months once for a new screwdriver.

Sometimes they'd been travelling north, sometimes south, but *always* west. It wasn't until they broke out of the trenches, when they started riding across hard packed sand, along *highways* that Vince realised he had *no idea* why he was with the general.

Vince was not a man given to questioning his personal fortune; an authority figure had just pulled him away from a very dangerous location, no questions asked, and it had been *weeks* since anyone had shot at him.

When they'd hit the highway, and the scowling seriousness of the bearded man faded, when they weren't *in the war* any more, however, there was a lot of time to think. There was the thud-thud-thud of horse hooves hitting packed sand and hard earth, and the long journey under the sun, with the steady rising scent of horse sweat accompanying.

Nobody wanted to talk.

Leigh had a perpetual scowl on her face as they rode, probably *wanting* to blurt out things, but mostly, she'd just leant over and muttered to Vince as they went, like she was trying to pass notes in class. Most of the time she hadn't had anything to say, just complaints about the way her brain felt hot, or the sun, or how she was starting to peel, or how she felt like a lizard, or *whatever*.

The messenger – Stannisfeld, he'd introduced himself, on the road – did try to talk, occasionally. The term that Vince had decided – after much deliberation – appropriate for him was *piping up*. Like someone had sat on an organ in a quiet church. A high and soft note, a question that rose up in amongst the group and that nobody seemed to want to answer in the long, steady *grind* of travel. Oo, grind was a good way to think of it. It made the labour sound harder.

Anyway, Stannisfeld would pipe up, ask a question, and nobody would answer it. It reminded Vince of a particularly cold classroom, with that One Boy who just *had* to try and make friends.

“I say, this highway is quite old, isn’t it?”

“Isn’t it strange how horses don’t blink when you’re looking at them?”

“I do wonder what’s going on back at the front.”

His questions were loosed upon the world like sweet little lambs being given freedom in a yard, whereupon they were vaporised in the dreadful silence that hung over the other riders. And a few kayem down the road, he’d try again.

The only people seemingly not bothered by the ride, however, were the General, who rode leaning back in his saddle with a little metal platform resting against the horn, upon which he seemed to be either reading, or sometimes writing, and Gael, the redheaded woman.

Thankfully, they were attacked by lions, which finally gave them something to talk about.

Vince hadn’t been very proud of himself in basic training, when handling a gun. It wasn’t that gunmanship was something he considered important, but it *was* a machine, and it was a machine that some dreadfully stupid people could use well. Since he didn’t consider himself very stupid, the way that his shot had arced wide on the training and practice ranges had seemed a personal insult. It wasn’t that practice wouldn’t improve him, he was just annoyed that he *had* to. After all, it all seemed dreadfully straightforward. Point, pull trigger, fire. Oh, surely a bit more tension and stress when you were under attack, but really, the way other people seemed to use guns seemed positively wasteful.

When he’d shot at the first lion, the bullet had blown up a clod of dirty twenty ems away and five ems wide of the lion. The horses scattered as the prowling, yowling beast, big and yellow and rangy, had leapt from some rocks, and Vince remembered there was quite a bit of yelling? But when the second lion joined in, attacking from behind – *flanking*, Vince corrected himself – the roaring was louder than the yelling.

One of the lions had lunged for his horse, which was pretty rude, and he’d fallen off it, which was *really* embarrassing. Briefly, Vince had seen images of fangs and teeth and hair and eyes, glaring down at him, when Stannisfeld, the flighty messenger, had *swept* past, his hand clamping onto the back of Vince’s uniform, where the straps crossed, and hauled him up into the saddle, riding away from the lions just in time to avoid being lunch.

Being flung into Stannisfeld’s lap like a sack of potatoes was not only undignified, but it meant Vince missed most of the rest of the fight. What he did know, as the horse wheeled around after the roaring stopped, was the general stood over the prone form of two lions. In one hand, he held his pistol, smoking still, and in the other, he held his sword, red to the hilt.

The mountain of a man looked around at his retinue. Gael, who hadn’t so much as put a hair out of place, but *had* apprehended Vince’s bolting horse. Leigh, who’d been the second target after Vince had been carried off. Stannisfeld and Vince, riding one horse, in a pose that Vince quietly resented for being dreadfully like a knight and a princess in a period drama.

“Nice work, princess.” Leigh guffawed, nicely coalescing the worst of Vince’s self-consciousness into a single spat phrase. She held the reins of his horse out for him daintily.

“Now now,” Yull said, smoothing out his coat. “A lad can be a princess if he wants. Nothin’ funny ‘bout that.” Tucking the pistol back in his holster, he leant down to tilt the head of the dead lion with one hand.

Leigh looked momentarily annoyed at the rebuke – but turned to grin at Vince. He had a new nickname now. She mouthed *princess* at him while Yull’s back was turned, and grinned cheekily.

“Good amount of meat on these,” he spoke, and it was the conversational tone he’d had in the trenches, far away. “You law mind setting up camp now? Could take a while, have some fresh meat. Been ridin’ hard enough for the Crown’s tastes... now we’re out of the war we can probably slow down a bit.” A cluck of his tongue, a shake of his head, and he seemed preoccupied by something. “Twin lions. Fancy that.”

Vince liked machines. He wasn’t very fond of flesh, and had been born high enough in his station in life that, prior to the military, he’d never had any reason to really look at how flesh was put together. That blind spot in his education was simply obliterated as he watched the general and Gael gut, skin, and clean the lions, turning them into orderly slabs of meat stretched out flat, hot rocks.

The campfire smelled of the meat, which honestly, didn’t smell very good. The meat was cycled into the flame in hard chunks, cooked hot, charred on a metal plate the general had had about him. They ate strips of the meat, and while Vince couldn’t help but imagine he was eating the leanest, least pleasant pork he’d ever had, Leigh and Gael practically *inhaled* the stuff.

The sun had set, some of the food eaten, some prepared for travel, in rolls of tightly-folded paper, and a warm quiet had settled upon them all. When Yull spoke, it wasn’t the tone of a man with his mind elsewhere.

“You all been serving long, law?” Vince was pretty sure he knew what *law* meant, now. It probably was something like *boy*, the way that the general kept directing it at people.

A pair of nods and a nod around the campfire. Vince cleared his throat and answered, “Not really, sir.”

“Not really?” Yull asked.

“Well, I’ve only served on the field for a year.”

“A year and they’ve put you out here?” Yull asked. “You must have annoyed someone.”

“No, actually,” Vince said, bold by the campfire’s golden light, and the way the General seemed to be treating him like an actual person. “I performed very well at the academy, and they sent me out to the front to do trench repairs.”

“Schooled well? Know your mottos, then, do you?” the huge man pointed the tip of his sword, still stained with ash from the campfire, at Vince. “Engineers, right?”

“Ah, yes, sir.”

“What is it? Your motto, mean. Know what it is, don't you?”

"Ah, I do," Vince said, rather primly, clearing his throat. "It's '*Ubiq*.'" The smugness of knowing, rather than being told, and interrupting Yull's teacherly tone, was a delicious flavour on the back of his tongue.

"Know what it means?"

"Ah, well-" Suddenly it didn't taste so good.

"Everywhere. It means 'everywhere.'"

"That's a stupid motto." Leigh grumbled, lying on her belly by the fire, her blanket piled up under her chin.

"Is it?" Yull asked, turning the sword back into the ashes, stirring them. "It's a promise. It's a threat. It says *wherever you are, we can fix your problem*. It says *wherever you've built your wall, we can take it down*. It's a proud motto, law, and don't let anyone tell you others. Alright, law, what about yours?" Tip of the sword, flicked with ashes, pointed at Gael.

The redhead sneered a little, raising her chin at the big man. "Non regis, Non Deo, Sed Pretium."

"Don't know that one," Yull said, his swordtip steady. "Know the meaning?"

She gave a scoff. "No kings, no gods. Only money." She shook her head. "You don't speak Latin?"

"Only a little."

"Like 'ubiq?'" she asked, throwing a glance at Vince, who very much looked like he'd have dropped it.

"Mmhm," rumbled Yull, putting his swordtip back into the ashes. "I like mottos. The words you carry with you, all the time. Even *if you're a mercenary*." And he *grinned* across the flames at her. "Most regiments have a motto of some sort." He said, rolling his shoulder to look at Leigh, who was quietly shrinking against her bedroll as if she could hide in her own shadow. "Know yours?"

"Um, well," she began, turning her head, trying to peer at the patch on her shoulder that marked her as King's Artillery.

"*Ultima ratio regum*." Stannisfeld's voice was a murmur.

Yull looked across at him, and smiled. "King's Artillery's motto, yes 'tis. But do you know what it *means*."

"The last resort of kings." Stannisfeld said.

The quiet settled back in... but now Yull was one of the students, digesting the lesson.

"Y'speak Latin, law?" Yull asked.

"No sir."

"Just that."

"And *In bello, manus ad numeros.*" Stannisfeld murmured, swallowing and waiting a moment.

Gael sat forwards in her seat, before Yull could ask a meaning. "In times of war, we wield numbers?"

Stannisfeld smiled brightly. "Y-yes!" He said, smoothing his brown hair against his head. "I'm sorry, yes."

Yull tilted his head. "That's an odd pair of things to know. Now, law... why *do* you know that?"

Stannisfeld adjusted in his chair. "Well, the First Bridge across the Timoritia River has a cannon on it... and those slogans are engraved on them."

"Know much about cannons?"

"No, but I do know much about mathematics."

"Why's that?"

"Um, because, when I was very young, I was interested in windmills."

Leigh, realising she was no longer under fire for not doing her homework, propped herself up on her elbows and watched. "Windmills?" she asked.

"Yes, um. They're very complex machines, to make them properly. You need to do all sorts of mathematics when you design them, based on the wind you have. You want a lot of regular, smooth wind, and the weights you're turning have to be able to handle the strain--"

"Good at math, are you?" asked Yull.

"Yes sir."

"Why aren't you an engineer?" someone blurted, and a moment after it had been said, Vince realised it'd been him.

"Um, I'm not allowed to enlist..." Stannisfeld swallowed, embarrassed.

"... because there's a touch of Djansk to you, isn't there, law?" Yull asked.

"Um, yes." Stannisfeld said, a little nervously.

"No shame in that. Parents traders?"

"Yes, actually. Um, bought some property when it became politically unwise to be in Djansk any longer."

"Hah... let me guess. Around the time the crown changed hands?"

"A little after."

"How little after?"

"About long enough for my mother to see the new tax rates."

“Hah! Heard the new king was a poor one. Didn't realise that's how it went.” Yull shifted back into his chair. “So now you’ve seen both sides of it – the king’s demands, and how the king has them heard.” He said, stretching his shoulders back and heaving an enormous yawn. “Bet he believes he’s doin’ the just thing, too. Let me tell you this much, law; There's not a person who don't believe what they want to, and what they want to believe comes easy to 'em.”

The way he said it, there was some special weight to it, some silence that followed hard upon. The silence was finally broken when he spoke again.

“Alright, law. Get yourself some rest,” he shoved backwards, pushing his pile up with his backside against a rock, nestling against it. “I'll watch the fire yet for a bit.”

Vincent tried to feel annoyed at the way the general had casually put the entire group to bed, like undisciplined children, and decided it was just coincidence that that’s when he felt so very warm and tired and full of fresh, if low quality, meat.

The general sat with his portable writing desk on his knees, and script out the words as they came to his mind.

My Dearest Calpurnia.

It's funny you mention in your last letter, 'twin lions...'

An empire's span away, Rafe leant back against the steeple of the church. Up on the rooftops of Timoritia, you could see the world differently. You didn't have to walk on cobblestones with muck in between them. There weren't any shoving and squalling people, reminding you that they didn't care about anything in the world but whatever was going on in their lives. You could see the city as a city, with its structures all built together, the way the roofing changed colour at a certain point as mark of historical development. You could hear the train and the people roaring, but not any of the individual sounds.

Rafe really hated individual sounds. It was like children playing. It always sounded innocent and sweet, he'd been told – there were popular poems and songs that spoke of those things. Thing is, if you ever stopped to listen to the *words the children said*, you'd hear *now you hold his arms down*.

"Hello, Rafe." Aderyn said, walking along the line of the church roof. It'd been a week since the Praefoco job. They'd returned to Brother Fratarelli, who had offered them both places to lay low – and crucially appended *for now*. Aderyn had politely declined, and as far as Rafe knew, gone back to her boarding school at the Assassins' Guild. It seemed reasonable, nobody would look for an assassin there.

He'd found the basement tolerable living, but the bars and down there wiggled him out. Brother Fratarelli had made great showings of how the locks had been taken away, and the bars were just a more effective form of wall than replacing them would indicate, but Rafe still didn't like sleeping in a room behind lines of metal.

At night, Kivis left the church, which helped reassure him somewhat. Something about sleeping near her left him always looking over his shoulder.

"Eyo, Aderyn," he responded, using her full name. Nicknaming her might give her the wrong impression. When she was close enough, she stood on the peak of the building, behind the steeple, behind Rafe. He looked over his shoulder for only a moment, before he stood up and turned to stand, facing her. She didn't blink at that. Didn't even seem to think there was anything odd about it. Rafe just took up his stance, and wondered about the silence that settled down... before eventually filling it.

"You know, I've had something on my mind..."

"What is it, Rafe?" She always pronounced his name oddly. That little tinge or flourish around it. Like she wanted to make sure the word didn't run into other words. Probably just part of her accent.

"You remember Praefoco's study?"

"Yes?"

"Well, it was something – I mean, it seems a bit strange to think about it," Rafe mused, tapping his fingertip on his chin. Aderyn made him self-conscious now. Before the hit, he thought he'd understood her – a young lady with an education she couldn't apply, a *girl* thinking she was as hard as him. Then there'd been the demonstration with Tully, and Rafe had had to reconsider that. And then he realised his introspection had skidded around for a few moments too long and he'd

forgotten where, in his sentence he'd left off. Standing there tapping his fingertip with his chin stupidly was not helping anything.

"The Black King's Crown?" Aderyn asked, tilting her head.

"The what?" he asked, blinking and trying to pull his mind back on course. She'd stabbed him through his fucking *jaw*, that took *strength* for god's sake, let alone how sharp that knife had to be – maybe it was the knife? Maybe she had better quality tools than he'd ever had, after all, a kitchen knife in the Drafts quarter wasn't exactly about to do much good even –

"The Black Crown. It's a bit of a Lleywa myth. I'm not surprised you don't know about it." And she didn't say *you* don't know about it, but he heard it anyway.

"What? Why wouldn't I?"

"Because you don't read anything."

"I do read things."

Aderyn gave Rafe a look that sat somewhere between condescending and surprised. "You do?"

Rafe stepped forwards on the rooftop, his arms tucked behind himself as he looked up at the sky.

*"Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity."*

Aderyn's carefully-cultivated look of condescension and surprise was shattered down the middle, her pale eyebrows raised. "Rafe, that is both quite lovely and completely not like you at all. Wherever did you hear that?"

"I didn't hear it," he said, "I read it."

"Do you understand it?"

Rafe's eyes screwed up tight, his cheeks rising and the heat rising in his throat. "What the f-"

Aderyn's finger pressed against his lip. It was a sudden, terrifying swiftness, pinning his words in his throat. "*Shh*. I mean that. Do you *understand* what it means?"

Remembering that he'd seen that hand propel a blade thirty centimeters long up through a man's skull, Rafe managed to keep a check on his outrage for long enough. "Yes." He said, confidently.

"Then can you explain it to me?"

Rafe leant back, confused. He had definitely lost the thread of this conversation.

“... Why?”

“Because,” Aderyn said, and he could *see* her adjusting her expression. “You say it like it means something very large, and I don’t know what that is.”

Rafe stopped abruptly. He leant forwards, putting his weight on his knee, and his elbow on that knee, looking at Aderyn more closely than he ever had before. “Aderyn?”

“Yes?”

Then, as if Rafe saw the *scope* of the conversation he was about to open up, he flicked swiftly as he could back to safer ground. “... Why didn’t Praefoco yell for guards after you killed Tully?”

Aderyn sat back slightly at that. She averted her gaze, adopting a thoughtful expression, putting her fingertip on her chin just like Rafe did. It had been only a tiny window of time, a few moments, enough for a few short words – but he had used those to talk to her.

“Right.” Rafe said, looking at her confused look. Straightening up, he smoothed his shirt with one hand, licking his lip nervously. “I think the guards aren’t looking for us – it’s been a few days, and all – but I’m... I’m worried.”

Aderyn looked at him again, those brilliant blue eyes focusing. “Why did you lie about the murders?”

“I didn’t – what, wait, why are you bringing that up now?”

“Because you’ve never answered it.” She said, and her tone was obstinate.

Rafe turned around and went to the edge of the roof, grumbling. “It’s ... it’s a poem about a society that falls apart because it spreads too wide. Nstuff. It’s about... it’s probably not about the Empire, but it’s like it’s about the Empire.”

Aderyn’s nostrils flared and she pouted in an unnervingly ladylike fashion. “That was *an* answer, Rafe, but it wasn’t an answer to my question.”

Rafe turned and drew himself back, waving one arm. “I...” he shook his head and stormed past her, over the crest of the roof. “Forget it. I’m going to get some sleep and see if I’m allowed to go home tonight.”

Aderyn slowly turned and watched him leave, her final question spoken to his back. “Home?”

*

Two weeks after the unfortunate end of some noble or other, the masks were gathered to speak. A suite of white faces in a dark room. Everyone knew who everyone else was – but to *say* that would be to imply all the secrecy was unnecessary. That would be *rude*.

“Well, he’s undeniably useful.” A voice behind the first mask spoke, her tone clear and dignified.

“Why the hell do you say that?” Shot the second, his tone distinctly different, slightly jowly.

“Manners, please.” Murmured a third.

“Oh, stuff it. What do you mean useful? He's told us nothing new. We *know* Yull is a good leader, we *know* he's well liked.”

“Yes, but – and this is important – he's well liked by someone who hasn't served under him for years.” The first continued.

“So? That's not a point in his favour.”

“General Yull Bachthane has overseen military operations against the Djansk colonies, in the Holy Land, in the Rus Wastes, he broke the siege of Ranthelm, he pushed the Norsk back out of Hadrian, and he helped break the Republican uprising on the Emralt. Yull has been serving as a *general* for as long as your average soldier has been *alive*, and he's been doing it quite *well*, clearly.” A deep breath, and she continued. “Quite frankly, there are very few men working for the crown who *haven't* served under him. Hadrians love him because he's not Timoritian. The Emralt love him because their Taoiseach loves him, *and* he stood against Timoritia during the Republican riots. The people of the countrysides love him because half of them have a relative who served under him, and the Lleywa love him because he's Lleywa too. Quite frankly, I'm *surprised*, he's almost too perfect for the job.”

“I cannot lie,” a fourth voice said. “That business in Emralt bothers me.”

“Why?” The second asked. This was meant to be about Marko Fiver, but somehow here they were talking about Yull again.

“He sided with the locals, against Vox. Tiber lost quite a bit of power in Emralt then.”

“And the Emralt are being fed now thanks to farms in Tiber. Our economic leash grows tighter.” A fourth voice said. “I doubt Yull realises that, but even his pigheaded moments are useful. You just have to know that when he's put in a corner, he'll break through a wall.” The second voice was clearly sick of arguing about Yull's viability.

“... All this, and a claim to the throne too.” The first voice murmured.

Everyone fell silent. That was the really juicy part, and they all knew it.

Had any one noble family found this little thread, it'd have been a trump card. They all knew it, too. However they did it, they'd have called Yull back, *kayem* by *kayem*, to the city, even if they'd had to shackle him to do it, and they'd have cultivated him. The man was married, so an heir could be on the cards quickly too – and even if they didn't own and control the father, they could definitely entrench themselves in the lives of the son. A son who would almost certainly be completely lost in the sea of Timoritia politicking. Lleywa was a nation which lacked the nobility of Tiber – the people received knighthoods and duchies for *doing things* rather than being born. This was slightly better than the situation in Hadrian, at least, where you could have a title if you killed someone else who had one.

“He's wealthy, isn't he?” Said that third voice, speculative unto the darkness.

“No,” the second said.

“Surely not – if he was at the siege of Ranthelm?”

“Yes, but he didn’t-”

“He didn’t accept the money?!” It was almost a yell.

“No, no, he did – come now, we’re not talking about a Messiah here. But he put it in an estate. Probably just didn’t want to deal with money until he decided to retire.”

“When the hell would he retire?”

“When there are no more wars,” she said, bitter laughter hiding in her words.

Morose silence. “Still not sure the use of Marko.” Returned the second.

“Fiver?” She shrugged. “He’s an old soldier. He’s a friend of Yull’s. He’s a bodyguard and he’s salaried. What more do you want?”

“I want to bring him in.”

“Wait, are you fucking serious?” Suddenly, the boredom was gone and she was the one cursing now.

“Why not? Praefoco’s dead – we have the room.”

“We have- listen to yourself. What did Praefoco *do*? The man was a money-launderer and a financial asset until whatever idiot deal he had going on with that fathead Cameo went sour. He could muster up the cash to pull Yull back home and finance the inevitable war with Djansk he’d want. That was the point, he was our carrot.”

“What if Marko Fiver was our carrot?”

The silence rushed back into the room. Fingers stroked the front of masks, as that thought slithered around in between very eager ears.

“I don’t like it,” she finally said. “Manipulation is tricky business. You want to say you can control Marko to control Yull? I don’t see that working.”

A fingertip tapped on soft porcelain. “No. I’m saying we *bring him in*. Marko Fiver doesn’t need to manipulate anyone. Tell me truly, don’t you think, if put to it, he’d *want* that man, that *great* man, running the world around him? Wouldn’t he *want* Yull Bachthane, the Black King from Lleywa?”

A chair creaked. Someone leant back, in the gloom.

“You mean, just appeal to what he thinks is right?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a dangerous proposition.”

“I’m sure we can work something out.”

*

A fortnight and some after hearing the news that the Tully estate was looking for cleaners and workers and there'd be an auction to distribute the goods, Mr Bauer stopped in at an apothecary to buy a large bundle of kettleweed. In his family line, heavy Visits From The Red could carry risks of illness, and his daughter was particularly vulnerable.

The kettleweed supply having dried up, he'd been pretty damn worried. Thankfully, whatever business had been blocking its arrival had cleared up. Whistling to himself the tune of a relieved man, Mr Bauer adjusted his blue cap with the brown paper bag bundled under his arm, heading to attend to one of many other points of business before he went home.

*

Three weeks after Cameo Tully's death, Marko Fiver sat in the kitchen, smiling and chatting with Wardell, a cup of milky tea in one hand and an old service revolver, smashed into unworkability, in the other.

It was good to laugh. He'd taken to coming by of an afternoon to talk to Wardell. Old Veterans didn't have much to talk about, and most of the time, the house was empty.

"So there I was, thirteen man to a side, and one of them had *broken* the thing by *stamping* on it." Marko said, waving the gun fruitlessly around. Even though the mass of metal was worthless, he still kept the muzzle pointed away, his finger far from the trigger. It wasn't even because it was a gun. It was because his brain just refused to defy the rules he'd been taught.

Wardell sat back in his own chair, laughing a little at the gesture. "What did you even *do*?"

"Rugby match." Marko shrugged, pushing the gun onto the table. "Yull reffed. Thank god we had a ball on hand, too." A shake of his head, a scratch of his beard, a beard he couldn't have grown back then, because it wasn't *allowed* at that rank. "Man's wild, but in the best ways."

Wardell shook his head and laughed. "Still, you came out from under his command well enough. Seems he kept his boys safe."

"His law," Marko said, sipping the tea. "Don't know quite why he says it, but he never says his men or his soldiers. We're always his law."

"His law, or his llaw?"

"Not sure... I mean, I never heard him pronounce it quite like that?"

Wardell shrugged his bad shoulder uncertainly. "Probably nothing. I just remember that in Lleywa, the word 'llaw' means 'hand.'"

Marko nodded, and looked down into his tea. Today, they'd asked him about the rescue in Hemulk, when the campaign had swept south through Gallia and raided one of the massive mosques that dotted the Barcan province. They'd set up, dug in, and refused to leave until the Hemulkar military withdrew from the territory near the city of Bartholomew near the Holy Land. The Hemulkar weren't a bad people, but their sappy religious fervour had made them even more prone to atrocity against

people they saw as *almost* but not *quite* like themselves. Yull had known the names they'd used for one another. Marko couldn't remember them.

It was a simple strategy, really. The Hemulkar were threatening a Tiberan city, so the Tiberan military threatened a Hemulkar city. To up the ante, they'd chosen Cordoba, which housed a building of great significance. Marko had expected this fight to be one of many, where the Hemulkar probably would respond by taking Bartholomew and ransacking it.

He'd remembered standing in the wide, open expanse of the old mosque, with its strange squiggly artwork and its decorated walls with an eerie symmetry to them, and the order Yull had given them.

Take off your shoes, law.

They'd occupied the grounds around the mosque. They had stood within a stone's throw of it at all times. But only a handful had entered the building. They'd entered silently. They'd taken off their shoes. And when the time had come on Friday, for the fearful people who lived in and around Cordoba to come to pray, when they boldly had walked to the mosque in the name of their God, Yull had ordered every gun and sword under his command to draw back, to leave a path, and to let the people go about their worship.

It was the strangest occupation Marko had been to. Memories of warm sun and sweet wine and delicious food from the locals, as an army large enough to flatten Cordoba had quietly, and respectfully, set up around its most important structure. After that Friday, the people hadn't feared them. There was talk, in the stilted words that he didn't quite understand, about how *it was all just bad business, and perhaps they'll understand.*

They'd stayed their two weeks.

When the Hemulkar army returned, spoiling for a fight, they'd found their own people, amongst the army. Volunteers from the army helping to bring in harvests. A chapel tent respectfully set up a good distance from the mosque – and soldiers in it, praying.

"Why are you here?" Wardell asked, his words failing to slice through Marko's reminiscence.

"... Because you weren't, and you should be." Marko murmured, thinking about what Yull had said to a towering general, staring eye to eye with him.

"No, I mean," Wardell cleared his throat. "Do you know why they want you here, Fiver?"

Marko shook himself, and looked across at the door, glad it wasn't raining, and he didn't have to think through that sound. "Honestly, Wardell, I've no idea. I think there's something they're looking for, but hell if I can work out what it is."

*

Rafe was still completely uncertain as to what, exactly, he was doing at the church. The first few days he'd slept at the church, which had been, in his mind, crashing. There were occasional errands with the fully-armoured Kivis, too, which could mark one or two days in the time since the Praefoco job. The most recent morning, though, he'd woken up, rubbed his hand through his hair, looked up at

the bars – bars he'd grown used to – and realised he had been sleeping in this same room, doing minor jobs and staying hidden inside the church for *four weeks*. Whole days melted away underneath the glossy sun that shone through the high windows of the church, and while it certainly was *better* than the prison cell life, and the food – bread and water – was at least less likely to be spat in, he was still tethered to the same bed, and slept behind bars.

For four Sundays now, Rafe had seen the church fill up, and then empty again, just once in the day. The people had been adorned about in grey and brown, with a few rare flashes of silver, or a bright purple feather. Children, often with no shoes, had laid on their bellies under the pews, whispering to one another, scribbling on tiny chalkboards, to keep themselves entertained. The sermons had all been short, had begun with a quote from the Books, and had not spoken of the books after that point. Simple hymns, hymns everyone *knew*, because they didn't have hymnbooks. The missing fingers, the shuffles and limps, and the slow, steady chorus of coughs throughout the service... Rafe felt his stomach turning as he looked out at them.

Shuffling footsteps left, and then Kivis and Rafe had emerged from their little corner of the church, behind the door which didn't quite shut properly, and helped stack the pews, pick up the chalkboards, and sort the money that had accrued in the dark purple velvet back, mothworn in the corners. There wasn't much, which explained why feeding three people was done with bread and water. Thankfully, the city rained enough that they at least always had water, when you scooped that odd floating web of brown and black strands off the top. That just settled on everything wet of a morning, downwind from the trainyards, steelworks, and shipyards.

"Hey, priest," Rafe said, his hands on his knees, as Brother Fratarelli came down, down into the basement cellar. "What're we doing?"

The Brother looked down at the little clay plate in his hand and the cup resting on it between two bread rolls and offered an uncertain shrug. "I was bringing you some breakfast. You really don't sleep well, you know?"

Rafe's nose wrinkled, his top lip curling back. Really, the sneer was too comfortable an expression to wear. "... Thanks," he managed to say, not sure if he meant to the concern or the food. He pushed himself to stand, walking to meet the priest, shaking out his hair.

"Aderyn will be coming around today, which will be nice for you," said the priest, with the tone like it was a play date. "You two do enjoy your little sessions."

Rafe followed the steps behind the priest, biting into one roll as he went. "It's not a little session, we train."

"Yes, I know! It's really quite remarkable."

"Why's that?" Rafe asked, circling around behind the Brother, trying to move past him up the stairs – but it was no good, the rotund monk filled the passage as he went up the spiral stairs.

"Well, you don't tend to appreciate difficult things."

Again, Rafe rankled. Everyone seemed intent to *tell* him things about himself, and it seemed they always were *wrong*. Still, no point yelling at the back of the priest's head about it. He'd just figure

Rafe was being *defensive*, that word they liked to use when someone got angry. “Girl comes at you like she's trying to kill me.” He said.

“That is her job, isn't it? Not to kill you, particularly, mind, but-”

“Yes, but she's... a bit good at it.” Rafe managed, lamely. Ever since the Praefoco job, he'd had to re-evaluate the incredibly prim girl. Girl. Young lady? Ugh, no word seemed right. They all seemed to undervalue the sort of person who could drive a fifteen-cim blade into someone's brain via their jaw.

“Well, get better.” The priest said, at the top of the stairs, holding the door open. “There are some high windows that need washing today – do you think you can give me a hand with those?”

Rafe was holding a bucket when he finally gave rise to the thought. “I think she might be, um, I think she may be crazy.”

“Crazy, Rafe?” Brother Fratarelli's voice was slightly muted by the glass, as he scrubbed side to side. Of *course* Rafe had the outside, where he had to stand on the scaffold and scrape off the soot.

“Well, you know... um-”

“Crazier than a boy who goes to prison for murders he didn't commit?”

Rafe let that pass with just a glare, which, thanks to the white sheen on the glass, was mostly seen by him.

The sunlight dried the sweat on his back, which was good, because it told Rafe that the now-clean windows had at least a *little* time before the rain sheeted black onto them again, as he wrung out his socks from the dropped bucket. The little step in the vestibule was soft, worn wood. Once it'd been a hard corner, like on the sides, but in the middle now it was worn smooth and shiny.

“Come with me.” Brother Fratarelli said, reaching down to pat his shoulder.

The church was one very large room, surrounded by a half-dozen very little rooms. The cell downstairs, which Rafe liked to pretend was originally just a boiler room. The priest's garret. The room where Kivis and Rafe and Brother Fratarelli ate in silence. The office, where the priest creaked up stairs to write his sermons – and it was into that that he led Rafe. While Rafe sat on one of the two chairs, the priest sorted down through an old cabinet, producing a thick bundle of tightly-tied papers, script on in black ink.

“Now, Rafe, you're a young man of analytical mind. I understand you're a bit on the sharp side. I want you to look at these.”

“What are they?”

“You could look at them and find out?”

Rafe sighed, blowing hair out of his eyes, and undid the stack. Pushing his hand through the sheaf, he regarded an odd form of writing he hadn't known before. There was a question, cleanly written, printed out on paper in broad script, and underneath it, in a flow of ink that showed a feminine hand, an answer to the question. Then another question, then another answer. At the top of each

set of pages there were some numbers, and the name *Aderyn Duthane*. While he wasn't sure, Rafe could at least make an ill-educated guess.

"These are Aderyn's test papers." Then a beat, as he turned the paper over. "You have her schoolwork."

"Yes, quite," Brother Fratarelli said. "It's to verify a student's abilities when they apply for positions. You can just request a transcript. They're made using gummed paper, you see, so you can acquire transcripts for--"

"You have her schoolwork." Rafe repeated.

"What you need to look for--"

"That is really creepy." He was dwelling.

Brother Fratarelli cleared his throat and thumbed the table. "Young man, Three weeks ago, you broke into a stranger's home and stabbed him in the neck with his own window."

"Oh. Aderyn told you about that? Hang on, it was four weeks."

"She told me in quite precise detail. And was it really four...? My word."

Both men sat, and sighed reflectively.

"Very well, now, Rafe. Look, carefully here now. Here is her first written test, six years ago. Look here, the red mark? That's from a teacher grading it. Look for these scores on the papers."

"... Seventy-two percent."

"Out of a possible hundred points, she scored seventy two. You're familiar with this system, yes?"

"Yeah," Rafe said, meaning *No, but I've worked it out from what you just said*.

"And here's her end-of-year one."

"Seventy two percent."

"And... well, here are three chosen at random." The priest cast the papers across the table.

"Seventy... two percent." Rafe didn't know *why* that seemed weird, just yet. But there was the way the priest talked about it. Clearly, you weren't supposed to earn the same score every time.

"Now then, Rafe, tell me, what do you think is more likely? That this young lady is just always exactly seventy-two percent informed on a topic? When you consider test scores are sort-of-random?"

"... I'd say someone is cheating."

"Indeed! That's what I thought. Most of these tests are graded by teachers who have no reason to comment on it, though. If she scored a hundred percent, every time, that would create an obvious problem."

“Right.”

“What I think happened, and why Aderyn drew my attention, is because her mark is perfectly placed. No teacher will notice a seventy-two on one test out of dozens. No teacher will comment on it to their peers. Nobody will see this pattern. You'd need systemic, deliberate and easily found organisation to make this pattern.”

“Or...”

“Or she chose to hit that score. Every time.”

Rafe surveyed the papers, his eyes scanning across the page. There were errors, errors highlighted in a dull red ink, but they were all small. Sometimes an answer was missed, but then later questions would be answered correctly. Her text was flowing and beautiful. Rafe sat back in his chair and looked over the paper at the priest.

“What's this meant to mean, then?”

“What it means, young man, is that I am *certain* that Lady Aderyn DuThane is a *kind* of crazy. But she is trying *very hard* to be normal, and I imagine you'd best respect what that says about her as a person.”

Chapter 7

Brother Fratarelli liked to consider himself a patient man, and a kind man, and a thoughtful man, which were traits he felt gave him great strength while dealing with Rafe. The fifth week of his time at the church, though, Kivis had come into the garret, and upon hearing her report, and all that patience had to reign in him spitting out 'Fiddlesticks!' to the ceiling. His hands on the table, he stood, and paced, and then, since pacing wasn't enough, he stormed out of the room, into the main hall of the church.

Aderyn and Rafe were duelling there, or rather, Aderyn had a knife, and Rafe was trying as artfully as possible to avoid being killed. The pressure was good for him, Brother Fratarelli reflected. Maybe the boy had taken to heart what he'd said a week ago, and tried to challenge himself more. The sight didn't do anything to stop the fume, though.

"Why, hello, Brother Fratarelli," Aderyn said, her tone cheerful and even, without even seeming to notice the exertion of sweeping a knife through the air towards Rafe's head. "That was some harsh language for a priest," she noted.

Ah, so they'd heard him. The priest tried to think less of his embarrassment and more of the matter. "I do apologise, to you and to god. Hopefully it wasn't too stern."

"You said," Rafe grunted, rolling back up to his feet. "Fiddlesticks. That's not much of a swear far as I know."

"The way I understand it, Rafe, you haven't been very well educated." Aderyn pointed out, with a lunge.

"Says who?"

"Says whom."

"What?" Rafe's confused expression leant back sharply as the knife, once more, shot into his personal space.

Brother Fratarelli sat on one of the pews, pushed up to the side of the room, nursing his chin in his hand, while his rear filled all the available space it could. Sweep, grunt, clash. Kick, leap, push. It was balletic to watch, and the priest let himself focus on the spectacle for a few minutes, while he tried to marshal his thoughts.

"It seems that since the death of Praefoco, his estate's been... ugh. There's been a lot of purchasing done of what he left behind. No widow to leave the goods to, and his business has been mostly broken into pieces. In the collapse of his estate, however, seems that a man named Luke Cornell has benefited."

"Is... that a problem?" Aderyn asked, even as she grabbed a fistful of Rafe's hair, sweeping him towards her other hand, blade pointed at his face – her attention over at the priest.

“Luke Cornell – well, you might know him as the Sinner?”

Rafe skidded onto his knees, tumbling forwards, out of Aderyn's grip and away from the knife. “Luke The Sinner?” he said, holding up a hand, signalling to Aderyn to stop the fight. She, unsurprisingly, didn't, lunging at his turned back.

“Yes...” Brother Fratarelli sighed, rubbing his chin even while Rafe was slammed face-first into the ground. “Luke the Sinner is a powerful man in the criminal underground. Apparently, Praefoco's estate had...” Brother Fratarelli shook his head, and sighed, hanging his head. Then, he drew himself up again. “The Praefoco estate purchased, as curios, several pieces of evidence that would have been useful for implicating Luke Cornell in his criminal enterprise.”

“So what?” Rafe asked. “Luke's got money, no real reason to expect he'd ever face, you know, consequences.”

Brother Fratarelli sighed, fingertip to his temple. “It's not *quite* as easily dismissed as all that, Rafe.”

“Of course,” Aderyn said, stabbing downwards into the floorboards of the church, while the young man underneath her rolled to the side. “With the right judge and watchman, a little evidence would do wonders.”

“So, kill him.” Rafe shrugged.

“What?!”

Rafe stopped short again, this time facing Aderyn, his hands raised, hoping this time she'd understand the signal. Still, the priest's indignant tone was tangible. “Hang the hell on here, hang on hang on. Did- did you just get indignant about me suggesting we kill someone? You blackmailed me into killing Praefoco!”

“Yes, but -”

“What?! No buts!” Rafe said. “What's got you squeamish about this one?”

The brother, sweat sheening his temples, had stood, had found himself pacing again, and now he stood, without even realising it, between the young boy and young woman who had between them, one knife. That much, it seemed, stopped Aderyn's movement.

“Praefoco was doing the wrong thing. He was *doing* the wrong thing.” he drew himself up, drawing in breath, pulling upon the power of sermon. “But there are many men who do the wrong thing, young man. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them?” The priest paused heavily, and drew a breath—

“That's quitter talk.” Aderyn murmured.

Brother Fratarelli sagged. “I have no intention of paying for the assassination of Luke Cornell.”

Aderyn “Why not?”

“Because we are *not* in the comeuppance business.”

“Brother,” Aderyn asked, leaning forwards. “Why does this matter to you?”

“Because there has to be a line. There has to be a rule. Praefoco and Tully were bad men, yes, but there are many, many bad men. I know, I hear their confessions every day. But I cannot just loose you both as a pair of hunting falcons to bring back whatever, whatever wickedness they find! Praefoco was making life almost impossible for thousands of women in the city, and there was no force that could stop him.”

“Not even God?”

“Not- that is NOT the point!”

“Says you.”

“We are in the business of Justice! We commit acts of righteous violence that-”

“Whoah, hold up there old man, we commit? You don't do SHIT.”

“And that's where you're wrong. I loosed you! I hired Aderyn! My hand is as bloody as yours-”

“Oh,” Aderyn said. Then she leapt over Brother Fratarelli's head, to try and stab Rafe again.

*

A week later, a meal of fish and chips, under a moonlit sky, paid for with a young woman's allowance from her land-owning parents. Aderyn wasn't sure what had done it, but for the past two weeks, Rafe had been behaving differently. The dynamic the boy had been using before – where he didn't respect her, and assumed she was incompetent – had disappeared. Most strangely, it hadn't disappeared after Cameo Tully, which was when she'd have expected it to. Quite frankly, he was confusing her. Still, she did have an experiment in mind.

Kicking her legs idly at the edge of the rooftop, Aderyn pushed a hand through her hair, the hand that hadn't touched any of her food. “You know much about Luke Cornell?”

“Cha mean?” he asked, picking the small, crunchy bits of chip out of the paper.

“Do you know where he lives, and what he does?”

“Yeah, most folk know him. Got a river boat, you know?”

Aderyn nodded. River boats. Contained environments. Those were excellent places to work.

“I think that we should find someone who would hire us to kill him.”

“Hire you,” Rafe noted. “I'm doing this shit for free.”

“And some bread rolls.” Aderyn noted, reproachfully.

“Yes, yes, and some bread rolls.”

“Do you think that it would upset Brother Fratarelli? That we would act without his urging?”

"I'm not going to lie to you, I'm pretty ambivalent." Rafe crunched on some burnt, crunchy potato mess.

"That's not what that means."

"What?"

"You're not ambivalent; you're apathetic. Ambivalent is holding two different emotional reactions to the thing. You might hate and love something, being ambivalent. But you, you just don't care. So you're apathetic."

"Huh. You read a lot, do you, lady?"

"As is appropriate for a young lady to do." Aderyn said, putting on her smile, and looking up at the moon.

*

Another day, another essay on city structure. Keol Pushanti licked his brush and regarded the opening paragraphs.

The river's name, at its head, was Beagnaoth, a deference to the bloody battles fought for its source by old tribes, where a length of iron the breadth of a man's wrist, forged in ashen fires, could be worth a war all of its own. Towards the mouth where it kissed the Strait between Gallia and Tiber, it was known as The Scramasax, a reference to that window of time when boats were crafted on the river to be loosed onto the Gallian shore like arrows from a bow. Along the way, there had been attempts to name it by the nearest landmark, from back when those landmarks were new ideas, so there were straits of its winding way known as the Ironwall Heft, the Tower Strait, the Benjamin, and most bafflingly, The Deep Wet. None of the names had stuck except amongst the people who considered themselves elite for knowing something nobody else knew. To the million names and faces that lived walking distance from it, the River was simply The River. It had become such a common thing that modern maps often just labelled that wriggly expanse as The.

Goodness, where to start. Slicking the brush under phrases like 'worth a war all of its own,' he scrawled in the margin: **Tone Too Familiar, Again.**

At its deepest, you could house one of those enormous storage ships called hulks, harboured temporarily and scudded in the narrow throat, to unload, or load up. At its shallowest, you could run across it, provided it was a warm day and the scum on the surface didn't break. It glowed in the sunset, mostly thanks to the floating surface chemicals, and it sheened in the mornings when the tanners waded out in reinforced rubbers to scoop strange, coagulated lumps off the top in the name of further research into what horrible things tanners could monetise.

The underline, the line **Just say hulks, they are common things** and Keol caught himself. This essay was *dreadfully* structured and there was – he lifted the corner of a page and counted the pages.

"Gosh." He murmured to his little marking room. "Gosh, gosh, gosh."

*

The Assassins' Guild was situated quite a way away from those parts of The River, and instead was near the wider parts, where you could take a barge across, or one of the many tilting bridges that opened and closed. Those tall towers were almost always used as first-year exam practice by young students, and very rarely did anyone die from it, thanks to the generations of climbing hands making sure all the handholds and footholds were stout and strong. Aderyn remembered her first year test, when she'd been told to use climbing in a form of assassination. Most students favoured a high location so they could drop down on a passerby, or, more often these days, crossbow them with a clear line of sight. Of course, they weren't *really* targets, but effigies of straw, moved amongst the traffic of a day. If your task hit the wrong person, you were docked quite a few marks, which was only small compensation for the occasionally accidentally-shot poor person.

Aderyn had dropped a liter clay pot of oil down onto her target, followed by carefully carved pieces of flint, which thanks to their shape were guaranteed to hit the rocks of the bridge at an angle to give off a spark. She'd underestimated the value of the wind, but there had been a hay-cart crossing the bridge at the time, which had served to at least prove the theory of her work sound.

It was under that same bridge that Aderyn stood next to Rafe, a scarf tucked up around her throat, hiding her mouth and expression as she looked out across the river from a much lower level than she was used to.

The city was strangely compressed, she reflected. At the very tops of its towers, where she had stood in her studies, she could see to the horizon, and even fancied at times she'd seen the winking lights of the Gallian shore. Rafe wasn't that kind of thing, he didn't soar above the skyline and leap from rooftop to rooftop unless he was scared. Even when he *did* take to the skies, it was with such a sullen refusal to forget where his feet came from. Yet, when you stood this close to the edge of the water, those towers seemed so strangely *close*. Looking up, over the hard stone protections, her hands folded underneath her coat, warded against the inevitable rain, she wondered if that was why Rafe was so *grubby*.

"Y'sure this is where th'boat comes?"

Aderyn rolled her eyes. He was so delightfully predictable. "Rafe, we've been waiting for less than eighty seconds."

"S'pose so, but —"

"But what?"

Rafe's mannerisms stayed away from his head and neck, which was strange. Those hands stayed by his side, opening and closing back into fists, again and again.

"I don't suppose you thought we'd wait until Luke Cornell's riverboat just drifted on past us, for the first time ever, we'd leap aboard and just deal with him?"

Rafe looked into the water, thankful it was too murky to show his expression in reflection.

"It's that sort of planning, *really* that got you *caught* for those three murders you didn't commit."

Aderyn didn't *need* to see his reflection to know the look on his face.

“Now then,” Aderyn looked up the river. “It seems the timing is a little off.”

Rafe had this way of starting a sentence that made it *sound* like he was hissing it, as if the words were being leaked out of a kettle on the boil. “It *is* a crime boss’ head quarters.”

“You’ve mentioned. I don’t find crime bosses do well if they aren’t punctual, though.”

“Where’d you get that idea from?”

“Rafe, you’ve *heard* of the Goranges, haven’t you?”

Rafe finally turned, and looked at her with a very *knit* expression. Like he didn’t want to open up his face much or something might burst out of it, possibly his skull. “I’ve *heard* of them,” he ventured.

Oh god.

Aderyn finally realised what was going on.

“Um,” she began, hesitating with careful practice, in case this was like the uterus talk she begun that time. “Well, the Goranges own three of the largest banks in Timoritia. They have been mostly in the business of stealing, in one way or another, other people’s money and using it for their own personal interests since before, well, before the Cathedral at Connaught was built.”

“How do you know?”

“Because the Cathedral at Connaught was built to destroy several hundred thousand pounds of bad debts.”

Rafe stopped short. “Hang on, the Cathedral at Connaught? The great big one with the cockerel in the window?”

“Yes!” Aderyn said, suddenly lighting up in a way Rafe hadn’t been prepared for. “You’ve been there?”

“Uh... well, I have, after a fashion.”

“I love that up close, each red pane of the cockerel is – hang on, you sound guilty. When?”

“You know that murder I didn’t commit?” There was a scorpion in Rafe’s voice.

“Yes?”

“That’s where I didn’t commit it. Slid off the roof with the guy.”

“... Oh.” Aderyn blinked. The lowest roof off the Cathedral at Connaught was three storeys tall, well, two if you considered that the tower at the side was a spiralling staircase and deliberately left space in the middle. That was a lot of distance to fall, and *suddenly* something clicked into place.

“Oh, Rafe.” She said, leaning forwards. “Is... is that what this has been about? Did you and the Father have an argument, then he slipped, and fell, and you went to prison because you felt guilty about it?”

Rafe turned to look back out at the river, raising his shoulders and heaving a sigh. "... Yeah, Aderyn. That's what it was."

Aderyn shook her head. "That's very sad."

Rafe turned to walk up the stairs, his hands stuffing into his pockets. "Kinda tricky to explain all the stab wounds he got, too."

A few moments later, Aderyn trotted after him, inexplicably steamed. "Rafe, we're waiting for a boat."

Rafe stopped at the top of the stairs. "Yeh. And it's not coming this morning. I know enough about men like Cornell that if he's late, there's a reason, and it's probably not nice." Gesturing over his shoulder at the water. "Man like him makes people wait and does a lotta business with folk who only know Benjamin's hours. C'mon. You got any money?"

Aderyn trotted up the steps to stand much closer to Rafe when she answered. "I have a little bit of money on my person, yes, and I would appreciate it if you do not make an issue of it, Rafe. There are muggers in these parts."

Rafe blinked at her like she'd sprouted wings. "You're fucking serious, aren't you."

"There are roughly five incidents of street crime an hour in this district of Timoritia, even this close to the Guildhall."

"Yeh, because the kids going to the Guild actually have some shit worth nicking. C'mon. I'm hungry and I haven't been this close to Mama's for five weeks. C'mon," he said, emphasising the word again and gesturing with his head. "Just across the bridge, one block that ways, and we'll have some hot food and I'll be able to let her know I'm out of prison."

"Your mother?" Aderyn asked, as they made their way across the bridge. Even out from under its shadow, it was still bitterly cold, and those towering posts gave shelter to loitering hands and their knives. Aderyn briefly shivered from the cold, and stepped closer to Rafe. "And she hasn't heard from you in four weeks?"

"Prolly closer to nine? And nah, she ain't my mam. Well, nah, I don't think so." Rafe hesitated, noticing Aderyn drawing closer. "Hang on, what's-s"

"Scuse us, mister," the voice said from the side of the cart. "You two wouldn't mind stepping over here for a minute, would ya?"

Rafe didn't even turn his head, ignoring the source of the voice, which was probably a foot above his head. "Piss off."

"See, it'd be a dreadful shame to get blood all over the young lady's-s"

*

It was probably only a minute later, but Rafe had to admit, it was a very eventful minute.

“So you’re saying you didn’t recognise me, Praddy?”

“I didn’t! I didn’t Rafe! You know me, hah, it’s – I mean, you remember back with the Cherish lads and the scrap on Bottle Lane, and-”

“Yeah, yeah, I reckon.” Rafe mused, keeping his tone of voice very even. “Y’heard much about Mama?”

“Oh, yes, yer Mama? She’s been real good, right proper fine,” he swallowed gingerly. “Don’t much bother with the wallet, really. And I don’t really know that guy either.”

“You said,” Rafe flicked through the billfold, ruminating on how it really was quite nice leather. Decent amount of cash in it, too, some of those really nice leafed-in bank notes. Man had to be turning some regular coin to get bank notes like that. “And so, guess I should introduce, this here’s a bloke I used to run with back when we were kids, names’... what was it again, Praddy?”

“Praddy! Praddy!” the bigger man yelped, blowing his long, straggly hair out of his face as best he could without moving his head too much. “Y’always called me Praddy because, because of that split lip, and saying Patty was ‘ard!”

Rafe stepped back from the edge of the bridge, folding the wallet closed. “Yeah, and this is my friend,” he drew himself up with what he felt was a little pardonable swagger, “Lady Aderyn DuThane. ‘Ey, Aderyn?”

“Yes, Rafe?” Aderyn asked, her tone so smooth you could roll rocks on it.

“You can probably let him down now.”

With the care of a surgeon – which, in Timoritia, is to say ‘enough to make you scared of what the hacksaw is for’ – Aderyn pulled the blade out of the railing by the man known as Padraig’s head and let go of the back of his neck. No longer confined by the blade pressing against the back of his ear and menacing further damage, he unfolded and stood up straight, but not too straight, because Aderyn’s foot was still planted firmly on his hand against the wrought iron fretwork under the wooden rail. As she lowered her foot, he gingerly brought the hand that wasn’t bleeding up to the side of his face that was also not bleeding, and pushed his hair back out of his eyes. “Uhm, uh-” he managed. “Uh, DuThane, then. That’s, uh, that’s Emralt, right?” he lamely tried, swallowing slowly.

“Lleywa,” she responded, clipped.

“Yeh,” Rafe said, leaning from around her side. “Means ‘Of Thane.””

“That doesn’t mean that,” Aderyn said, as Rafe spoke over the top of her head.

“So anyway, uh, Praddy-”

“Excuse me, Rafe,” Aderyn said, leaning back and looking up at Praddy. “I think I know the customary thing to do here.”

Praddy looked very, very nervous, as Aderyn took his wallet off Rafe, and snapped it closed. Raising her hand, she flung it down the bridge, off back the way they came. “Now piss off.” She appended.

Praddy didn't need two hints – he was bolting away at pace, leaving behind the prone form of his cohort.

Rafe looked down at the second body, and jutted his chin as he considered. “Probably can sell the boots, but getting rid of bodies is a bit of a bugger. Could throw him over the rail I *suppose*–”

Then the man groaned.

“Oh, Christ,” Rafe said, hunkering down. “Guess you messed up, Aderyn. Didn't kill the guy?”

The look she shot Rafe was surprisingly hurt. “Rafe, I *am* a professional.”

“Wait, what?” he asked, distracted even as he rolled the hurt man onto his back. “What're y'saying.”

“I'm not going to go around killing people without being *paid* for it.”

“What, like Luke Cornell?” Rafe asked, his head tilted to the side. “C'mon, mate, up you get. She barely touched you. Most of this blood's Praddy's I – oh, no, wait, guess she really did touch you. Christ, if you're going to try hittin' girls, you should at least make sure y'can take the hit back...” Rafe tut-tutted. “Y'mum able to sew?”

The accomplice, burbling through bloody lips, hunkered away from the implicit threat.

“I didn't mean that!” Rafe shook his head, tousling the hurt man's hair. “Just sayin', if she doesn't stitch up y'cheek, it's gunna heal funny. She can't? Okay, burble once for yes, twice for no.” Beat. “Okay, so she can't sew. Alright, then.” Rafe said, bending down, and hoisting with one arm. “C'mon. We'll get you some attention.”

The man burbled again, and Aderyn tilted her head the opposite way, as the man unsteadily wobbled on his feet. “Where?” It wasn't like she knew Rafe to be particularly medically minded.

“Gunna ask if Mama can take care of him.” Rafe said, and suddenly he wasn't helping anyone stand at all. Praddy's accomplice had bolted away from him, given mad strength by fear, and Rafe almost fell over with the suddenness of it.

“Christ, what a waste of time,” he said, shaking his head. “Guess he doesn't like paying for needlework,” he said, stuffing his hands into his pockets again and stepping back towards the walkway on the bridge.

Aderyn smoothed her scarf back in place and cleared her throat. “I must say, I think it's jolly nice of you to be so kind to introduce me to your old friends.” A pause. “And it's even nicer of you to introduce me as your friend.”

“Why's that so nice?” he said, confused.

“Because, well, I rather thought that you thought I was a horrible noblewoman abusing your knowledge of window snibs to advance her own plans.”

Rafe drew his chin out long, lips finally parting with a thoughtful *pop*. “Well, guess so. Are y'?”

“I do not believe that there is much room in my life for horribleness.”

“Just killing people professionally.”

“I did say much.”

“How much?”

“Exactly as much as is appropriate for a young lady.”

Aderyn wasn't sure why Rafe laughed at that. She'd work out what made him laugh, eventually.

*

When Rafe had told her they were meeting his mother – or rather, Mama – it had given Aderyn some expectations. Rafe was after all, an urchin of some variety – she'd actually thought him an orphan at first, given the way he'd fallen easily to crime of such brutal stripes at such a young age. Orphans were very dramatic, after all, and Rafe had all the makings about him of a usefully dramatic young man. Perhaps he'd lead her to a quiet corner of the city, where a narrow doorway led up stairs to a tiny little home in which she'd find poor but honest people, clenching their fists to keep warm. That seemed most appropriate, given Rafe. He had that streak of honesty about him, the sign of some humble beginning. Perhaps the tables would be soaped down, but the children wouldn't be.

Aderyn was *not* expecting Mama's.

It wasn't that Aderyn had been ignorant of the city in general. It was just that all of her travel throughout the city had very pointedly taken her away from this area, the Dims, where you couldn't see Benjamin through the windows, either because they faced another building, or they were caked with grime. The Dims, which weren't the criminal underworld known as the Shades, or the cutthroat piratical bay tavern area known as The Shallows, because both of those locations were too *proactive*. Life wasn't *cheap* here, because nobody was going to bother paying for it. Why, in the Dims, you could get killed for free if you stopped under the right gas lamp wearing the wrong colours.

It was the home of the boot party, of rough and ready workers who lived in the mills and plants, who rode the trains every morning with their heads and bones aching, and who drank from bags in paper bottles bought at the company store on the way home, where they'd drink a little more. Wrong place, wrong time, wrong word, and you'd find yourself the outlet for these sullen, slumping, walking towers of justified resentment.

When the folk of the Dims didn't have a target, though, they had a strange sense of justice amongst one another. A man like Mister Bauer could walk this street unmolested, because he was hard-working, working class, and he earned his coin.

Aderyn's eyes sparkled, looking up at the sign. *Mama's Obliteratum*.

“I must say, Rafe, this looks quite exciting.”

Rafe shook his head and shouldered the door, leaning down on the door handle, testing to see if it was barred. “Yeah, Mama's been running it for a while now.”

“She's not very well-educated, is she?” Aderyn asked, her hands tucked behind her back.

“Why y’say that?” Rafe asked, leaning forwards, into the little cubbyhole entryway, gesturing with his hand for her to follow. This was a narrow doorway alright, but it was a side entrance into a massive two-storey construction that seemed a house made of equal parts green and flop. The windows in front glowed from within with restful yellows, and the panes above seemed to be frosted on the inside as well as out.

“Well, Obliteratum means ‘erased,’ and I don’t necessarily know if that’s what she means.”

Rafe stopped in the second doorway, gesturing with a thumb at the door. The panels around them were a light brown, worked once with varnish, and never any more. His head cocked to the side, Rafe pressed his hand to the door. “You want to get this out of y’r system before I go in? Or do you wanna wait out here?”

“Well, Obliteratum is the past tense *erased*, and I don’t know if-”

“Okay, that’s enough.” Rafe said, pushing the door open. Even as he did it, though, he reached behind him, his fingers curling around Aderyn’s wrist but *not touching her*. Fingers curled to *look* like a hold, but *not*. And then they were across the doorframe, into a grimy, warm smoke that Aderyn could *taste*, but not quite smell.

Outside, Mama’s looked like an inn and a greenhouse. Inside, the golden lights and the dimness made much more sense, with the piles of pillows all across the floor. At one point, the place had been an inn, but wasn’t any more. The bar remained, lurching out from one wall sullenly, but there weren’t any stools outside it, just more space for pillows and cushions. It looked almost childish, like a playgroup den, until you saw the forms curled up and half-asleep in the cushions.

“Oh.” Aderyn said, holding her wrist iron steady, leaving Rafe to walk on without her. This was *new*.

Behind the bar sat – no, *sprawled* a woman of girth Aderyn was unused to seeing. The working class women she had dealt with over a certain age, in the great Parcel street market, had something of the crone about them, narrow and thin, even when they smiled. This was not such a woman – she sat on her stool all hips and curves and extravagant *shape* that Aderyn thought might make someone quite self-conscious. Her outfit had fishnet gloves, pearls dotting the wrists and hands, and purple and peach colours winked at the edges of her inky-black dress. The dress had been designed for a smaller woman, and had panels cut in it – panels that showed more fishnets.

Aderyn was trying to put her finger on why this was so strange. It wasn’t how she was formed – well not just – but how she sat! Spread legged on a sofa, tucked behind the bar in barely enough space, up on a platform that surely had to be built there, it had the trapping of some sort of throne. Wait, that was it. Mama did not sit like a Lady. She sat like a gentleman – the sort who owned horses and cannons and assumed you were interested in whatever they had to say.

With ink-black hair slicked down over one side of her face, her dark eye glittered looking at Aderyn, and then the young girl realised she’d been *staring*, and that was Not Appropriate For A Young Lady. Blushing and looking down, Aderyn still took notice of the woman’s eyeshadow – a streak of bright blue from above the eye, a flare of violent red from beneath.

“Hey, Mama-” Rafe began.

“Shut up, Rafe.” The woman leant forwards on her sofa, bits of her wobbling subtly. “And who might *you* be, young lady?”

“Her name-”

“Shut up. Your name, girl?”

The window was a relative weak point, and there were no people between her and it to present a problem. The woman herself was probably no direct threat, but chances were good a gun was easy within her reach. This woman was territorial, in a very old way, in a way that the Guild of Assassins didn't really *know* how to describe, because it had been that way since well before the Guild was the Guild.

Very few things could make Aderyn feel, but between the smoke and the stare, right now she was creeping up on discomfort.

“My name is Aderyn DuThane, and I'm an Assassin,” Aderyn said, with the smallest of curtseys.

“And I'm Mama Cass,” said the woman, reaching underneath the bar. Up came the hand and in it was grasped a plain, unvarnished woodcutting axe. No sigils, no insignia. Simple leather handle. She rested it on the bar and slouched back in her sofa. “Why'd you bring Rafe back, girl?”

Somewhere on the periphery of her vision, Rafe was doing that indignant look he usually did when someone was treating him with the respect he probably deserved.

“Rafe wanted to tell you that he's not dead.”

The woman slouched to the side of the sofa, then turned, swinging her legs up and over the arm of it, waving one hand over her head. “The boy knew that I didn't want a hitter. He can rot in the streets for all I care. I run a clean business here, you hear?”

“I was not planning on returning Rafe to your possession, madam,” Aderyn said, the hard d interspersing itself in a word like a subtly clenched fist.

“... Well good. You're an Assassin, you say?”

“Yes.”

“What's the rate?”

“I'm afraid I'm under contract at the moment.”

“So what's *their* rate?”

“Forty-five pounds a kill.”

“WHAT-” Rafe's voice was a loudness.

Mama Cass stroked her chin, leaning back and making the sofa squeak. “... Well, well, well. A young lady could get by quite happily for forty-five pounds a month. And you've done...?”

“Two under this contract.”

“Aderyn, why are you telling her this-”

“Ninety pounds, quite nice, quite nice. And how much are you paying it?” she asked, wagging the axe-handle at Rafe with one hand.

“Nothing.”

That made the older woman's eyebrows raise. “He's doing something for free now?” she shook her head, sighing and slouching to the other arm of her sofa, an expression more for the flounce than the comfort. “Rafe, boy, I thought I raised you far better than that. If you're good at something *never* do it for free.”

Rafe opened his mouth to respond –

“Shut up.” Mama Cass went on. “Now then, young lady... be careful what you accept for free. Men don't know how to be loyal without some incentive to their lives.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because, young lady, I have run this place now for going on seventeen years and let me tell you, there's never been a man I've been able to rely on to do what's smart, only what satisfies.” She gestured around the room, pointing at the prone, curled, cushion-bound forms.

“No,” Aderyn repeated. “Why would you give me that advice?”

The woman threw her head back and laughed. It was quite confusing. Aderyn wasn't sure why she would much care about what she had to say about 'men' or indeed why that sort of advice was even useful. The smoke *did* make it uncomfortable to think. Aderyn turned to look at Rafe, who wasn't even paying attention to Mama Cass. He was off to the side, hunkering down on his knees, talking to someone over by the stairs that led upstairs.

“Oi!” Mama Cass barked. “You don't get influencing, you hear me?”

Nothing about the girl fit properly. Her shirt was shorter than it should be, because it was originally a short cardigan. Instead of a dress, she was wearing workman's pants, with stout pockets sewn on the sides, and tied at the waist with white cord, stolen from the docks. Atop her head, she wore ... well, Aderyn had to assume it was originally a tea cosy of some variety, knitted into a sort of beanie-like arrangement, into which she'd tucked all of the mass of brown tangled hair she had. She was looking up at Aderyn from over in the stairwell, with an oddly innocent smile on her face for a prepubescent girl hanging around in a place that could only courteously be called an opium den, but maybe that was all an act. Aderyn was used to acts.

Rafe turned and looked over at Aderyn, still crouched down to the girl's eye height. She was maybe nine years old, and could not look less like Rafe. In her hands, she held a potted plant, green leaves bobbing loosely.

“Her name is Aina,” Cass said, somewhere behind Aderyn's head, far away but loud. “She works the greenhouse upstairs. “Like I said, I run a nice, legal business here, young lady.” The axe lifted and

dropped again. “Legal product, legal distribution, legal customers. Anyone dies in here, they’re legally dead.”

“That’s not what that means,” Aderyn said, stepping closer to Rafe and the little girl.

“What does it mean?” Aina asked, looking up at Aderyn.

Aderyn hunkered down on her knees next to Rafe, mimicking the stance, and put on her best smile. The moment of confusion – *nobody ever asked that question* – juddered quickly past, as she cleared her throat, folding her arms in and resting her elbows on her knees.

“Well, legally dead is a term used in inheritances of the crown,” she said, watching as close as she could for signs the girl understood her. “You see, if a person has done something that makes them unable to become the king, they are considered legally dead.”

“Like what?”

Rafe was making that face again, off out of Aderyn’s peripheral vision.

It was quite a list, come to think of it. “Worshipping the wrong God, for one. Lutherans are legally dead. Having served in the military of another nation – unless you conquer Timoritia, then it’s alright. Oh! And treason against an older heir, or attempting to kill them. So,” she said with a smile, and a practiced wink, “If you try and kill a royal heir, make sure you finish the job.”

Aina leant back at the wink – but giggled at the advice. Rafe’s hand came into Aderyn’s vision, rubbing the top of that beanie. He stood up, and cleared his throat. “Thanks, Miss Wary,” he said, very formally to the girl – who looked up at him and returned the nod.

Mama Cass watched them as they made their way back to the door, but didn’t leave her sofa while she waited for them to leave. When Aina moved to the bar with the potted plant in her hands, the woman’s manner melted, completely shifting from its draconian, flinty expression to a bright smile and a cheek pinch. Aderyn’s last sight of the fearsome Mama Cass was the woman leaning down to Aina and ignoring Rafe and Aderyn’s exit.

A few minutes later and they were out on the street, and Aderyn wasn’t *quite* sure what the purpose had been.

“That’s an opium den?” she asked, as they made their way back along the street.

“Marijuana,” he said, his hands stuffed in his pockets.

“Oh, like they have in Djansk.”

“Yeah, pretty much exactly like they have in Djansk.”

A few ems down the road, Aderyn tried again. “Mama is quite attractive.”

Rafe glanced at her sidelong, but looked back to the road, shoulders drawing up and in. “Don’t really notice, myself.”

“Did she raise you?”

“Why do you ask all these questions?” Rafe shot back. “The cathedral, Mama, the -” he stopped in the street, and turned to glare at her. “You're a fucking assassin, you're noble, you have like, like, a knife arm that's – I mean, with your tests, you're-”

His frustration flagged in the face of her expression.

The silence settled between them, an uncomfortable blanket, while Aderyn kept watching Rafe's expression, for longer than he felt comfortable. Eventually – as always – he broke and looked aside. “I just don't get why y're interested.”

Aderyn turned sharply in the opposite direction, and started to walk once more. “I don't understand you very well, Rafe. But you're the first person I know who doesn't like talking all about themselves, and I think that I'd like to understand why.”

Rafe shook his head, picking up the pace to catch up. “... Think Luke the Sinner's houseboat is in yet?”

Chapter 8

Far from the The River – well, far as could be considered for a man like Brother Fratarelli who could get puffed out walking upstairs – in the cold little dining room, the Brother and the Knight sat, looking at a spread of papers between them. The paper was uniform little white stacks, pinned together at the corners with a needle, then the needles tied together delicately with twine.

“Even details of the conversation. The types of cigarettes they were smoking – and look here, she’s even provided a description of the Black King’s Crown. Why would you even bother with that? I mean, if it meant something, I’m sure I could have looked it up.”

“It’s an old wives’ tale.”

Sometimes, Brother Fratarelli wished Kivis wouldn’t wear the helmet indoors. The cathedral was already an old building, with a large, wide open space, hard walls, and this room had basically nothing to muffle or block the echo of her words. With her helmet on, the echo had an echo, and it gave her an eerie choral quality, as if she was not one, but two women, speaking in near-perfect time. Almost but not *quite* perfect.

“I’m fairly sure you can say the same thing of the parting of the Red Sea, doesn’t mean people don’t *do things* because of the story.”

Kivis’ gauntleted hands slid between the pages with a mechanical precision. “She wrote this?”

The priest nodded, shoving his bowl aside. “Yes. It’s like she was plastering the walls or something.” He shrugged a shoulder. “It’s actually a bit reassuring. Interested in details like that, she’d surely find anything else important.”

“You mean any greater sins, don’t you?”

The Brother hunkered forwards slightly, his entire manner embarrassed. His fingers curled around the small bowl again, bringing it back before him like a shield, and he turned it back and forth to peer at it, not at her.

Kivis sat back on the bench. Her armour creaked. When the priest had first started associating with her, he’d always expected her armour to *clink* or possibly to make no noise at all. Armour was too alien a thing here in the cities. You’d see a hauberk or two, maybe a cuirass, but never someone who wore full armour all the time like Kivis.

Silence didn’t *necessarily* bother Brother Fratarelli. Well, some silences did, but the silence here wasn’t *nearly* so bad as the silence inside a confessional booth, where you knew someone was sitting only a few cims away and they’d done something dreadful, and as much as you wanted to encourage them to talk you had to just *wait* for it to come naturally. That sort of silence was almost always lighter than it looked, er, felt, because most of the time, nobody wanted to confess anything that was actually bad. Thank goodness though, they came to him, rather than let that little twist of guilt blossom into something dreadful. The really nasty ones, they were the ones who confessed out of habit, and didn’t think anything good or ill of what they’d said. The ones who knew that confession was a secret and just didn’t care.

Why did the armour creak, anyway? It was something about the leather underneath it. Did that mean Kivis was always walking around dressed in leather? That seemed incredibly awkward. Not that the Brother had the same reaction to that that he imagined say, Rafe would. But then, that was part of why Kivis did what she did, wasn't it? It was a sad kind of cage, really, where she hid everything about herself to prevent other people from perceiving her as weak, or projecting onto her things that weren't true.

The silence really was a long one.

Probably didn't want to push it any further. Kivis would be getting uncomfortable, which would be his fault, and that was rude. Turning the bowl over and pushing it aside, in a different direction – you know, so as to not be repetitive – he finally reached across the table for Aderyn's report on the assassination. "It's the *research* that surprised me."

"Mmmhm." Kivis responded, and there was *so much disdain* in that little sound for the change in conversation.

Brother Fratarelli looked across at Kivis. His friend, he knew, even though she wasn't the kind of woman to use that kind of word. The prickly knight would be more likely to use the word 'colleague' which was as nice as she could manage considering she'd called a fiancée 'a target' and her father 'the guilty party, your honour.' Turning the paper over in his hand, he remembered that day – the stony faced young woman with blood still on her dress, unblinking and unflinching as she ended her own family with a blade and the force of law. Being an orphan was pretty common in books and even more common in the streets, but finding your best friend was a self-made orphan was much rarer. He swallowed, parting his dry lips –

"I think you're doing the right thing," Kivis said, setting the stack of papers aside.

"You do?" Fratarelli started, leaning back. "You... I mean, I would have assumed."

Kivis rested her elbows on the table, folding her hands together. The helmet meant he couldn't see her expression, just the owl-like glare of the metal hood. "Brother, I'm not the one who swore an oath to a church and a god. *I* have no problem killing nobles."

It wasn't a big threat; it was just a little one. A little threat that said *if you continue down this line of conversation, I can make you feel worse than you can make me*. It was one of those little lines between friends, a warning shot. And Brother Fratarelli turned back to the paper, reading aloud, as if Kivis wasn't already intimately familiar with the text.

"The target referred in a panic to 'The Black King's Crown,' a tale of Lleywan nobility. The tale runs that during the 1100s, a Lleywan Thane, known as 'The Black Thane' successfully conquered Timoritia and declared himself king. The King sired an heir before returning to Lleywa. His son supposedly married into the Timoritian nobility and continued the royal line. This idea is popular in Lleywa as it implies a form of dominance over the more wealthy and politically powerful Tiberan state than it currently enjoys.

“The Lleywan position of subservience is said to be seen in everything from primary produce (sheep) to its national dish (cheese on toast) to- It just keeps going on like this. It’s like she did a book report for a murder.”

“This is evidence.” Kivis said. It wasn’t a hushed sentiment, a fearful whisper. It just was. Aderyn DuThane, the Assassin, had handed to people she had no *particular* reason to trust, proof that she had murdered another noble of the city for forty-five pounds, give or take expenses. It demonstrated remarkable trust in the two.

The priest shook his head, rubbing the side of his temple. “Then I need to put these in the care of someone I can trust utterly to not break confidence.” Shaking his head, he pulled the papers into a pile, and pushed them across the table. “Please. If you’d be so kind.”

*

The tea was just the way Marko liked it, and if he’d learned one thing walking a trench it was that comfort was to be feared. The chats with Wardell were nice, but it was still a strange slice of his day to come around here, wait in the kitchen for an hour or two, and leave to go back to work again. There were times when the masked figures called him in, but they rarely had anything to ask; strange inquiries about old campaigns, about campaign forces. Marko was sure they were testing his memory and his patience. He’d been to job interviews before.

Every day so far, though, Wardell had needed a reminder about the tea. It was reasonable. Marko wasn’t that important, in the order of the house. Four masters in the other room, and Wardell *never* made a mistake as to *their* tea orders. He hadn’t even asked, obviously distracted, as he slid the cup across the table – not drawing close – and made his way with that little hobble into the next room, like a good servant.

Six sugars, milk, and the milk went in *last*, just enough to blend in smoothly and take the dark off it. The swirl of milk was a stylised eye of accusation, peering from the table to Marko. When Wardell came back, Marko pushed the cup away slightly.

“What’s going on?”

Wardell looked like he’d been bitten. “Wh-whatcha mean, Fiver?” he asked, turning his head, raising an eyebrow, uncertain.

“Wardell, don’t try to sand this one over. We’ve both hidden things from brass before. What’s on your mind?”

“What do you mean, Fiver?”

“You’ve been cagey this morning. Moreso than normal.” Not really true, but one signal was all Marko *needed*. Being indecisive when you were given a signal was a good way to wind up *dead*.

“I, um, I don’t know what you could mean,” Wardell said, shuffling back around the back of the kitchen, keeping the length of the table between them. “It’s not really my place to rightly say.” He hedged, the sound of a unit clerk who really, really didn’t want the person dropped in the cack to be him.

Marko stood up. There was still some of the old Sergeant in him. It was a doughy weight, a weight with implied threat. Generals and lieutenants barked orders knowing that they could punish. Sergeants didn't have that luxury – they instead just had to make someone's life *very difficult*.
“Wardell.”

“They're just discussing... I mean, you know how it is Sir-” *Ahah*. “They've been talking about things lately, and I know it's not my place to listen, but a man does hear things.”

Marko knew he should feel a pang of guilt for exploiting an authority structure he'd left behind years ago, but there was *something* afoot, and he was tired of it. “That's it.” He said, gripping the hilt of his blade at his hip, storming to the door and ramming it open with the force of a storm.

“Sarge!” yelled Wardell after him as Marko plunged into the dark.

The faces shrouded in darkness and wearing masks were much less intimidating when they were sat around a short table with their masks propped up atop their heads. They were also far less inscrutable. Names flashed across his mind – because one could not work as a protector for the fearful and moneyed in Timoritia without meeting the other fearful and moneyed – as quick as an arrow. Asca Gorange, the fat-jowled complainer with a rat-trap sense of timing. Ulster Dulf, the too-ginger, too-freckled gunner who'd shot two fiancées before her family got the idea. Ligier Rangst, a man who looked like a tiger wearing a human suit and had all the same social grace. And nestled amongst them was the nervously shaking form of Tenner Chilver, a man whose greatest accomplishment had been being born *after* an incredibly boorish lout that made him look better by comparison.

“Oh.” He managed.

It was hard to hold onto that spark of rage that'd pushed him through the door. Even grasping as tight as he could, the way Tenner's hand shook while he sipped his tea, and the ridiculous way the masks sat atop heads, and suddenly he felt a lot less like he'd rooted out a conspiracy and more that someone was *very extensively* taking the piss.

“Oh, Marko,” said Ulster, with a voice that Marko was already in hindsight regretting not recognising. The woman had a voice like a low growl. People were hasty to say ‘unmistakeably feminine’ but they were all lying. “We were just talking about you-”

“What's this about?” Marko asked, stepping towards the table. No lighting effects. No strangeness. Just four silly nobles sipping tea wearing things that were really very silly hats. “What's *going on*?”

“Well,” Tenner said, adjusting his cup and setting it down. “Well, we ... well. Well, you see, it's like this. We're trying to find the Black Thane's heir.”

Asca gave a grumbling sound at that. “Well, we're trying to find *if there is* a Black Thane's heir.”

Marko was glad he hadn't *drawn* his sword, or he'd feel pretty ridiculous right now. “This is... this is some sort of *genealogy club*?”

“WELL,” Ligier said, barging his words across the table like a brick into a pie. “We’re trying to find a *king and heir* for our *country*, you know. The wealthiest empire in the goddamn WORLD, after all, if you’re not too PICKY about things like that.”

“And so, I’m here because...”

Ulster sat back, putting her tea to the side, and folding her arms. “Marko Fiver, we have reasons to believe that you have personally served at the right hand of the current and appropriate King of Timoritia. Now, you’re a man renowned for seeing patterns. Do you remember what you had to tell us about General Yull *Bach-Thane*?”

*

The Cathedral doors were large and robust, and bound with iron, which is why they only opened on Sundays when the people were coming to file in, and closed when there were three or four people to help Brother Fratarelli with it. That meant normally, when a door had to be opened, it was opened with slowness, and the *sound* of it was a mighty creak that shook the walls of the church.

Brother Fratarelli had never heard the sound from the small room by the building, because he was always one of the hands *opening* the doors. It sounded like someone had taken a gunshot and spread it out long and slow, like jam on bread.

Kivis was standing and looking at the door. “That’s not right,” she said, picking up that same small wooden bowl and heading to the small door that led to the main hall. “Brother?”

“Yes?”

“Stay here.”

Staying was a flexible word, and Brother Fratarelli leant up against the door, peering through the keyhole with his heart in his throat.

There were seven men ranging in age from perhaps twenty to maybe forty years at the oldest, wearing dockers’ clothes. One was holding a boat-hook over his shoulders, and they were all wearing suspenders like they were some sort of uniform. “Excuse us, mate,” said one, as Kivis stepped into the light of the room. “Just here to pick up the priest. He’s got some business, down by the river.”

There were no pews set up in the main hall. They were all pushed to the walls, stacked up and over one another, which meant the main hall was just one large, empty space with a stone-tiled floor and a rug on it. “You’ve not been here before,” Kivis said, that twofold voice echoing off the walls.

“No, this ain’t one of your typical shakedowns,” said the man with a boathook, grinning broadly. “Boss’ got a few words for the guy – don’t worry your head ‘bout it.” He said, sweeping the hook around to rest it on the ground like a spear. “You’re not about to give us some trouble, is ya?”

Kivis tilted her head one way, then the other, rolling her neck under her armour. Both fists up, clenched, she punched one into the other, testing her shoulders, the weight of her arms. “It’s not wise to try anything in this church,” she said.

“Yeah, God works wonders for the poor,” said the leader, bringing the hook up. “Never been one for faith.”

The bowl *whizzed* past his face by cimeter, and he lunged backwards to avoid the impact of it on his nose. In that tiny fraction of compressed time, he felt enormously clever, and made to turn his head back to Kivis, with a short, sharp quip on his lips, ready to launch. It maybe travelled to the edge of his lip before the words hit Kivis’ massive metal *fist* crashing into him.

The boathook hit the ground, but he didn’t let go of it, which she felt was quite convenient of him; she stamped on the midsection, snapping it, and swept up the half he still held to smack him in the face with the splintered end. Fist around his throat, she swung the man – easily a hundred kegs if he was any weight at all – around like a rag-doll and threw him like a child’s toy into the arms of the youngest of the group, who collapsed at the blow.

Then the rest of the crowd managed to *blink*.

“*Well?*” the knight asked, standing, her arms spread.

Five men considered just how badly they wanted to fight a woman in full armour holding a metal hook, and began a nervous shuffle back and out of the building. When she was sure they were gone, she walked to the doors, and, straining the weight under her steel, pulled the doors closed again. The two forms lay in quite a bit of pain, but not unconscious – because Kivis knew what it took to make someone unconscious, and she hadn’t bothered to *do* any of it.

The younger man had a look of dazed embarrassment on his face underneath the older man. The way the tide of things had been shifted so easily had surprised him, and then he’d laid there asking himself an important question: *just how devoted am I to the cause of getting the shit kicked out of me?* Good. Boys like that lasted longer. Hunkering down on her knees, Kivis hooked the boathook into the shirt of the older of the two, and flipped him over without directly biting into his flesh.

All the thug saw, looming over him, was the owl-like visage of the church’s knight, holding his weapon in her hands, and light shining behind her head.

“Works of god be *damned*,” Kivis’ words echoed around the man’s head. “This place is guarded by *me*.”

*

Kivis stood over the edge of the river and rocked one foot back and forth against the stone. It gave her body some casual rhythm, which helped her in what she was doing, making sure she didn’t get bored maintaining a single position for such a long time.

“Did you knock him out?” Brother Fratarelli asked, leaning down and looking at the man hanging over the edge of the support wall by his ankles. Fratarelli really didn’t appreciate what was involved in a fight, not a proper fight. You couldn’t knock a man unconscious with one blow easily, not unless you had something like a mallet to bring down on his head. If you wanted to put someone under you had to choke them, or something. Really, if this sort of thing was going to happen again, she’d have to teach the Brother how to defend himself. “I mean, I understand-” He was cut off by the groan.

Kivis gripped, and rolled her shoulders and repeated the question *again*. “What interest does your boss have with Brother Fratarelli?”

“Hngh, I... ugh. Let... let me think!”

“No.” Kivis said, and shook the man, from the ankles down, like he was an old rug, thudding him into the side of the wall with an almighty *whack*. The coins last left in his pockets tumbled out and jangled down into the water, which was black and sludgy around here, thanks to the bend upstream.

Letting them think was bad; they’d try to come up with lies. Of course, she couldn’t do this sort of violence long if she wanted an answer; he’d just say *anything* to get out of her clutches, and at that point there was no point listening to him. The point of it wasn’t information – it was terror. She couldn’t fight every person who might want to strike at the church, but she *could* make them all fear what happened if they were caught. “One more time. What interest does your boss-”

“I don’t *know*,” he howled, trying to brace himself against the wall, arms behind him, flailing for balance. “We was told to come pick up the Brother! Boss doesn’t like givin’ us orders we can screw up!”

“Um, who is your boss?” Brother Fratarelli asked, still crouching near to the man’s head, like raising his voice would be rude in the circumstances.

“Um, can-”

WHACK.

“Luke the Sinner! Luke the Sinner, guv! Christ on my words, it’s Luke the Sinner! Me back, I swear, I’m gunna be crippled, lady, you-”

Kivis let go of one of the man’s ankles and put the hand on her hip as she looked at Brother Fratarelli. Not a woman prone to exhibiting such joys in her life, she did love that her helmet always looked unimpressed. It was a useful expression to always present the world; the hawklike stylised image that told whoever she was talking to that she was *not having any of this*.

“Oh dear.” The Brother said, nursing his chin, folding a finger and gnawing on the knuckle. “Oh dear oh dear. Oh dear.”

“Uhm, mam, can I-”

Kivis dragged the fellow over the lip of the wall and dropped him in the street. “I was kind,” she said, her words echoing in her helm, and she didn’t spare him a glance as he hoisted himself up into a stand and hobbled away as fast as he could.

“Alright, Fratarelli. What did you *do*?”

Fratarelli drew himself up and rubbed his hand on the little bit of hair he still had at his sides. “Um, well, um. I think this may be about ah, I... I think I may have to explain myself on this one...”

“It’d be nice of you to start explaining yourself.”

“You never asked.”

“I did, actually. Several times. You can’t play that card, Brother. It’s your guilt, not mine.”

“Ugh.” Fratarelli lurched, crossing his arm over his paunch and grabbing his elbow nervously. It was like he was trying to screw himself up into a ball like an old piece of paper. “Yes! I did confession for Father Reighland over at Connaught some months ago,”

“Brother?”

“It meant I-”

Kivis just put her hand over the priest's mouth. “Not here. Not in the street. Hm?”

Silenced, the Brother took a moment, gathered his wits, and nodded. Then Kivis set him down, gently, and gestured to the church.

“What happened to the other boy?” Fratarelli asked.

“Let him go. Mercy to the ignorant.”

“How very... faithful.”

“No point kicking a dog that doesn’t know what it’s done.”

“... You know, Kivis, I don’t imagine you the sort to kick dogs.”

“Of course not. Dogs are nice.” She said, pulling the church doors closed behind her.

*

Rafe’s path out of the Dims wasn’t a direct one. There was a surly walk to it, a slouch that spoke of dragged feet, and curling streets. He didn’t know *why* he was doing it, but some part of him didn’t want to slink back to the little flat dock down by the riverside where Aderyn was going to, inevitably ask him more questions. Surely she should recognise by now that he didn’t want to *answer*. Hell, she sort of did – but that just made her more interested in finding out *why* he didn’t want to answer. Ugh, curious people.

“What’s that?”

Worse, when she asked a question, there was always that faintly flat edge to it. Most people asked questions like they were expected to have an answer already. Aderyn asked questions like she knew the answer, but was trying to make conversation. Stopping and looking down her arm, he squinted at the storefront.

“It’s a hock shop.”

“A hock shop?”

“Uh, pawnbrokers? It’s a fence.”

“Oh! How interesting. I was talking about the dress in the front window.”

Rafe squinted at it, turning in his walk to head towards the window, with its circular pattern of Clean and brown grimy edges of Not Clean, and looked in at one of the pinkest things he'd ever seen in his life.

It was a dress sitting on a dressmaker's dummy, which stood somewhat apart from the repurposed bookshelf that sat in the window. While the cells of the bookshelf were filled with things like cigar cases and lighters and, of course, at least one knife that was almost certainly an object of interest to the barneys, the dress had none of that workday filth on it. It didn't look as much like a dress to Rafe as it looked like some sort of construction project. Starting at the throat, there was a sort of frilly ring that connected to high sleeves that belled at the top and tapered down to the elbow like a pair of very lazy lilies, all decorated about in pink. There was a white panel over the chest, which was edged with pastel pink. Down the front, there were three piped lines of the same pink that looked, for want of a better word, flexible. It was cinched about the middle with a pink belt, and then, just as Rafe was getting to grips with how a human was meant to wear it, it *exploded* outwards in a bell shape of the same pink. It was pink without demand, pink without mercy; the pink expanded outwards and sat in an inexorable shape that refused to be reasoned with. The shape of it hinted at layers upon layers of skirts underneath, and it hovered above the counter top on which the dressmaker's stand rested with careful precision.

"It's a dress, Aderyn," Rafe said, when he realised he'd spent a good two minutes just gawping at the festival of pink behind the glass of brown in a shop window of green.

"Yes, it is a dress. I'm just surprised to see it here."

Tilting his head Rafe considered it. It was a pretty scabby hock shop. Chances are there was a story for why a dress like that wound up here, but he wasn't likely to hunt it out. When you saw something that pretty in the Dims it usually meant someone had a sad tale that ended with a life once with sunshine in it, where maybe a thing was bought or given as part of a promise, a promise that ended with the handover of a few small coins in a grubby little corner of the Dims, because promises couldn't buy oil or food or worse. He shrugged and tried to find a thread to keep the conversation going. As he opened his mouth, Aderyn interrupted him.

"Of course nobody's going to buy it."

"Well, y- wait, why do you think?"

"You see there? The brooch at the bodice, the one on each hip?" Aderyn pointed on the dress, at the little silvered cameos. Oh, so the front of the thing was its bodice? "Those are royal seals, Rafe. This is a Princess' dress; wearing it if you're not a princess is a dreadfully disrespectful thing." Aderyn drew an outline of the shape, something like a crown, on the glass. "Of course, a duchess could wear it, though there are not many of those in the city at the moment, and it would be seen as *quite* gauche with the throne empty. Why did *you* think nobody would buy it?"

Rafe shrugged and tried to hide between his shoulders, glaring up the street. "Because this is the Dims and it's worth five pounds. Are you kidding me? A princess' dress, here? My arse."

"I don't really see what your backside and a princess dress have in common at all, Rafe."

Rafe shook his head as he picked up his pace moving away from the shopfront window. This was bollocks.

*

The kettle sat on the stove-top, slowly heating but refusing to heat quickly. Kivis sat, with her arms folded, next to it, on one of the bench seats tucked under the table, and waited. Brother Fratarelli had been her friend for some time now, but throughout all the time she'd known him, she'd never seen him this *nervous*.

"It's..." he finally said, then hesitated, as if he was hoping the kettle would whistle and interrupt him. "It's complicated."

"Brother," Kivis said with the same deliberate pause. "Yes?"

The rebuke made him squirm. "You understand that confession is not the same thing under the Church of Tiber's religious strictures as it is under the Athlan faith where the tradition came from, right?"

Thank god for the helmet. It meant she didn't have to give him a flat look. It was just implied.

"Alright, well... you see..." Brother Fratarelli wrung his hands and rested them on the table top. "About... a month and a half ago, a priest couldn't handle his services, so I was asked to fill in for him. I'm in the area, you see..."

"Brother, this is Timoritia. Everyone's in the area."

"Yes, but I'm within walking distance, and-"

"And your congregation isn't important."

He sagged. "Yes... yes, basically. If my flock go a week without anything it doesn't matter. But the other congregation... it's the Cathedral at Connaught."

"And?"

Brother shifted a little. "See, I... I did the service and listened to confessional there, which was the better part of a day... and while I was there, I heard stories from the congregation there. Confessions... confessions to violent acts... confessions to ah... criminal acts... it wasn't like doing confession here. Here, they're looking for someone to soothe their consciences for their little misdeeds. Scuffles on Saturday night, forgiven on Sunday morning, you know? Nobody's that..."

"Bad." Kivis finished.

"... Yes. Nobody's that bad."

She shook her head, and reached over to slide the kettle slightly off the flame.

"... Anyway. That's how I heard about... what Cameo Tully was doing."

"He confessed."

“... He *bragged*. He was sitting in the booth next to me and called me the other priest’s name, though he *had* to know that I was someone else. I’d just given a sermon! And... and he ... he wanted *praise* for it? He wanted praise for stopping these... poor women, and- and I just mean *poor* women, women without money – from having access to something that meant they could have some, some *control* over their lives.” The priest wasn’t crying, but there was the sound of it to him. “And he was... he was so *proud* of himself for it. It was...”

She shook her head. “Your guilt, Father, not mine. I’d probably have duelled him on the spot.”

“Well, yes, you have that luxury.”

“Not really. He’d have refused. He’s no fool.”

“He wasn’t. But Aderyn-”

“Aderyn’s no fool either.” Kivis said, pushing herself to stand. “She’s just different. And you’re telling me that this is how you found out about Cameo’s work. How does this relate to Luke Cornell?”

“Well, I was the big difference. I... I mean, Cameo Tully confesses to me, turns up dead later?”

“... A month and a *half* later, Brother.” She shook her head. “If this is why they want to talk to you, they’re geniuses. How many other things in Cameo Tully’s life *changed* in those days? Praefoco?”

“Praefoco’s been his associate for... for nine months, I think.”

Kivis stopped. “... Do you think that this is the sort of thing *Praefoco* might have noticed?”

“... Because he’d have taken notes...” Brother Fratarelli said, eyes open. “You think he would have?”

“I don’t know. I never dealt with the man. But if that’s what Luke Cornell has, that’s evidence.”

“... Oh dear.” Fratarelli stood up again, stepping over the bench. “We... we should do something about this.”

“You think? Come on. We need to find Rafe and Aderyn.”

“You think, you’d uh, you’d rather they handle it?”

“I’d rather set a thief, thank you.” Kivis said, leading Brother Fratarelli with her, out into the main hall, through the small side door, and out onto the street that faced the river and...

Which now hosted, sitting squat, and low, and sour in the river, a two-storey houseboat, decorated about with barbed wire and brass bells.

*

“Well, this is just all happening today, isn’t it?” Kivis growled in harmony with herself.

The houseboat was something like a drifting palace. Some houseboats were squat, low and tight, turning a room the size of a large closet into a living space, but not this one. This one towered high and had to be careful under bridges, with monstrous engines that belched smoke and turned paddle wheels behind it, crawling through the river’s thick waters like some particularly large sea-beast that

strayed from the ocean up and into the largest city in the world. There was no way that the Sinner's Steamer could reach up and down the river proper, with all its little curling sub-rivery bits. It was too deep, too broad. It circled, instead, on its little route through the river – and that was the territory that Luke Cornell owned.

The territory included Brother Fratarelli's church, and Kivis now realised why he the priest was comfortable 'fixing' the Cameo Tully problem, but so uncomfortable striking out against Luke Cornell.

"Why, Brother Francis!"

Kivis didn't need any signal as to who that was. The man stood on the second storey of the houseboat, on an open deck with a rail around it, level with the stone walls that flanked the river. The man wore brown breeches without a pattern, but with telltale creases at the back of the knees, and weight that sat in the front of them. The man wore braces, and a labourer's button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up and tight. On his hands he wore short black gloves that barely reached the wrist, shiny and black. If you looked at his clothes, Luke Cornell was a respectable man with respectable clothes and probably worked at a respectable business. If you looked to the rest of him, and saw the coiling serpents painted up and down his arms in a dozen different bright colours from a host of different tattoo parlours, you'd know better.

Kivis knew better without seeing any of those things. She could look straight at Cornell's eyes and see it in him. His eyes were a peculiar pale blue, like somewhere something that made Luke a human had slowly bleached away and left behind something that didn't *quite* think and feel *right*.

"That is the name, yes? Francis Fratarelli?"

Kivis turned her helm only subtly to indicate she was listening to Fratarelli. Another reason to love her helm; she could use its body language to mislead. A cant of her head made it look left while her eyes stayed fixed through the eyes to watch every move of that river-shark that had taken on human form.

"I really do prefer just Fratarelli."

"Good to know, Francis! Well now, I've been feeling quite sinful lately and I was *wondering* if I might invite you aboard for some confessions!"

Cornell spoke with the voice of a noble. It was that swaggering arrogance, that aggressive certainty. Luke spoke like he knew he was in charge, and if you yelled back, he'd just start stabbing things.

"You could come into the church?" Fratarelli said, trying to not sweat too visibly.

"No can do, Brother Francis!" called back Luke, and his grin didn't waver. "I can't leave my daughter unattended for so long!" Gesturing down at the deck, he called to the gathering number of river vermin that called themselves dockhands. "Lads and lady – do be precious and invite the Brother on board, will you?"

Some of the men moved slower than the others. They'd already seen what happened when they approached Kivis. But there was an open room around her now, there were more of them. Steeled

with the courage of crowds, hands holding boathooks gripped tight and hauled. Feet hit the walls and thugs and crooks that knew what a coin was worth pulled up over the edge of the wall and started the familiar fan-out circle that spoke of a coming boot party. There were seven in front of her. Three more over there. The space behind her probably had room for five, with a circle that wide. Fifteen grown men.

“Kivis, we have to get out of here.” Fratarelli pulled at her arm, drawing up against her back. Well, he would complicate matters, wouldn’t he?

She lowered her helm and gripped her fists tightly in their metal cases. “We *do*?”

“You can’t fight all of them.”

“Want to *bet*?”

Some signal – probably Cornell’s growing impatience – and a sudden burst. Someone lunged forwards.

Chapter 9

Standing on the Dunbredge Pier, Aderyn couldn't help but wonder just why they'd bothered to call it a pier. It wasn't a pier – it was a wharf. Wharfs were built into the sides of buildings – in this case, the building was a wall, which had build up as the city had, away from the river. The river went up, the river went down, and sometimes the wharf they stood on simply wasn't *there*, lurking under water like that.

There were seventeen steps down to the ground which was a prime number, and Aderyn had amused herself by skipping the second, fourth, sixth, eighth, and tenth steps, which let her hop one-two-three down the stairs. Unfortunately to jump from the seventh stair to the seventeenth would have been too obvious and might draw attention to her step being slightly unladylike.

The wharf was a little out of the way of the rain that fell, and had been falling since halfway out of the Dims. Inasmuch as she could say such things, Aderyn did think she liked the rain. It had an echo to it, a choral quality, and people who moved about in the rain kept to themselves. Nobody thought it odd for her to hunker down in a coat and press through the crowd with her arms tucked in against herself. Thankfully, her coat did have a hood on it.

Rafe had ceded to the rain too. He'd reached into the sleeves of the monk's robe, and slipped his arms in them to lift it up and pull it up onto himself, pulling the front closed and tying it just once – instead of all down the front, where the little wooden toggles were. Then he'd pulled the hood over his head. It was quite amusing, him all charcoal grey and her in a pale bone-like white, like birds on the edge of the wharf, her hands huddled in close.

"Well?"

Rafe had spoken. That was odd. Normally Rafe didn't start conversations.

"Well, what?" Aderyn asked. Be coy, be polite. When possible, let someone else determine the rules and standards of the conversation. It makes it easier to play by their rules.

"... You weren't talking."

"Oh, I am sorry, Rafe," she said, biting her lip and turning to him. "Did you want to talk about something in particular?"

"... Y'said," Rafe came for the subject like a stray dog circling a drunk. "... Y'said that I'm the first person y'know who doesn't talk about himself."

"I said *themselves*," Aderyn offered, primly. Why were other people *so bad* at remembering simple details like that?

"Whatever, just... y'know I've never heard you talkin' much about *you* either."

Aderyn looked up at the underside of the bridge. Oh. Someone had noticed.

"Well, what would you like to know?"

Rafe drew himself up and shrugged under the charcoal grey of the outfit. "... Where y'from, what y'family's like, why y're an assassin, what y're doing this for, what y'like, if y'have any other friends, what kinda..." he petered out. "Stuff like that."

"Well, to answer those questions in reverse order, that's not a question, I have a roommate by the name of Quynn who I have not spoken to since graduation day, and I think Kivis is quite interesting, I like a large variety of things in a short alphabetical list including acrobatics, bottoms, chess, ducks, elks, finches, green tea, handcuffs, intelligence, jelly, kingfishers, Lleywa, masonry, neoteny, ointments, penguins, questions, ropes, snibs, terraced roofs, understanding, vexation, weathervanes, xylophones, yew, and zeniths – just the word, mind you, it has a pleasant shape to it, I am an Assassin because it was the school my parents chose for me and I saw no reason to protest, my father and mother are noble landowners of Lleywa who oversee a valley, populated by roughly six hundred people, and I'm from the DuThane valley in Lleywa, coincidentally the same place as my parents."

Rafe stared at her for a good long while. It was like she'd just smacked him in the face with more words than he knew existed. "... Y're really just nae on the same path as th'rest of us, are y'?"

"If I understand what you mean, Rafe, I believe it's philosophically considered that most people are on their own path alone."

"That's a cheery fuckin' thought." He shrugged. "Man, to hell with this." He shook his head and ducked under the hood deeper. "Don't think Cornell's coming today."

"It's a houseboat, Rafe, it will probably come by here eventually."

"Yeh, but chances are 'e's got it moored somewhere he's doing the business."

"That does sound a little rude, when you say it like that."

"... What's neoteny?"

"Alright, then." Aderyn said, shaking herself. It had been a nice bit of an excursion, she could see that, at least. "Let's head back to the church and try again tomorrow."

*

Kivis threw the body onto the deck of the boat, onto the pile.

"And fifteen." She raised her head and glared at Cornell. "Who's next?"

The big man looked past her, up at the church behind them, at its freshly-cleaned windows, only barely grimed with the smoke from the stacks. "Alright, Brother Francis. I see you're not in a confessional mood," he drawled, lazily. "But I daresay we can meet something of a compromise--"

"Get stuffed." Kivis called, throwing a broken boathook at him. Cornell, to his credit, at least swatted it aside with a speed she hadn't expected.

“Let me try a bit more of an incentive scheme here. Brother, you come aboard and hear my confession, and I won’t have to come on back in an hour with twice as many men and burn your church-house down.”

Kivis bit back the anger in her throat. She’d do it, quite happily, but the church wasn’t hers to burn. She turned to Fratarelli, who was white as a sheet – the entire fracas had unfolded around him like a sort of elaborate magical trick, and he was standing wringing his hands, wondering just what he was going to do next. “W-well.” He stammered.

It was unfair, in Kivis’ mind, that she so often found herself bound by things that let other people change the battlefield. Last time, it’d been *the law*, the time before that it’d been *family obligation*. Now she was being shackled to Brother Fratarelli’s silly attachment to a specific building. But it *would* be inconvenient to rebuild it, she supposed. What did churches even cost? Ugh. Turning her head, she lowered her chin and leant close to the Brother. “If you go, I’ll go with you.”

“Now now, there, lady. This is between me and the priest. And *just* between me and the priest.”

Kivis grit her teeth. Bullies. Always bullies. As she drew back, Fratarelli’s hand caught her wrist, and he whispered low:

“Get Rafe.”

“Rafe? Why him? Why not Aderyn-”

“Because I’m going to need a burglar.”

Kivis stepped back and clenched her fists, looking at Luke Cornell, Luke the Sinner, and the back of her friend as he made his way down the stairs. Closing her fists and punching them together, she gritted her teeth. Theft was not her strong suit. Fine. *Fine*. “Hey Cornell,” she called over.

“Yes, m’lady?” he asked, tipping his hand by his ear, as if to hear her.

“You ever get off that boat near me and I’ll tear your arms off and beat you to death with them.”

“Hahah, a pretty threat!” he said, opening the cabin door. “Don’t worry, m’lady. I never get off this boat.” He stepped inside, and the engines took up.

Stand still. Wait. Don’t be seen to move *fast*. She knew she couldn’t chase the boat down, after all. And if she was seen running, it’d look like panic.

As the rain sheeted down, the boat turned from a presence to a shape behind curtains of water. When she was sure she wasn’t being glared at through the mist, Kivis turned, walked into the archway of the church, pulled it closed... then ran like hell for the back door.

*

When the rain steepened, Rafe pulled under an awning, and it was only after a few moments standing there in silence with him that Aderyn realised she wasn’t sure what they were doing there. It was a slow walk in the rain – the streets locked up and people in hard raincoats moving goods

under tarps or in barrels moved more carefully, not wanting to be the person who lost a dray of goods for a dram of impatience.

Still. Standing in an awning watching rain sheet down while standing next to someone she knew and never spoke to was pleasantly reminiscent of home. It would have made a nice way to fill an afternoon, watching people go past, until the heavily armoured figure of Kivis emerged from the rain, whipped her head around as it saw them, then closed in quickly, her fists balled up in determination.

The owl shape loomed into their dry little space, and her fist thudded into the wood of the wall behind Rafe, by his ear.

“You. Rafe. Brother Fratarelli needs you. Now.”

“Rafe?” Aderyn asked in surprise. “Whatever for?”

“Fratarelli wants a burglar. Luke Cornell has him-”

“Oh what the *fuck*?” Rafe threw his hands down at his side. “We were waiting for his boat *all day*, and he went to you? This is *bullshit*.”

“... What's his problem?” Kivis asked, glancing over at Aderyn.

“I do not know. Maybe he is not comfortable with the word 'neoteny?’”

“Oh for fuck's sake.” Rafe rubbed his forehead. “Why's he need me? Aderyn's b... just as good as I am at...” he gestured. “Wait, this is about pay, isn't it?”

“No – I ...” Kivis shook her head and grabbed Rafe by his ear, dragging him out of the awning, her metal visage nose to nose with him. “My friend is in the clutches of a vicious gangster who wants to burn down a church. I'm not inclined to his particular methods, *young man*, but Brother Fratarelli has pulled you out of prison and I *think* you owe him at least a *thank you*.”

“He's blackmailing meeeeoowowowow!” Rafe yelled in pain as he began a long, slow agreement.

*

The houseboat rumbled on, dreadful and low, through the thick grey waters of the The River. On the forward flat deck, his hands on his hips, Luke Cornell looked down at the little bird he'd captured.

The Priest was not a *small* man. There was a decently large amount of Brother Fratarelli, all swelled out in a circle shape. But he was not a *tall* man, and his weight was not the kind that implied threat. The handful of men around him weren't *particularly* threatening, in and of themselves, but Luke Cornell made the height difference between the two feel like he was looking up a mountainside. Swallowing, Brother Fratarelli folded his hands into his robe. “Ah, so, uh, Mister Cornell... you wanted confessional, yes? That is something we should... we should probably do somewhere private.”

“Ah, yes, Father Francis,” Luke said, planting his hand on Brother Fratarelli's head, turning to gesture to the main houseboat. “Don't worry, we'll be having plenty of time for that.”

“A-ah, well, yes, for the betterment of the soul,” Brother Fratarelli said, clearing his throat. “It’s really best that you consult entirely in private.”

“Souls?” Luke Cornell said, nodding. “Makes sense to me. Nebrin!” he called, one hand up by his mouth.

A wet slopping sound by the sound of the boat seemed to come in response. A moment later around the corner came an enormous man in a heavy brown leather apron, spattered up and down in dark black stains. “Yeh, boss?”

“Come. We’re going down into the hold with the Brother. He’s going to hear my confessional.”

“Your confession. And ah, it really does need to be alone,” Brother Fratarelli almost squeaked, hoping against hope that whatever was coming would not, in fact, come.

“Oh, that needn’t be a bother. Nebrin here doesn’t have a soul at all.”

Brother Fratarelli had lived in a cold church, in thick robes, and for the first time in his life, he could consciously remember shivering.

*

Kivis had spoken to a lock-keeper on the river, who’d been helpful enough, with a few light punches and a few coins, to tell them where the locks were set today. That had limited where the houseboat could be, and as the rain abated and the evening fell, that had cut the search short. They couldn’t be sure the Brother was on the boat, but it was their best option to find him. When Rafe and Aderyn had found the boat, it was moored in a compound, one of many of those houses that had once been warehouses on the river, now refitted to be an expensive home with a dock.

Looked at from the outside, the houseboat was really just, well, a house. It was even nicely designed with a set of tiers to it – each storey had to be a bit smaller than the storey above it, so it was like climbing a wedding cake. Railings around each level, as well. Rafe stopped himself as he realised he was already thinking about how *quickly* he could fly up and down that houseboat’s outside and be gone, looking at it from the side. Speed wasn’t important here – haste would make waste.

Haste makes waste? Ugh, that wasn’t like him to think. That was some twee little aphorism like Aderyn would use. Except she hadn’t. She never did. Wait, that was pretty strange, now he thought about it. The girl was all patterns, but he’d never heard her say something like *that*. Just ‘As is appropriate for a young lady,’ and ‘that’s not what that means.’

Rafe shook himself out of that cul-de-sac of thought and crept along the dockside. Barrels, ropes, crates, they were all piled on the sides of the river walls. The scent of wet rope and burlap after the rain wasn’t really as offensive as the smell of the river itself. No wonder the people piled the boxes high.

The houseboat’s shape was a carnival of handholds, and those three decks were wonderfully open areas, but they were also lit by golden ponds of lamplight. The dark colours he wore blurred well with the various washed-out *things* dotted around the riverside through the half-light of night, but in the light he’d stand out like a priest’s d-

“Patrols,” Aderyn hissed next to him.

A clatter on the decks. One of the cones of light shifted, and turned. Peering through the dark, Rafe could make out the image of guards, holding lanterns as *well* as the fixed lights. Who had their *houseboat* patrolled at night? Why not just rest it in the middle of the river, away from anyone? It wasn't like anyone who swam through the river would be in a fit state to do anything when they clambered over the edge of the boat. Guards meant that the problem changed every moment. Rafe had to try and deal with, well, people who might be having a good day or a bad one, who might investigate noises, or ignore noises, or – ugh.

“How y’want to handle this?” he asked.

“Taking out the guards one at a time would be thorough but time consuming. And they have a hostage. It’s best to be direct.”

“We can’t sink the boat, Aderyn-”

She gave him that look again.

“What? You said to be direct!”

Aderyn shook her head and put a hand on the ground. “The guards are probably blind to things outside the light. Stay in the dark, stay in the quiet, you should do fine.”

Rafe wanted to yell at her that *he knew how to avoid a fucking guard*, but she was already moving. God damn, the girl did not wait once she’d made a plan.

“Hey, wait!” he called. Aderyn was dressed almost entirely in *white*. She’d be as visible as she could be if anyone looked in her direction. Grumbling, Rafe threw himself over the edge of the river walls. One hand hung onto the stone, pressed to it as he slid down, before he reached the level of the boat’s side – when he bunched his legs and sprung forwards. Wind spun past his ears as he caught the railing, using it for momentum to become a forward roll. He was out in the open for maybe a tenth of a heartbeat, landing behind a torch.

Peeking up over the edge of the crates piled on the fore part of the deck, Rafe started to map a path up and over the boat. The Father was *inside* it somewhere – and he had to find his way in, while avoiding attention. Stick to walls. Breathe even. Do not, do not, do not panic. Most people just *aren’t paying attention*, especially the ones who have been paying attention for the past few hours.

There were bells on each level, on each side – heavy bells, so the creep of the boat through the water didn’t just ring them all the time. But each bell stood out from the wall on a small, flat strut of brass. Bells were exactly what he’d *avoid* – guards near bells could easily sound the alarm, and surely they’d hang around near them. Then, while he looked around for the signs of moving lights around the back of the boat, he spotted Aderyn’s pale braid through the gloom of night.

She stood right next to one of the bells – and put her hand atop the metal strut that supported it. Then, without touching the bell itself, she swung her whole body up – standing on the fingers of one hand atop the strut; she hooked a leg over the railing of the next loor, then swept up and over, to the next bell strut – landing on it with her palm, pulling her weight onto it, then leaping up to the

next. She was atop the top roof of the houseboat – and three storeys up, Rafe saw Aderyn’s pale hair disappear into trapdoor. And then Rafe felt his next heartbeat.

Good god, Aderyn was fast. Thank god those bells had been fixed in well, and she hadn’t slipped and hit one, and that she hadn’t brushed one as she swept up and *what the hell was she even thinking trying stupid stuff like that*. Rafe swallowed as he felt behind his back, gripping one of the two short knives. Kivis had offered them, and Aderyn had refused him, and *he’d* taken both, because *free stuff*. If she was searching from the top down, he’d search from the bottom up...

Past the crates, he looked left, right, and slid past a door. Keeping low and close to the wall, he brushed his forearm against the underside of the knob, testing its resistance to a push. Yep, locked. Which meant if he wanted in there... he’d have to find one of the guards with the keys. Or find another door. Or... well.

Rafe bit his top lip and kept his breathing steady. It was a big puzzle. But it was a puzzle with a solution. Keep moving, stay alert, and *be bold*. People didn’t look, because they didn’t expect to see. These guards weren’t here to notice things, they were here to notice the same thing that they always saw.

They also tended to patterns. The boat was designed like a loop, and that was perfect for Rafe. Every step he took, he pressed his hand flat down on the boards, testing them for creaks, and feeling for the movement through the boards of anyone nearby. Nothing, nothing, nothing – until he rounded the corner.

A guard was resting his hands on the rail, a cigarette between his fingers, his lantern on the ground next to him, pointing out at the water, where he’d pointlessly set it. Hanging from his hip was a boathook the length of his arm, and from the other hip, a ring of keys, hooked on a stout little notch on his belt. Silent, serious, and at least at the moment, he was trying to make forty-five cents of paper and tobacco last.

The keys were easy, and the way back easier. A door, a clasp, and Rafe was in.

*

“This is the most private room I have.” Luke said, pulling on thick gloves. His big voice boomed against the inside of the room. There were chains on the ceiling, hanging loose and low. The walls were metal. The floor was smooth and flat and tiled, and had a drain in the centre. Stacked up around the edges of the room were crates, ropes, and stacks of goods. Some part of the place made Brother Fratarelli think of a fishery’s cleaning room, but it still was being used just for storage.

Really, it was strange how much of this houseboat was... well, stuffed full of things? Luke Cornell lived his life like he was a king of the river. He bullied the Barneys and he swaggered with the nobles but for some reason, his actual home was... kind of a mess. “I do hope that you can forgive the wait, Father.”

“It’s... it’s entirely okay.” Brother Fratarelli said, shifting awkwardly on the little wooden bench. He’d been sitting there for hours, but thankfully, he was panicked, which meant that the hours had

merely felt like an eternity. He was desperate to try and put a positive spin on this event. Plenty of time contemplating his own mortality and the line of cause and effect that had put him here.

Brother Fratarelli *knew* that justice moved strangely. The question he had to grapple with now was whether this was *judgment* for his actions, or a *struggle* for him to overcome to keep doing what he was doing.

Nebrin, behind Cornell, picked up a pair of pliers, and Brother Fratarelli tried *very very hard* to anticipate a struggle.

Luke Cornell hunkered slightly in front of the bench. Those mad, empty eyes fixed on Brother Fratarelli's, and his hand came up under his chin. "Now then, Brother Fratarelli. I think, based on some of my dealings with Cameo Tully, that you may be having something I *want*."

"U-um?"

"Oh yes indeed. You know about Cameo Tully, yes?" Luke's hands were on his knee, and he looked Brother Fratarelli in the eyes like he was sitting on a bench, but *there was nothing supporting him*. Somehow, the stance was more *strange* than anything else. Brother Fratarelli swallowed and realised he'd stopped listening.

"Um, yes. About Cameo Tully. He was ass-murdered, right?"

"Killed," Nebrin grunted behind his boss.

Luke barely looked over his shoulder for a moment, his nose wrinkling as he focused back on the Brother.

"Alright, then, Francis." Luke said, his voice lowering, dropping some of that affect. "Praefoco had a set of silver candlesticks, and he was murdered in the same incident where Cameo Tully was. The candlesticks are missing from Praefoco's estate, which means, I cannot *buy* them, which I very much would like to *do*." The emphasis, the *punch* on the *words* he was using built up. His nostrils flared. "While I tried to find records of their sale in Praefoco's estate, I found no such thing. I *did* however, find a *book*, which mentioned any changes in Cameo Tully's day-to-day *schedule*. *Now, then*." He drew a long breath, and the timing seemed to reset. "You were mentioned. Cameo Tully confessed to you, at the Cathedral of Connaught. His silver candlesticks are missing."

Suddenly, Luke's hand was on Brother Fratarelli's throat *but he wasn't breathing anyway*.

"What in the *world* did Cameo Tully pay you for?"

*

The top of the houseboat had barely seemed much like a boat at all. The windows were square and fitted with latches like windows of a house. The floor was carpeted and the staircase Aderyn had found that led downwards had a little box next to it where people could put their shoes. It even had a warning, printed on a brass plaque above the box, *You are not allowed here*.

Well, she wasn't, but that didn't seem something the plaque could enforce, which left Aderyn unimpressed. Aderyn slipped on like a ghost, holding her breath between steps and exhaling after her foot came down, moving in a slow rhythm that kept her footfalls quiet.

There was an umbrella stand on the third floor. A houseboat with an umbrella stand didn't seem as far as Aderyn knew, *wrong* or anything like that, but it sat by a door to the outside railing with a certain jauntiness that felt strange. It was made out of an elephant's foot, too, which seemed awfully tacky. That had always confounded her: Umbrellas and elephants had almost nothing to do with one another beyond large scores in scrabble games, and the idea of tearing off one's foot for that sort of purpose seemed to lack all sort of conceptual elegance. They weren't even particularly waterproof, elephants. Why, they could *swim*. That wasn't very much like an umbrella *at all*.

Aderyn stopped at the door of a young lady. She knew it was the door of a young lady, because someone had put a little wooden plaque in the shape of a heart, painted pink and studded with little shell beads to say 'Princess,' which Aderyn was *reasonably certain* was unlikely to be on the door of a young man. Listening at the door, she hadn't heard anything – and a quick keyhole check had shown a room dark, so dark that it couldn't have any windows. That much made her uncomfortable, but it was silent. Wherever Brother Fratarelli was he was likely *not* going to be silent.

Just outside the door, there was a little half-moon table, recessed tastefully into a wall and probably quite expensive, upon which sat a little silver dish with some coins in it, and an opened invitation. It smelled of perfume, another thing Aderyn knew was expected but also didn't understand. None of her friends, upon receiving their invitations, had ever sat around smelling them, but still, money and effort was spent. It was an invitation to an estate ball – a birthday party of sorts, for young ladies who had turned eighteen years of age.

There was less than zero mystery about the room. Aderyn allowed herself a momentary huff of irritation, and she went back to her hunt. This was a home, not a workplace, and Luke Cornell was almost certainly *going to work* on the Brother.

*

"You know, boss," Nebrin said, idly shifting tools on his tray, "I don't think you're quite gettin' through to him." The tools were clean, for now.

Brother Fratarelli was, basically, a bundle of sweat in robes. His feet were clammy in their sandals and he felt like the metal walls of the room were slanted inwards, the roof slowly coming downwards. Maybe it was just riversickness, or nausea or the suspicious way Nebrin was sorting metal implements that were quite clearly designed to tear metal.

"Shh, Nebrin. I know what I'm doing here." Cornell shook his head. "Forgive Nebrin. He's a bit of the old guard of criminal. Doesn't trust what he can't *beat out of a man*." Nebrin, listening to that, shrugged, and nodded.

"Fair."

"Now then. You've explained the exchange, which was, as you say, quite nice." Luke Cornell counted off his fingers. "You mentioned that such things are regular when a priest is dead, yes. But you don't

explain why Praefoco thought fit to name *you* in his books, and not the other two priests who filled in.”

Brother Fratarelli swallowed. So far in his answers, he had tried to impress that he *definitely, definitely* knew nothing about silver candlesticks, which were the *last* thing he had expected to hear about today. Murder, and his part in it, were apparently far less important to Luke Cornell than a pair of silver candlesticks. What’s more, he was paying attention to these things in the strangest way. It wasn’t odd that Praefoco and Cameo Tully had died at the same time, but it *was* odd that Praefoco had written down Brother Fratarelli’s name?

“Well,” Luke said, hunkering close again, putting his hand on top of the Brother’s head. “Let’s just *remove all doubt*, shall we? Why don’t you tell me, Brother, just what Cameo Tully *confessed* that day?”

Brother Fratarelli was not, in his opinion, a particularly ardent churchman. The laws of his childhood had become the rules of his seminary years and those had become the guidelines of his life spent administering to the poor and the underprivileged. Confession was only a tradition, after all, not even an official church sacrament, here in Tiber.

But.

“I can’t.”

“You can’t?” Luke asked, his tone surprisingly light. “You can’t. You can’t tell me because...?”

“Because it would be wrong.” Why would it be wrong, Francis? Because, no matter how he wanted to pretend otherwise, some things in church mattered. Cameo Tully was a bad man, who had confessed bad things. He had told them to Kivis, and she had kept his secret, but... but... this was different. This was being demanded, by force of arms, to render up something that he had promised not to do.

Luke nodded. Then he swung his arm back and struck Brother Fratarelli across the face so hard that the *heat* of the blow felt like blood. Brother Fratarelli fell off the stool, hit the ground shoulder-first, and the pain that ran across his shoulders, and the doughy uselessness of his own flesh around him reverberated as Luke’s boot swung into his midsection.

The priest did what he’d learned to do when he was very young, the last time he’d suffered this. He curled into a ball, and prayed. And as he curled, his eyes fell on the flit in the shadows – the image of a young man, with brown hair and priests’ robes.

Rafe was a weak form of salvation, but here, as Luke Cornell’s blows rained upon his head, any dream would do.

*

Rafe knew these moments. He’d been here before. You saw your mate in the cacky, hunkering on the ground, hands over his head, and you looked at your mate, and you looked at the bully, and you *sat still*. You couldn’t fix it. Luke Cornell wasn’t some Bottle Street thug with a few inches of height and a roll of pennies in his fist. Luke Cornell was Luke the Sinner, a crime lord who owned straits of

land right through the city's guts. The man wasn't a target, not some cringing wickedness, he was a force unto himself – a mountain of inhumane cruelty that was, at this moment, crashing down on someone who half an hour ago, Rafe had complained was blackmailing him. Cornell's savagery would be satisfied soon, Rafe just had to ride it out, and then he'd have a chance to rescue him.

Aderyn slithered out of the shadows next to him and looked through the coiled ropes and wooden crates. They had a little letterbox view of the fat priest whimpering as he was beaten, which she peered out into with those dazzling eyes. The door he'd unlocked, he'd left unlatched – and thanks to Nebrin's focus on the tools and Luke Cornell's focus on his *intense rage*, they'd not even noticed the door open twice.

Okay, Rafe knew what was coming. Aderyn was going to turn to him, and ask why he wasn't helping. Then he'd hiss at her *you don't jump in the cacky* and she'd give him that look like he was stupid and she'd demand an explanation and he'd hush her then she'd put her hand on the crate, and he'd grab her wrist and-

Thoughts were very, very quick, but Rafe was surprised indeed to see Aderyn vaulting over the crates without so much as looking at him.

Fuck!

Luke Cornell was a big man, and Aderyn wasn't a big woman, and while Rafe had lived a bareknuckle life on the streets firmly believing that size wasn't everything, he typically gave that sort of thing a wide berth when it came to people who were *twice* someone's size. Size wasn't *everything* in a fight, but it was *enough*.

It wasn't enough for Aderyn.

She arched over the top of Luke Cornell's head, long white sleeves fluttering, with her hand on the top of his head. Grip twisted, reversed, she went from supporting her weight on his head like a fulcrum to *grabbing* his head- a thumb hooked into the orbit of his eye-socket. Her feet hit the roof, and she kicked off it, landing on the floor, pulling the man's weight with her – and *flipping him head over feet*, throwing him face-first into a wall.

"Get yours!" she barked at Rafe, in a voice very much unlike her norm – with a white scarf pulled across her face. When had she done that?! That was a good idea –

Nebrin's fist crashed against Rafe's face like a brick, and he fell back into crates with an almighty thud.

"Who the *fuck* do you *fink* you are, mate?" bellowed the – equally huge – Nebrin, as he reached down into the broken wood to grab at Rafe.

Rafe rolled sideways, and lunged forwards, throwing his weight onto one end of the bench as Nebrin bent over, thudding the wood into his chest. Size mattered. Size mattered a lot. Size meant the other guy, when he got his chance was going to do everything to crush you. Rafe had grown up in the poorest parts of the city. He knew what it meant when a Bigger Boy had you. You got hit. You went down. And then they started kicking you – and *kept kicking*.

The only real solution was to make sure that he was so badly hurt that he didn't want to fight you.

...or you killed him.

That hadn't been an easy option, back then.

These were the thoughts that drifted through Rafe's head like clouds, as a fist pounded helplessly against his back, trying to take a good angle at his kidneys. A hand that sought to grab at his hips in some way, the struggle slowing, striving. The precise details were a little lost on him. All he really knew is that he was making sure that this big guy, Nebrin *was hurt so badly*. He had a leg around the bigger guy's neck. He was on the ground, he – yeah, he could remember the ground, because he smashed the back of his head against it. Hadn't grabbed his knife, not sure why. Had grabbed an ear. But it was a hand on his shoulder that really pulled his attention.

“Rafe... Rafe, my boy. Please. Let's... let's get out of here.”

Rafe looked across the room, where Aderyn, still masked, was *dancing* with Cornell. The man was big, and mad, and vicious, and she kept running him into things. There was *nothing* between them that she didn't control.

Why...

Why wasn't Aderyn just *killing* him?

Looking down at his bloody hands, Rafe pushed off Nebrin's chest and stood. The man gurgled. He was a big man. Big men didn't often make sounds like that.

“Door,” Rafe said, stumbling towards it, realising he wasn't *really* feeling his hands or his feet. They were there, on the ends of his arms and legs, but they were freezing cold and they were numb. He hadn't felt like that in months. Not even Praefoco had felt like that. “C'mon.”

Aderyn dropped face-first onto the floor, and swung both her legs out into Cornell's knee, smacking it an unpleasant angle with an unreasonable force, and by the time he righted himself from the fall, she was across the room. One hand on Brother Fratarelli's back, she shoved them out the door – pulling the door closed behind them.

“Key!” she hissed at Rafe, who, after some fumbling, handed it over. On the other side of the door, Luke Cornell was trying to brute-force the handle which she held. Brother Fratarelli had to take the key from him, lock the door. He turned, running up the stairs, and Aderyn with him –

But Rafe stopped, and dropped his elbow onto the key in the lock, snapping it off in the mechanism.

Up. Out. Over the railing, onto the moor, past guards who had no idea, and figured the loud, angry bellowing from down in the hold was *exactly as expected*. The Priest took some shuffling, but the second they hit cobblestones, the three stopped running, and started to walk.

Two blocks away, Rafe could feel his fingers again. He could feel his *fingernails*. It wasn't a good thing to feel, considering the state of them.

“You know,” Brother Fratarelli said, swallowing, “I daresay there will be... consequences.”

“You got somewhere you can hide for a week or two?” Rafe was already thinking defensively, dazed.

“I could head back to Lleywa,” Aderyn ventured.

“Y'know, I wasn't *really* worried about you.”

Brother Fratarelli rubbed his aching side with one hand, shuffling along. “Kivis and I... I can't leave the church unattended for much time. It would be a problem for the – I mean, my congregation, you realise.”

A half block. “Can't leave them?”

“Maybe... maybe for a week or two?”

Aderyn slid her arm underneath the priest's shoulder to give him some support, guiding him onwards. “Well, then. I rather think Mr Cornell is not likely to forget about you quickly, so how about we find some place that's nice and quiet for you to hide in the mean time?”

“I suppose... I suppose I have to.”

“What did you want us to steal, anyway?” Aderyn asked.

“... Kivis didn't tell you? It was a book...” the priest drew a heavy breath. “It was a book from Praefoco's estate. He'd recorded... well, business in it. It apparently incriminates me.”

Aderyn stopped short. “I... see.”

“You...” Rafe mimicked the pause. “...See?”

“I see.” she repeated, clearing her throat. “Well.”

“Well?”

“Well.”

The moon slipped behind clouds again. The sky rumbled. Once again, as almost ever always, it rained in Timoritia. Sheeting water poured down over the hoods of the bruised, the beaten, and the bothered equally.

Chapter 10

Vince had seen the sea from the shores of Timoritia before, and it had always looked nothing as much as a continuation of the grey dullness that was the sky. When they'd rounded the Hemulkar cape, and passed Gibartar, he'd seen a shore of white cliffs, bright green grass, and a lovely bright blue sky overhead. When he saw *that*, he realised why as a young boy he'd read stories in cheap little novels and boys' compendiums that spoke about going down to the seaside for a lovely holiday. The seaside in Timoritia was a grim grey-brown place with a dark grey-brown river vomiting into the ocean; the seaside at the gulf of Hemulkar, and here, on the far side of the Phoenecian Sea, was beautiful. The sand was yellow-white, the people were laughing and comfortable, and the sunshine no longer beat down on them like it was trying to do them violence. It just *was*. And somehow, after the freezing nights crossing deserts in a straight line, to feel a sea breeze on his skin was a welcoming reminder of home. Or rather, a welcoming reminder of what home would be, if it wasn't so grimy and stank so much. A reminder of what home *should* be, really.

"Y'know, if you wave at the ocean, it might wave back, Princess." Leigh snickered from her horse next to him.

"You're going to look like a lobster by the end of this journey," he responded, wrinkling his nose at her. It was quite a jab, but she had been getting on his nerves lately, and-

"Like a what?"

Humph.

"He means you'll look like my hair if you stay in the sun." Gael called over from Vince's other side. The woman had this amazing way of looking effortless despite having been sat in the saddle, the same way, for the past ten hours. Vince tried not to resent her for it, but he didn't try very hard.

"Pfah, y'could all look a lot worse, me law," called the huge-voiced Yull from behind them. Slouching from hip to hip as he rounded the horse, weaving ahead, "After all, I'm built for this." He threw his head back and crowed. "Now then... we're out of supply lines comin' along here. Here, we're just travellers. No army, no support. So," he turned in the saddle, and gripped the reins. "Just *try* and act like y'got some sense in those heads, will y'?" he turned it to a mighty laugh.

"Hey, boss," Leigh chipped in. "You know I'm clean," she gestured with her head on either side of her. "Can't speak for these city boys."

Gael cleared her throat. "Or me."

Leigh rolled her eyes. "Or *Gael*. I swear, you're as big a princess as Vince here."

Gael said nothing at that. "You got travelling money, Sir?" she asked, raising her chin to Yull.

"Bit of cash on me, nothing too local." He said, fishing a pouch from his belt. "You're all stuck on script, right?" He asked, referring to the military's habit of issuing payments in paperwork that only could be used within the military, to minimise impact on local economies as they travelled. It was an offense to travel with actual money, let alone local money, and could be met with a reprimand.

"Of course," Vince said, truthfully.

“No.” Leigh followed.

“Nope.” Gael shook her head.

“I don’t even have that, sir.” Stannisfeld said, sheepishly.

Vince turned his head very slowly, and tried to give the others a shocked, no, *mortified* look, a look that conveyed all his disapproval at his comrades’ blatant disregard for the military rules. None of them bothered to look at him. It made *some* sense that Stannisfeld use local money, since he was a messenger, and not technically part of the military. And that made sense for Gael, too, since she was a mercenary – chances are she didn’t have acquisition or the like, either, so maybe she wasn’t beholden to script. Thinking about it, it wasn’t like Leigh was going to respect any rule she didn’t *have* to either.

With these thoughts colliding up the back end of his look of disapproval, Vince tried to slowly return his expression to the General, and act like he hadn’t just tried to act like his mother. If on cue, everyone shifted a little, and, out of the corners of his eyes, Vince was *sure* they were all looking at him.

“Anyway,” Yull said, cantering forwards towards his soldiers, “Here’s some local coin. Not a lot, but we don’t need a lot. Try to get bargains if you need food or drink, and don’t get fancy. We’re not here to tour the isles, after all. We follow the coast roads, then we cut through Gallia. We should be back home to Timoritia in maybe a month or two. Assuming things are fine in Gallia.”

“Are things ever fine in Gallia?” Leigh groused.

“Yes, I’ve no idea how they get by, what with their food, culture, music, art, architecture, wine, and sex.” Gael jockeyed her horse into a canter, grinning.

“Does...” Vince looked over to Leigh. “Um, does she hate us or not?”

“I don’t know. I hate you, though.” Leigh offered.

The first village they met had a lovely boardwalk. It had once been to host boats, and the boats had grown bigger, and needed more depth. The people had built their dock out further, and used the rest of the dock to build places, like stores and cafes. Sailors disembarked, they sang, they drank, they sold a little, and then they went back onto their boats and made their way on to a serious trading port. Supplies were stored, people grew and lived, and the tiny little seaside village lived off the trade when it was good, and off the fishing when it wasn’t.

Despite it, though, they didn’t stay much more than half an hour in the town. Vince watched his cohorts trading and bartering, and very politely shook his head when he was asked if he wanted to buy things, in broken Tiberan by people who learned a bit of everything from the sailors. There were fruits and meats there that Vince hadn’t had in months – or ever. Bacon, fresh-cut bacon. Peaches. In one of the stores, there was a basket full of tropical fruits; rough-sided pineapples with their spiky leaves cut off, oranges the size of his fists, and bananas, green at the tops and yellow at the base. When he’d found them, Leigh and Gael were a step ahead of him – and Leigh was busy counting the fruit out onto the counter.

"These are great," Leigh said, glancing up at Vince. "Oh, hi, Princess." She sneered. "You ever had bananas before?"

"Oh, yes. My mother used to fry them in oil."

"Ah, so she bought shitty ones."

"I daresay my mother bought the best bananas she could buy."

"Whatever. If they're good and firm – like these! – you can have them just straight out of the wrapper."

"The *peel*." Gael corrected her, her tone slightly irritated.

"Aw, c'mon, don't get shitty with me," Leigh said. "Tell you what, I'll even buy you one, Princess." She said, nudging Vince in the ribs. "You want one, Gael?"

"No, thank you."

"What, really? They're a real treat."

"I know, thank you."

"Y'sure? I mean, they're cheap here."

"I am sure. Thank you."

"Suit yourself." Leigh wrinkled her nose, and turned to the shopkeeper. Vince watched Gael buy herself pineapples and oranges, and quietly kicked himself for being a good boy. If he'd kept a few pounds, he could be walking out of there with fresh fruit, and maybe a nice string basket he could give to his mother afterwards as a memento, and a way to lead into the story about this one time, on the way home, with the general? Leigh tucked a banana into his hand as they walked out of the store, and he stopped worrying about it quite so much.

They camped kayem up the road from the town. There were others, off the highway, but the sun had set between them, and the sides of the road were nice and green, the sticks easily grabbed, the campfire roaring and smelling of different woods than the ones they'd trekked through. Yull had his writing desk on his lap, his sword by his bedroll, and Stannisfeld looked happier and healthier than he had all trip. Opposite one another, across the fire, though, something crackled between Leigh and Gael.

"So then," Leigh went on with her story, "Princess just moped around the store like a lost soul, rather than ask to borrow any money."

"Would you have given me any?"

"No, because I hate you." Leigh shrugged. "But maybe I'd have pitied you a little."

"How wonderful."

"Didn't your brothers harden you up or anything, Princess?" Leigh asked, wrinkling her nose.

"Y'know, law," Yull said, shifting in his sitting position, pushing his back against the hard rock where he'd set himself, "I can't help but notice you keep callin' Vince there Princess."

"Well—" Leigh began, but Yull didn't seem to notice.

"Since it seems y're fit on the idea of having a Princess, way I see it, y're going to treat Vince like a Princess. Y're going to show some respect when Princess Vince talks, and you'll be sure to pay fealty to your princess. Bow when you greet him." Yull hunkered forwards, one elbow on his knee. "Or do you want t'tell me you were just making fun of him all this time for some stupid bloody reason?"

Leigh's lips pursed into a tiny shape, then slid across her cheek a little. Thoughtful wasn't a look that sat well on her – and when Stannsifeld burst out laughing, she did too. "Fuck it, fiiine," she said, slouching back against her bedroll, which, underneath her, looked like bedding for a giant.

Yull gave a low rumble of a laugh. "Alright, law. I'm turning in. Do keep quiet if you're going to talk."

"Don't worry, boss. Anyone tries to get at you while you sleep, we'll mess 'em up. We're your men, right?" Leigh called happily to the General's side.

"No." Gael interrupted, her tone icy.

"You know what I mean." Leigh said, waving her hand. It'd been on the boil for most of the journey, but the energy crackling between the redhead and the blonde had grown so thick that Vince wanted to hide under his blanket and wait until it was gone.

"I know what you *mean*. You mean that soldiers are all men. But I'm a woman. I will be a hand and a sword and a soldier, but I'm *not* a man."

Behind Gael, Leigh wrinkled her nose and made a mimicking gesture with her hand. Vince almost laughed, but Gael was looking at him – and whipped her head around to look at the shorter soldier with eyes like ice.

Slowly, Leigh sank underneath her bedroll, and didn't make any more noise until the morning.

*

In Timoritia, Marko Fiver was listening to the careful machinations of people who fancied themselves the masters of the city.

"I don't see why we should—"

"Because you don't respect paperwork, you addle-headed *buffoon*."

"It's Lleywa paperwork, do they – do they even *have* paper there?"

"It's *peerage*. Most of the nobility they even *have* are from Tiber, aren't they?"

"If that was the case, we wouldn't even *want* Yull!" Ulster spat, drumming her fingers on the tabletop as if she was firing a gun. Repeatedly. Would that the wish had given her strength.

Tenner stopped short, his expression confused, as if a thought had only just occurred to him. “Hang on, isn’t Yull Tiber stock? I thought the Black Thane *was* Tiberan, just...”

“Just what?” Ulster asked, turning sharply to the smaller man next to her.

“Well, I...” Attention focused on him, Tenner just naturally shrunk. Not a lot of leadership in that boy.

“Come on now. Did you seriously think that the Lleywan Thane that crushed the Timoritian armies and conquered the city, and declared himself king, *was already Tiberan* and just led an army of Lleywans for *fun*?” The barrel-chested Ligier slapped both his hands on the table, which served to jostle Tenner further.

“W-well, I mean, surely it just makes sense.”

“Sense.” Ligier asked, his words *prowling* around Tenner.

“Sense! I mean, think... think about it, when you hear these stories, it *is* always a Tiberan who, you know, fixes things, makes things work. We’re natural leaders, you know.”

The audacity in the phrase coming from a man who still wore the shirts he’d been bought in high school seemed to take a moment to settle in.

“Bravely spoken for a man with no chin.” Asca grunted.

“Up your bottom, Asca, at least I don’t have *four*.”

Marko sat back at the table, nursing his temple. When he’d first forced his way into this group, he’d expected something with some animosity, some dark purpose that he needed to steer. Mostly, these ineffectual nobles spent their time *bickering*, and it was about the *stupidest* things.

They’d made some changes in these parts, since he’d arrived. The masks were gone – as were the robes. Maybe those ideas had had some purpose originally, perhaps to lend some anonymity to the proceedings, but since the circles of Timoritian society were so interlocked and *small*, they’d all been able to recognise one another from their voices, and the whole thing had fallen apart. Then the robes and masks had just seemed like some sort of Boys Own Club affair – Ulster notwithstanding. They’d lit the room up properly, they’d brought in a table, so they could look at paperwork and discuss things, and have somewhere Wardell could put the tea.

Still, Marko could see there *was something* here. There was a meaning to their task. To be King of Timoritia was the most powerful seat in the world. A legitimate heir – such as there was – was a great boon to the nation, and Yull? Yull would be a *brilliant* king. A king who could lead the army to taking more territory, a king who would see to it that soldiers who did their service were paid for their work – a king who could break Djansk and maybe even expand across to Hemulk.

If he could just make these *ninnies* work.

“Alright.” Marko said, clearing his throat. Unlike the others, he never pounded the table. He didn’t have to. No matter how Ligier threatened, and despite Ulster’s repeated winging of paramours, everyone in the room knew who, exactly, had killed people.

“Yes, Marko?” Tenner asked, relieved to shift the attention.

“This is much simpler than you fear it is. You’re all of noble birth – your families keep peerage records, yes?”

“Of course.” Ligier said, and he had the tone of voice of that boy in class who wanted to not be seen as ignorant, but lacked conviction to simply state what he was thinking.

“If we’re trying to find a legitimate King, this isn’t hard. We go to Middengarth and bring back a copy of the peerage records there.”

“We?” Tenner asked, touching his collar.

“Well, of course. Would you want to trust this to a servant? Wouldn’t that make people ask questions?”

“Well, I can’t go this week,” Ulster said. “My family’s arranging a *soiree*.”

“What about next week?” Tenner asked.

“Can’t do it,” Ligier said. “The hunting season begins.”

“Ew.” Ulster wrinkled her nose.

“Wait, Ew?” Ligier asked, turning to look her full in the face, twisting his head in disbelief. “You *shoot people*.”

“I shoot *people*. They at least have the moral sense to be worth shooting.”

Asca and Tenner shifted away from Ulster.

Marko rubbed his temple. “I’m going to anticipate you all have obligations keeping you in the city indefinitely.”

Nobody wanted to make eye contact. Marko sighed heavily. “Alright, then. One of you will have to send a note to Zigg Gorange, telling him where I’ve gone? It shouldn’t be a big problem – Asca, you’re in the family, yes?”

“Shouldn’t be a problem.” He shook his head, and it stopped moving a moment later.

“A few pounds for a horse and some food – I’ll stop by Wardell to sort the cash out. It’s not a week to Lleywa. I can be back in a few days.”

“Oh, how dashing.” Tenner said, clasping his hands.

“... You know he’s just going to follow the highway until he finds the wettest place on the Isle, right?” Ligier scoffed. Marko had his riding cape on. The notion of heading to a part of the world where it always rained made something inside him clench, but it probably wasn’t going to be *that* bad. It wasn’t as if any of his ‘co-conspirators’ were going to help, anyway.

*

Another fireplace. Another camp. Another week of travel. The languages and accents shifted as they crept up the side of the sea, but the people were the same, mostly. They didn't like the uniforms, but they did like the laughter and they didn't mind Vince as long as he stayed close to Yull. Some places weren't interested in trading with Leigh or Gael, and that had been awkward, and some places weren't interested in trading at all, but that was fine, because they needed to save their money. It was why they camped out at night, too.

"Sir," Stannisfeld asked, as the flames crackled, and that little writing desk was produced once more. "Who are you writing to?"

"Hm?" Yull asked, licking the tip of his pencil. "Ah, my wife. Nothing too interesting, I'm afraid. I saw enough lads and lasses take the time to write – I figured it wise to do it too."

"Ever send them, sir?" Stannisfeld shifted a little. "I mean, I carried a lot of mail runs – maybe I delivered to your wife some time." He offered a bright smile, a little social contact.

"Hah, no. No, I hand them over to her when we meet up. Which tends to be mid-wars."

"Ah... I'm sorry."

"Don't be, law. The woman writes letters to me the same way. Writes like she's prophesying the damn future. Dates the letters when she figures I'll read them, too. Just a little thing. Family thing, really." He scratched his beard, giant hand rubbing the hair, before he raised his chin and looked to the rest. "Y'have much family, me law?"

"Well... I have my parents." Stannisfeld said. "I think if they'd had more children they'd have stayed in Djansk."

"Ah, of course. Harder to get them on the boat." Leigh offered.

"Er, I don't think that's what he meant."

"Shut up, Princess."

Yull cleared his throat.

"I'm... sorry," Leigh managed, haltingly. "Thank you for your contribution..."

"Your highness," Yull added, meaningfully.

"Your highness."

"What about you, law?" Yull said, waving his pencil in Vince's direction. "Are you an only child too?"

"Oh goodness, no. I have four older brothers."

"Four?" Gael asked, raising her eyebrows. "I thought my three were excessive."

"Ah, let me guess," Vince said. "Your mother and father kept trying until they had a g-"

"A Gael, yes." Gael cut him off, and Vince recoiled from the sentence. "Just... leave it at that."

Leigh sat up sharply, looking over at the redhead, and narrowed her eyes. Hunkering forwards, her hands on her shoes, she tried to not glare, but it'd been getting worse.

"What?" Gael asked, returning the stare.

"You're just... weird."

"And you're short." Gael grit her teeth.

"What about you, General?" Leigh asked, pulling her legs up to her chest, holding her ankles awkwardly.

"What, me, law?" The huge man shook his head. "No. Well..." he laughed. "Y'heard th'rumours, aye? That Great Yull was born one of two lions, and of them, courage was th'lesser?"

Stannisfeld leant forwards, his eyes sparkling, his lips in a broad smile. "Oh – do you have a long-lost brother, or something?"

"... What? No? I don't think so. I just thought the line about two lions was nice." The General looked down at his page. "Now, hush." He slid his pencil under the envelope's flap, and tugged through a wax seal, producing a letter that even now, still smelled of the wood-smoke in Lleywa.

My Dearest Yull

Another day, another tiresome piece of news about the Vox Coronate. I still don't believe it wise to trust anything that comes from an official branch of government whose very name admits its authority is borrowed...

*

The same little kitchen, but a different late hour. Marko was *soaked* to the bones, thanks to the rain that had poured down as he made his way into the city. By the time he'd reached the townhouse, though, the rain had stopped – *thank god*. The black-haired war hero wanted to drop off his delivery, then head home to get some sleep.

The lights were still on. Marko let himself in, using his key. Who was still here? It wasn't like Ulster or Asca to stay here when meal times rolled around. It was definitely not like Tenner to be anywhere alone with Ligier. And Ligier had hunting he wanted to do, didn't he...?

Then Marko heard the shuffling step in the kitchen, and it made sense. Pulling his cloak back and hanging it in the hall, he stepped in through to the kitchen, an enormous package, wrapped in canvas, under his arm. Setting it on the table, Marko sat down, giving the closest thing he could give to a smile in the wet and the noise. "Wardell."

"Oh, hullo, Fiver." The sink was full of soapy water, the benchtops were wiped clean. "Anything happen?"

"It was Lleywa. Nothing ever happens. It rained. That's basically nothing happening, too."

"Here, let me put the kettle on,"

“Please.” Marko unwrapped the book slowly. “I’m going to leave this here – the place is secure, of course?”

“Of course. Mostly because nobody knows what this place is even *for*.” Wardell said, shuffling over to the stove. Lighting it with a match, he set the kettle on its heat, offering Marko a smile that spoke of a long day of weariness. “Nobody’s been doing anything without you, Fiver. Seems to me that they respect your command.”

Marko nodded, but he wasn’t listening. The canvas parted, and there, under his fingers, traced the outlines of the word *uchelwyr*. Underneath it, on a piece of paper pinned to the cover, the notes from the advisor at the library who had helped him – *Of Lleywan Nobility*.

“Did you check?” Wardell asked, setting up cups, freshly rinsed from the sudsy water.

“What, check Yull’s parentage in here? I wouldn’t know where to start. You know how to read these charts? Or, for that matter, Lleywa?”

“You don’t know how to read Lleywa?”

“It’s a language without vowels.”

“Oh, that’s not true. *Pan fyddwch yn clywed carnau, peidiwch ag edrych am dynfarch*, after all.”

“Wardell, what the hell was that?”

“Ah, it’s an old saying. ‘When you hear hoofbeats, don’t look for a centaur.’ It’s about being practical, Fiver.”

“Hm.”

“They left me with this,” Marko fished into his shirt and produced a letter, folded and bossed with a wax seal. “I’m told this verifies Yull’s lineage – and it’s written in a sensible language.”

Wardell nodded again. “Just relax, Fiver. I’ll have your tea done in a minute.”

*

Kivis was used to spending a lot of time in one of only two rooms. The safehouse wasn’t really all that bad by her estimation. As a young girl, she’d been limited to a dining room and a bedroom where the largest and most noteworthy feature had been a virginal – a type of musical instrument, she *always* had to explain.

Kivis needed time to bathe and remove her armour, maybe get a little fresh air at night? But she could cope. A bath would be nice, but she’d gone longer without one. Being confined underneath a criminal’s workplace, which always smelled faintly of smoke, and had only two rooms, was a much worse experience for Brother Fratarelli.

The priest was like an ant in an old jam jar. He kept pacing, fit to lose some of that weight he normally hauled around. When Rafe or Aderyn came by of an evening to talk to them, the brother

drank in the news. News of the city, news of the criminal underclass, news of the congregation, news of the church.

The church that was still standing.

A few nights ago, Rafe had mentioned someone trying to burn the place. A night before that, Aderyn had news of people surveying it from the outside.

Luke the Sinner was still after them.

"Is Aderyn late?" Brother Fratarelli asked.

"It is her day," Kivis responded, turning the page on her book. It was a book full of information about the proper use and participation in weed smoking. Remarkably well-written, very thorough, really. Boring, but better than nothing – and it was something she'd read only three other times.

"Yes, but that's... it's not very like her to *be* late, you know?"

"I know."

"Kivis, you're being very calm."

"You're being very agitated."

Brother Fratarelli drew a breath. Of course. Nothing was wrong. Nothing would be wrong.

He just had to wait a little while longer.

*

"Oi, you fat bastard," Rafe grumbled, hunkering down the steps into the cellars. Mama Cass had given him her obligatory stink-eye, insisted he was racking up a bill, sneered at his peace offerings and threatened him with an axe. Pretty typical, to mildly good, really. "Aderyn here? Got something for her."

Brother Fratarelli sat up too fast at the sound of the voice, and realised he'd jumped when he'd heard anything. "Oh goodness, Rafe," he said, blustering up out of his seat to help the boy down the steps – help he didn't need, and brushed off.

"Fuck's sake, old man, what's the problem?"

"Um. Um, you haven't seen Aderyn today, have you?"

"... No. That's kind of why I *came* here. It's her turn to visit."

"I – oh dear. Oh. Oh dear. She's missing."

Kivis called from across the room, with the voice of the interminably bored, speaking to the angsty and anxious. "She's just *late*."

Immediately Rafe whirled around to Brother Fratarelli. "Crap, seriously?"

"Please don't swear," the priest offered. "Y-yes, Kivis is right. She's just late now."

"How late?"

"How late, Kivis?"

The armoured woman put one fingertip to her forehead and conspicuously tapped it, miming an irritated scratch. "Forty-five minutes."

"That's way too long," Brother Fratarelli said, swallowing.

"Yeah, for her that's a day. What the shit are we--"

"Please, don't swear," Brother Fratarelli swallowed. "Oh dear. Oh dearie. Oh dear fiddlesticks."

"She *could* just be buying some bread or whatever." Kivis called.

"No." Brother Fratarelli shook his head.

"Nope."

Kivis leant back in her nook, head against the wall. "I don't know the girl the way you two know her, but right now you sound like a pair of *idiots*. Girl's late for an appointment and you start to panic."

"You remember we're hiding in a cellar, right, Kivis?" Brother Fratarelli said, stomping forwards, as best he could. Somewhere inside him, some of the parts bruised by Luke Cornell's boot twinged.

"There is a *reason* to be paranoid if someone goes missing!"

"There's reason to be paranoid if *you* or *Rafe* go missing." Kivis shrugged. "You need support. You're both very predictable, you know." She slid down slightly, lying down fully.

Brother Fratarelli almost spoke, but Rafe's hand grabbed his arm.

"Oh. Oh god. Oh *fuck*." Rafe blurted. "S'the party thing. That estate party – Luke Cornell's at it? She's gone to get that book of yours."

Kivis tilted her head, and the unblinking visage of her hawklike helm regarded the pair. "Alright, *boys*," she said, her tone flinty. "Let's think about this *rationaly* for a moment. Lady Aderyn DuThane, your *friend* and *colleague*, is more likely to be striking out on her own to steal a book from a dangerous murderer during a gala event at the estate of a *government police officer*, than she is to run an hour late to a mundane appointment."

Nobody spoke until Kivis appended. "Come to think of it, you're probably right."

Rafe threw his hands in the air and stormed to the back of the room. "Okay! Okay, we can do this, Fratarelli! We did this before." Rafe said, raising his voice unduly. There was thirty cims of stone between the ceiling and the pavements of the street, or he'd fear being heard. Thank god, in hindsight, for criminal underclasses that wanted soundproofed spaces in which to do terrible things. "S'the estate of, the, uh, the Sheriff of The Benjamin Courts. Guy's got a lock in his building, so that'd have like... drainage? And that means there'd be... uh, a ring of buildings. Think I've seen this place."

“You’re going *after* her? Rafe – this is no small task! This is, this is as hard as an assassination, but worse, because you’ll have more witnesses! And – and you don’t know the area! You *think*?! Rafe, last time I sent you to an estate, I had floor plans-”

“Which I ignored.”

“-And a partner, who you *most certainly did not*.”

“And y’had two targets and this time I only have *one*. I just need to *find* her, right? *Right*?”

Brother Fratarelli ran his hand across his scalp. “Yes. This isn’t... I’m not paying for – look. This is about saving Aderyn. Not about saving me. Whatever plan *she* had, it’s not as important as- look, this sort of thing will *get her killed*.”

This was the sort of story Rafe knew all too well. Some posh kid had a run-in with the lower class, thought they could handle it, and something *terrible* happened. The sort of people who had fox hunts thought they knew what the world had to offer if you could be dropped in the cacky. Even now he was wondering what would happen to all her elegant dance with Cornell if there hadn’t been someone to take care of Nebrin.

Pushing those thoughts out of his mind – and the implication they brought with them, that Aderyn’s health and well-being were somehow his concern, Rafe grit his teeth. Make a plan, then make a decision. Right, it was a party. There’d be open spaces. Places where people could be a distraction, places where Aderyn would be standing. Places Rafe couldn’t stand, but a noblewoman could. Wait, a noblewoman- “Can’t we send Kivis?”

“Kivis?” Brother Fratarelli asked, looking up, across the room, where the knightly woman was lounging. “Can we-”

“Do you want everyone at the party dead?”

“Um. No.”

“Then no, you can’t send me.”

“Who else do you know, Brother?”

“Nobody.” Fratarelli said, hunkering down.

“You want my opinion?” Kivis called from across the room.

Rafe turned to look over his shoulder, while the wheels in his mind were still turning. “Yeah?”

“Leave it.”

“Are you *serious*,” Brother Fratarelli sputtered, which spared Rafe yelping it.

“I absolutely am. You’re talking about Lady Aderyn DuThane,” Kivis said, sitting up from her repose, resting her forearms on her knees, metal plates touching one another with a soft low *tang* sound. “So far I’ve *never* seen that girl do *anything* she doesn’t know she can do.”

Rafe was already trying to find a way to tell Kivis she was wrong, she was stupid, and do so without making it very, very clear he was panicking a little. “What if-”

“What *if?*” she asked, shrugging. “The girl getting paid for half of your work isn’t in your hair any more. You can do what she does, right? Just throw on a dress and maybe Brother Fratarelli will give you her payment.”

Rafe raised a hand to say something –

– Hang on.

“... Okay. Hey, Brother Fratarelli. How close can you get a punt to the Sheriff’s place?”

“Probably across the way, if Kivis is not averse to rowing.”

“Kivis?”

The knight heaved a sigh that echoed twice back. “I’ll haul the punt over.” Shaking her head, she raised a hand, and waved a metal finger menacingly. “But I warn you, if I come in there, I’m not leaving until I’ve duelled every single corrupt asshole with a title that crosses my path.”

“... Yeh, so?” Rafe asked, in time to get a hit in the head from Brother Fratarelli.

*

The cellar door had taken some breaking. Luke Cornell was not a small man, but the room had once been designed to store and drain meat while the boat was in motion, and people were well-acquainted with leaving it alone when they heard howls and screams behind it. By the time the morning had arrived, and one of his grunts had started to work on the outside of the now thoroughly-broken door, Nebrin had come to into near-consciousness and burred out oaths of revenge.

That... had been one of the more unpleasant mornings of Luke Cornell’s life. It was in the past, now; two weeks gone. Nebrin was recovered, as best he could be, and now he had that dapper eye patch to go with his elegant, piratical style. It suited him. Maybe medical attention could have saved his eye, but Luke still felt the whole affair had been Nebrin’s *fault*, and withholding something while the man was unconscious would serve as a lasting reminder. Nebrin’s attention had been wandering much of the year, and only in the past few weeks had he seemed to be returning to form. A bit of punishment for his disloyalty would serve well.

These were the memories stirred in his mind as he turned over and over in his hand, a glossy kingfisher feather, gathered from the Praefoco estate. A pair of silver candlesticks were all he’d wanted – was that so wrong? – but now he was dealing with *birds*. Well, see how birds liked dealing with a *shark*. Turning with the feather in his hand, he looked back along the deck; down at his men, down at the barrel-shaped frame of Nebrin, and at the half-dozen rough and ready criminals with their boathooks and bad attitudes.

“Well, men.” Luke crushed his fist around the feather, casting it behind him. “It seems we have a *bird* problem.”

The faces of his followers – most men, some women – were turned to him, waiting for him to finish that thought.

“They have *broached* my boat, they have *violated* my private spaces, and they *stole* my priest, during confession. There were two of them. A white bird; a black bird. Well, we know what happens when two such birds draw too close, don’t we, lads?”

“A penguin, boss?” called one.

“Wh-what? No. No, I-”

“Oh, two penguins, of course.” Offered another boathand.

“No. *No*. Are you even paying attention to me, I’m saying-”

“OH! One big fat pigeon. Right?” The third dockhand volunteered.

Luke put one hand to his forehead while his other squeezed a throat. He was fairly sure it was the throat of one of the men who’d been talking. He couldn’t really be bothered to keep track at this point, pushing the smaller man up against the railing of his houseboat, *clenching* his fist. “I’m sorry, gentlemen, I clearly am dealing with *clever people*. And clever people are *not* in for Mister Cock-up, you *hear me?*”

The man struggling under his fist thumped at Luke’s arm. He was quite blue. Luke briefly reflected on how, back when he was younger, he’d need both hands to get that effect. Eventually, behind him somewhere, he heard Nebrin grumble. “I’ll keep an... I’ll be looking for them, boss.”

“Yes.” Luke turned, relaxing his grip, stepping away from the railing, the kneeling, collapsing figure that had *bothered him*. “Yes, you *keep an eye out* for them, Nebrin.”

“Right,” Nebrin didn’t quite flinch. “And if we see ‘em, we’ll drag them down to the metal room for a work-over.”

“No. Just kill them. You’ve had two weeks. Tonight, at the party, *you will not fail me*, you understand?”

Chapter 11

Asking to hide bodies in Mama Cass' cellar hadn't been much of a lift. The kind of heat that Luke Cornell could bring down was limited to the parts of the city he owned, and the Dims was too cheap, too grubby to own. The only really interesting part of this tale from Mama Cass' seat had been that the bodies were alive and willing. On the other hand, asking her for money was *guaranteed* to not work.

Rafe slipped up out of the cellar, and, rather than use the stairs, left the building and slithered up the outside rear wall. When his fingertips touched the lead outlines of the glasshouse atop it, he stopped his ascent, and shimmied sideways until he found a familiar wooden set of slats. Holding his weight on one hand and both his feet together on a small metal knob about three cims wide, he hooked a finger in behind the slats, and flicked up a catch. The window swung, and he swung after it, before the spring-loaded windowframe clacked it shut after him.

Downstairs, with her sofas and her clients and her dull disdain for *everyone*, Mama Cass ruled. Here, in the garrett connected to the greenhouses, Aina had made herself a little pocket of wonder, month after month.

It was *technically* a shed, for the maintenance of the greenhouse. The greenhouse only really worked in this city because it was up high enough no buildings shadowed its flat, glass ceiling – and that much glass had been *expensive* to buy. Rafe remembered helping build the place, years ago. They wanted people who could climb, and didn't mind risking a two-storey fall to their deaths, possibly surrounded by jagged shards of sharpness. It also paid a shilling a day, which was the kind of money Rafe had only dreamt of when he'd been twelve.

And when Mama Cass had grown sick of growing and managing the green leaf, like a little magical sprite, Aina had materialised. The shed was a small space, but she was a small girl. A few boards had turned one room into two. In the room with the trick window, Aina had put her books and her mobile; she had painted the ceiling dark blue, had dotted it about with little shiny bits of tin and daubs of yellow paint. It didn't look particularly good – but it was hers.

"Aina?" Rafe called. In the next room, he knew there was a bed, and under that bed was a pan, and if that window had swung for anyone but him, he was pretty sure that pan would be in Aina's hands, ready to swing at midriff height, through the mottled green curtain that hung between the two rooms. "S'me."

A silence, but only for a moment. Then, a giggle. "Hey, Rafe. You wanna come in?"

"Can I?"

"Yeah, you can." She said, sheepishly pulling back, the presence behind the door fading back a little.

Rafe slipped into the next room, ducking under the slope of the roof. This was Aina's space. A little misshapen, a little strange, perched up high, in a place everyone said was too dangerous. All that really mattered to her was making flowers grow. After a fashion. "H'lo, Aina..." he murmured, bending down slightly. "Should I-"

“Sit on the bed,” Aina said, from her own seat across from the bed. “It’s real nice to see you.” She said, beaming at him. “But-”

“But I only use the window in an emergency.” He said.

She bit her lower lip and huddled in on her little stool. “Okay. Okay. I get it.” She nodded, then nodded again, as if listening to someone he didn’t hear. “What is it?”

Rafe steeled himself, his hand gripping his navel under his robes. Here he was, in the garb of a priest, about to ask her for a favour. It didn’t *look* good, and it felt even worse. “You remember what I used to tell you?”

“No favours.” The bright-eyed girl smiled, a constellation in her eyes.

Fuck.

“Uh, well.” His other hand rubbed the top of his head. Few things felt worse than asking for a favour. Even as that thought arrived, he couldn’t escape how stupid it was. He’d had someone break a bottle on his neck once. Another time a bigger boy had stomped on his face until some of his teeth had come out. Thankfully, he’d been working on a spare. He’d been *stabbed*. Why was it just *asking for help* was twisting him inside like a blade?

“Whatcha need?” she asked, pulling her legs up onto the stool underneath her. The knitted cap she wore slid down over her eyes, and she pushed it back up with the heel of her hand. “You can just *say*.”

Deep breath. Clinch the grip. “I need some money.” And –

– “How much?”

Somehow, that vast silence had been no time at all. Aina was still sitting in front of him, still so cute and so tough. The girl was like a pearl – somehow shaped by the irritations and accretions of this strange, wet place on the riverside, protected by a barbed, hard shell and owning a pale purity. “... Maybe five pounds?”

Aina gave a low whistle, a long sliding note that carried disapproval but wasn’t a no. “That’s a lot of no favours.”

“I know,” Rafe rubbed the back of his head, anxious. “I need it fast, though – there’s a girl’s life at stake.”

Aina shifted forwards on her little stool, both hands reaching for Rafe’s cheeks. She held him there, looking him in the eyes, and shook her head with a little sigh. Eventually, she pulled with her hands,

and hugged the boy around the neck – even though he had to bend down to do it. Eventually, her cheek by his, she spoke.

“It’s Mama Cass’ money. It’ll be counted at the end of the month.” Then, as if that was settled, she squeezed him. “You need to do something to heal, you know.”

“Huh?” He asked, sitting back slightly, resting on his toes, looking the young girl in her eyes. “I’m fine, the big ox barely touched m-”

“I mean here.” She said, smiling at him, pressing her hand to his heart.

Asking favours of a ten year old was painful. This was so much worse. “... Thanks, Aina. Sorry I never got you that party.”

“It’s okay.” She said, leaning forward and pecking his forehead. “Maybe one day.”

“Um.”

“Yes...?” Aina asked, tilting her head.

“Do you still have that old makeup kit from Mama Cass?”

Aina nodded, then leant forwards. “Whyyy?”

“Um.” Rafe adjusted his robes. “I... I’ll need your help putting some on. But first I have to go grab something from the shops, alright?”

*

The sheriff’s estate was in one of the gentrified areas along the The River. It was beautiful, in its old ways; the building loomed high and proud over the river. The walls were flush with the foundation, shooting straight down into the river. On either side of the estate there were well-lit bridges which opened to permit through the larger river traffic. The only place to go was into the estate itself, which was shaped like an U, facing outwards to the river flow with a little lock inside for boats to fill. Normally, it was used to store something like a delightful riverboat, or perhaps a yacht – with the doors open. At the crests of the U, there were two huge gates, shaped out of decorated plates, and interspersed with empty spaces to resist the wind better, that were shut *fast*. Down beneath the water line, for those brave enough to touch the water outside of thick rubber pants, a weighted mesh net sunk down the floor.

The roofs were slanted downwards, but with a central pathway atop each; the gutters decorated, but a keen eye could see the metal spines that jutted up from the centre inside. Up on the pathways, Rafe couldn’t see any people per se – but he saw the stars that disappeared, momentarily, showing a patrolling frame, probably decked out in blue and black. Blue and black were *great* colours for nighttime rooftop crawling. The dark blue tended to blur into the sky; turning to look black in the shadows could spare you notice down in between buildings, too. Those colours were fine for patrolling and hiding and skulking, activities that Rafe felt he could do *excellently* well.

Pink, however, was not a good colour for it.

“Christ, careful there, Brother.” Rafe grumbled as the punt bumped a jutting post out of the water. Sighing, Rafe shrugged his shoulders and pushed the heavy tarpaulin off his shoulders that had hidden what he was wearing. “Don’t want this getting splashed.”

Five pounds. Five pounds! He had to return it intact to get the deposit back, but it was still the most money he’d ever spent on an object, let alone an object that seemed so useless and stupid. Rafe had *no idea* why girls even *liked* this sort of thing. Damn thing weighed a lot, too, easily several kegs of fabric spilling down over his hips.

“Mmm, best be careful, careful there.” The Brother grunted, sweating, as he looped rope around the post. “This is probably about as close as we can make it...” The portly man clucked his tongue as he smoothed his own robe, as if somehow *that* would make him feel far less self-conscious about what Rafe had... become in a few hours.

This morning, Rafe had been a slouching, resentful, cocky street rat, a murderer out of Drafftane and an assassin working for free, dressed in second-hand robes that the priest had found around the church. He had been *lean* and *mean* and all sorts of other words boys liked to use to label themselves. Now, he was none of those things. Now, he was... he was...

No good word for it.

Rafe was *pink*. Rafe was *lots of pink*. Rafe was *all the pink there was*.

With the wash of water around them, while the punt slid through the river, Rafe had stood in the centre of it, away from every possible edge. It was low enough and broad enough that he couldn’t *quite* manage that when they’d pushed against the current at places –and Rafe had responded by darting and dodging the wash of water. It was impressive, but standing like that, for the whole journey, had been undeniably strange to the old priest. Rafe had worn a heavy raincoat for most of the way, but there was no place for the battered slicker here. A shrug of his shoulders and off it went.

“Alright,” Kivis said. Somewhere over the course of the evening, she’d moved from *dismissive* into somehow subtly amused. “What, exactly, is your plan here, Rafe?”

Rafe smoothed down the shape of the dress about his midsection. On the dressmaker’s dummy, the dress had seemed a bit formless, with space in the middle where he could easily slip a few things. When the time had come to put it *on*, the experience had been very different indeed. Something underneath the soft fabric sat *snugly* about his middle, his normally smooth and hairless body strained into shape by what he was *fairly* sure were strips of bone. It wasn’t *his* bone, though, and that made it strange. Thankfully, it wasn’t making it *too* hard to breathe – up in the top, the dress did a *lot* of that work for him. He’d imagined he had to stuff it at first, but Aina had demonstrated, while giggling endlessly, the way the strings in the back could be drawn to hold it into shape. She hadn’t been strong enough to do that on her own – Kivis had had to be recruited for that, and it was around then that the woman’s manner had taken its turn for the amused.

That’s when Rafe had had to start acting – specifically acting like someone who wasn’t in pain from the busted or bruised ribs he was nursing. Despite his early impressions of escaping the fight with

Nebrin intact, no, he had most certainly something wrong there, and every time he had to take a deep sudden breath, it howled in his mind, pain amplified by the corset.

Wait, hang on, Kivis had asked him a question. Shit. "I thought I could just walk on in, like Aderyn. You know, go where I pleased." *At Praefoco's, she'd just walked through the crowd.* "Way I figure, here, she's goin' to do the same thing as last time. Walk into a party, act like she belongs there, walk out again. If that's how it goes, then shit, I just gotta... hng... walk the same way."

"Rafe, you have a *lot* to learn about how women have to live their lives. And trust me, you will not walk the same way as Aderyn unless you put a little less *roll* into your hips when you walk."

"I do *not*."

"You so do. When everyone thinks you're a boy, it looks cocky. Like this, it looks like you want people to notice your rear."

"I don't."

"You say one thing, your hips say another."

Rafe dragged in a breath and waved a hand, feeling the evening cold creeping into his lungs and reminding him of how little heat the thin fabric on his arms was helping him retain. What he *didn't* say, what sat on his tongue, was the phrase *shut up*. "Aderyn's in there, right?" *I assume.* "So this is just going in and convincing her to come on out again. Simple. Don't need to do anything cute while I'm in there, don't need to fight anyone. Just walk in, talk to Aderyn, walk out again."

Brother Fratarelli ducked down, giving loose a tiny prayer while he shifted around the punt, to sit on the far end, away from Rafe – and to provide him counterbalance for his jump. "That's all it should take. This isn't going to be some *affair* like it, ah, like it was when we last, um. Well, yes."

"Since Luke Cornell noticed us?"

"Something like that," the priest appended. "Rafe, nobody in there knows what she looks like but you. I don't imagine Aderyn needs a disguise—"

"What do you mean?" Kivis asked. "Girl's Lleywa nobility. She's probably got friends in there. Heck, might have *family* in there."

"Oh." The priest looked up. "Think they'd, uh, recognise her?"

"Why?" Rafe asked, adjusting his gloves again. They sat up under his *armpits*. How did anyone get anything done with gloves like *this* on?

"Because, er... I mean, at a glance, you *are* the right height —"

"My hair's *brown*, you jackass," Rafe grumbled.

"He's right, though. Rafe, you look like *her*." Kivis stood up in the punt, holding her hands square at his shoulders. "About the same build, the dress hides your legs, and that makeup *does* make your eyes look a lot more vibrant—"

“Oh, fuck off.”

“You don’t want to talk like that.” Kivis shook her head. “In fact, you don’t want to talk at all. Here.” One large, metal-clad hand held out a fan, delicate and decorated in pale pink and white. “Keep it over your mouth. And whatever you want, *do not say anything*. You can disguise everything, and good grief, that corset gives you hips milkmaids would kill for, but – “

“Yes, yes, I *get it*.”

“What I’m saying is, Rafe, you have a back-up career if you ever want it.”

“Can we *stop talking about my arse?*”

“You’re wearing a corset and high heels, Rafe, trust me, I am not going to be the last person to mention it tonight.”

Rafe *sneered*, his nose wrinkling up.

“No, you don’t want to do that. Not that expression, not at all. Okay, whenever you want to look at people like that? Bring up the fan. Hold it in front of your face. And then, *don’t say anything*.”

“Why not?”

“Rafe, you have a girly voice, but you don’t *speak* like a *lady*-”

“Neither do you.”

Kivis knuckled against the top of his head, knowing that wouldn’t disturb his makeup. “The point is, people are more likely to believe you – especially someone with *those* hips and *that* makeup – are too shy to talk than they are that someone dressed like *this* can’t pronounce *vichyssoise*.” She tugged on the front of his bodice – a word he’d learned tonight – and settled the choker at his throat. “You want to smile and look dumb.”

“Wait, so I can’t *talk*?”

“Were you... what. Planning on asking questions?”

“Not really-”

“Have a backstory for your noble lady? Got a new name picked out?”

“Well, no-”

“Then shut up and stay shut up. Don’t worry, it’s nothing women don’t have to deal with *all the time*. You can cope with it for an evening.”

Rafe drew himself up. “Aderyn doesn’t-”

“Aderyn is much, much better at playing this game than you are. Go on. Up on the bridgework, fall in with the people going past, and keep your words behind that fan.”

Rafe's bodice swelled with indignation, and deflated with defeat. "Alright." he managed – and swung his hands up to grip the underside of the boardwalk. The gloves were really quite good quality, he could barely feel them on his hands as he gripped the edge of the polished metal fence. Swinging his legs forwards, he started to lift –

then stopped short, as the lift had to accommodate the extra weight below his hips. Good *grief!* He let his weight hang for a moment, drew in a breath, then *hoisted* anew. Even while he moved, he knew he couldn't let the dress catch on anything, so, rather than use his knees to pull himself up, Rafe swung forwards – feet sweeping over Brother Fratarelli's head – and then back again. Momentum gathered, he tensed his arms and *swept* over the side of the bridge in a single geometric arc.

Brother Fratarelli waited until he heard the steps click away. Sure he was out of earshot, the priest turned to his friend.

"Um, Kivis,"

"Yes?"

"Was it strictly necessary for him to wear the stockings and underwear, as well?"

Kivis tapped her chin with a metal fingertip. "I'm not sure I understand the question."

"Well..." The priest squirmed a little onto the flat board of the boat. Around, the moonlight shone off the surface of the river, a white ring in the black sludge. "Whatever happens, I hope everything goes alright."

"You want my opinion?" Kivis asked, yawning and stretching.

"Well, I'd say I *always* do, but now I think you're going to say something rude."

"I'm sure Aderyn's going to come back just fine. So's that jackass, though he'll probably ruin the dress. If Aderyn is at this party, she's *fine*. Haven't you noticed how *good* that girl is at the things she does?"

Brother Fratarelli realised he was gnawing on one of his knuckles, and yanked it away from his mouth defensively. Rafe was away, it was out of his control, and all he *could* do if he had to help, in some way, was send in Kivis and watch the slaughter, then spend *years* doing some form of penance. "Then why did you help?"

Kivis shrugged. "Boy's cute in a dress." Somewhere in the edges of that voice, there was laughter, and beneath that helm, there was a smirk.

*

Becoming used to the dress wasn't so hard. It was a big bell of fabric, and he'd worn robes that hid his legs before. It actually worked out pretty well; he could enjoy the freedom his legs had, bumping against one another. It might be tricky to really get a run going, but he could certainly be more flexible with one leg providing the balance.

Thoughts like that kept him entertained as he slid through the crowd, silent, maintaining that dull, bored expression. His makeup made him look like he was smiling a little, but that didn't mean he had to help it out. Back behind a form, he saw an invitation, held back and high, some father with his daughter, talking pointlessly about formal behaviour. Man didn't even see Rafe walk past, let alone feel the fingers pluck the invitation from the back of his waistcoat.

The gatekeeper was bored and busy, a bad combination. He took the invitation from white-and-pink gloved digits, he returned it with a forced smile, and he shooed Rafe on inside, without even blinking. This dress was *magic*, clearly.

The pathway into the Estate wended around the outside path – marked with little metal trellises, set up and decorated with fine table linens, leading Rafe along a paved path around the side, up the back and past the little private dock, where Rafe watched the enormous frame of Luke the Sinner walking down a gangway. Almost occluded by him, decorated in greens, and wearing a veil – a veil? Really? That was *weird* – was a more petite figure.

Rafe wished he had pockets to jam his hands into. Well, no, he wished he had a *knife*. Slowing his steps just a shade, he stopped, looking back down at the skirt of his dress, checking some imaginary slight. Luke hadn't had a good look at him, but he didn't want to risk it. Besides – Nebrin was the *real* concern.

Somehow, Rafe had beaten up a boy that much bigger than him, something that hadn't happened since he grew up and the boys started carrying knives. No matter how he tried to shake the feeling, Rafe was waiting for the inevitable comeuppance that came from that. Boys like Nebrin didn't give up. They came back with friends. They came back with *ten* friends, and they came back with broken bottles and they came back with a *plan*.

Rafe shivered, though he'd never admit it, and stepped up behind Luke the Sinner. Moving in his shadow, Rafe tried to focus. If Aderyn was here to take out the man, she'd want to be close to him, after all.

"Now then, dear," He grumbled in a low voice that wasn't a whisper, despite what he may have thought all his life. "This is your party, as far as I'm concerned."

"Merci, papa."

"And you know you can take the veil off at any time, and if *anyone* has a problem with-

"Oui, Merci, papa."

... He was hiding his daughter because she was from Gallia? That was pretty weird.

"Just... just so you know. Nobody takes issue with anything of mine, you know?" It was said so sweetly, but Rafe didn't miss the words he used. What an asshole.

Down the path, they passed a stand of wooden crates, stacked and labelled, and with a tarpaulin over most of them. Two young women and one young man, wearing his hair in a white ponytail that made Rafe immediately want to yank on it and drag his face through something, were talking, facing away from the path, down at the boxes.

“Oh, yes! Bursts of fireworks. Quite lovely, really. They’re designed to all go off with *mathematical* precision. When you see one of the red burst, the white follows it, then the blue, one-two-three! Lovely pattern you see in the sky, just like the flag!”

Well, talking. More that the boy was yammering and the two young ladies were avoiding telling him to get lost. What was *with* these people? Weren’t they all posh? Couldn’t they just *do what they wanted*? Rafe pushed that thought to the back of his head and settled back in behind Cornell.

The path led into the game room, and butlers and maids drew near, taking Luke’s drink order, his coat, the young woman’s parasol, her hat – and suddenly someone was standing in front of Rafe, asking – “Ah, young lady, will your father or date be along soon?”

Thank god for the fan. Rafe flicked it up and out and held his breath just for a moment, forcing a blush onto his cheeks. Gesturing vaguely with his other hand, he pointed over his shoulder, and the butler nodded. “Ah, yes, madam. We’ll come back to you.”

Well... that worked out better than he’d expected. The problem was in that moment of surprise, he’d lost track of Cornell – and surely that’s where Aderyn would be. The main room was a gaming hall – large, larger than the church’s main room by Rafe’s estimate, and the other rooms all connected to it – which made it a good place to start. Plus, it was warm, and people milled and gathered close to gossip and watch the games. Just settle in, move natural. Don’t run, don’t push – people would notice that shit. Okay. He could do this.

Ugh, games. Posh games. Rafe walked past felt tables of dice-rolling men and tall poles surrounded by ladies in lovely dresses, throwing small balls of knotted fabric up into rings. Small, low tables on which board games were set, with men and women sitting on opposite sides, ladies laughing cheerily as they lost to smug boys. That didn’t seem right to Rafe. Back in Bottle Street, if you were smug winning, someone would hit you with a brick.

“Why, *belladonna*, what do I have *here*? What *wonder* has graced my presence?”

Oh fuck, what fresh hell was this.

The man was slightly taller than Rafe was in the heels. Even then, most of him seemed to be empty space – he wore a black suit, with a bright, vivid yellow tunic, a yellow rose in his lapel and he had pale skin and yellow hair. Rafe had heard something about ‘colour matching’ from Aina and Kivis, but in this case it just made the guy look *sick*. Plus, his hair looked like it was still wet.

“I can’t help but see,” he said, turning his hand, showing glinting cufflinks studded with jewels, “That god has committed his own sin and let someone as *lovely* as you, in such exquisite finery, walk about here unaccompanied!” shaking his head, yellow-pale-whosit-guy held out his hand.

The hand hung in the air like a dead fish on a forgotten line. Who the fuck was this guy. Who the fuck was this posh kid all grown up. Rafe flicked out the fan and hid his mouth so he had something to do other than tell the jackass to piss off. Turning and looking around, over, around – trying to get a look at the room *past* this sudden, persistent obstruction – proved more difficult than he’d thought. What, did this guy just think he could walk up to a stranger and start talking to them like

that? Back where Rafe was from, a boy did that to you, you put your forehead in his teeth to see how serious he was...

“Oh, come now, pretty lady – surely a mystery like you can offer me a *smile*?”

Rafe had never wanted to break a person’s nose as badly as in that moment. Not even old Jodson Toddy had been *this* fucking creepy, and *he’d* been trying to get Rafe into bed. This jackass just seemed to think this is how you *treated* people. For the right reason, though, Rafe could swallow that pride, and that violent urge – and he tried to ignore him, casting his gaze around the room, looking for that tell-tale shock of white hair.

“Ahah, so *coy*,” and the guy, this, this fucking *posh kid* had his hand on Rafe’s hand, snapping the fan closed, and leaning into his personal space with what he was probably sure was a sly smile but looked more like a toothless shark faking charm. “How about we go... play some *games*.”

Rafe almost broke cover there and yelled in the guy’s face. This asshole had left himself wide open, after all. Hand on his hand, grab the wrist, twist with it – and buck the body up, shoulder under his chin. Spin the guy in the air, send him face-first onto the floor and stomp on the back of his head. Then keep stomping until he learned some respect. The shoes at least meant he could do some real goddamn *damage* if –

“Then games it is, my silent lovely!” he said, drawing away, and Rafe’s violent fantasies were blown away while he gathered his thoughts and tried to *not* indulge further imaginations of using those heels as a weapon to hurt others as much as they were hurting him. “Come – not darts, I’m sure,” Could this guy even *see* Rafe’s expression? He’d pushed aside the fan. He’d *looked*. He had to see those blazing blue eyes and the *outrage* on his face. “You don’t seem the sort of girl who favours more... athletic movements as the ball-toss requires, ahahah,” Had to be able to see the *boiling fucking wrath*, the *need to hurt him*. “Tell you what – down here, by the tables.” Surely scorn was a universal language? “Come along, my lady,” The As-Yet-Unkilled Corpse said, leading Rafe by one hand, “I’ll show you some things about *chess*.”

Rafe needed very badly to find a way to hurt this person before it clouded his judgment any further. In that moment, he understood what it was to be Kivis.

*

Rafe took a seat at the chess tables, but under some form of protest. The wall was behind him, which made him feel a bit like he was being pinned in by this... this *fucking guy*. All the chairs were so arranged – black pieces faced the walls, and along the row of tables, other young ladies occupied the seats closest to the wall. Weird. Wouldn’t they want to start the game occasionally? Still, from that vantage point, Rafe could look over *whatsisface’s* shoulders and keep an eye on the crowd. *Whatsisface*. Oh, yeah, he’d introduced himself, some name that had ‘And/or’ in it or something *like* it, and now he was gesturing down at the chess board like he’d invented it. “It’s quite an old game, of course, from the lands around Salem,” he said, as he settled in to the chair.

It’s from the Indus Continent, you idiot. Keeping his thoughts to himself was probably the wiser course of action right now, though. Rafe adjusted his fan a little, and kept looking to the corners of the room. The doorways there were open, but had doors in them – so they were probably opened

up for the party. They were also pretty decently sized – probably so servants could move tables up and through them, kind of regularly travelled. If Cornell moved through those spaces, it'd be obvious, but if *Aderyn* did, she'd move like a goddamn *shadow*. She was *good*, like that. Probably better than him, really. Rafe had brown hair, white skin and usually wore grubby dark colours – he was unremarkable to the eye in almost every way, massive pink dress, high heels and silken underwear notwithstanding.

“There’s quite a storied history about it, actually – but I’m sure you don’t have the taste for *that* kind of thing. No, it’s a lovely, elaborate, intelligent game – a *war* played out on seventy tiles.”

Sixty-four. They’re right there in fucking front of you just count them you piece of shit. Still, *Aderyn* had a tell or two. Her fondness for white, and her ... uh... Rafe realised that for all that he’d seen *Aderyn* use kingfisher feathers, she’d never actually worn those colours where he’d seen them. He hadn’t ever had to try and *track* her, before – just react to her movements. *Praefoco* and *Tully* had basically sequestered themselves, and Rafe had already been spiderwalking around the outside of the building to avoid guards.

“The King, here, you see, is the weakest piece on the board; it’s crucial to the way the game plays, but ultimately can’t do anything on its own.”

Know how I know you’ve never tried to use the king offensively? Rafe pushed a piece forwards on the board, barely paying any attention. The man’s voice was a bray, and it didn’t seem to bother him that Rafe was paying him basically no attention. There wasn’t much to notice, really; black tuxedo, yellow shirt, yellow flower, yellow hair, skin and eyes pale enough that *they* looked yellow and watery. The boy looked as healthy as a streak of piss and he didn’t seem to have anything about him worth nicking. A rapier would be hard to hide, but say, a short knife would be a treat.

“The Rooks – well, yes, you can see the Rooks, or I suppose you’d call them the ‘castles’? But you mustn’t – castling in chess is a *verb*, not a *noun*. Ahah – I shouldn’t be teasing you like this, though. After all, when I win, you’ll owe me a kiss, of course?”

Bringing his own knife from the boat would have worked better, but *Aina* had argued against putting anything sharp into the outfit. *Kivis*, too. Of course, *Kivis* seemed to expect Rafe to turn around and slink out of the party, embarrassed and humiliated by the *hang on what the fuck did this asshole just say*.

Rafe was shaking his head energetically, but streak-of-piss wasn’t paying any attention, as he lofted his piece off the board. “The Queen – ahahah, the Queen is of course, the real power of the board. As you’d well know, mademoiselle – isn’t it true that women are the ones who *really* wield power?”

Then *Nebrin* walked into the room, his enormous, cliff-face profile carrying an enormous scowl. He was dressed in a suit that didn’t quite fit, but that was probably just him. Even a tailored suit would look like it’d been painted on a rock. Rafe whipped his head down to look at the board, drawing the fan up further, hiding behind it, and tried to gauge where *Nebrin* was going, based on the man’s movements. Not towards *Cornell* – who was off on one side of the room, drinking from a tiny little glass, and laughing too loud at the tiny nobles standing next to him. The man walked past one of the large, round mirrors, and stopped briefly, wrinkling his nose – before moving on.

“The Bishop, you see-” *blah blah fucking blah*. Rafe realised he was holding his breath when Nebrin left the room, stalking towards the right hand of the place. Was Nebrin wearing an *eyepatch*? What the hell had Rafe *done* in the cold room? Good god, messing a guy up in a fight was one thing, but, but Rafe had been punching Nebrin well after the big bloke stopped swinging back, hadn’t he? Had Rafe...

It was strange to feel sick because of that. Maybe eyes were special. Wait, what was *assfeatures* saying?

“Ahah, I think you’re in a spot of danger, lady. Take your time, I’m sure you should enjoy the hunt too.”

The board had a very simple little net around Rafe’s king – a pawn could slip into place next to the king and block the diagonal, which pushed it into the path of a Rook or a bishop. It was a very nice, basic little net that failed to consider the king could just *take* the pawn and be out of check *and* strand the rook without any greater purpose in the path of a knight. That is to say, like most people who liked chess, Rafe was dealing with someone who thought that he was clever just *because he played chess*.

Fucking posh kids.

Rafe took his turn. The other took his. Rafe took check, and his opponent didn’t notice it. Rafe cleared his throat, and tapped the butt of his fan against the king – raised eyebrows and a gesture at it, only to hear a laugh. “Oh my! Checkmate.”

It’s not checkmate. You can sacrifice your queen, you idiot.

“Well, we know this doesn’t count. Now that you’ve got a handle on the rules, let’s play for real?”

What.

What.

What.

Rafe dragged his breath in, just as Luke Cornell turned around to survey the room, bidden by one of his conversation mates. While Cornell looked around the room, he gestured to a waiter – two gestures, showing sizes of glasses, then held up two fingers. Like the man had a snake in his gaze, Rafe flipped the fan out and ducked down behind it, and his opponent gave a little laugh.

“Oh no, there’s no need to be embarrassed! If we’d been playing for real, after all, I’d have beaten you in only a few moves. That was quite a quick game, though, wasn’t it?”

Teeth grit, the boy assassin tried to focus on the game. Chess, that is – not the etiquette of the situation, which was its own game, and that was an *old* game indeed. One of those games which were supposedly about manipulation and awareness and anticipation but what so many of them were about was building a fortress of rules around the most simple of operations so that any

behaviour you did could be considered part of a field of errors. They made a game into another way to look down on you.

Last time he'd played this game, it was with a priest who hadn't expected him to know the rules. Now, because Rafe was being a *lady*, this, this *jackass* expected him to know the rules, *and* be bad at it.

The board was set up again – and Rafe pointed down at one of the white pieces, raising an eyebrow inquisitively. After all, he'd played second last time.

"Why... of course! After all," he laughed, "Ladies will have their advantages, no? Actually, there's a way to score checkmate in only ... five moves, if you play white." A laugh that was meant to sound jocular but instead was rank and forced followed hard upon. "Why," he moved his pawn, responding to Rafe's. "I heard-" Rafe snapped the fan shut, and tapped his bishop. Then tapped it again, drawing a line between the idiot's king and Rafe's own bishop.

"Why... yes! Something just like that!" said the boy, with a hint of impatience in his voice. "Yes, that's the kind of way white can score an early checkmate." He gave that smile, and *finally* Rafe could see a hint of irritation in it. It was *three* moves – and Rafe was sure *everyone* who played chess knew about *that* trick. "Now that you've finished playing arrround," he said, turning the board around again, looking down at his pieces.

This *asshole*. Rafe hadn't agreed to his terms, but now this horse-ass was going to try and force Rafe to play to them. Twice he'd lost, and twice he'd ignored it. He was just going to keep playing until he got what he wanted, and whenever he was rebuffed, he was going to change the rules. Who the hell *was* this guy? He couldn't just be some... typical shithead from the noble class, could he? Nobody was reacting to him like he was special. Was this just what boys *became* when they had money?

Alright. Fine. This *idiot* wasn't going to win. Rafe couldn't win, but that didn't matter too much because he even *want* to win. He wanted to *hurt* this asshole and no achievement, no loss of pride on a tabletop game, could possibly do what he wanted to do right now with fifteen cims of steel.

Rafe had been a woman without a voice for only twenty minutes and he was already planning bloody revolution, even if he had to start on a chessboard.

Alright. If he couldn't win, he could draw. If he could deadlock the game, maybe this idiot would get bored and wander off. Ugh. That was an odious thought. Hoping for *disinterest*. Boiling in his skin, Rafe quietly slid his pieces into play.

Then there was a foot up under his skirt, rubbing up against the inside of his thigh.

Chapter 12

Rafe wasn't really sure what his expression was like. He knew what he *felt* – his cheeks were hot, his knuckles were white – hidden underneath gloves – and the instinct to clamp his legs together and pull the offender into a grip on the floor so Rafe could punch his face until there wasn't anything left to punch were all *well tuned* responses. But he looked across the table, around at the party, at *nobody reacting to any of it*, and had to make a plan first.

Rafe snapped the fan closed again and *lunged* across the table with it. One hand grabbed the man's black tie, the other punched the wooden handle of the fan into the flesh of the man's throat just above his tie, pushing against his windpipe, choking him in against the fabric and the wood, stopping any screams or breath, and knowing the kind of odious little *snot* he was dealing with, stopping the foot in motion. With Rafe, in that voluminous pile of pink fabric leaning forwards, across the table, someone might imagine the lucky noble was receiving his wish, and being given his victory kiss!

Rafe put his lips right by his ear, and spoke in a whisper, as close to falsetto as he could manage.

"If you ever talk to me again, I am going to take away one of your fingers." Rafe said, his voice taking on the high, soft cast of someone trying to teach a dog. "Put your foot down, leave your shoe, and *go away* and I won't *choke you to death right now*."

Rafe drew back a little and looked his opponent in the eyes. He raised his eyebrows, *daring* him to say something... then smiled, when the boy nodded. Slowly, Rafe settled back into his seat, but not for a good thirty seconds did he release the tie and move his fan. Gesturing with his head, Rafe flared his nostrils.

The other was up and moving, walking away with the hobble-footed movement of someone walking in only one shoe.

Rafe sagged in his chair and slumped backwards. This plan had been, a few hours ago, a remarkably clever one. Young women could move around freely as they like at parties – so Aderyn would be in the party, moving around freely. To follow her, it'd be easiest to just make like a young woman and move around the party just as freely. Rafe hadn't been expecting it to be anything like *this*. He felt like he was nailed to his chair, without a voice, as people drifted back and forth and sat down just to ignore him for a few minutes at a time. A breakout of violence would risk the dress, and the dress was *five pounds* that wasn't his. It also risked causing An Incident, which would disrupt whatever it was Aderyn was planning. Thanks to the dress, thanks to what people assumed when they looked at him, Rafe couldn't *do* anything, and he couldn't *go* anywhere. It was enough to make a boy scream. How the hell did women put up with this shit!?

A few hours ago, this stupid useless idiotic plan had been *clever*.

This was, this was what Rafe had uncomfortably hitherto put in a large box in his life labelled *girl stuff*. How babies were born, that was girl stuff. How vaginas worked, that was girl stuff. Was there some password he was missing? Maybe it was about how the girls over there giggled to one another. Or was it because that girl over there was particularly pretty? Well, he was pretty pretty. Well, Kivis had complimented him. Wait, that was not the right mental road to go down. This party, this was girl stuff! There were all these girls, and they were having... fun? Sort of? Looking at the

gathering, he couldn't help but notice how many of the young ladies were either talking to other young ladies, or watching as some boy or other in a fancy suit tried to impress them at a game.

Girl stuff. Rafe had made a non-aggression pact at a young age with girl stuff. Mama Cass or Aina had mentioned 'girl stuff' and he'd spun around and walked right out until they were done. Now here he was, up to his neck in Girl Stuff and it was *horrible*.

How did girls *stand* it?

When the chair in front of him stirred, Rafe realised that by sitting still, at a chess board, idly replacing the pieces, he must have looked a bit like he was anticipating a game. Too late, though, as a figure sat down across from him, inscrutable behind her veil.

Rafe *knew* who she was, before she sat down. It was Luke Cornell's daughter – the one he'd walked behind on the way inside. That dress of hers was a rich, deep green, like the sea at night, decorated about the edges with lines of lace and finery that looked like mint – not the cheap, sugar-dipped mint you saw at the cheap little lolly shops down near Bottle Street, but the expensive stuff that sat in the front window up in Conster Street. It was presented in little tins, with a tiny little hammer next to them; a pale green that made the tongue wonder about its mystery. Her *clothing* was decorated with colours so delicate. While she adjusted her seat, and shifted the chair in a little, Rafe looked at all the places on her clothes to *hide things*. Like behind that veil, for example.

Rafe's fan stilled momentarily. There were literally *no other people* here wearing veils. Most of the ladies had their hats taken by butlers. Sure, he could see one or two older women around the edges of the room, still wearing their hats as signs of seniority. The gauzy veil, however, of palest green with silvery tracing through it, gave hints of dark brown eyes behind it and nothing more. The question formed in his throat, the base rudeness of *what the hell is with the veil* before he caught himself, squelched it down, and sat, drawing in his breath, and trying to not think about the way the corset seemed to keep inhaling a little after he was done.

"Ah, bonjour," she said. "You are seeking an opponent, oui?"

All Rafe could do was nod, holding the fan in place to hide his confused expression. What to do here? Shit, shit, shit, she was his *daughter*. Was Cornell watching him right now? Was *Nebrin*? Jesus fucking Christ he didn't want to have to deal with that right now. Certainly not in this dress.

"Ah, mou – you cannot speak?" the young lady shook her head and put her fingertip to her lips. "I do not mean to presume?"

Rafe shook his head, and shrugged a little lamely.

"Forgive me, forgive me; I do not mean to be rude." Settling into her chair a little more, her tone of voice had a smile in it, even though its volume hovered somewhere only a little bit above a whisper. "Still, let us do each other this service – let us play some games, and per'aps girls like that," she tilted her head back, jutting her chin towards two giggling figures in white, silver, blue and yellow, "– will 'ave less reason to bother girls like us."

Then one hand came up, to the veil, and the other to the back of her hat, and she lifted it off. Freeing her hair and setting the hat aside on the table, she shook her head, and let a *pile* of thick,

dark hair tumble free. Her hair was glossy and dark, and when she shook her head, peach scents filled the air around her – speaking of expensive shampoos and conditioners.

But then there was her skin.

Rafe hadn't seen colour like hers on anyone who wasn't already covered in soot. There were poor kids like her, down in the Dims. Kids with broad accents and bright white teeth, up from the colonies down south. He'd never seen a noblewoman like her – if Luke Cornell even *counted* as noble. He was rich? Did that count? Either way, when hearing about Luke Cornell's daughter, Rafe wouldn't have expected her, with her skin darker than chocolate, speckled around the lips, the eyes, and the forehead, with patches of white-pink skin. It formed in white circles, like she'd been spattered with thrown paint. Around her forehead and cheeks, it made her look like some sort of great hunting cat; around her lips, it made her smile wider.

Her cheekbones were high, her lips full; her eyes were wide and almond-shaped, sparkling and expressive. Rafe was sure that she looked at herself in the mirror in the mornings and hated what she saw, because Rafe had been around enough women to know *that* was universal. In that moment, though, shaking out her hair, and smiling nervously, with her black-and-white skin, Rafe couldn't even breathe.

"Ah, 'allo," she said, with that half-Gallian accent he'd overheard earlier. "Ah, you must 'ave come 'ere with ze party around ze same time as moi; please, do forgive me for presuming on your silence. My faszeire," was that how she pronounced *father*? "prefers szat I display some form of animation while at a party, for fear szat I seem sheltered. 'E would be most embarrassed to consider szat."

She smiled, rocking her foot back and forth while she sat across from him, gesturing down at her pieces. "Do we play? We do not 'ave to."

Rafe held the fan up close to his nose, resting it against the tip of his nose. There wasn't any makeup there, right? He wasn't about to smudge anything. Ugh, *so many things to pay attention to*. It was easier when he walked around and everyone thought he was scum. Sure, he lived his life tense as a spring then, but he could just *brain someone* when they pushed him too far. Here, he had to be *nice*. She was setting up her side of the table before Rafe realised he'd even nodded, he was that distracted.

"You seemed... boszered by sze other man. I can understand. Randall Orlean boszered me for a little earlier, too, until 'e found out about my faszeire." She sighed, as if even that dispensation of her father's presence was more than she wanted.

She fumbled with a piece momentarily – her gloves so soft that the polished pieces slipped through them. Huffing with irritation, she peeled off one of her short gloves – giving Rafe an apologetic smile as she did so. "Ah, forgive me. This outfit, it was a gift from my mama, from across the waves?" she said, gesturing widely, now with one bare hand showing that remarkable black-and-white patterning. "She runs a plantation in the Gallian colonies, you see."

"It is a... strange place, to 'ear her speak of it." She murred, tapping her fingertip under her chin. Bare fingers turned the chess pieces as she set them up. "I 'ave no actual acquaintance with szem,

but szey are so very far away it is 'ard to imagine szey are much like any place. But szen, the Djansk 'ave colonies down far asouth as sze cape of sze darkest continent, non?"

Rafe gave a helpless little shrug. There was wistfulness to the young woman's actions. "Mama, I understand, left my faszeire when I was but one year old, which does not seem inappropriate. 'Ave you ever met my faszeire?" she asked, gesturing with a queen over Rafe's shoulder. "Luke Cornell. Sze big one, wisz sze snake tattoos on 'is arms."

Rafe was adrift, listening to the woman. Luke Cornell was looking over at her, and at him, and he smiled, and waved, and that was exactly *not* what Rafe wanted to see a mark doing during a potential hit. At least he was sitting. Rafe had underestimated what his weight landing on those shoes had done to his ankles. Once, Rafe had looked at a leg hanging out of a gibbet in a prison quad, and seen the bones peeking out of the sinew and muscle that time and birds had stripped away. It was a lot of little bones that all slid against one another. Now that he'd put all his weight on those heels, and the heels had pushed back, he was convinced he had only one big packed in bone, like a distorted hoof that would only ever fit in these kind of shoes in the future.

Rafe looked down at the pieces, at her gloved fingers and her bare ones. He looked at the way they curled against his own white-gloved fingers. Then he *felt* the intense grip she had, the *squeeze* of her fingers fuelled by fear and desperation.

"Madame assassin, I am sure it is you; I beg you, please, 'ear my case. My name is Xenops Cornell, and I wish to 'ire you to assassinate my faszeire."

*

Xenops grew up on the river, watching gulls overhead and swans down below. The gulls ate trash and insisted they could take everything, and nobody liked them. The swans on the river slid through the scum and the muck and looked so serene, because you didn't see the frantic movement underneath the surface. Here, at the party, she saw them both again. There were the swans in their dresses, drifting from table to table, talking amongst themselves, and there were all the gulls around them, diving down and pecking at things they assumed they owned.

The woman across the table from her was a pretty one, prettier than Xenops may have dared to talk to this evening. Women of status were *dangerous* when they thought they saw something out of the ordinary – and she, a girl of dark skin with white spots, was *definitely* out of the ordinary. Just like a swan hiding its swimming, she kept the sigh deep inside herself. Women, pretty women, funny women, sweet women, laughing women, tough women, angry women – and yet just by *talking* to them, Xenops could cause *someone* a bit of a scandal. God only knew what would happen if they knew who her father was. If her *grandfather* had done all the murdering, she'd be welcomed by these people with open arms.

Well, if not for *the other thing*.

Still, she had found an opportunity here, and it was not one she intended to waste.

"I suppose," she said, looking down to her hands as she pulled off her gloves, twisting the fabric in her grip, "you might wonder why I am saying szis..." she shook her head. Could she explain herself to

this assassin? *Should* she? While she'd rehearsed the speech many times in her mind, ever since her mother...

Xenops shook her head and tried to clear her thoughts. She tried to clear out the memory of sitting in her warm little bed, with its high wooden sides, and the bottom that was shaped with the arch of a barrel. Those long, rainy nights in the middle of the autumn, where the birds were quiet and the roof was loud. It was hard to remember the details, now, though she was sure she'd etched them in her mind like they were carved into wood. There, at the foot of the bed, sitting cross-legged in the space empty by her little legs, was her mother. Beautiful as she was, with those deep, soulful eyes and long hair pulled into tight braids; a scarf around her throat, knitted shawl around her shoulders, while she turned the pages and spoke in Gallian of the places far away.

Xenops had known how to read and write Gallian before she'd ever learned Tiberan. Somewhere, she'd read once that it was possible to lose the accent, to speak as a native. When she'd found that passage in the book, she'd thrown it out one of the windows. Let the people of Tiber speak Tiberan. Xenops was a girl of the river, and her mother was from the furthest parts of the world. If they couldn't understand her, that was *their* problem.

Those years had been nice and comforting. She woke up, read some books with her mother, played a little, and watched the city roll past out the windows. There'd been toys, scattered from their little chests, and there'd been music from her mother's lips. There were lessons, too – lessons about how to speak, how to *listen*, and even lessons on how to lead.

"You see," her mother had told her, in Gallian, where she was sure that Luke Cornell did not hear her, "People make choices. Do you see this one?" holding up the book, she pointed to the princess on the cover.

"She's a princess!" Xenops remembered cawing happily.

"Mm-hm. She's a princess. She's a princess because she was born a princess, and she grew up a housemaid and she worked and became an owner, but it was at the end, when someone showed her she was really a princess, that she had always been a princess, that she just was one."

"Mm?" It had been a big lesson her mother had tried to teach her, and she *was* only seven years old.

"This... this is not a very good book," Mother had said, closing it, turning it over and over in her hands. "The girl in this book, she had everything chosen for her – and what she chose, with her life..." she hook her head, tut-tutting at the actions of a fictional character. "Weak people accept what they are told to be." Standing up, mother'd gone to the porthole in the corner of the room and swung it open. A flick of her wrist, and the book arced out into the cold.

There were other books. That wasn't a very good book. Xenops didn't remember if she cried or not, but she probably had. It'd been very shocking. Her mother was normally so calm, so lovely. But she'd moved to the bookshelves, and taken a book in her hands, one from the higher shelves that Xenops couldn't reach, and returned to sit by her on the bed. "'Ere. I like this one much better." She turned the pages, past the scribbly text that didn't seem to mean anything, and started to read.

“When the young man on board saw this person approach, he left his station by the pilot, and, hat in hand, leaned over the ship's bulwarks.

“She was a fine, tall, slim young lady of eighteen or twenty, with black eyes, and hair as dark as a raven's wing; and her whole appearance bespoke that calmness and resolution peculiar to women accustomed from their cradle to contend with danger.”

The story was a sad one, at first. The heroine, a beautiful and dangerous person, was the victim of a conspiracy by others, and was thrown into prison. It was a dreadful thing to hear, a horrible experience that the book described. When the guards brought in the food, little Xenops had squirmed closer to her mother, and tried to listen bravely.

But then she'd broken free.

With a chance, offered by another, she had broken out of the prison, and escaped. And every night, for many weeks more, her mother had read her that book – a chapter or two at a time, about this wonderful heroine, who travelled to strange sounding places like Naples and Marseilles, who gathered up money and returned to visit her revenge on the enemies who had tried to destroy her forever.

The night she'd finished reading that book had been strangely sad. There had been duels and danger, and her mother had paused oddly at a few points when the heroine – the Contessa Monte Cristo – had indulged in dances with other women, but that hadn't seemed particularly strange to her.

“Do you remember, mama,” she'd asked, as her mother closed the book for the last time, “Do, do you remember what made you get that book down, again?”

Her mother was running her fingers over the book, not looking at her daughter directly, while she spoke. “Why... I don't think I do.”

“It was because you talked about how people have their lives chosen for them. And the Contessa didn't! She was told she was one thing, and she chose to be another!” she beamed, lesson observed, so proud of herself.

“Ah, yes,” Mama had said, leaning down and kissing her forehead. “But for now... now, you must sleep.”

“Mama,” she'd asked, settling into her blankets, squirming down and pulling them up against herself, “What about leaders that take away others' choices?”

“Ah, yes, yes...” her mother had said. “In that case, they are a tyrant,” she'd whispered, brushing her daughter's hair from her face with fingers so gentle, “when you meet a tyrant, kill him.”

Xenops drifted off to sleep that night with a smile on her face, and the engines' song humming her to sleep.

Those engines! They'd been on the ship as long as she had, even though they were apparently relatively new. There was a broken thread in one of the engines. You didn't hear it, if you were outside – the air and the ambient noise, not to mention the roar of the second engine – covered it.

When you were inside, though, and leant against one of the walls, you could hear the song through the skull. Eyes closed, lips parted, humming throatily along with the engine, she could remember that song. Her mother had sung it when she was younger, and now she was

Xenops didn't know why she was gone. There'd been an argument. A raging one. Blood had hit the floor. In the middle of the night, she'd watched a shadow hovering before her door, and slid down as deep as she could under the blankets, hoping that whatever it was, it would go away.

With her head back, she could hear her mother's song. The mother who had been here, and now was not here any longer. One day, she'd told herself mother was just gone. Three days, she was worried she was sick. It wasn't for *six days* that she mustered the courage to creep through to her father's office, knock on the door, and ask him where mama was.

Luke Cornell was a big man, but to a child, he was something taller than clouds.

"Your mother's gone," he'd said, leaning forwards, resting his hand on his knee, while the chair underneath him *creaked*. "But she taught you how to behave." He said, holding a hand bound with a bandage close to his chest. "She's off in the Colonies, hunting bad people, she said." He wrinkled his nose, and sunk back in his chair, and not for the first time, Xenops felt like he'd forgotten she existed. "But don't worry, dear. You're mine, and I take care of what's mine. Nebrin? Take my daughter to her room, make sure she's safe."

Little Xenops hadn't been bothered by that sentence at the time. It wasn't until she heard it echoed ten, twenty, thirty more times, over the years, that she realised how badly it bothered her. Words were important. He shouldn't have used words like that. Those kind of words could injure people, like a loaded gun left somewhere quiet.

As for loaded guns, she'd been ten when she found it.

When her mother had been on the boat with her, she had lived her life in a very small world, full of books. It hadn't bothered her all that much, because she had someone who listened to her and spoke to her. Maybe she'd have grown frustrated with being on the boat all the time if her mother had been there. But at ten, being stuck in one of four rooms, atop the lurching houseboat felt less like being in a home and more like being a prison.

Her father had left a loaded gun on the hall table. She knew it was loaded, because she'd seen him load it and push it against Nebrin's ribs, glaring at the bigger man.

"You know what y'are, y'great bastard," he'd said. There were far too many of those moments around her father. Nebrin was a big fellow – but somehow, no matter how badly Luke treated him, he always fell into line. All those years of watching and listening had never revealed *why*. Xenops had to assume Nebrin was paid remarkably well.

After the exchange, the gun went on the counter. Luke left the gun next to Nebrin as he simply walked away from him, sneering. Nebrin didn't even look at the gun, though – he just turned around and walked to the stairs.

She didn't think either of them had noticed her.

It wasn't really a well-thought out plan. Xenops knew she couldn't shoot her father while looking at him. He was big, and scary, and, well, what if she'd missed? It wasn't like it was going to be easy. The books had made it so very clear to her that killing people was never easy.

So had the screams from down below.

When her father killed people, he did look them in the face.

She'd shuddered when she picked up the gun. It wasn't actually all that heavy – one of those four-chamber things that the police favoured. She'd fired it at the door of his office, and the shattering of glass as the bullet punched through the door meant she'd hit a porthole – gone *well* wide of the desk that sat squarely in front of the door. There were gunshots in response – and Xenops had run from the hallway with her hands over her head, screaming.

When she was in her room she slammed the door threw the gun out the porthole in her room. It'd hit the dock, instead of splashing in the water, and she'd been *terrified* of that.

Her father had emerged from his office, angrily snarling for Nebrin.

Xenops had never been more terrified before than she had been that night. But while she hid under her bed, terrified and holding back tears, she'd heard them talking. She'd heard them piece things together...

She'd listened as they dragged the poorest member of the crew out onto the docks. She'd watched, through the porthole, where they searched the docks, found the gun. She watched in horror as her father beat the man on the side of the river. They'd thought the shot came *in* through the window. They thought the gun had been *taken* and thrown to an accomplice. There was some petty grievance, some minor nothing, and they'd stood there on the riverside, beating the man to death for the threat against Cornell. Then they'd found the thief cowering in an alleyway, heard him screaming he had nothing to do with it, and they'd emptied the gun into him.

Luke Cornell had killed two men, because of something she'd tried to do. And then the business was concluded, and they were done, and they dumped the bodies in the river, and the boat steamed along merrily.

Lying underneath her bed, swallowing her tongue, Xenops had reflected on what she'd just done. She'd just let two men die because of something she'd tried to do. By not speaking up, had she killed those men? Had she let someone die for her?

She didn't sleep that night.

When she woke up and looked at her hands, the little white spots below her fingernails were larger than they'd been yesterday. Scrubbing hadn't removed them, no matter how she tried. Not when she'd ran downstairs, grabbing the bucket of hard soap they used to swab the deck. Not when she'd gone into the meat room and used the burning, acrid cake of *something* white and sulphurous against her skin, trying to clean those white spots.

She was Luke Cornell's daughter. There was something about him inside her, and now, she could see it bubbling to the surface. In a moment of weakness, she'd done what he'd do, and now, now she was losing herself to become something like *him*.

That terror, that fear – not the threat of her father, or the threat of being caught – kept Xenops' trembling hands away from guns and blades for two long years. The whiteness didn't stop, though. It freckled along her hands, up her arms; it spackled around her lips and across the bridge of her nose; she woke up every few days to find new patches of her skin had decided they liked being white more than they liked being brown.

Luke Cornell hadn't taught her much. Mostly she'd learned how to *look ladylike* and *how to look for an escape*.

The escape was very hard, though. The boat always had guards. Twice she'd tried to creep out, and seen the men with boathooks walking the decks. She'd seen the gulf between the boat and the walls, and known that she couldn't swim. The only time anyone left the boat was with her father – and she hadn't put her foot on dry land as far as she knew, all her life.

Resentment at her father built as fear of her skin condition diminished. Despite being as well-behaved as possible, studying and learning and hiding who she was, escape was still on her mind. Escape had not become a single action – it was now a corridor. It required a *plan*. One of her books had been very helpful, too; it talked about a man poisoned by candles, slowly, invisibly.

Six months of slipping bits of candle into her father's food yielded nothing. Annoyed, she'd reread the book, and found that the candles had originally been laced with arsenic. Which was *cheating*.

Long term plans were good. She'd have to come up with one of them. That was what, when she was thirteen? My, time had flown.

She'd been fifteen, the last time she'd actively tried to kill her father. While she'd worn away at her accent a little, and managed to make the most of her time in what she now imagined her own personal dungeon, as the Countess had. The carpets were nicer; there were fewer rats. But it was still a cage; she was still bound; and at night, she still heard the screams from down in the *meat room*.

The letter, that'd been the last time she'd acted directly. The letter that she'd found while doing some tidying up in her father's office. He had a letter opener and a paper trimmer, and she'd been using them to construct some... paper somethings that had interested her for a few weeks at that point.

The books in her room had not changed much in seventeen years. There had been plenty of them, and she had read all of them. Most of them had been recovered from old libraries in the disused parts of the city – unlike the binders and ledgers that sat on her father's shelf.

There'd been a single book resting on the shelf that had caught her eye, as she slid the letter-opener in a smooth, straight line to form a proper right-angle triangle so the device fit together well. *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The name immediately brought to mind those beautiful phrases from her mother – the reading all in Gallian. There had been a sequel? How *wonderful!*

Without asking, she'd reached to the shelf; plucked the book; and the letter had fluttered down to her feet, from its place tucked into the back cover.

To my dearest daughter, it had read on the cover, in Gallian.

When she bent down to take it, though, she'd risen into a shadow.

"I didn't give you permission to touch my things," her father had said, reaching over her shoulder, **snapping** the book closed in one of his hands.

"Ow long 'ave you had szis, faszeire?" she remembered asking. She remembered it that way, though she knew that there had been a tremble, a pause, between some of those words. Turning the letter over in her hand, she rested the tip of the letter-opener against it.

Then... he'd put his hand on hers, and stopped her.

And she'd screamed.

And... something.

The memory was fuzzy.

There was a splash of blood she'd had to clean out of the dress. Her father's trousers had a bloody gash in the thigh. She'd been trying to kill him, she'd twisted the blade when it sank in. Oh, god, how she'd wanted to. How she wanted to turn his fortress of silence and veneer of respectability into a place where freedom howled. *God*. How she wish she'd known what she did about blades and blood vessels now.

But she also remembered him kneeling on her chest.

She remembered two black eyes for weeks.

She remembered *I'll beat the ladylike into you if I have to*.

...

The memory was pretty fuzzy.

Xenops drew her breath, and steeled as hard as she could ever be, leant forwards, to whisper to the Assassin.

"I—" then she hesitated. The Assassin, she had *beautiful* eyes. Oh, there was something in them – her gaze seemed to be like some tangible thing, like a steel rod, nearly vibrating with contained rage, but there had to be something else there as well. Some sadness. Some disappointment.

Xenops could understand that.

Then she saw, reflected in one eye, over her shoulder, another single eye. Hastily, bare fingers plucked a piece from the board, and *be ladylike* came to her rescue.

“You know, I often szink szat sze pawn is sze soul of chess. Szhey are sze very life of sze game. Szey alone form sze attack and sze defense; on szeir good or bad situation depends sze gain or loss of sze party.”

The Assassin looked very confused, behind the fan. She was so well made-up, too – and probably had very kissable lips, behind that fan. To signal what she saw, Xenops tilted her head, setting the pawn back down, hoping the lilt of her head would draw the Assassin’s eye to the figure that loomed closer over her shoulder.

“Allo, Miss Zee,” Nebrin asked, his voice a low grumble. “Don’t suppose y’ve seen yer dad around have you?”

“Ah, *mais, non.*”

Nebrin nodded. Her father’s terrier. Slinking around, waiting for an order. The only problem was, he didn’t know what he was hunting. They’d both assumed the bullet came from outside, after all – they’d both been *so sure*. If you wanted to be safe around a terrier, you had to walk – they’d chase anything that ran.

Nebrin slouched away, while she turned back to her friend, and laughed sweetly – “Just a friend of my faszeire’s,” she said, glibly, before lowering her voice once Nebrin was out of earshot.

“You *are* the Assassin.” She said, gesturing with the same pawn she’d plucked from the board. “I was given a catalogue of sze oszer girls’ dresses before sze event, so I could coordinate mine. Szat dress is not one of szem... and you are too pretty to be so shy. *Too too pretty.*”

The Assassin looked awfully concerned, and ... well, it was cute. Xenops wasn’t going to flatter herself that she was seducing the woman, but ... still. It was nice to have that reaction. A little harmless flirting, yes?

“Sze assassin that killed two men in one moment during a party – you ‘ave to be here wisz a reason. And... I would like to offer you an opportunity.”

From her blouse, her purse; from her purse, a coin. Then, another coin. Then, another... while she focused on the coins. On the time they represented.

“Every week since I was thirteen years old, my father gives me two pennies.” Xenops felt her fingers trembling at their touch. It was freedom. It was a key to a cage. “It is, he tells me, my pocket money. I szink he believes szat I will, um, ask Nebrin to buy szings from the market wisz it.” Every word came very carefully, her eyes fixed on her fingertips. “I have saved szem all, two pennies at a time. When I had twenty, I changed szem for shillings. When I had five shillings, I changed szem for pounds.”

Those trembling fingers set five round, flat, tarnished gold-ish coins on the table, behind her chess pieces. Each one was cleaned and polished, worn at the edges where the millinery had been handled by dozens of hands. “It is all I have to offer you, Mademoiselle Assassin, but I wish to hire you to kill my father, and set me free.”

The other woman leant forwards, her glorious white-and-pink fan snapped shut, while she closed her gloved hand around Xenops. With a hoarse voice, a croak, really, whispering down low, she asked – “*Why?*”

Xenops drew herself back. “Because my faszeire is a tyrant.”

Chapter 13

Moments like those should come with a curtain, really. Someone made such a meaningful declaration, put such *weight* behind their words, and then, everything should stop and everyone should just move on to another thing. On Bottle Street, you deliver a line like that, and in a fair world, the sting of the moment would sail you through to freer places. Normally, though, Rafe knew it just led to a tiny pause before he'd had the living shit kicked out of him. The chess game played a little further, while he looked at the coins on the side of the board, wondering about what they meant.

Well, to him they meant some safety. Right now it was hard to forget that he was running around in clothes that, for want of a better consideration, Mama Cass owned, down to his skin. A spray of blood on his clothes and he'd be five pounds in debt. Five pounds was the money necessary to pay her back, *and* it was more money than he'd ever seen before, and... if the dress somehow came out of things alright, five pounds was more money than he'd ever held in his hands.

"You play strangely," she said, and he jolted out of his ruminations again. "Was szat deliberate? You passed up a chance to check."

Shaking the fan, Rafe slid a rook back across the board, to where it had been and shrugged. The fan hid a smile, though.

When Rafe was in his element, he didn't miss anything. You never knew, in the dark places, where the next boot was going to come from. You had to be alert. You had to see it all. Here, though, he knew *nothing*. People were moving around with glasses and trays and everything he'd assumed about freedom of movement in these crowds was totally wrong. The game, then, the game and the coins, the game, the coins and the movements of Nebrin around the back of the room.

When Nebrin swept around the back of the room this time, he was facing away from Rafe and Xenops, though he did spare a little glare at the back of her head when he turned. With his back to them, Rafe could see the reason all the wait-staff kept their distance from him – and not just because of the man's single eye and bruised features. Hooked over one shoulder, Nebrin walked carrying a gun with two barrels, each one as wide as Rafe's fist. Most anyone else who was armed had something small and elegant, something noble. Nebrin was walking around with a gun designed to hunt elephants in a room full of quail.

"Madamoiselle Assassin?" Xenops asked, again, as she repeated her hand movement. Underneath her pawn, she'd stacked five coins, all while Rafe hadn't so much as noticed. "Do you, um, accept?"

Rafe looked back around the room one last time, checking to see who noticed him acting. Finally, he lowered the fan, closing it and setting it aside with a smile. He reached over, took her pawn. When he lifted his piece, and moved it over hers, there were coins; when he moved his hand back, there were no coins. A tiny little theft – and it brought a smile to her speckled lips.

"... Merci, madamoiselle assassin. I please, um. I beg of you -" she began, then hesitated. "I... would recommend... if you could... please act tonight. It is... very important? It may be if I go back on board szat boat I may never 'ave a chance to come off it again."

Rafe nodded, and knocked over his king. He had played enough for one day. Standing and curtsying – as he'd seen the other women do when they raised out of their seats, Rafe slipped to the side, out past the table.

This was something he could cope with. He had a goal – take out Luke Cornell. Well, he had two goals – take out Luke Cornell, and find Aderyn and make sure she was safe. That meant maybe dealing with Nebrin, with a cracked rib that would almost *certainly* get worse when the big galoot punched him, *or* just becoming smeared into geography when that gun was pointed at him, *and* Nebrin was looking for them proactively. That meant he had three goals, and okay-

Okay!

Okay, he could work this out.

Oh, he also had to keep the dress intact. Because holy shit, five pounds was a lot of money. Wait, why not get out of the dress? It was a horrible thing to move in. More horrible to fight in. And god help him if someone he *knew* saw him. Well, someone aside from Aderyn. He was already prepared for *that* eventuality.

Wait, where could he get out of the dress? The estate was a big place, surely he could just slip into a room. No, he needed some place to store the dress where it'd be safe and it'd be there when he came back. Shit. He needed... he needed a woman's room. And ideally, one unoccupied by a woman in a current sense.

Okay.

Thanks to Xenops, he knew where one of those was. The houseboat.

So.

Step one, get to the houseboat. Step two, get out of the dress and wear something practical. Step three, find Aderyn, step four, kill Luke the Sinner.

Maybe step four was going to be a little hard.

Rafe put his hands on the railing that ran alongside the pathway. He swung his weight forwards, lifted with his arms and with one motion, hooked his high heels over the rail. It was a short jump to the side of the boat from here, and the boat was covered in handholds. Just as he was about to launch himself, though, a pain shot up the back of his heels, up through his thighs and into the pits of his knees, reminding him that the high heels he was wearing were not shoes as much as they were iron nails, driven up into the flesh of his feet as punishment for some not-understood slight.

For just a moment, Rafe teetered on that rail, his hands gripping the metal, his arms tense, while his throat tried to throw a yelp into the sky. His midsection tensed and *that* made the rib bruise *squeal* inside him and he had to hold his *breath* for *that* and and and ow ow ow ow-

Slowly, the pain subsided, and Rafe slid his feet up, putting the toes on the rail. Harder to balance. Less hell on the legs, though. Tense and bunched, hands released, and he *threw* himself forwards,

grabbing some rolled and knotted netting with one hand, before swinging his whole frame up, onto the deck, landing on his toes.

Okay.

Okay, he could do this. He just had to walk on his toes, with his legs tensed a little so the heels didn't press up against him. All that sitting had clearly given his body enough time to recognise just *how badly* landing had hurt him.

That meant slow, stealthy movements – and the flickering glow of lanterns around the boat showed there will still guards to contend with. Made sense. Luke Cornell wasn't the kind of man who let his paranoia go the one night he decided to step off his floating fortress.

One step at a time, Rafe skulked behind the crates and ropes of Luke Cornell's home. If he couldn't climb, and he couldn't run, he had to be *thorough*.

Deep breath. Okay.

*

Rafe found it very easy to choke people into unconsciousness. He tried to imagine the stages as he saw them from the outside.

The timing was important, first.

Stepping up behind the guard, with his baggy blue cap on his head, Rafe watched the puffs of breath in the cold air, like the wimpiest of dragons. At that point of exhalation, he struck; one hand clamping over mouth and nose, thumb mashing nostrils shut into the inside edge of his hand, while his big, seamless palm in its delicate white silk pressed across a mouth open to yell. Pressure, more pressure, was important. Rafe forced his head sideways, made him turn, and pulled back with the hand, lifting his head to expose his throat. Forearm, one long, unshaking bone, rammed up against the guard's throat, under the adam's apple, forcing it up and into his other tissues. Pressure on the windpipe, he wanted to force a panic in the lungs. The man was heavier than Rafe, but a bit shorter. Everyone attempted escape – this guy put both his arms up to try and wrestle at Rafe's arm with his weight. Which was fruitless – Rafe was already lifting him by his throat. What was pulling on his arm going to do?

Rafe watched his eyes go wide, saw that panic that showed the guy realised the inevitability of it. Rather than ride into unconsciousness, though, that just made things worse. Rafe knew that point was *probably* where the edges of the guard's vision was going all grey. The feeling his world was closing in, that he was going to *die*. Anxiety. Fear. *Terror*. Here and now, this man had no idea if he was ever going to wake up.

Rafe had been knocked unconscious in the past, and he'd been choked into the blackness. That feeling of being pulled, inexorably, into the black, was a painful terror he'd *kill* to avoid ever feeling again.

The slump.

Rafe kept the choke on a little longer. Some guards tried to be clever. He waited until he felt the blood in his throat slow a little, and set the man down, very gently, on the floor. Turning his cap around in his hand, Rafe set it on the man's face. No point losing a perfectly good hat.

He'd just inflicted a horrible experience, and it'd been pretty easy. What Rafe didn't want to think about, though, was how Praefoco had been even easier.

*

The top floor was where Luke Cornell lived, personally. That meant that's where Xenops lived, which meant, he was sure, it was where he could find a changing room. Maybe one of those privacy screens. And possibly in Luke's room, some, you know, pants. But when he slid into the hallway that ran like a curled C around the top floor's rooms, he was stopped in his tracks by a figure, dressed all in white, emerging from a room with a bag over one shoulder, and a mask across its face. Their face. Wait, *her* face.

"ADERYN!" Rafe blurted, running towards- ow, ow, ow, okay, no not running, just moving towards her faster, his hand on the wall. *Fuck* these shoes. Who thought they were a good idea? Jesus!

Aderyn stopped short, and whirled around, hissing through her white mask, her bright blue eyes flaring with the closest thing he'd ever seen to rage. "Don't use *names* while you're infiltrating, you, you, you *miscreant*." then her eyes widened even further. "Rafe, you're in a dress."

"What was that about names?" he grumbled, leaning against the wall, his backside sore, his thighs an expanse of ache.

"You're not hiding your face."

"I'm in disguise."

"You look like yourself, but with some lovely makeup and a dress." she noted, shifting her weight and moving the bag over her shoulder to the other shoulder. "Surely you wouldn't fool anyone who knew what you looked like."

"Fooled Nebrin."

"The one-eyed man you beat into a pulp?"

"... Well, yes, but-

"I'm not sure that you should be too concerned about someone you beat half-blind."

"It's not *him* I'm worried about," Rafe grumbled. "I'm worried about him *and the twenty other guys around him*. Not to mention his fucking *gun*."

Aderyn looked up and down the hall of the boat. "Rafe, please, tell me, is this the best place to have this conversation?"

He stopped short and looked behind himself. "Um, nobody outside of the boat is conscious."

"You're sure of that?"

"I've been... thorough."

"Well!" Aderyn put on her smile and adjusted her white tunic. "That's lovely. I left behind my feather in the library, if you wanted to leave something behind."

"This place has a library?"

"... Yes. In Luke Cornell's office." Aderyn shook her head, and Rafe tried to not feel intense rage at being ridiculed. "It's where the book was kept."

"!" Rafe didn't know what he just said, but it was certainly a sound. "You- the book! You came for the book?"

Aderyn tilted her head and surveyed Rafe very, very slowly. "Yes, Rafe. I came here to retrieve the book that was evidence for the assassination of Cameo Tully, an associate of Nebrin's, that endangered my client. What did you *think* I came here to do...?"

"... Kill... Luke Cornell?"

"Why would I do that, Rafe?"

"You suggested it-"

"I suggested we find ourselves a client who wanted him dead. I imagined that would not be hard for you."

"What, at *your* rates?" Rafe sneered. "Come on-"

"... Is that why you came here in a dress?" Aderyn blinked, then blinked again. "Oh my *god* you were trying to infiltrate the way I do."

"What?! No!" Beat. "Well, yes."

"And it didn't go how you expected."

"Not as such, no."

Aderyn patted Rafe on the cheek. "If it is any consolation, Rafe, you look lovely. I recommend you grow your hair out a little for next time, though. A ponytail isn't unmanly and you can turn it into a braid."

"Why... why would I want a *braid*?!"

Aderyn reached up behind her head, lifting her long braid at the end, then slid two fingers into the base – pulling free a thin leather scabbard, with a black-handled dagger. Tossing the dagger into Rafe's hands, she shook her head. "Now then. What *I've* come here to do is *done*. I didn't intend to choke every one of Luke Cornell's men, but you've added some flair to what should be a subtle theft."

"Think this'll stop him coming after Brother Fratarelli though?" Rafe asked. "I mean... really?"

"That isn't *actually* my concern, Rafe."

“Shouldn't it be?”

Aderyn stood firm. “Rafe, I want you to listen very carefully. I came here with a particular purpose that is orthogonal to the purpose you assumed. The correct course of action here is to *leave* and to ensure that we are not discovered, and deal with the Luke Cornell problem in its own time.”

“What the *fuck* does Orthogonal mean.”

“Please focus on the words you *did* understand, Rafe.”

Rafe rubbed his hand against his chin, wishing his bodice wasn't up so tight and high that he couldn't touch his throat like he normally did. When he drew them from his skin, his hands were balled into fists. “... We need to take out Luke Cornell tonight. And that might mean Nebrin, too, if he's bodyguarding the guy.”

“No.”

“Wait, what, why not?”

“I'm not being paid.”

“Is that it?! is THAT why?”

“I *am* a professional, Rafe.” Aderyn said, stepping past him. “Why *you* came here is not why *I* came here.”

She made it down the hall, and had her hand on the door before the words found courage enough to escape Rafe's lips. “... I came here because I was afraid for you. And because you're my friend.”

“And...”

“... Because I thought it'd be easy.”

“And it isn't, is it?”

“No, no, it's not. It's not easy being you.”

Turning around, Aderyn walked back to Rafe, and patted his shoulder. “For what it's worth, Rafe, you're not being me. You're being a girl, and yes, that is very hard indeed. Now then, if this *is* the best place to have this conversation, Rafe, I want you to know that I-”

“YOU BASTARDS,” bellowed Nebrin, as the far door *exploded* inwards in a hail of bullets and wood, and Rafe was running for the other door before his feet even had time to scream at him. Aderyn was already through the doorway by the time he leapt out, feet given wings by panic, reaching up as he went to catch on *anything* that might mean he didn't plunge into the river below.

For one long, aching moment, there was nothing under Rafe but sky, and he couldn't see Aderyn. The river stretched out below, the gulf between the narrow end of the boat and the high walls of the pavement yawning below him like the mouth of a dreadful, ink-black monster.

And then his fingers felt cable, somewhere hanging in the sky. Weight on metal line that wasn't meant for it, and it *snapped*. Rafe *swept* through the air in an arc, and the second-storey wall of the third-storey estate arced towards him with the force of a battering ram, diverted at the last moment into a window box full of shrubbery. Grunting and rolling, Rafe landed on a verandah, far above the party, tumbled through an open door, and *prayed* as much as a godless boy could pray that *holy shit I hope the dress is okay*.

Rafe was pretty confident he could handle Nebrin a second time, *if* he got the drop on him and *if* there was no chance anyone else got involved. Nebrin and that *cannon* he was carrying? *In a crowd?* Nebrin was the kind of fool who'd risk hurting strangers if it meant he hurt the hated.

Sitting up, Rafe looked down at his hands. The gloves were fine. They hadn't taken on any grime from the cable, which now dangled by the window frame, hanging low and gently swaying in the breeze. Looking back, Rafe allowed himself a moment of curiosity, a moment to see the criss-cross of those cables from one side of the estate to the other, before he realised he'd taken down a row of fluttering pennants, whipping in the evening breeze. Chances were, someone would come to investigate that – not to mention the *roar* of Nebrin's gun, over on the boat.

And he'd lost Aderyn.

Again.

Well.

Rafe stood up, and smoothed himself down. The heels under his skirt felt like icy nails in his feet, and the corset pushing into his sides didn't respect how deeply he wanted to breath – but he could do this. He was going to do this. The dress was, for now, intact. Luke Cornell was, for now, alive.

Gathering up his skirts in both hands, Rafe set himself a grim expression, and headed for the nearest hallway.

*

Whenever she found herself in these situations, parallel to Rafe, Aderyn couldn't help but wonder why Rafe always went *up*. It'd been that way in the Praefoco estate, too – she had very sensibly ducked *down* out of sight, and he had thrown himself into the rafters. Up was unpredictable, and the human eye *did*, to some extent, look vertical as it moved forwards. Duck down, duck under things. Perhaps Rafe felt that he didn't fit under things, or maybe it was his ego wanting to avoid being 'beneath notice.'

Hah, that would be silly.

Thoughts like these flew through Aderyn's mind as she flew down the side of the boat. Gravity gave her wings, but her hands caught posts, grips, the mounts for bells and the frames of windows while she arced and swept downwards. Nebrin was behind her, his gun was reloaded, and if he saw her, she was sure, he would unload that massive blunderbuss aimlessly into her direction. Aderyn was confident in her ability to deal with Nebrin personally, but dodging a cloud of metal seemed a solution to a problem she'd rather avoid occurring in the first place.

Landing on the deck wouldn't hide her; up at the third floor of the boat, the deck had very few hiding spaces. The trick was to put herself *under* something, or *behind* something. When the deck rose up to meet her, Aderyn had one hand out, her shoulders loose, and *rolled* with the impact. One hand caught the edge of the boat, and she flipped her weight up, and over it. The other hand hooked out, catching the edge of the gangway, and held there, swinging her up like a spider underneath it.

Hanging as she was, she could look up and see her braid, dangling a little closer to the surface of the river than she'd like. It was night, with the moon up high, but the river wasn't reflecting that light. The river was black, a dull blackness with faint bubbles of white, sudsy foam clinging to the very edge of the boat, where it rested on the river. Probably pine tar, mixed with some oil, to give the water a dark cast around the lock, and mask the smell. Not uncommon – and the smear would be washed away by morning. It *would*, however, stain quite badly.

Holding herself in place, toes in soft fabric shoes hooked over the edges, Aderyn waited, as still as she could for the inevitable swear. Nebrin was not a very bright man, she could tell. While Rafe was right to fear the man as a bully, he wasn't the kind of bully who learned how to be properly vicious. Further, that missing eye was *quite* the challenge to overcome with only two weeks of time to do it. It would be a matter of moments before –

“Fuck it!” she heard the yell, the slam of a door, as Nebrin stormed back into the boat, to make his way down to her level, down to the gangway and continue his search for her.

A heartbeat later, enough to be sure, and she swept her weight back up onto the gangplank, stood on the pathway by the side of the riverboat, and checked the book. Such a large tome – almost as big as her chest – was going to be unwieldy to move at the best of times. The straps she'd brought to secure it fit just fine, though.

Luke Cornell had had a lovely library, full of remarkable old books. Some of them she'd never heard of, with titles full of strange, fantastic words like *The Modern Prometheus* or cryptic names for central characters like *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hide*. Books with tell-tale water damage around the edges, things that had the sign that they'd been dredged up from somewhere, somewhere forgotten, rather than the volumes, crisp and clear, resting on the shelves up in the Assassins guild library.

It was a little bit of a shame. Burglary wasn't her job, but perhaps sometime she could return to the boat, treat it as a hobby – examine those books a bit more.

Just as Aderyn was about to move on, to find Rafe, a figure emerged from the party, dressed in green and brown and white, with a veiled hat on her head. Ah, Cornell's daughter. While most of the partygoers within the building could be seen drifting restlessly, Xenops was moving with purpose. When she saw Aderyn, standing by the gangway to the boat, she lunged forwards, with no weapon, nor skill to hurt her. One hand clutched at Aderyn's arm, and through the veil, Aderyn saw the glimmer of eyes that were dark of colour, but bright with emotion.

“Ah, Mademoiselle Assassin,” the girl said, holding Aderyn's arm with nervous strength. “I – wait.” She blinked, and peered so close at Aderyn, looking from her collar to her crown, then peered deep into her eyes. “Ah... oh.” Her eyes widened suddenly and she leant in, her lips an O.

“There are *two* of you?”

Well, Aderyn considered, in this particular environment, there were a number of noble targets acting in what they considered safety for no particular purpose. It was, in her mind, a target-rich environment, where if Aderyn had had the contract, she could have killed almost anyone. Really, for a city with an Assassins' Guild, people were just *not* prepared for assassinations. Statistically, however, Aderyn knew very few other active assassins. Which meant that she *almost certainly* was talking about *Rafe*.

Well!

Aderyn *could* improvise, if she had to! "Yes," she answered, in a heartbeat. "You have met my associate?"

"Ah..." Mint-green gloved hands closed around Aderyn's hands, as she tried to turn her, tried to move past politely. "Forgive me. I am preparing to make flight from my faszeire. Please, do not let me delay you – I am just trying to get to my faszeire's library."

"Oh?" Aderyn turned, looking over her shoulder at the boat, and steadfastly refusing to be moved. "Oh! Oh, you're Xenops?"

"Ah! Ah, oui, She told you about me?"

"No." Aderyn said. The book on her shoulder was heavy. Why would she have to learn about Xenops Cornell from Rafe? She'd had *two weeks* to plan this theft. Seventeen year old girl, daughter of Luke Cornell and Zapata Dewitt. Vitiligo, bilingual, probably bisexual, one hundred and seventy cims tall, forty-five keegs in weight. Most recent dressmakers' commission put her measurements at eighty-five-sixty-eighty-five cims, and her dresses were most often chosen in pale shades of green. Like this one. How in the world would she have obtained any of *that* information by asking *Rafe*. Really, people did not have *any* appreciation for the work she did.

"Um, ah –well, you see," Xenops said, stepping to the side, and into Aderyn. Why did people *try* that. Goodness. "I, um, I was planning on making my escape in, um, in case it does not *work out*," she managed, gesturing at the boat. "And I wanted sze book my moszeire left me."

Aderyn stepped to the side again, her steps in time with Xenops'. Blinking when Xenops did, she considered her options. "Ah, well, the library is currently unlocked."

"Oh." Xenops cleared her throat a little awkward. "May I... please... move past?"

About time. People really should pay better attention to the rules. "Of course," Aderyn said, stepping aside and hoisting the book on her shoulder as Xenops hurried past, onto the boat she'd lived on for what was probably the last time. What a lovely young lady.

Stepping off the sidewalk, Aderyn slid off to the side. Unlike Rafe, *she* was not dressed for a party. Of course, a bit of flair could cover that little sin, but here, the women were dressed *quite* extravagantly – she couldn't rely on the perception of Lleywans as bumpkins to carry her like she had at the Praefoco party. If she was to blend, well, she'd have needed a dress like Rafe's dress, which would also limit her legs, not to mention the way heels would interfere with a climb. Also it would clash with her belt.

Thus, the party was *out*.

Fortunately, there were always alternatives. When people partied downstairs, they rarely looked upstairs. Rafe was upstairs, too, but he was also *moving*. The estate wasn't very remarkable for homes along the Benjamin Court – chances are it had been designed with a series of hallways with smaller rooms spreading off it on all sides, and a stairwell at each end. It was a workmanlike design, something that the people who bought it could call *classic* and that Aderyn could appreciate for its mathematical simplicity. It was like dividing up a box.

Rafe probably didn't know that, but Rafe *did* know to avoid a room when he could run down a hall. Also he probably wouldn't be climbing outside the building – as Aderyn started, hopping from the sidewalk to a post designed to hold coiled rope. Still, the boy had an instinct for *up*. While Aderyn would normally head downwards, to the servant's quarters, and slip out through the bottom of the lock, Rafe would *probably* head upwards. That seemed to be one of his rules.

Gripping the brickwork tight with fingers practiced at lifting weapons, lifting coins, and lifting her entire body, Aderyn pulled herself vertically, a slow, steady climb. It was like the tower back during her exam, all those weeks ago, except this time, she had to avoid windows. A shame, really – window-frames had such *useful* hand-holds.

*

Climbing buildings was so calming. Not that Aderyn was *particularly* bothered at the moment – after all, she had the book, her obligation was fulfilled, and she had stolen a few tasty snacks from the party when they were setting up. It had really been quite an easy, good night, though the planning stages had perhaps taken too long.

Cornell had a strangely false impression to the world. While his vessel was clearly heavily secured, it wasn't impossible to enter and scout around. His office had been *somewhat* risky, when he was around; the man barely spent more than two minutes away from it at a time, or with someone posted in the room to do some task or another. While Nebrin and Cornell were the two main people who spent their time in that top storey, there was still some foot traffic.

Why not just wait for the party? It wasn't *really* any difficulty, after all. Then she could sweep in, deal with any guard while she knew it wasn't going to be found quickly, and take the book.

A window slipped past her side. The door was closed, so no look into a hallway. Still, if she had timed it right –

The door swung open for a moment. Rafe looked in, his expression frustrated, and slammed just as quickly. Well, she was on the right *track*, at least.

Returning to her climb, Aderyn rested her heels atop the windowframe. Bushes and arches and elaborate structures – the entire inside courtyard was designed for an aesthetic, rather than for security. Oh, there were metal crowns on the inside walls – but what were they going to do to stop someone like her? They'd discourage... what, athletic children? But here she was, clambering up the side of the building.

Somewhere in Aderyn's coolly analytical mind, she was sure that there was an explanation for why a city with a school for assassins seemed to be so apathetic to the existence of assassins. Perhaps there was an economy for them. Perhaps assassinations were expected? None of her schoolwork had featured statistics on just how much money one could expect to *earn* as an assassin – there was just the price sheet, which had been taught in one class as a historical curio.

The rooftop under her fingertips, Aderyn curled a leg underneath her and unfolded smoothly. A guard was walking down the path, away from her. A few steps past and she was in the lee of the building, hiding in a shadow while she counted segments on the roof. Drifting between the movements of the patrolling guards like a ghost, Aderyn did some swift math.

Rafe was reasonably efficient and quick; he was panicky, but when panicking he was rarely *stupid*. And if she had the read of the house *right*, he'd be coming up through the attic exit any... moment...

“Aderyn!”

... Oh dear.

Chapter 14

When Rafe swung the door open, it was with a loud bang. Loud enough that the guard patrolling the other side of the door whirled around to get his attention – and that's when she watched Rafe *act*. He *leapt* on the man, knee hitting him squarely in the solar plexus, all of his weight plunging down on the man through Rafe's hand on his throat. Pinned to the floor, Rafe kneeling on his chest, the brown-haired boy leant down and in, on his elbow, until the man underneath him wasn't struggling any more...

... but not long enough to kill him.

Probably!

"Hello, Rafe," Aderyn greeted him, as was proper. Stepping out of the shadows, Aderyn gestured down to the boat. "Did you consider that you might be better off heading back down into the party?"

Rafe was flush pink in the cheeks, his hair a tousled mess. Still, despite it, he'd managed to keep that dress in impeccable shape, really – it was fulgent and well-set, and even had been measured properly to his waist. Had Rafe always been that androgynous about the hips? Aderyn normally noticed that kind of detail, but Rafe's clothing had always bunched up around his middle. That monk robe in particular – maybe he was a bit shy about being built that way?

Or perhaps he was just cold?

Most people were pleasantly open with everything, even if they didn't realise it. Rafe was annoyingly not. It was quite bothersome.

All those thoughts took *just* about as much time as Rafe did to catch up with her very reasonable suggestion – and the word, "Uhhh-"

"Yes, I didn't think so." breathe, don't say everything all at once. "Shall we climb down, now?"

"STOP. RIGHT. THERE."

Oh *bother*.

Through the same door Rafe had used, the one-eyed man named 'Nebrin' – formerly of Bottle Street, thirty eight years old, several major injuries in his lifetime, and over twenty-seven years working for Luke Cornell, not counting the many months moonlighting as a money changer for Praefoco – stormed, waving a four-barrelled, wooden-housed doorbuster rifle. "Alright, you two."

Nebrin turned his head and hollered over his shoulder to a guard. Ah. Not a *threat*. He kept the gun trained on the pair even as he called. "Hey! You! Go downstairs, fetch Luke Cornell! The Sinner, yeah!"

Rafe was still, and leaving him behind *would* mean coming up the side of the building would be a waste of time. Oh well. There was some... positioning. Some jockeying. He moved forwards; Rafe

moved back. He pointed the gun at Aderyn, pointing the butt low at her midsection, then stepped back and to the side. They couldn't make it to the door without going through him, which *probably* meant he felt he had power.

"Gunna enjoy when the boss gives the word on you," he said, hoisting the gun against his hip, resting it there. It was a heavy weapon – obviously. It'd torn a wall out of the houseboat, after all. While running, he might have been able to reload it with new cylinders, if he was deft and knew the location reasonably well.

Aderyn was very confident neither were true. Nebrin had the look about him of a wall of muscle, a man who had never had to learn care as long as he'd had power. Someone *else* was the deft direction for his mass.

"You two got a lot of nerve," he said, talking, *talking*, always *talking*. Why did people *bother*? It never seemed to *do* anything, just expose all sorts of weaknesses. "Don't know who you're protecting for a pair of silver candlesticks, but the boss isn't the kind of man who's *kind* about bein' denied."

"Candlesticks." Rafe said, and what was that thing about his tone. So hard to pick out those details.

"Yeah. The candlesticks from Tully's place. The ones the priest had."

Rafe put his hands on his forehead, and drew in a long sigh. That meant *tangible exasperation*, but also that Rafe wanted to *tell* you that. Rafe had tells. Briefly, Aderyn felt a surge of pride at that. After all, Rafe felt nobody understood him, which meant understanding him was a little secret. Still, there *was* a man with a gun and that probably meant something to Rafe.

"Just... two silver candlesticks, and... Fratarelli had them?"

"The priest at Connaught had 'em." Nebrin narrowed his eyes, glaring at Rafe closely. Ripple in his throat. He didn't even really notice Aderyn. There was *something* about Rafe that was bothering him, but he couldn't work out what it was.

"Hang on," Rafe cleared his throat, adjusting his dress, and waving a finger at Nebrin. "This is about a pair of silver candlesticks? From Connaught?"

"I just **said**," Nebrin's gun swung at Rafe, in part because he seemed to actually care about it. The boy in pink leaned back, which was *silly*, since if it went off, it'd kill him even if he was leaning backwards. The trick would be to prevent Nebrin from firing it, which was *very* easy.

Rafe on the other hand, was confrontational, even with the muzzle of a box-like brown wall-wrecker waved at him. "They're on the fucking *roof*. Where I *left* them. When I killed the goddamn priest."

"You *did* kill the priest?" Aderyn asked, interrupting Nebrin's response. That didn't make sense. Brother Fratarelli had been quite adamant that Rafe was lying about the murders, *and* Rafe was quite competent at killing people. Three incompetent murders seemed unreasonable.

"Yes!" Rafe said, throwing his hands up in exasperation. "I killed the priest! Why does nobody believe me *except a judge?!*"

“Well, it's just not how that sort of story goes, you know.” Aderyn offered, in his idiom. “You know. About the cute boy with a heart of gold who's just misunderstood.”

“Heart of gold?” Nebrin laughed hard enough to shake the gun.

“Cute boy?!” Rafe shouted.

“Wait, boy?!” Nebrin's awareness snapped back. “Hang on, you're a fa-”

“I'm a *what?*” Rafe sneered, closing his fists.

“You're a – you're a fuckin' *guy*, in that dress?” Nebrin said, swinging the gun up high and bellowing as the fireworks burst overhead. “You two are – I'm- *fuck it*,” he growled. “You're going to stay *right here* until the boss gets here.”

Rafe tilted his head, trying to make eye contact with Aderyn. She was going to have to talk to him about using his peripherals. For all that he had quite a bit of natural talent, *nobody* seemed to have taught him to hide information from his opponents.

“Oi, Aderyn,” Rafe said.

“Yes?”

“That, uh, that's Luke Cornell coming?”

“Yes. He just mentioned. Your point?”

“I found us a client?”

“Oh. Well, that *does* change things. What's the rate?”

“Wait, you don't care *who?*”

“Right now, I don't imagine you should care either.”

“HEY!” Nebrin bellowed, waved his gun between them. “Am I *boring* you?”

“Yes,” Aderyn said, putting her hand on the gun barrel and pointing over at Rafe calmly. “How much?”

“Does that *matter?*” he blurted, staring down at the gun now.

“Of course it matters. It matters because there need to be *rules*. I'm an *assassin*, not a murderer.”

Shock swung the gun without resistance, because Nebrin wasn't expecting anyone to react to the firearm like that. Why would he? Nebrin was the kind of person who didn't ever bring *his own* power to bear. Someone – almost certainly Cornell – had broken the bully.

“Five pounds.”

“*Hey!*” Nebrin bellowed, thumping his hand into the stock of his gun, swinging it *back* to Aderyn, while Rafe visibly relaxed. “*Gun* here.”

“Yes, but you're not going to fire it.”

“... you wanna bet?”

And *then*, Rafe sneered. “Don't try her. Not you. You're not the guy who tries her.”

Strange.

Nebrin's one eye narrowed, and he glared at the princess-dressed boy, lunging forwards, ramming the gun against his chest. And there it was. Rafe didn't lean back. Rafe knew what Aderyn knew the second she'd first seen Nebrin. “Listen to me, you *fa-*”

And then Rafe slapped him. Short. Sharp. Instantaneous, reaching along the length of the gun. As if nothing had happened, he rested one elbow on the gun, and turned to Aderyn. “Five pounds for Luke Cornell. Client's confidential.”

“*what,*” Nebrin's voice was almost a whisper, *tangibly stunned.*

“Five pounds?” Aderyn considered it for a long moment, tilting her head back while she thought, in the same manner Rafe liked. Communicating to him his mental image of 'thought.' It *was* a very low rate. On the other hand, he *was* a danger to an existing client. And her window of time to make a decision was very small.

The door handle behind Nebrin turned, and the door swung open. Luke Cornell stepped forwards, into the glimmering light of the firework display. One hand held up, he was half-way through clearing his throat. Mouth open, he prepared to bellow-

“Deal,” Aderyn said.

- and Luke Cornell slumped down, tumbling backwards into the building again. Rafe looked at her with wide eyes, his mouth slack. That made sense. Aderyn had taken the knife from him that she'd loaned him only a few minutes beforehand – tucked into the back of his dress. Nebrin looked shocked, too, because he thought he had all that power in his gun. And of course, it stood to reason that Luke Cornell would look shocked, before the door swung close again, because he had the handle of a knife jutting out of his mouth. A single straight line, over that kind of distance? Very easy. Everyone was surprised, but that was sensible and coherent, and Aderyn turned back to Rafe.

“You already have the payment, right?”

“...You, I- did you just-I-” Rafe managed.

“Yes. Now, do you have the payment?”

Rafe adapted remarkably quickly. “Yeah, in my uh, bustle?”

“That's around the back and you're not wearing one.”

“Um, around the back, in the uh,”

“Your corsetry?” Aderyn added, her peripheral vision taking in the clenching of a fist and the drawing of Nebrin's breath and from his blind spot on his bad side, she swung her foot up into the underside

of the gun, slinging its barrel upwards *just in time*, because *then* the gun discharged, and Rafe was ducking one way while Aderyn ducked backwards. Nebrin had found the courage to pull the trigger.

“You *FUCKERS!*” Nebrin hollered, swinging his gun around, a chamber rotating to bring the next huge charge of shot to bear. “You- you- I- You *FUCKERS!*”

Huh.

Aderyn reflected that she had just killed the man that had half-blinded Nebrin. Shouldn't he be behaving gratefully? Oh well. People so often behaved unreasonably. He swung the gun around towards Rafe again as he dived to a chimney. The explosion struck the brickwork, and in a shower of white and brown, Rafe disappeared. Nebrin swung the gun back around, and, close as she was to the edge, Aderyn had to make a decision.

If she lunged forwards, she could attack Nebrin. After all, he *had* started something. On the other hand, she hadn't been paid for *him*, and that would be free work. If she lunged backwards, she could escape down the building... *if*. *If*. If she was willing to dive into the river.

Stepping back, Aderyn slid her arms up behind her head, gripping the book in both hands. As she arced through the air, she turned, looking down for the right location to drop the evidence – and spotted the punt.

It was one long, beautiful, smooth arc through the sky.

The book arced down, spine-first. Aderyn could watch it, as she turned and dived through the air. A monstrous explosion followed her, well high of where she was – because a man with one eye could not judge distances properly – and the book went down before her. When it hit the punt, she almost imagined she *heard* it – a crisp, loud, *thwack* –

- which only proceeded the churning *slosh* of water closing around her by a moment. A moment enough, though – Fratarelli and Kivis were watching her dive, her perfect swallow form from three storeys up, as she *slid* into the water, fingertips first.

As the priest and the knight leant over the edge of the punt, the teeming black water seemed for too long a moment to have won. Nobody went into the water. Nobody dared. Brother Fratarelli hesitated, his hands not quite breaking the surface. Kivis was much less hesitant – sweeping her hand down into the water, feeling around by the bottom of the punt, groping in the darkness for the woman she'd saw disappear.

Then Aderyn burst free from the water on the opposite side. Momentarily graceful, her arm flailed out and caught the side of the punt – behind her – before turning into a white-knuckle death-grip. Pulling with the force that had propelled her up clocktowers and palisades, her white garb streaked black with the thick, viscous fluid, her other hand caught the punt as well. Kivis had her hand before she was half-turned.

It was the tiniest of moments, as Aderyn saw the hand coming towards her, the hands of Kivis – and then, the moment was passed, and she grabbed them in turn. *Not a threat*. The two women strained for only a moment, and Aderyn hauled over the edge of the boat, slumping onto her hands and knees on the floor of the punt. With her braid drawn black and brown thanks to the muddy wash of

the water, she put her hands on her cheeks, and *dragged* at the glob of fluid there, splattering it down on the floor. Then, and only then, with her nose and mouth clear, did she *gasp* for breath, a loud, wet sound as she pushed her hair back from her face and struggled to breathe.

The priest was next to her, offering some consolation by rubbing her back, trying to hold her hair back, which was nice, if, somewhat unhelpful. The old man wailed soppily as he rubbed her back, sounding on the verge of tears. “Aderyn! Oh Aderyn, you’re okay, oh, goodness, I’m so- my prodigal daughter, who was lost, is found!”

Aderyn coughed up black sludge as she hunkered forwards on the wooden planks of the boat. “That’s... not what... prodigal means.”

“Rafe’s fine?” Kivis asked, looking up at the outlines on the top of the building.

Aderyn straightened up. *Control* was important. When the mask was knocked aside, it was important to *put it back in place* as soon as possible. Just like riding a pony, back home. Straight and tall, she turned and followed Kivis’ gaze, at the bell of pink lace and silk that drifted and swirled around the rooftop.

The fastest route down the side of the building – well, the fastest one *after* the one that Aderyn had taken – was to dive headlong along one awning, catch the post over the third arch, swing on that to lose momentum, hit the wall of the larger arch outside, and skid downwards. That route was not an option for anyone in high heels, and as best she could guess, Rafe *knew* it.

If he was *smart* he’d drop down, through that awning and let the bushes catch the dress, absorb most of the fall, and roll with it. Sure, he’d have to sprint across the quad in his underpants, but -

Kivis laughed next to her. Rafe jumped, showing a mass of white petticoats and – well, that sort of faithfulness to a disguise wasn’t *strictly* necessary, was it? But maybe Rafe had his reasons. No reason to be judgmental.

He wasn’t leaping towards the bushes, though – he had one arm outstretched, catching the tether that strung across the quad. Why the *devil* was he trying for that? It was only going to arc him down onto the top of the *boat* and-

The fireworks tied to the line burst, and Rafe was soaring, buoyed only a tiny bit by the skirts. It looked very impressive, for the moment it lasted, but then he vanished behind the smokestack atop it. Well, he’d be running across that in just a moment, rolling with the impact, and...

Hm.

“He’s not moving.” Kivis said. “Fratarelli!”

“Aum!” The priest managed, helpfully, as he swung the punt around. “Um, um – where’s his coat?”

“What?” Kivis asked, grabbing the oars and pulling *hard* through the muck. “Hngh, it’s like *tar*.”

“His coat! He came in wearing a robe over him! If he’s hurt, wrap him up in it so he doesn’t have to move!”

"If I get on that *boat*," Kivis threatened.

Aderyn looked at the pair, then took the cloth on the ground. She wasn't being paid for this. But Rafe *was*... something. He wasn't nothing. There was that poem that she wanted to understand. And he *had* been very helpful with Praefoco, not to mention the silver candlesticks.

There was still a pain in her chest when she slung the cloak over herself. Hitting the water, even as narrowly as she had, put enormous pressure on her fast. In that moment of darkness, she'd been almost to the bottom, eyes closed tight to try and preserve them. Breathing in she still took in that scent of trees grown *kayem* and *kayem* away. Smearing Rafe with muck wouldn't likely help if he was seriously hurt, though. The stout wool of the cloak – more of the monk's robes. "Point at the boat." Cool, simple orders. Let people know *someone was in control*.

"What?" Brother Fratarelli said, turning and looking over his shoulder. "We need to approach the sid—"

People were *far* too easily surprised. When he turned to look at her, her moment was there. Bounding forwards, she bunched her arms up under her chest. One step. Two steps. Three steps, off the prow of the little boat, foot came down for the next step into mid-air, and her arms *shot* out to catch the lip of the boat. Momentum brought up her feet, and *four* steps.

The boat was moving. That was a bit of a surprise. Hadn't Rafe choked *everyone* on this boat?

No time to check. No time to think about it. Leaving black footprints, Aderyn raced up the side of the boat. Bells clanged in her wake, while the boat's wake started to foam. Somewhere behind her, she could hear yelling – Brother Fratarelli was trying to pull the punt out of the boat's path. Made some sense, after all, the boat would probably crush the punt against the wall, certainly with the momentum it was gathering.

Behind the stack, Rafe was on the floor, which was also the roof. Curled up in a ball, with the dress billowing out around his hips. Not still, but quiet – only when she drew close did she hear the chattering grunt of pain, the laboured breath. He wasn't swearing, though, which was strange. Rafe liked to swear. Well, Rafe swore quite readily. Maybe he had to? Well, he did things that didn't make much sense, sometimes. "Rafe?"

"Hngh," he answered. "The f... you...?" he slowly started to sit up – then faltered.

"Did Nebrin shoot you?" Aderyn asked, feeling her freshly-browned hair bobbing while she bent down to lift him.

"Missed me. Hit the fn... hit the chimney. Lungful of the dust though." And a headful, too – the boy's hair was white as a sheet, covered entirely with thick, chalky dust. "Don't worry 'bout... hn. Him."

"Oh, you killed him?"

Rafe winced as he reached up for her hand. "Help me up."

"No," Aderyn said, bending forwards. Putting her head forwards, she ducked under his hand, and slid her arms underneath his legs and back. Lifting easily, she was struck by how little of Rafe there *was*.

Under the spit and anger, the swear words and the classist resentment, Rafe wasn't nearly as big as he seemed to be.

“Come on.” And while he protested with his face, his arms slid around her neck and held there while she ran the length of the roof. The temporarily-blonde temporary princess' temporary dress billowed as she leapt-

The boat was moving but she didn't see anyone near the wheel when she flit by its window, which suggested that whoever had moved the boat had done so without any intention of steering it. The library wasn't a very big one, even though it was quite nice, and maybe a large sack could carry most of what it contained, if you were willing to let all of Luke Cornell's financial records go.

landed-

The chambers inside the boat were full of air, with the doors closed, but when the boat hit the hard wall it did so with enough speed to shake everything. Doors thrown open, engine room suddenly awash with heat and ignition, and sudden pathways for furnaces full of heat to blast free.

-leapt again-

Somewhere behind her, Aderyn accepted that the boat's movement had stopped, that it had struck the opposite wall of the river, broken moorings and all, that the fireworks Rafe had pulled down were burning wood up above, and the world behind her was in one single instant probably nothing but a wall of incandescent flames, but it was a moment she could not spare to look. To her, it was just a warm push behind her.

and landed on the punt.

“Dashing.” Kivis said, dryly, as she hauled her arms. “We staying?”

“No.” Aderyn said, setting down Rafe as gingerly as he could. “I'll speak with my client later.”

The punt scudded along the surface as swiftly as a shadow, away from the burning wake of every last thing that had meant anything to the King of the River.

*

The church seemed more welcoming, somehow, to Rafe. Brother Fratarelli was through the door straight away, off to the kitchen to prepare tea. Something about bread rolls, too. The room was dusty, after only a few weeks left alone, but the pews were still piled up by the sides of the room, little nooks to sit in. When Rafe shuffled onwards, to the corner of the room, he noticed something hanging on the door to the dining room.

“What's that?” Rafe asked, squinting at the little tool, metal and wood, as he tugged off his high heels and felt his toes *slowly* relax in the air.

“A boathook.” Kivis said plainly.

“Why do you have a boathook?”

“Boathook emergencies.”

“What... what the hell is a boathook emergency?”

Kivis adjusted her gauntlets as she watched the boy sag on a pew. “What do you have?”

“I daresay, if it's alright by everyone else, I'd rather like to have a long bath.” Aderyn murmured, walking in behind them. With the last of the pine tar from the river running through her hair, she looked like a particularly inverted style of hair; dark at the tips, brunette at the tops. With his own hair still white, Rafe wondered if a bath might do *him* some good, too.

Maybe once his ribs weren't hurting so *damn* much.

Kivis took her seat next to him on the pew, and without a word of warning, started to feel his wrists and his shoulders, listening for his reactions. Which mostly were profane and loud.

“Quiet, you're in a church.” Kivis grumbled.

“Christ, stop, uh, wow, ugh-”

“These are probably broken, you know-”

“Hngh. Probably... christ, just – gimme a minute.”

“A minute? It'll take longer than that for them to heal.”

“I mean...” Rafe drew a long breath, his head back against the pew. “I need to get out of this dress. And these shoes. And the... uh... other things.”

“If you need a *hand* with those other things, Rafe-”

“*I think I am fine.*” he held up a hand.

“You wore them because I convinced you. It was, in a little bit my fault.”

“I don't care.” he growled.

“You act like you don't care, but you do.” her voice misted against the inside of her helmet. Couldn't see her eyes. That always unnerved Rafe. He didn't know if he was being watched. And worse, he didn't know if she meant *care about the clothes* or something more.

“And you act like you care, but you *don't*,” he spat back, just as pain *arced* up his leg and into the well of his hip. Those *shoes*. “Fu-”

“Wrong.” Kivis said, yanking on the corset ties to pull them undone. The muscles of his back squealed in Rafe's head in protest.

“Well why the fuck should you care about a stranger?”

“I'm afraid I don't understand the question.” Kivis said, as she continued freeing him – delicately – from his pink prison.

Chapter 15

The journey from the Holy Land to Tiber could be, in Vince's mind, an outline curling around the edge of the sea and up along the coastline. They'd cut across a few places, but travelling as quickly as they could took a circuitous route. If they wanted to push through Gallia, they'd have to travel across a coastline that was owned by the Gallians and patrolled by the Djansk. Easier, Yull had argued, to travel to Gibraltar, head north through Hemulkar – he seemed quite comfortable with the people and the language – and board a vessel from the northern coast due for Tiber. Tradeships went through there all the time, from the Ivory cape far to the south – and it wasn't hard to board on there.

The circle route seemed a little slow to Vince's practical mind. Rails ran all the way to the border of Gallia, through barbarian-owned territory. It was faster to escape the whole system by horseback, but as they drew closer to Tiber, they'd taken a slightly slower route.

Sometimes, when he thought about the map – in the hazy way that Vince was sure everyone thought about maps – he liked to imagine all the little campfires they'd left, on the way. There hadn't been any time they slept indoors – they always rode too long and far for that. A line of campfires, dotted across the horizon, one after another.

Vince thought these thoughts, sitting and staring into a campfire, looking at the empty bedroll before him, with the little metal writing desk. The bedroll next to him, where the very bottom was never moved by Leigh's short legs. The bedroll next to that, just a little bit closer than before, which had patches and marks on it from a campaign as long as Vince's entire education. And across from that, the bedroll that touched his at the corner – just the tiniest touch, in the subtlest way, and that normally would make him smile – which was its own colour, brown instead of grey-green.

"When we say we buy time, law, we normally buy it with blood." Words that echoed in Vince's mind while he tried to sit still and breathe shallowly. Those words were from his first day in the trenches, back when the General had lectured the troops, scourging them against desertion. Deserters were very bad, quite a problem. On the other hand, those details were hazy. He couldn't really remember his shoes or his clothes or the scent of that trench, when he stood, listening in the burning sun to that speech. Details around him *now* were important. Concentrating was important, too. Falling asleep would be dangerous, he was fairly sure. He'd read that somewhere.

It hurt too much to move, but the writing desk glimmered in the light. The dancing fire against its frame reminded him just how much he *hadn't* been doing on this trip. Every time they were still, Yull was writing. Whenever they stopped at any town for supplies, he had a letter to hand over, and some instructions – brief or not – to put that letter on the main lines.

Vince had never been one for sending letters, when he lived with his parents. Since being shipped out, he saw the appeal but had still not adopted the practice.

Bleeding slightly onto his clothes, aching from the throat down, Vince had a slightly greater appreciation for them, and hoped a great deal he'd have the opportunity to send one to his parents, sometime. Maybe even sometime soon. His arm ached, even though it was just sitting across his midsection and applying pressure, and he wondered if the heat he felt on his elbow was from some blood.

Probably didn't want to tell his mother about this in a letter. It would be quite depressing, what with the stains on the paper. And she wouldn't want to upset General Yull by touching his writing supplies without permission.

Would he write to his mother about the thing they saw in the river as they rode north through Hemulkar? It was certainly a thing that had happened. They'd been riding along the deep dirt roads that cut north through the country, and one of the riverbanks had slowly shifted and moved. At first, Vince had only seen it in the corner of his vision – but Stannisfeld and Leigh had reacted to it, and he turned to look. Leigh had sworn – and Stannisfeld had put a hand on his chest, stopping him from riding forward. Maybe should write to his mother about the concern that showed.

Probably not, though, she, uh, she might not want to find out about that. That way.

After her swear, Leigh had managed a smothered, "What the hell *is* that?"

"A Tyrant." Gael said. It was uncanny, to look between her and Yull – neither he nor her were in the slightest bit bothered by the sight of it. While Leigh seemed to want to shrink into her shadow, and Vince kept glancing at Stannisfeld – you know, in case he ran – the two veterans just *looked* at it.

The creature was enormous, easily twice as tall at its hips as Yull was at the shoulder. The underside of it was a thick, leathery strata of criss-crossed texture. Each of its legs were wide as bollard, planted flat on the sloughed dirt, but spread wide enough that it didn't sink. While its legs and hips were wide, its midsection was almost round, like an enormous ball, with a long tail jutting out the back and angled slightly upwards. Perhaps it had some sort of bone shaping it that way – which seemed at odds with its long, boneless neck.

Once as a child, Vince had seen a skeleton in the museum, visiting with his parents of a crocodile. Long, low river creatures, their bodies had made sense to him. They didn't raise their heads very high, so they could make a very big head and fill it with teeth. This creature, whatever it was, had a head much like the crocodile, except it was almost an em and a half long on its own – and it sat at the end of a long, sinuous neck. Upon its back was a light fuzz, looking like the whole creature had been left to grow mouldy – and in its hands it held a sloppy mass of tangled river-weed, stained red by the results of its ferocious tearing.

"I... I've never seen anything like that before."

"Really? Not even on the campaign?" Yull mused.

"We, uh, we rode the trains out."

"Ah, arses to that." Yull shook his head. "Slow if you're moving light."

"General," Stannisfeld murmured, very low, "Are we avoiding making any sudden movements because it might attack us?"

"What?" The huge man turned in his saddle to look the messenger in the face. "Oh, bloody hell, come now. It's a river scavenger. Great big idiots. They're not the really nasty ones. You want something to be scared of, look at the hookfeet or the hammerjaws. Those big beasts are militarised these days, after all. This is just a scavenger. River beastie, really. Come on now."

Leigh was the last in line, looking up at the creature as they turned down the road. “Why don’t we have anything like that uh, back home?”

“Because we killed them all,” Gael growled, focusing on her horse’s ears. “As cities rise, lions fall.”

“Huh?”

“Tiber’s a tiny island-” Gael began.

“It’s huge! There’s, like, Hadrian and Lleywa there as well.” Stannisfeld said.

“Quiet you, you’re from Djansk. You can fit Djansk in a backyard.” Leigh interrupted.

Gael cleared her throat and geed her horse. “Thing is, tiny island. People built places to live, and we hunted everything big. Pretty sure the biggest thing that can bite you on land in Tiber is, what, a badger?”

Yull laughed at that, leaning over and nudging Gael. When they’d started the ride, he’d been at the fore; then at the back. Now here in these muddy roads, he’d slot in alongside them. “She had Tyrants at the siege of Ranthelm, you know? Ten hundred law all lined up-”

Gael burst out laughing, “Oh, yeah, riding on the backs of Hammerjaws? The ones that can’t hear gunfire. You kinda can’t fire guns on them, so you just steered your beast into people and they *eat them.*”

On his left, Leigh shuddered, and on his right, Stannisfeld blanched. Vince hoped he did both, but couldn’t be sure of either. Skeletons in glass cases, lit by pressured tubes, in museum displays flit through his mind – amazing and enormous.

“I think I prefer the cities,” he murmured, as they rode on.

“Engineer.” Leigh sneered.

Conversations? Should he sent stories back about the kinds of conversations they’d been having on the travel? It was more interesting than playing counting games out of the window of the train, even if they were a bit rare. In that long wending line of campfires and trails between them, it seemed only a matter of time before the silence became unbearable, and someone would chatter. A little bit of conversation, tiny snatches of remembered chatter. *Those* might interest mother. Like the time Leigh had asked:

“What does law mean anyway?”

“Means ‘hand,’ in Lleywan,” Yull had said, with the faint reproach in his voice as if that *should* be common knowledge.

“You call all of us your hands?” Leigh probed again, horse clattering away underneath her.

“Used to use the word ‘sword’ – but we use too many rifles these days. Plenty of soldiers don’t even use their swords any more.”

“But don’t most generals say ‘men’?” Leigh went on.

“Most generals do a lot of things,” Yull shrugged, scratching his beard with one gloved hand.

“I like it,” Gael volunteered. “It’s why I follow him.”

“I thought you followed your wallet.”

Gael shrugged. “My wallet chooses the direction.” She laughed. “But I like a leader who can respect me.”

Leigh grumbled about that. It wasn’t a very punchy anecdote. Maybe his mother would prefer a story which wasn’t as ... pointless? Almost certainly, he couldn’t tell his mother about *that* conversation Gael and Leigh had had. The wet one, with the yelling.

It’d been near a lake. Normally, chances to bathe were few and far between, so of the morning, when the general was at a nearby town buying some food, with Stannisfeld, the girls had slipped down to the lake and bathed. Vince had mentioned going as well – until they pointed out to him that they weren’t comfortable bathing around a man, and that they didn’t want to leave the camp unattended. Vince couldn’t exactly fight that he was, in fact, a man, even if a pair of bathing women was somewhere deep down on his list of priorities.

They were gone for many fifteen minutes when the yelling had started. Then silence. When they came back, it was after almost twenty minutes. Whatever they’d talked about, they came back with an uneasy air between the two of them, looking side to side and *not* at one another. Gael’s red hair was piled up atop her head, still, from the bath, and Leigh’s shorter bob was wet all through.

Before they made it to the camp site, though, Leigh stopped short. Vince was pointedly looking past them, up and over at the lake with hope and envy in his eyes, he was sure, which meant he wasn’t paying attention to the artillerywoman’s expression while she spoke. “Um, hey, Gael?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry. I uh.”

“You didn’t know.” Gael said, with a sing-songness to it. Vince had never heard a sincere acceptance done with such a practiced tone. How many times had Gael *said* that? He wanted to ask, but doing that would involve making it clear that he had been listening, *and* then asking what the conversation was about.

“I’m just saying,” Leigh said, adjusting her uniform with a grumbling look aside. “I just. I’m ... so uh, how...”

Gael had that same bored voice. “It’s very simple. I am a woman. So. Just don’t call me a man. Because,” and her voice took on the hard, steely tone it had back when Vince had first heard her speak, “I’m *not*.”

“I’m sorry, I mean, you know, it’s just a thing everyone does in the military, I mean-”

“I *am* aware. Trust me.”

“Anyway, sorry.”

“We’re done. Don’t worry about it, just don’t do it any more.”

“Yeah, well, I mean.” Leigh wrinkled her nose... then looked over in Vince’s direction, sharply. “Hey, you! What’re you lookin’ at?!”

Vince blinked, and looked around. “I was... um – can I go to the lake now?”

No, probably not that. Mother probably would come up with something silly to explain that.

Maybe he could write his mother about Stannisfeld.

Just...

Not mention some details.

Like that Stannisfeld was a boy.

It didn’t have to concern her, the specifics at least. The night that the Djansk boy had been shivering cold on the ground, awake at the same time Vince was.

They spoke, a little, in low whispers. A bit about Stannisfeld’s family. A bit about the museum Vince had gone to as a child. A bit about each other. A smile in the darkness that lit up more than the last of the campfire.

Stannisfeld had made a joke... hard to remember what it was. Something light and silly. Then Vinc had made a joke, and back and forth, and they’d drifted off to sleep, facing each other.

When Vince woke up he was holding Stannisfeld’s hand, which was ... nice.

Nothing dirty, nothing special, just *nice*.

There’d been a few other talks. A muffin poached from a town. The moment when Stannisfeld had held his hand and helped him down from his horse.

Leigh had called him Princess then, but whatever.

There wasn’t any real privacy or anything. It wasn’t like they’d... kissed or anything. But it was nice. A little shared experience... a tiny little candle in the darker nights.

If he was thinking about Stannisfeld like *that*, he didn’t want to keep thinking now. It would be an awful bother considering the pain. Besides, thinking about unrequited love was a perfectly poetic way to fade into dark and die, and while Vince could appreciate the art of it he rather didn’t want to *actually do it*.

Somewhere far away he heard gunfire. Gunfire was strangely comforting, because it meant people were fighting, and if they were fighting, Vince had some confidence that his friends were winning. Well. Gael and Yull. Hopefully Leigh was okay. Hopefully.

What if he wrote to his mother about the things he’d saw the first day in the trenches? The first time Yull had commanded a regiment of soldiers over the walls and into the field of fire and bullets? The

man had yelled to a regiment full of soldiers from Hadrian, Tiber, and Lleywa, but spoken to them like they were all his neighbours:

“They say we don’t do anything but rain. Well grab your swords, law – let ‘em hear our thunder!”

Vince wondered how many of those soldiers, in that moment, had known inside themselves they couldn’t fight any more. How many had deserted. Probably not many. The deserters just over the rise were probably not people who had followed Yull. If they *had*, they probably wouldn’t have been silly enough to attack the camp.

But then maybe it wasn’t silliness. They were far from the war, and yet the men were in their uniforms. They were far from any authority of the Tiberan crown, but they’d looked tattered and angry. Yull had said something when they saw them on the highway that first time. They hadn’t said anything – they’d just turned their heads and looked down, refusing Yull’s hail.

“Deserting’s bad business,” Gael observed, when they were well past them. “Bet they thought they were off to big meals in foreign lands?”

Yull had laughed heartily at that. “No reason to fear the fat ones. It’s the ones who know what hunger means that you’ve got to watch out for. Hunger makes deserters do *mean* things.”

Yull was an awfully big figure in his mind right now. Yull would, if this bleeding didn’t stop, be the person who last spoke to Vince, and he felt his last words were not particularly good ones.

The whole fracas had started with grenades thrown into the camp. The reactions were all impressive, to Vince. One grenade, Leigh had rolled over to, grabbed, and she flung it down into the river, a short, sharp reaction. Gael had plucked up another from the floor and arced it back on its own trajectory, thrown high and showering the space between them with rubble.

Then the deserters had opened fire on the camp, and everything had grown a bit hazy for Vince.

The soldiers scattered; it was different types of training. Leigh ran towards the river, down and out of sight. Gael had run forwards, towards the men with guns. Stannisfeld had run wide, off to the side, into the darkness of the trees.

Vince had stood still and panicked, and it wasn’t until he felt a numbness in his hips that he looked down and saw his bloody hand. He was slumped against the fallen log in their camp when Yull had slid down onto his side next to him, sword in hand.

“Y’alright, law?”

“I... I think I’ve been shot, General.”

“You *think*? Law, trust me, you’ll know.”

“My entire side is numb and... and I’m very scared.”

One huge hand, like a bunch of bananas, planted on Vince’s side, pressing downwards. “Keep pressure on it, law. Sit tight, I’ll buy us some time.”

“Wait, General-” Vince said, his eyes opened wide, the scream of terror dead in his throat. He *knew* what that phrase meant. He *knew*!

Vince couldn’t lift himself up high enough to see over the wall – all he could see was the reflection on the wall before him, the shadows outlined by the flare of guns. Yull’s boots vanished over the wall’s top, and he landed with the sound of *thunder*. A gunshot, and the towering man had his sword in his hand. Another gunshot, he was already bent over, another gunshot and he was reaching out-

- then another gunshot, and the shadow on the ground from the flares of gun was punctuated with a spatter of blood, furthered when a Djansk soldier arched through the air and *smashed* into the ground before Vince with a sound Vince would be very happy to never hear again. Once as a child he’d dropped a bag full of sausages and even that sound hadn’t been *quite* comparable.

There were no more muzzle flares. No more gunshots. There was a whimpering sound, a bloody, unhappy grunting. Vince let his head loll back, hitting the wall, and bit his lip. Now he had to solve this with-

Yull’s hand planted on his shoulder, guiding him up to sitting. “Turns out time was going cheaper than we thought, law. Alright, now, keep breathin’ steady. Law! To me!” he called. “We’ve wounded, one spot, together, now!”

Gael was by his side in a moment; blood on her hands and sword, but it wasn’t hers. Leigh was already grabbing bedrolls, hauling them up and pulling as much as she could from the campsite as they made to leave.

“I’ll take him General,” Gael said, hunkering down-

“No, I will,” Stannisfeld interrupted.

Gael glared at him. “What-”

“You’re stronger than me. You’re better with a sword. You can fight. I... can carry Vince.” Stannisfeld swallowed. They didn’t have time for an argument. But his friends were on hand, and Vince couldn’t help but think that writing his mother about the moment Stannisfeld picked him up in his arms, and he cradled his arms around his neck was *probably* not the proudest kind of moment soldiers proclaimed too loudly.

When they stopped next, it was in an inn. Vince watched with dull confusion as Gael fished two bullets out of his arm and chest, and tied him tight with bandages. Nodded a bit when Yull had arranged Leigh and Gael into a guard to wait downstairs, paid for the room, brought food. Smiled – weakly – when Leigh had expressed her concern – something, something, princess. He fell asleep, for the first time in a long time, on a pillow, with his hand holding Stannisfeld’s.

Probably wouldn’t tell his mother about this.

It'd only worry her.

*

Few things comforted Brother Fratarelli quite like being back in his church. There were chores to do, a congregation to reassure, and many missed sermons to restore. Missing two sermons felt like agony – and it wasn't until he'd given six more that he realised how his surroundings had settled. Like cheap flaked cereal in cardboard boxes, everything had just fallen gently into place.

Had he really, two seasons ago, sat down with Kivis and spoken to her about the proper methodology for hiring a murderer? It seemed such a strange thing to have done. On the other hand, he could remember more than once, his entire life changing based on simple changes in his perspective. Once, he had been a man who had never been involved in a crime, and now, he was a man who had an assassin living in his basement, and one of the most notorious not-quite-outlaws in the city visiting every day.

Kivis existed in a legal twilight. Officially, she had not done anything illegal, and had even *enforced* the law. Unofficially, she had killed nobles, and even nobles weren't very happy with that. In spite of it, she was a free woman, *and* a noblewoman, and those moved by different sets of rules. She could be on her estate, but here, instead, she was sitting in his church of a Sunday, in her armour, and *nobody* dared comment on it.

They'd missed him, those missing weeks. Only a few weeks without their priest, only a few weeks with the doors closed on a Sunday morning. Nothing had gone terribly wrong, nobody had become lost or died or needed him in a way that couldn't wait, but Fratarelli had been even more uncomfortable about *that*. If his people didn't need him, he'd have to answer some much bigger, much more worrying questions about what he was doing with his life

Such as harbouring the seemingly consequence-free murderer of Elian Praefoco and *probably* the thug known as Nebrin, and the accomplice to the murders of Cameo Tully and Luke Cornell, the king of the river. These were not things that he had expected.

Rafe was a sticking point to the priest. Officially, he'd signed him out of the prison underneath his responsibility, with an eye to reforming the Worst Murderer in the city, and *after a fashion*, that hadn't been a lie.

He hadn't given Rafe permission to leave the church, but he'd also learned after the third night he didn't really have the opportunity to keep him in. When Brother Fratarelli went down of a morning to wake him, Rafe was there, and that was a *kind* of control. Also, the brother fancied that waking him regularly would keep him from staying up late and doing anything *reckless*. After all, young men needed their sleep. Well, Brother Fratarelli needed his sleep, and he wasn't *old*. Maybe ten years older than Rafe. Okay, maybe a bit more than that.

Thoughts tumbled around over one another while he ate his breakfast, cold leftover potatoes from the night before. Positively comfort food, really, with some of the cheese melted on. Only one – there was one set aside for Rafe as well – but the boy was training before he ate. It was a good idea, even if it wasn't, technically, Rafe's idea. Sometimes Aderyn just slipped through a window and attacked him, and then they were off.

It was like having a pair of cats.

"Kids these days," Kivis shrugged, the visor on her helmet opened downwards, giving her a room to bring food to her mouth. "Let them murder a few people and they get all antsy of a morning."

"Assassinate," Aderyn corrected primly, as she slung her fist past Rafe's face. He waved backwards, just in time.

"Whatever."

"It's important," Aderyn said.

Kivis slid the plate forwards slightly, and when she tilted her head, the metal of the helm tapped against her shoulder. It was an expression that looked even more birdlike than normal. "Is it?"

"A murder," Aderyn said, as she put her palm onto Rafe's forehead and threw herself overhead over him in a single gymnastic sweep, "is explicitly *not* an assassination by law; an assassination is a killing performed by an unrelated third party for recompense, *often* but not *always*," she ducked a slung fist, dropping to the floor, spinning her weight around on her hands and sweeping both legs up to grab Rafe's arm, pull him downwards and throw his back onto the ground with a thud. "for political reasons."

Rafe grunted as he hit the floor, and propped himself up even as he twisted his arm and slithered out of her grip, throwing himself away from her, attempting – perhaps vainly – to make his way to his food on the table. "Don't really see the difference," he grouched.

"That is probably because you are not a lawyer, Rafe."

"Thank god," Kivis laughed.

"So that would make Tully and Praefoco assassinations, then." Fratarelli nodded. "But Cornell—"

"Cornell was an assassination." Aderyn cut in shortly.

"Really? You haven't, uh, given me a report...?"

"You were not my client."

The brother blinked. Of course it stood to reason that an assassin of Aderyn's skill would have other clients, inasmuch as anyone in this city hired an assassin to *actually kill people*, but, still, it was a surprise. "Oh, um. I'm sorry. Who was the client?"

"That's confidential, Brother Fratarelli," she said, standing with one hand on her hip, a reproachful look on her face.

"Me," grumbled Rafe, as he sat up again on the floor from where he'd been thrown.

"You were an intermediary." she shook her head. "The client is *confidential*, Rafe. Have some professionalism."

"Do I have that?" he asked, rubbing his nose. "If I had that, wouldn't someone have to *pay me*."

“Professionals still do work *pro bono*.”

“That means 'for bones,' Rafe. Like a dog.” Kivis chipped in.

“It means *for free*, dunnit?” Rafe shot back.

“You know any Latin?” the brother mused, as Rafe sailed over the table. The oven shuddered.

“I know a *bit*,” the boy growled, as he pulled himself up off the ground, again. At least he was near the table. He swung a leg over the bench, and gestured, “I’m trying to eat breakfast!” he called over at Aderyn, who was adjusting her belt.

“And I am trying to stop you. It is good practice.” Aderyn offered crisply.

“Practice is for professionals. I haven’t been paid yet and I didn’t offer my services.” he wrinkled his nose at the priest next to him. “Pretty sure I was *blackmailed*, y’know.”

“You were an accomplice to Praefoco.”

“I *killed* Praefoco!” he growled.

“Did you kill Nebrin?” Aderyn asked, standing still for a moment in her assault on Rafe’s personal space.

“What? What kind of question is *that*?”

“Well, he did try to kill you.”

“*So are you right now.*”

“You know, Rafe,” the portly priest ruminated, holding his fork between his fingers and twirling it in the air, the weight of the potato on it providing momentum to the gesture. “You’ve never explained why you lied about those murders.”

“You never explained,” the arc of Aderyn’s knife over Rafe’s head cut the sentence short, but his hand hit the floor, and he rolled forwards underneath her leaping form to avoid the followup, darting under the table. When Aderyn leapt on the table to follow him, knife in her hand, Brother Fratarelli wondered when that sort of thing had stopped bothering him. The girl put all her weight behind every hit – how the hell had she put a blade through a man’s skull? “Why you think I lied.”

“Are you calling me a liar, Rafe?”

“You’re calling ME a liar!” Rafe yelled, turning his head just in time for Aderyn’s boot to hit him in the side of the head.

Kivis laughed into her breakfast, just shaking her head.

*

Down in Parcel Street, Mr Bauer handed over a small blue cap to the latest worker in the union. “It’s not easy work, but it’s work,” he said. “And it’ll get you out of the city.”

Recruitment down at Mr Bauer's stall was never very high, because it wasn't what it was for. But he knew what labour was worth and he knew when someone came to the stall looking for work, who he could connect them to. Trains out of the city could take a worker to a farm, someplace he could spend his energy recovering from whatever injury had burned his arms and taken his eye.

It was a mess, but, Mr Bauer reflected, the country was a fine place to work out messes.

Chapter 16

Vince knew, as a soldier, he would be asked to do some very challenging things in the name of his country. Travelling from the Holy Land to the cape of Hemulkar to the northern tip to catch a boat without supplies and with just what he could forage from the land was, in his mind, easy. It was just moving forwards, a little bit at a time. Being shot at also wasn't very challenging, *really*, because even rocks could do that.

This, however, was terrifying and maddening.

“Come *on!*” Leigh yelled, from the top of the gangway, jumping up and down on the wood. It shook and shuddered underneath her, and Vince felt his stomach lurch.

Stannisfeld and Gael were on either side of the engineer, guiding his steps. The cane in his hand supported his weight well. Secretly, Vince hoped he'd been injured enough to pull him off the front line, and also, just as secretly, hoped that if he had to use the cane, *that wasn't so bad*. The cane, after all, looked a little bit stylish. On the other hand, he was still off-balance; movement in his leg sent a sharp pain up his hip, into his back, and then his stomach *lurched* and he couldn't think for a moment.

The gangway looked like hell. And it was too narrow for Gael or Stannisfeld to help guide him up.

“Leigh! Stop being a bi-” Gael hollered up the gangway, as a crash of the water hit the side of the boat. “Boy's been *shot*.”

The boat, or was it a ship? Whatever. It was tall and narrow, with many sails, and lots of ropey bits. Vince knew he was distracting himself from the task ahead of himself by trying to take in other details, and he didn't, frankly, care. Had Yull called it a clipper? Some variety of vessel that could claim the channel in a day, and be in Tiberan waters. They were literally within a few days of Timoritia, and within a few days of this strange, long journey being done.

He wasn't sure if rest, or reassignment was waiting for him.

Worse, he didn't want to ask Yull for a favour, just because they'd travelled together.

“That was *days ago!*” the short gunner called. “Hurry it *up*, Princess!”

“That *does* it,” Stannisfeld growled, glaring up the gangway. “Gael?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you step back? Vince?”

Vince found himself off the ground, with a hand behind his back and another hand tucked under his legs. Arms, uncertain of what to do, slid around Stannisfeld's neck, and held there, while the other boy, cushioning the impact, walked up the gangway.

When Vince passed Leigh, he poked his tongue out at her.

When Gael passed her, she knuckled her on the top of the head, to a yell of, “Hey!”

*

Lunchtime at the church was bread rolls and pasta, and an irritated Rafe glaring down at a pile of paper.

“You know I can *read*, right?”

“I'm aware,” Kivis said, her tone of voice totally impassive.

“Then why this shit?”

“Because I don't know *what* you can read.”

Rafe's fists bunched at the side of the paper. “*And why does that matter?*”

“Right now, you're a ward of the state, Rafe. You're under this church's protection, and under Brother Fratarelli's care.”

“... Until he doesn't want me any more and I go back to Draftfane.”

“I suppose so,” she shrugged, metal clinking. “Guess you want to keep the priest happy.”

Rafe *glared* at her with the sort of energy he normally reserved for... for glaring. Glaring and not much else, really. The boy had such *anger* inside him, and he just didn't know what to do with it. Walking around with his fists balled waiting for something to give him an excuse to commit a dreadful thing.

The helmet didn't blink. “Or, of course, you could consider that maybe, Rafe, Brother Fratarelli likes you, and feels responsible for you.”

Rafe turned the paper over. “It's passages from the Books. It's just Raise Up A Child In the Way He Should Go, all that shit. It's I Wanna Marry Daddy When I Grow Up. An' this is...” he looked at the next paper, “Where'd you get these?”

“Around the church – some that were dumped in with the mail this morning.”

Rafe lifted up one piece of paper, and through the thin sheet, Kivis could see the expensively printed, clearly-printed letters, parsing it after a moment. *The New King*.

*

Tenner Chilver wasn't a man with a lot of presence. You had to push him past angry into enraged to see any discernable reaction – and it tended to express itself as more *whiny* and petulant than anything like fury. But when he slammed the paper down on the table, with his palm out, he was fairly *vibrating*, and the squeak in his voice betrayed every bit of that rage.

“Ligier, what the *hell* do you think you were doing?!”

Marko leant forwards, reaching for the paper, and pulling it out from under the furious noble's grip. It was news to him – but these people were so *disorganised*.

“Me?” bellowed the tiger of a man, shoving the table with both hands, as he glared at the paper. “How *dare* you?!” Then a breath later, “What is it?”

“It's a playbill!”

“It's a *newsbill*,” Ulster clarified, leaning around and reading over Marko's shoulder. “A new king... tum tum tum... oh my. Oh *my*.” She raised an eyebrow. “So this *isn't* yours, Ligier?”

“No!” the giant hammered his fist on the table. “Why would I- I don't even know what it is!”

“It's...” Marko turned the paper in his hand, checking the back. Ah, nothing – probably meant to be glued on public spaces. “It's *clever*.”

“It – what?” Ligier said, immediately shifting gears. “You really think so?”

That tone shift would be a surprise if Marko hadn't dealt with Ligier for weeks now. Chances are he just wanted to position himself to benefit. “Wardell?” he asked, gesturing over his shoulder. “You see any of these when you go walking?”

“Oh yes, sir,” Wardell said, shuffling forwards with the tea tray. “Yes, I've seen them all up and down the street on the way to the shops of a morning.”

Marko spread the paper out, and looked around the table.

THE NEW KING

PEOPLE OF TIBER REJOICE!

The Rightful Heir to the Throne,

The Great Veteran

The Lion Of Courage

Of the House of Bachthane

Has been found!

“I wouldn't have written it that way,” Ulster sniffed. “All that wasted space on the sides.”

“It looks fancy,” Asca said, his tone slightly defensive. “You can surrender some space for that sort of thing.”

“Is this *yours*?” Marko asked, holding the paper in his hand, grinning slyly, appending in his head *you great jowly bastard*.

“Well,” Asca laughed, drawing himself up, holding his hands in front of his belly. “I wouldn't want to *brag*. I mean, we're all in this conspiracy together, aren't we...?”

Marko sat back in his chair, taking his cup of tea without even looking at it. Wardell knew to put the cup near his hand. “It's smart. Smarter than you probably think.” he said, taking a sip. Perfect. “It prepares the people for the arrival of Yull, but it also shows them that someone *official* is involved.

Newsbills! Who can afford newsbills? Certainly scattered like this? No, this is good – and better yet, it makes it common knowledge. Nobody will want to be against it, or outside of it, if it is *known*. Good work, Asca.”

The big man rumbled a little, jiggling slightly with a smile on his face. “Well, I wouldn't want to *brag*,” “You said,” Ulster. “So don't.”

Marko held up the paper. The Lion of Courage. Oh yes. He could imagine it now. Yull marching in through the gates, retinue of soldiers at his side, walking to the throne, and taking his place. The city would have a king again, and the squalling nobles would finally have to start *doing things* other than fight over the throne.

*

Kivis hadn't much taste for pageantry. Her personal crest had been somewhat dramatically altered a few years ago, and while she could appreciate the artistry of it, a black shield with a noose on it and the words *Mors In Iustitia* was hardly a party piece. The last time she'd seen it, someone had artfully drawn fallen feathers underneath the banner. The change had been supposedly to her disgraced father's symbols, but it was just as much a stain on her. More fool them – it was a symbol and motto *she* could be proud of. Still, it didn't exactly pull in party invites.

On the other hand, the fabric before her on the table was positively beautiful. A bright, vibrant blue field, with a steel-grey shield laid in the centre of it, split into three sections. Green lines in stylised grass on one side; a set of scales with coins and wheat on them on the right; and in the centre, a pair of birds, the same colour as the background field. Two large rams horns curled about the side of the crest as well. It was pastoral, but the colours were, at the least, *pleasant*.

“Pageantry, Aderyn? Didn't seem your style.” Kivis ruminated, tugging on the fabric.

“Well, there is an event of some formality coming.” Aderyn said, her tone considered. “A general is arriving and there seems to be some announcement on that matter.”

“Oh, yes, Bachthane?” Kivis nodded. “Ah, and of course, you're Lleywa – you have to care about that, mm?”

“Inasmuch as is appropriate for a young lady,” Aderyn said.

“Why bluebirds?” Kivis asked, holding up the fabric, watching as it rolled down a little further.

“Ah, they're not bluebirds.” Aderyn said, gesturing at the birds in the centre. “They're actually meant to be holes in the shield.”

“Holes in the shield...? Oh, so that's the colour of the field behind?”

“Yes!” Aderyn nodded.

“... Why?”

“Well, heraldry is a complicated affair-”

"If you don't know, that's okay."

"I *do* know," Aderyn said, and her brows briefly knit with frustration. As if that was *even a thought*. Emotion was rare on the girl's face – it made that one a pleasant showing. "The birds are transparent as defers to an old incident in the DuThane family name—"

"What's this? Oh!" And suddenly, Brother Fratarelli was walking into the kitchen, clapping his hands together and ambling towards the brilliant blue drape. Unfolding the fabric a little further, looking down at the sky blue crest and the geometric figures designed on the shield, he pointed at the ribbon banner beneath it, with its fine, artful writing. "*Beati Pafici* – that's one of the beatitudes! I didn't know your family were religious."

"Well, insofar as is appropriate," Aderyn said, putting on her smile.

"You know which one it is...?" Brother Fratarelli asked, with the tone of voice of someone who *very much* wants to explain something, but knew there was a chance it was inappropriate.

"It means—"

"Beat the peace into them." Rafe said, slouching past the table with a cup of water in his hand.

"No," Brother Fratarelli said, turning with a raised hand to point at Rafe's back. "It means *blessed a—*"

"*are the peacemakers,*" Aderyn finished, clearing her throat. "Though I do imagine my mother would quite like Rafe's interpretation."

Kivis shook her head. "Boys."

"They do interrupt, don't they?"

*

The church roof had become a favourite perch for Aderyn DuThane, lady of Lleywa and, currently, successful and active Assassin.

From the rooftop, she could watch schedules finishing. She could see peoples' days, and their plans, culminating. It was an ending of things, but it came with signifiers. Lights came on, lights stayed on for a reasonable amount of time, then lights went off. Blinds were pulled, shutters were closed. The Benjamin would toll, and its loud bell would swallow the sound of all the smaller, nearer clocks as well. It was close to that moment.

While her career was not *particularly* active, she did have the start of a support network, a client who had led to some other business. There was not a lot of call for her services. Maybe she should advertise?

Hm.

"Evening."

Aderyn turned slowly, because turning quickly bothered people, and she recognised the choral voice of Kivis. "Good evening, Lady Kivis."

The knight walked along the path between the chimneys. That armour was very frustrating to Aderyn's sense of professionalism. Normally, people went without wearing any – and it protected almost all of her vulnerable areas. If she ever had to take a target like Kivis, or, well, at least, one *armoured* like Kivis, she'd need to do something nonconventional to those weak points in the armour.

The best kills took one hit. Anything more than that, things could go wrong.

Still, even then, that was just dealing with a target *like* Kivis. Kivis herself was...

Very problematic.

"Hello, Aderyn."

"Not Lady Aderyn?"

"I try not to remember that you're noble," the knight said, until she stood next to Aderyn's seat.

"Oh. Is that wise?"

"I think so. I tend to have a bad reaction to nobility."

"Like... an allergy?" Aderyn asked.

Kivis laughed, her voice a quiet boom inside her helmet. "Yes, something like that. It makes me break out in violence."

Aderyn was confused. "Aren't you a noblewoman, yourself? The Athene family-"

"Is a cul-de-sac."

"Oh. You, um-"

Aderyn's hesitation took longer than she wanted it to. People didn't like long pauses in conversation; normally, a bit of patter would suffice. But try as she might, she couldn't remember any other Athenes. There had to be others, beyond the dead ones, that weren't appropriate for mention, because of the *public humiliation*, but how far back could a family tree spread? *Mathematically*, there had to be *plenty* of people related to Kivis.

It gave Kivis time to sit down, flat hands on the roof as hung her legs over the side of the pathway. Her hands rested in her lap, her head forwards, her helm tilted to the side. "It's alright, Aderyn. I'm well aware of what my family is like."

"Ah." Aderyn nodded. "Well, I just didn't want to mention."

"You didn't? That's oddly sensitive, for you."

"As sensitive as is appropriate for a young lady."

"I have been wondering about that," Kivis said. "You care about what it means to be a lady."

"Do I?" Aderyn asked, tilting her head to the side, her eyes narrowing only imperceptibly.

"... Well," Kivis said, knee raised up, gauntlets clacking slightly as she adjusted the greave. "You say *As is appropriate for a young lady* often."

"And that means I care about it?"

Aderyn liked Kivis. The woman had very clear body language, and no confusing facial expressions. When she wanted you to see what she was thinking, she made it eminently clear. Often by punching someone with a big, hard, metal fist, which was *beautifully* direct. She could understand the dynamic between Kivis and Rafe easily, and Kivis and Brother Fratarelli, and Kivis and herself.

And that stillness, Kivis was probably reconsidering what she had just said.

“Okay...” Kivis leant forwards, reaching up with her thumb. “It *appears* you care about the behaviour of a young lady?”

Aderyn tilted her head the other way, holding that expression as before. Stable expressions were important. Showing frustration made people change *their* expressions, and that made them *even harder* to understand.

“It is a set of rules,” she finally ventured. “And following them is convenient for communication?”

Kivis leant forwards again. Her helmet, with its birdlike design, was pointed at her face. Finally, after maybe thirty seconds, she sat back again, the knight laughing and gesturing down at the river.

“There's change coming, Aderyn. You worried about those rules?”

With concentration, Aderyn kept her brows from knotting up together. After all, frustration was bad for communication. “I...” Wait, what rules was she referring to?

Was this a rooftops thing? What did she remember of reading about rooftops? Conversations on rooftops were important – often they were confessions of love, or admissions of dreadful sin. Though maybe that wasn't rooftops as much as it was *very high places*. High places were dangerous, though – that may serve as dramatic structure for the events that unfolded. She had had a conversation that meant quite a great deal to her with Rafe on a rooftop – was she having another one here, with Kivis? Well, Kivis did have a pleasantly explicable manner but Aderyn wasn't sure if she wanted to commit to a romantic arc with her without some more information. Perhaps a confession of love, then an admission of a sin, *then* absolving herself by throwing herself *off* the great height? Most of those seemed unlikely for Kivis, but as high places went, the church roof *was* perfect.

Wait. Aderyn remembered to blink.

“I am not sure.”

Kivis nodded, slowly, and turned to look away from Aderyn. Aderyn put on her smile, and sighed.

“But I think I like this roof.”

Kivis laughed. “Yep.” Then, she put her fist against Aderyn's arm, and nudged. It wasn't a punch. That was very good, because a punch would need defensive measures. It was just a push, with her knuckles. Confusing. “And I like you, Aderyn.”

Oh.

Well, that made things more confusing.

“What do you me-” Aderyn began, and the bells began to boom out, across the city.

*

Vince had been taught, as a young man, not to stare at people, since it was rude. It was the kind of injunction he remembered but only followed if he felt he could justify it. Since the man he was staring at was blind, it didn't seem to be much of a sin.

With the others in better health and spirits than Vince, they'd offered their hands and arms around the ship, with Yull talking mostly with the captain. It was an arrangement Vince appreciated – in that he never fancied himself one for pulling ropes or turning large wheels – but also left him dissolute. The decks were a boring place, where the quiet folk remaining served to highlight the lack of purpose they had. Particularly today, there was only one person on the dock besides him – sitting, shirtless, near the railing with a low bench connected to it, by the ... front? of the boat? Was that the prow? Vince would have to look that up.

What made it hardest to not stare, though, was the man's *back*. Strung across it, from shoulder-blade to shoulder-blade, was a tattoo; a diagram in circles, strangely familiar as if Vince had seen something like it once before. Down the centre line of the circle was the body of a bird, short-tailed and short-necked; but while the circle sat in the middle of his back, its wings spread out *wide*, across his shoulders, feathers detailed oh-so-delicately, each one painted exquisitely. It was a work of remarkable art, with circles traced at the joints of the bird's wings. The thing looked a strange diagram, an artwork of astounding quality, the bird *itself*, and the mechanical designing around the edges.

"Someone starin' back there?" the man said, his voice a rasp.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Vince said, shuffling forwards along the deck, moving down a little further. "I'm... hn... a little slow on my feet right now."

"Oh, aye, son." But he didn't turn his head to look at Vince – and when he shuffled a little further ahead, sinking down slowly to one knee, he saw why.

"Call me Arty," said the man, looping rope end over end in his hands, feeling the net sliding under his grip. Vince was reminded of his childhood reading, of thick albums with bound spines that came out every year, full of interesting stories about men of adventure and the women they rescued. Every year, the stories had someone blind in them, someone given great and valuable insight through the loss of their eyes. With his white beard and his worn, weathered features, this man looked like he had walked off the page, and sat down on the edge of the boat, working a net, finding holes and tears in the structure.

"Ah, Vince." he offered, resting his rear on the edge of the railing.

"Not movin' very easy there, are ye? But y'sound a bit young to be too badly injured. You a story to share, youngun?"

Vince laughed a little, holding his hand against his side as he settled in. "Mnh... I was shot a few days ago."

"Ahh, bad business, that."

"Very."

"Did you shoot back?"

Vince shook his head. "Oh, no... no. I'm an engineer."

Thick fingers found a gap in the net. Fingers wound errant strands together, pulling carefully, pieces of line slowly. "Engineer? Ah, with the trains...?"

"No, no," Vince said with a laugh. "No, I'm a military engineer."

"Ah..." fingers hit the end of a row, and moved down a level. "I've heard of those. The lads that make the wheel-guns turn, yeah? Fix the cannons. Power those engines that set the mines, mmm?"

"Oh... well, yes." Vince admitted. He'd only worked with crab-mines recently; they were a relatively new development. A little cart and trolley you wheeled across the sand, with three wide wheels. It left some white paint behind as it planted a round mine under the shallow sand. It was a nasty little thing, with its metal pot belly – and you had to work fast to seed the earth. Take too long, the wind shifted, you'd lose the paint, and have to make your way back over a field you'd just crafted. Worse, you were still pushing a cart full of highly explosive devices. If they'd been loaded properly, by a good engineer, then they wouldn't pose any threat until they were planted.

If.

Vince hated relying on other people's ifs.

"Seems you give as good as you get," Arty nodded. "Mines are a rough show in the battlefield."

"... I guess I hadn't thought of it. I mean, I didn't make the mines."

"Most soldiers don't make their own guns, either, or their bullets." he shrugged. "I didn't make this net, I suppose."

Vince leant against the edge of the boat, feeling the cool spray of the water on the back of his neck. "I mostly maintained cannons and trenches."

"Ah... trench wars?" the man nodded. "Big flat planes of wood, little castles in the ground, hm?"

"Mm," Vince nodded. It was nicer to think of the walls he'd built than the legs he'd removed, remotely, randomly, indiscriminately. Oh goodness, what if one of Yull's soldiers had stepped on one of *his* mines.

"Sorry, young'un?"

"Oh, I mean yes. I nodded."

"You'll have to forgive a blind old man his failures."

Vince looked out on the waves. "Sorry," he murmured. He had ridden trains as a child. Conversations came and went, there; you spoke for a bit; you talked of the idea, and the idea that that idea had; you dredged your memory, but eventually, you ran out of things to say, and you watched out the window. In the quiet, maybe another idea could arise.

Hang on.

"You're blind?"

"Mm-hm."

"And you've been blind for...?"

"Probably longer than you've been alive, Vince," Arty said, finding the next thread, tying together the patch.

“How do you know about crab-mines?”

Arty shrugged his shoulders. “Mn... I don't see things. I just... reflect on things. See in my imagination, such as it is... seems that what I see, time to time, is true – or true enough.” He looked out over at the waves.

“Let me see... you're with the general, yah?” The net whispered as it was dragged hand over hand, and he wrinkled his nose as the sun bore down against eyes that barely noticed it. “Great big man, big beard... walks with a sword on his hip?”

“Ah... yes. You, um-”

“Best not to ask too many questions,” Arty shrugged. “I long since stopped askin' questions about how I see the things I see.”

“... What else have you seen...?” It was a creepy feeling. Vince couldn't help but think of the many, many ways he could be being fooled. Maybe this man was wearing some sort of paste on his eyes. Or... or maybe he had been blinded very recently. Wait, no, that would show some scars. Maybe he wasn't blind *at all*? Then surely he would blink a bit more often. None of the explanations were satisfactory, immediately, though.

“I've seen the general die saving you, though he didn't.” the knot fell. “I've seen him raise his sword, and-”

The huge man on his back, six knives in his chest, shuddering as he bled out, his whole body a mighty straining gasp. He had so much blood, but who knew what a task it had been to kill him?

Vince shuddered. “Wh-what was that?”

The man shrugged, and looked out on the water. “Don't believe much in magic, do you, lad?”

“Not really, no. I'm... I'm an engineer.”

A man, lying in the trenches; the wood placed there by Vince's hands, blown into shards stabbed into his chest, thanks to a mine planted too close to the edge. Red chunks around him, another man's leg on his lap, and the rest of the man nowhere to be seen.

“I've seen that boy... the Djansk one. The one whose smile makes you giggle today. You used to think he was... what, a bit silly...? Bit of a schoolboy? Yeah... “

Vince shifted uncomfortably. “... Yeah.”

A nod, a raised chin. “The boy's escaped a fate.”

The tyrant fell to its side, massive and bloody, terrible and raging. Not some placid river-walker this, it was a proud beast that knew humans as meat. But it was too late, it had moved too fast, and even as Yull plunged his sword into the beast's neck, there was a shudder through it, and Stannisfeld's arm held out underneath it, gripping at the mud. It was still, too still; he was gone.

Vince felt little; loss at a comrade.

That was all.

Vince didn't even realise he was vomiting over the side until a moment after the sensation passed. “Hnh... wh-what was that?”

The old man's fingers tugged on the net again. "Something that didn't happen."

Vince felt ill in a violent way. The disorientation was momentary – of feeling he was somewhere else, some *when* else so suddenly – but what was *truly* churning was the feeling of being *someone else* who was also, at the same time, *himself*.

Vince had a crush on Stannisfeld. He'd held his hand. He'd hugged him – just once – as he was getting out of bed, and the injury was his excuse. But *that* Vince he *wasn't*, but that Arty had just showed him... that Vince had not even *liked* Stannisfeld. He was just someone.

It was a strange, hollowing feeling, to have a little thing like that taken away.

"I'm... are you..." Vince shifted away slightly.

"I'm sorry, young man," Arty said, holding the net high, running his hand down through it, looking for more tears, more damage. "These are just the things I see... with blind eyes."

Vince squirmed a little in the sun. "Can you... um. Can you stop that?"

"The net?"

"I mean, uhm, with the... the things you see."

The old man shook his head. "I cannot."

"Is it... is it okay if I, uh...?"

"Go?" he nodded. "I would. But they're wherever I am. Young man?"

"I... yes?"

The old man shifted forwards, looking up. "Heading to Timoritia, yes? It's... about... March, yeh?"

"Mm-hm." Vince said, shuffling along the rail, putting distance between him and the albatross, and the man underneath it.

"Well, rains a lot then. Beware the skies of March." And then he lowered his head, turned the net hand over hand, while Vince shuffled away from the disturbing man, with the disturbing visions.

*

"What do you mean *visions*?" Leigh sneered.

"I'm telling you, he, like, showed me visions."

"The guy with the bird tattoo on his back?" She waved her hand freely, only for the biscuit she'd been holding to tumble out of her grip and fall down to the ground.

The room in the boat they shared had a table, nailed to the centre of the room. Bunks on three sides of the room were just close enough that the table wasn't *very* comfortable to sit at, but the hardtack, cheese, onions and ham they had were enough reason to ignore the discomfort. Plus, there was some feeling of *closeness*.

"What's strange about that?" Gael asked.

"Well, it was awfully *magical*," Vince said, waving his fingertips in the air, wriggling them back and forth.

“Vince, if you want, we can ride south to Cordoba and I can show you people who can turn you into a *snake* with alchemy.”

“What?!”

“What I want to know,” Leigh repeated, thumping her hand on the table as she fished underneath it for the discarded biscuit, “is why there were *Djansk* soldiers.”

“There were?” Stannisfeld asked, his arms folded, head down on the table. In one hand, he turned a little ball over and over, a little rose preserved inside it. Some pointless trinket. “I was, um, a bit busy.”

“You were fine,” Gael said.

“I don't-”

Gael shook her head, her braid falling over her shoulder. “Look, kid, you're a messenger, not a soldier. Nobody expects you to do well in those situations. And you handled yourself fairly well.”

The messenger ran his hand through his hair, and lowered his head again. “I *fell* in a *ditch*.”

She shrugged. “You weren't in my way.”

Stannisfeld shuddered visibly. “Yes, I ... I saw what happened to people who were *in your way*.”

Gael shrugged. “I'm paid for efficiency.”

“Paid better than me.” Leigh grumbled.

“Paid better than *all of you*. Probably put together.” Gael laughed.

“Well, um, I can't complain,” Stannisfeld mumbled. “I mean, I've *seen*-”

“Shh,” Gael said. “You don't wanna think about that too much.”

The boat lurched for a moment, and the biscuits slid on the tabletop.

“What's that?” Vince asked, panic seizing his heart. “Is that a storm?”

Gael looked up, listening to the rattling of the roof above them. “No, probably just rain. We're tacking about.”

Leigh emerged from under the table with a triumphant biscuit in her hand. “That mean we're almost home?”

“Surely.” the redhead offered, raising her chin. “We'll be in Timoritia by morning.”

Chapter 17

Wardell could measure a day in cups of tea.

There was the first cup of the morning. Months ago, when this whole affair had begun, he was the only person in the kitchen in the morning, and the solace afforded him a little license. The owners of the home didn't care about the state of the upstairs bedrooms or the curtains or the dust – they came here to meet, and they left afterwards. To the mind of someone who never had to *buy* milk or cheese, the idea of a larder that wasn't decently stocked was strange, and Wardell had enjoyed cheese sandwiches cooked under a grill as breakfast alone.

The lack of oversight pleased him. It was one of the least challenging, and easiest positions Wardell had ever worked, though he wasn't planning on staying a house-servant forever. And after all, most nobles didn't really know how to *run* things. They just thought they did, but they had money.

Since Marko had joined with the conspirators, the soldier's conscientiousness meant he always arrived early of a morning. That meant fewer snacks, but more conversation. Except, of course, when it rained.

"Another cup, Fiver?" Wardell asked, taking the kettle from the stovetop. "I don't imagine the lords and lady are due for a little while yet."

Marko had a book open in front of him, his brow furrowed. "Hm?"

"I said, do you want another cuppa, sir?"

"Ah, thank you." Marko nodded, raising his chin, and folding over the paper on his book. Billfolds and birthrights – the soldier had clearly worked *hard* since joining the little excursion.

"Something on your mind?"

"Mm. The Qisar is almost here." He said, turning the page, "And I don't know if we're ready."

"Ready, sir? Isn't he the rightful king?"

Marko looked up across the table at Wardell, with the look of a man used to higher ideas. "That's... it's not that simple. There needs to be a sense of legitimacy, a feeling it's being done right."

"Ah, a *feeling*. Well, I understand that's tricky, sir."

"Don't you sass me," Marko said, but he was smiling. "You know how nobles are. And Yull might be a bit rough for them. God," he laughed. "Do you remember, ah, Emralt? He was younger then, but I think if he talked to the nobles like that, they'd *die* of shock."

"Hear our thunder?" Wardell asked, tilting his head. "It's a good line. People like rain."

"There's... loose ends," Marko said, lowering his head and turning the page. "Asca says the books show that he's a valid heir, but they also say he's – what is it – not an only child? All that talk of the two lions, that speech he liked to give... if he's got a brother who's *older*, that's a problem."

"Why might you think him older, Fiver?"

“Well, Yull’s in his *fifties*, I don’t imagine he *would*... Still those are bloody fights. If he’s got a sister, that’ll probably sort itself out easily-”

“Oh?”

“Well... *technically*, a sister is as valid an heir as a brother, but they have a tradition of abdicating to a brother.”

Wardell tilted the kettle and filled the cups. “Strange sounds to me, sir. But who am I to say?”

Marko took the cup as Wardell added the sugar. “Either way. A younger brother wouldn’t be bad. Might make things more palatable, too, to the – ah, nobility. Yull might not rub them the right way, but a prince regent could be useful. I’ll have to talk to Yull about it.”

“If he knows about it.” Wardell said, picking up a teatowel and wiping the counter. “Could be, ahah, one of those long-lost brother things.”

Marko laughed. “I doubt *that*.” He shrugged. “But he’ll have the army’s backing, brother or not. If the nobles don’t like him... well, he’s an heir. He’s got the authority. I suppose he might be able to just *make* it happen.”

Wardell looked at Marko’s expression, with all of the worry in it. “It’s happening, I suppose then, sir. Today might be the last day Tiber lacks a king.”

“God, yes. You might be right.” Marko drew a breath. “It’s strange to be... in these places. I feel history turning around me, Wardell.”

There was a storm expected later in the day. That was useful to know.

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Francis liked to fancy he was the first person awake in the little church, bustling back and forth in the kitchen to prepare breakfast, but that was because he had no idea what it took to don armour. The creak of leather straps that cinched down, one by one; double checking, loosening, re-tightening. When she was younger, it had taken longer; years of armouring herself, daily, had made the task easier, and quicker, but still not *easy* and still not *quick*. Armour was also prone to smelling, and Kivis had no desire to reek on a daily basis – so she bathed every morning, even though it was unfashionable.

Kivis ran her hand through her long, black hair, sitting on the edge of the bathtub. The bottom of it was a clear, sharp cut, but she’d made sure to do it with care, the most recent times. When she closed her eyes just a touch, she saw the range of contrast; hair, black, her fingernails, pale, her skin a shade between them. Fashion hadn’t really meant much to her in the past few years, had it? As she raised one arm, she reflected on the tone of the muscle in her forearm. When she clenched her fist, she could see, just around the edges of her elbow, the veins that tensed. Hands that once held reigns and parasols that now were hands that held... well, boathooks and bratty boys and at least once, an executioner’s axe.

That'd been when she bought the tattoo. The list of humans who had seen her out of the armour was a short one – a list she'd shortened personally – and the artist was one of a handful of people Kivis trusted. The letters were backwards, bold and clear. Her skin, olive as it was, contrasted with the clear, deep writing, curled on the inside of her forearm. They didn't look right, if she wasn't looking in the mirror. If she wanted to see them – if she wanted to *read* them – she had to stand before a mirror, and see herself. *All* of herself.

Swinging her feet over the edge of the bath, she padded on bare stone floors to her cupboard, opening it up. It had a mirror hung on the inside, a mirror she checked, every day.

It was easy, in the armour, to think of hands, and fists, and feet and laughter. It was easy to think of people as their worst moments, to think of everyone in individual moments. Years ago, she'd done that, and it had blinded her once. A father was not his sins, those were... somewhere else. They happened to other people. The man she'd met, the man who lived in her home, *he* was okay, she couldn't believe he'd do things like *that*. If you treated a person as little incidents, and didn't look at their whole, you could hide all sorts of things in those spaces you didn't check.

Kivis stretched her arms above her head, and tensed. Without sun, she'd grown a little more pale.

Her new company pleased her, too. Normally, when she associated with people, there were questions people either asked or *wanted* to ask so badly they let the thoughts leak out around her. This little clique didn't. Francis had known her before the armour, and after the armour, and not once had he ever asked. Years passed without a question asked. Of course, back then, he'd used different words to comfort her. Words like providence and faith.

Aderyn didn't ask, and Kivis was reasonably certain that it was because she didn't see anything *odd* about the armour. Most people would go on to say there was something odd about Aderyn. Kivis couldn't really agree. Aderyn seemed to have a clearly defined area of *what was her business*, and didn't seem to think much outside it. There was also the way she never seemed to correct herself twice.

Rafe didn't ask, and it wasn't just the boy's naturally insular manner. She'd seen sulky boys before, selfish ones. Rafe spat when you poked him, but for the most part, he didn't poke anyone else, or demand attention. And there was the way he just committed to things – wholeheartedly throwing himself into a task when it was put forwards. Most boys would balk at being handed a pair of satin panties – she'd figured it would dissuade him from a stupid plan. Rafe was a quiet boy who had something on a leash. She could understand that.

Plus, boy looked pretty cute in a dress.

People attributed huge meaning to decisions, sometimes. If she'd woken up one morning and decided to wear blue skirts all the time, there wouldn't be a thought about it. Hell – if she was a man, people would probably deem her demeanour romantic.

Kivis stood before the mirror and spread her arms, reading the words as they appeared in the mirror. Down her right forearm, ending at the wrist ran the words **HIC SUNT LEONES**. From the elbow of her left forearm, the letters of **HIC SUNT DRACONES** ran up, stopping just over her heart on

her collarbone. They vanished under the fabric as she raised her head, pulling her tunic shirt over her head.

Lions and dragons.

Nobles liked to take on animal symbols, to claim power and pride they'd never really understood. Symbols people used to mean *the unknown*.

The moment of reflection – *hah* – passed, Kivis reached behind her back, and gripped the fabric of her shirt tight. Time to prepare for the day. There was a parade to attend, after all. Maybe there'd be someone who stepped out of line.

Now *that* was a tiny satisfying fantasy, to imagine someone stepping out of line. To imagine someone on the *other side* pushing their authority a little further than they should. To watch someone *actually hit* someone. To hear someone of station demand what they *were not allowed*. For someone to *justify* what she knew she could do.

Lady Kivis Athene had a very carefully defined set of rules in her mind to ensure that she wasn't a vengeful woman; she made sure that she was a just one.

Parades were for commoners. They were for the people who didn't sit on cushions.

Maybe something would happen today. There were low clouds on the horizon, after all.

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Wardell's second round of tea for the day was around what he'd consider his morning tea, but coincided with the first break in the meeting. They always needed it around midmorning, even if they didn't ask for it. That's when they were at the height of their anger – or did they call it *dudgeon*? Interrupting things before the tumultuous tempers of the nobles tore the little group apart and prompted someone storming home for a sulk kept the whole operation moving quietly towards its goal. These were the skills a house servant learned – managing nobles.

"Yes, I *know* the crime's rising, but that's not what I *asked*. We had a man on that, didn't we? Keeping the crime together?" Ligier asked. The little table in the centre of the room still sat in a circle of light, which meant Wardell could fill the cups from the shadows by the door without disturbing anyone.

"Mnh, Cornell?" Ulster asked, sitting back in her chair, one leg folded over the other. She was worryingly calm most of the time. It seemed a bit noncommittal. If something went wrong, Wardell couldn't help but worry that he was going to be the one standing by the side and capitalising on the change. Commitment was *important*.

"Well, yes, it was him, but it, uh, the situation grew complicated." Asca murmured, rubbing fingertips against one of his chins. It was either nervous or imperious – but then, Asca only had those two modes.

"You're going to use as many words as possible for this, aren't you." Ulster sneered.

"Oh, shut up." Asca snapped.

“No, no, keep on. What’s going on with this? It’s your business, Asca, not mine.” Tenner shifted forwards, pulling his chair with him.

“Well, the poors have their own form of nobility – crime lords, you know?”

“Cornell’s daughter killed him at the Sheriff’s ball and blew up his boat.” Ulster interrupted.

“... Good god, seriously? His *daughter*?” Ligier couldn’t hide surprise with a paper sack.

“... Yes, his *daughter*,” Ulster asked, and suddenly, she wasn’t sitting back any more. Leaning forwards, her hand gripped into a fist on the table.

“I wouldn’t expect that.” Ligier said, stepping forwards into a verbal minefield – and that’s when Wardell pushed the cart into the light.

“Ah, lords and lady, just some tea.” He murmured, setting the cups out.

Wardell’s presence tempered the sudden rise of heat in the room. Ulster took her cup, and, slowly sat back – looking at Ligier carefully.

“You’re single, right, Ligier?” she asked, threatening in a way that nobody else could.

Tenner waved his hand. “Pshh. We had a man on the inside with Cornell, didn’t we? Silly named one. What, Nebrin Tulips? I know that I’ve been banking coin to that name.”

“Mmnh, some nobody. Some Bottle-Street no-name.” Asca concurred.

“Well, not quite a no-name. Bottle Street’s a little more picky than that.” Marko said from his seat, closing his book. “The Bottle Street Orphanage is there – that’s why there’s no shortage of kids running around. At least Tulips had a surname, even if it wasn’t a very good one.”

“How does that happen?” Ulster asked, turning her head and finally breaking her daggerlike stare from Ligier.

“Orphans beg to be adopted by some local business owner. Work rotten jobs and are given a surname that points them to the business. You see it all the time, kids with silly names like Jackrum Drum because they work for a butcher, or Polly Cherish because they handle comfort patches at the hospice.” Asca explained.

Ligier waved a hand in the middle of the table. “What’s a comfort patch?”

“I swear, have you ever MET a poor person? Wardell, do be a sport.” Marko asked, gesturing to the servant.

“Ah, a comfort patch is a little folded heart made of thin fabric that you fill with, ah, greenleaf to brew, to relieve pain.”

“Oh. Is that effective?”

“Some might say, sir. It’s a cheap little thing,”

“Yes, for cheap little people. Do these people not own *pipes*?” Tenner sneered.

"It, ah, as I understand it, sir, costs less to re-use the leaves."

"How disgusting."

"Whatever! the point is, you'll get a name, and that's better than no name." Asca asserted. "It's the step the poors can take away from the gutter."

"... I can't begin to tell you how unutterably bored I am with this." Ulster sneered.

"Unutterably. That's an adverb. That shows a little bit how."

"... You are the worst kind of prating spod, you know that?"

"Oh, Fiver —" Wardell cleared his throat. "Just so you know, the tide's on the way in, I'm told."

"Oh!" Marko pushed himself up to standing. "I should go meet with..." he drew a breath. "Our Future King."

"Be careful out there," Ligier said. "They're lining up for a *parade*."

"... I thought this would be slightly more private than that." Marko said, suddenly worried. "I mean, can't we meet with him in private, first...?"

Ligier curled his finger on the top of his lip. "... Ah. I thought the..."

"You *thought*, did you?" Marko asked, leaning forward, hand on the table. "Where's the parade lead, Ligier?"

Wardell held his breath. Ligier. Not *Sir Rangst*. Ligier, like Ligier's *father* would say. "Ah... the, uh. The Palace of Westminster."

"Wardell?" Marko asked, as he walked, almost *storming*.

"Yes sir?"

"Go grab the books and meet me at Westminster. The rest of you, head there *now*. *Now*. God, what did you *think* you were going to have to *do* today?!"

Wardell swallowed. Marko was *angry*, and not the way he was normally. Frustrated with the nobles, *that* was easy to manage. But Ligier had acted out of turn and committed them to a task, without thinking it through.

"Sir, yes sir!" Wardell called behind him, as he pushed the cart along. Nobody in the room corrected Wardell about who was *actually* in charge.

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"No, no, I can stand on my own." Vince insisted. He had to insist, because if he didn't Stannisfeld was *going* to carry him and as charming as that was, this wasn't some private embarrassment heading up the gangplank on a little Hemulkar dock. This was a much more *public* affair, and uniforms weren't designed for that sort of thing.

"If you're sure," the courier said behind him.

"Fucking *hell*," Leigh grumbled, looking out at the dock.

The *crowd* was a surprise, at least.

"What?" Gael asked, looking out at the crowd, her eyes narrowed as if Leigh had just pointed out a snake amongst the thronging faces at the side of the river.

"I don't... I mean Christ, how many people *are* there in this city?"

"A few million." Gael said, matter-of-factly, looking down to Leigh at her side. "Not used to this, huh? Thought they did basic training near here."

Leigh shook her head. "We had a range up in Brighaven... it's why I joined artillery."

And because you're short, Vince didn't say. That would be mean, and just because Leigh had been mean to him didn't mean he had to return the favour *out loud*. Strange to see Gael's reaction, though – she was looking out for them.

"Just... lotta folk and they're looking at us. Not used to that." Vince felt a pang of sympathy there. The first time he'd ridden the train and seen how *big* the world was, all the way up to Hadrian, he'd realised everything he knew about the scope of the world was *wrong*. Poor Leigh was a girl from Brighaven, a town composed mostly of canals and pub violence, and now she was standing on a dock watching a crowd thronging to the edges of the riverside, in the shadow of the greatest living General of a military that had been her family for what, two years?

"They're more scared of you than you are of them," Stannisfeld said, from behind, as he adjusted his belt.

"That's bears." Leigh grunted, visibly tense.

"No, I'm pretty sure that's not." Vince offered. "I've seen a bear, it didn't seem very scared of anything."

Gael shrugged. "Bears are scared of me."

"Law, y'all done bickering back there?" Yull grunted, turning his head only slightly. Looking behind him would break the line of the group, who were stood in what counted as a kind of formation while the boat slid along the river. Vince redoubled his attention, hands by his side, trying to stand straight enough that his collarbones tried to escape upwards out of his shoulders. Somewhere near his hip, muscles that weren't *really* all that healed grunted in protest – but he had insisted.

He'd insisted, because last night, when Yull mentioned *dress uniforms*, it was with the leery voice of a man describing a visit to a vulgar relative. And now they were on the boat, standing together. If Vince had not taken position beside his general, it would have been Yull and Leigh alone in their uniforms, the dark blue-grey woollen coats of the Tiberan military, and they'd have looked like a comedy act. Leigh wasn't *quite* half Yull's height, but she was easily a third of his *size*. Vince felt his own frame provided a balancing point of contrast.

These were the thoughts Vince had, that he took very seriously.

Gael wasn't to stand with them; near, but apart. She was a mercenary, not a member of the military. Her own clothes, her own wear – and she wore a green cloak pulled up high to her chin. Her red hair, normally bound in a tight knot at the top of her neck, was braided and fell between her shoulderblades. Sword on one hip, gun on the other, Vince wondered if she looked, in her own way, like a sort of pirate, or a privateer, on the boat. He'd have to look up the difference between the two.

Stannisfeld was also not a soldier, so he had to stand back, behind them, next to Gael. He wore a uniform, too, but it was the same uniform he'd been wearing when they'd started riding together. Somewhere on that uniform – brushed clean, not washed – there was dust from the trenches that Vince had dug, months earlier.

Vince couldn't help but think *ick*.

The boat slowed to a stop, and Yull adjusted his coat, his sword. "Alright, then, law. Not sure what's going on – thought we were meeting with, ah..."

"Ah?"

"There." Yull said, raising his chin – his beard pointed down at the docks, at the figure in the middle of the dock. No crowd around him, curtailed by the lines of chalk drawn on the stone. Vince was honestly a little surprised that people would obey a chalk line in a city, especially this one.

The man was quite handsome; clad in partial armour, the look of a bodyguard; a cuirass and shoulderguard. Nice shoulders, dark hair, and a very arresting scar across his cheek. "Your friend...?" Vince asked. "Not to presume, sir, but, he seems to have brought some friends."

"... Quite a *few* friends."

"Half the city." Leigh grumbled, and Vince nudged her.

"Alright, law. Let's see what this is about."

Vince had *never* heard sounds like he heard as they moved down the gangway. First, there had been some caution; as if the crowd held their breath together. But then, perhaps as he was halfway down the plank, a roar rippled through the crowd, an immense bellow of... joy? Surprise? *Something?*

The city of Timoritia had become a long sluglike beast of thousands of faces and it was yelling at Vince, and he wasn't particularly keen on it. But the crowd's yelling *didn't stop*. They were waving *flags*. They were *cheering* something.

"Stannisfeld," Vince asked, as he put his feet gingerly on the dock. "Is... uh... do you remember what that note to the General was all about?"

"It said *come back*, far as I know, Vince..." Stannisfeld said, having to raise his voice to be heard.

Yull's huge hand clapped into the hand of the soldier in the streets, and he bellowed out his hello – because *nobody* out-yelled the General.

“Marko! Haven’t seen you in *years*! What the *bloody bloody hell* is going on here?”

“Aha!” Marko said, clapping his hand into the general’s, dipping his head. “Ah, General – please, come with me! We’ve a meeting for you, up in Westminster.”

“Westminster?” Yull laughed, stomping forwards. He gestured over his shoulders. “Come on, law. In step, now. Let’s be proper about this. And tain’t a thing in Westminster to talk about unless we’ve got paperwork or a tour to do.”

“Want to see the throne while we’re there?” Marko asked, raising his voice.

Yull’s laugh echoed off the windows around, rattling lead and wood.

Leigh drew in, between Gael and Vince. “This is *creepy*.”

Gael patted her shoulder, as they fell in line behind the general. “Nationalism usually is.”

*

Westminster Palace was one of three Palaces set around the city, and the one closest to the seat of power. It was the one that sat closest to the Old City and claimed its foundations had been built from those very walls. With that age came *importance*, as any Chilver would *happily* tell you. Age was important, age was how habits became traditions. It was also where the throne had been vacated – and had been maintained and cared for for over a century as a symbol of the inevitable return of the monarchy. It had been designed some time ago but slowly refined over that time – shells of building slowly forming around each layer, with more land purchased and flattened in the centre of the city to give the palace space. It was very important, after all, being a King’s palace.

The palace’s expansion stopped when the King died; that meant it was locked in a century-old fashion and so, most buildings around it, even newer ones, strove to emulate it. White facing walls, painted and carefully marked. All about these white panels was black edging and curved-inward shapes marking the edges. Windows were huge – smooth, flat glass panes of high quality cut as big as walls, and reinforced with delicate iron lines. Lead was for poors.

They’d hustled on over with Marko’s order, and nobody was too keen to talk about how a *soldier* and *bodyguard* had bossed them into action. Then it’d been past the main areas, where some official bureaucratic actions still transpired, and headed up to a room they’d set aside for the negotiation a few weeks ago. And there, they were waiting, and watching, and planning the inevitable arrival of the king, exaltation onto the throne, and then, of course, all that power *and such*.

Ligier had been the one to order in the Binoculars. They were marvellous little inventions – normally this set was used for attending the horse races or watching river boats racers. *Those must have been the days*. The binoculars sat pertly on little arms, with elaborate and clever designs to keep them ratcheted in place when adjusted into space. It was how Ligier, that towering buffoon, could stand next to Asca sitting, and they both could look out through a set of binoculars that stood next to one another. The binoculars were how the conspirators – or as Tenner Chilver had named them *The Black King’s Crown* – were looking at the coming ‘parade’ of six people.

Tenner wasn’t at the binoculars; he was at the table. It was round and polished, decorated only with a red runner that ran down the centre. The whole palace had been maintained as it was since the

execution of the *Chilver King*, perpetually in the state he'd left it. Well, almost. Some of the prison rooms had been repurposed from what they had *become*. That was rather unpleasant, after all.

Upon the runner was a drape, so as to not dust the King's runner, and upon the drape sat the files that Marko had made for the group over the past few months. Each one was in a familiar dark-grey folder, made out of pressed old cardboard, thick and hard-cut at the edges. Typical of the soldier to use something like that. They looked ugly and their faces wore hard letters written in a large hand.

"Not sure we want all six of them to come in, do we?"

"Well, we have to have Marko and Yull. What's four more?"

Ligier rumbled, peering through the binoculars. "You seen them, Tenner?"

"No," *of course not, you crook-pated mattock-faced buffon*, Tenner pointedly didn't add. "I'm handling the paperwork that Marko wanted. The genealogy. And the files on his soldiers."

"They're all soldiers?" Asca asked, pushing his binocular closer to the window, as if *that* would help.

"Well, one's wearing a grey-brown coat. Long sleeves, white trim...?"

"Ah, that's the courier." Tenner murmured, fishing through the pile. The binoculars didn't feel comfortable on his nose because of his wide-set eyes, and the whole experience made him feel a bit sick, like he was at the bottom of a fishbowl. Again. "Ah, here's the name. Jame Stannisfeld."

"Well, we can't allow *him* in."

"Oh, definitely not. He's a *courier*, not a soldier. And he's Djansk." Tenner flipped through the notes.

"What? *We let those deliver our mail?*" Asca sputtered.

"Well, I mean, how would you know if someone was Djansk? It's not exactly obvious to look at them." Ulster murmured. "They're basically just like Gallians."

"Calais is Tiberan." Tenner grouched.

"Oh don't start *that* up."

"Oh, I'd *know* if my mailman was Djansk," Ligier growled, drawing a breath, his mighty shoulders bunching up. "I'd *know*."

"Who's the short one?" Ulster asked, cutting across Ligier's seethe.

"Short, short – ah, yes, there's a note here. Corporal ah, Leigh Taisheer. Artillery."

Ulster tapped her chin, looking speculatively out the window across the river. It was hard to read a person through their gestures behind binoculars like that.

"Can't really let her in. Not with the big one – they'd look ridiculous side by side. And really, I don't know why we let the short ones *join*. She ruins the look of a parade." Asca reached across his chair to fumble with the binocular's post, trying to adjust himself back into a more comfortable, luxurious sit.

"While we're at it, two women? That's a bit excessive, isn't it? Not to mention that the redhead's not in uniform-" Ligier added.

Tenner rifled through the paperwork. There was a note about this somewhere. "Ah, she, she doesn't *have* a uniform. Gael Morris. She's a mercenary, and... there aren't any records of her childhood in the folder."

"We *have* mercenaries in our army!?"

Ulster lowered her binoculars, and just *stared* at him.

Somehow, Asca knew, and he leant back in his chair, away from the binoculars.

"Well... I mean, I know *Dulfs* hire armies-" He began, petering out slowly in the face of that freckled glare.

"Hello." Ulster said. "Ulster *Dulf*. I'm sure we've *met*."

Tenner coughed, and shifted the paperwork around. "Either way, she's got no records as a child, she's not a soldier, and she's a mercenary. That's *very* suspicious. We certainly shouldn't be letting her into Westminster." Asca was a big, fat man and Tenner was legitimately frightened that if Ulster stared at him too long, he might *melt*.

"*Very* suspicious." Ligier added, obliviously peering through the binoculars.

Ulster stopped tormenting Asca as she turned to her binoculars, but there was still something in that tight line of her lips. Tenner made a note to send servants to talk to her tonight. It probably wouldn't go well in person.

"What about the ah..." Asca began, then quietly floundered. Understandable, Ulster had just dragged him around the room with a look. Just how many boyfriends had she *shot*, exactly?

"The ah..." Ligier gestured. "Big one."

"Yes, he's..." Asca fumbled around something.

"Well," Ulster cleared her throat. "I suppose we could speak with the General *alone*..."

"You want to invite *our king* in here without *some* retinue?" Tenner called over from the table.

"Well, the big monkey, what's his name?"

He shoved aside the three files they'd opened already, below which sat the thick folder labelled **YULL BACHTHANE**, and grabbed the other. Without opening it, he read off the front. "Vincent Swanhill... that's a very *local* name."

"That's *very* local." Asca muttered. "I think... didn't a Swanhill work on the Tower Bridge, or something like that, recently?"

"And, he *is* with the General." Tenner added, looking over at the window as if the bright white sheen in from above would help him understand what was going on better. What weren't they mentioning?

Tenner slid the files around, grumbling to himself. "*None* of them are... *really*... *appropriate* for this... but... it does make a better *story* if he has, you know... one of his soldiers from the front." He pushed the files around. "Okay. I'll send a note to the guards at the gate. Neither of the women. I mean, they're *women*. And Swanhill is local to the area, no matter how big he is. So... let him in with the General."

“Just, um, keep a servant to keep an eye on him.” Asca offered, thoughtfully.

“Make sure he doesn’t steal the silverware.” Ligier added.

*

“I’m still not sure why the Parade, Marko,” Yull laughed, hand on his sword hilt. Beneath them, the road slid past, under the steady rhythm of what Vince had come to know as *the procession*. Not too fast, because that took too much energy, but not too slow, because that was inefficient.

“Statement of purpose!” Marko said. “It’s important that the people of the city recognise you, sir.”

“Is that so?”

“You know me,” Marko laughed. “We don’t respect our leaders enough as it is.”

“Respect?” Stannisfeld asked. “Who... uh, who even *runs* the city, sir?”

“Well, it’s a council of – well, you know, the nobility?” Marko said, clearing his throat as they walked.

“But it holds together well because of our principles.”

“And what principles are those?” Yull asked, leaning slightly, looming over Marko from the side.

“Well, there’s honesty, tenacity, pride,” The man faltered momentarily as if remembering something on his cereal packet that morning, “Courage.”

“Oh, like us!” Leigh crowed. “I mean, Gael’s tenacity, and I’m honesty.”

“You sure of that?” Gael asked.

“You calling me a liar?”

“And that would make you pride, mmmm, Vince?” Gael nudged the boy with her arm from behind.

“After all, never seen you risk *anything*.”

“Is that what courage is in Timoritia?” Stannisfeld asked, his steps easy and smooth behind Vince. It wasn’t really much of a *parade*, really, but Vince was comforted to hear his, uh. To hear Stannisfeld behind him.

Marko turned only slightly to say, speaking over his shoulder. “Yes – it’s why we walk when we do these things. There’s no need to rush that which is decided. It’s a sign of our charge, the courage to act, but not just that. It’s the way that we commit to an action; when we resolve to act, the deed is done. It’s just a matter of time.”

“Huh.” Stannisfeld said. Vince was sure Stannisfeld was nodding, beneath that mop of pale blonde hair. It’s grown a little since they’d ridden all the way across the world – when he’d shown up in the trenches that first time, he’d had hair barely past his ears, shaved close around the base of his scalp. But the months of travel had let it creep down his head and now it ducktailed cutely by the base of his neck. It was a cute hair style, sort of halfway between short and long, really, but-

Someone – someone, pfft, of course it would be Stannisfeld – tapped Vince on the shoulder as they walked. Did he have something to say? Vince turned – only to find Stannisfeld’s hand on his shoulder, turning him fully around while the parade yet moved; for one span of two ems, there were no people on either side of them, but there *was* a convenient wall, and suddenly Stannisfeld’s chest was up against his, his hand was in Vince’s hair and he was –

“Hey Vince,” Stannisfeld asked, smiling, walking him backwards, one finger hooked under his coat lapel. “Mind if I kiss you?”

oh.

“N-nnnoo?” Vince managed, and under the shadow of the alleyway, Stannisfeld kissed Vince, one arm swept around him, squeezing him in a hug. All the details around Vince were clear, but muted – Leigh grumbling, Yull walking alongside Marko Fiver before them on the road, Gael's whoop of... something. But they weren't as important as feeling Stannisfeld's lips against his; suddenly, Vince was profoundly self-conscious about the stubble he thought he might have missed this morning, especially since Stannisfeld's skin was, well, uh, so soft... and then, the messenger broke the hold and grinned at him.

“Courage, right?” Stannisfeld said, *without missing a step*. They were still standing *right next* to Gael and Leigh, and right behind Yull and Marko. And very gently, Stannisfeld turned him around, and Vince was just back in the parade, feeling his cheeks on *fire*. He couldn't find his breath, and stammered for a moment, waving one hand as if to try and recover the thread of conversation.

“Cat got yer tongue?” Leigh snickered.

“Or someone else?” Gael added.

*

Rafe had come along to the parade with the air of a truculent dog being pulled along on a lead. As the weather was turning, he'd returned to the thick woollen coat and pants made out a friar's robe, and Aderyn wore thicker leggings under her skirt than she had earlier in the year. The thicker leggings weren't much of an extravagance – they didn't limit her movement nearly as much as, for example as that ridiculous dress Rafe had worn.

“Why we all the way out here if we're going to the parade?” Rafe asked, with his hands jammed into his pocket, looking across the river. Flickering eyes, though! That was useful to notice about Rafe. Even though he always looked at the world like a little boy, he was noticing plenty of detail. Even if he didn't apply it properly, or even realise he was doing it. Maybe that was why he'd leapt *upwards* when he'd jumped out of a window?

“Because we'll just walk on up to the bottleneck and make our way to the front.” Kivis said. “You'd be surprised how few people want to get in my way right by Westminster.”

The wrought iron fence on their left was a lovely structure, designed to protect the palace as a sort of ceremonial thing. Long, thin fenceposts. She could probably have slipped through them, a year earlier – but her head had grown slightly since then. The palace itself was boring – big white panes and so many cornices and hooks that she could have *danced* along its surfaces. And huge windows that *opened*. What kept people from assassinating kings any time they wanted?

“Okay, why we going to the parade?” Rafe asked, a curl in his lip.

“Because they're telling us the king's coming. I want to see the king.” Kivis said.

“You like kings, Kivis?” Rafe asked.

“Not at all,” she said, as the crowd drew around them – and parted in front of her. “But you should always recognise the king.”

“Yeah?” asked the teen. “Why's that?”

“Because,” said a voice like chocolate and honey, right by Aderyn's side, “When you meet a Tyrant, kill him.”

“... Uh.” Rafe looked between the two, and cleared his throat. “Well, Aderyn? This is Xenops Cornell.” Even as he said it, though, he was looking for Kivis – stopping when he saw the back of the knight, who had stopped to peer down the street, right by the chalk lines on the floor, pushing away some meat-pie salesman who was trying to have her attention.

“Hello again, Xenops,” Aderyn said.

“You've met-” Rafe yelped, then took a moment to calm himself. “When did you-”

“Rafe, the party was *weeks* ago.” Aderyn said.

“Didn't I tell you the client was-”

Aderyn shook her head, and sighed, curtsying slightly to Xenops. “Confidential, yes. But there were a limited number of possible people who could have spoken to you, and I investigated.”

“... You *what*?” Rafe asked.

“Well, Rafe, you see, when you were wearing that dress-”

Wait.

That was odd.

“I am sorry,” Aderyn said. “I was expecting you to interrupt me.”

“Why?” Rafe looked confused. She knew that look, now. He narrowed his eyes, and scrunched up his nose. These days there was something else to it, though – the corners of his mouth tugged up a little.

“We're talking about you wearing a dress in front of a pretty girl.” Maybe elaboration was helpful.

“I'm right here.” Xenops added, leaning into Rafe's personal space, which didn't seem to bother him which was strange, and come to think of it what she said was strange, because, yes, of course she was. Why *did* people mention that.

“And she saw me wearing it. I ... what's yer point?”

“Oh.” Something was strange. Aderyn was *sure* that Rafe would object to having his masculinity questioned like that. The subverted expectation was a bother, a tiny bother, but a bother. “Well-”

“So it was you in sze dress?” Xenops asked, tilting her head to Rafe. “Ah, such a shame! You made such a beautiful princess. But at least your friend 'ere would look just as magnificent!”

Aderyn felt momentarily out of her depth. “Rafe, I do not think your friends and I have been introduced.”

“You *just said her name*,” Rafe growled. “You *know* who Xenops is-”

“Ah, oui, Princess Assassin, but I do not know who she is!” Then the woman with the mottled skin put her finger to her pink lips and tapped them. “Come to szink of it, I do not know who *you* are. By name, at least.”

“Rafe,” he said, gesturing at himself with his thumb, then gestured at Aderyn with his other. “Aderyn.”

“*Lady Aderyn DuThane*,” she clarified.

“Mou!” Xenops said with a laugh, putting her hand to her lips. “Now I know your names – am I a witness to a crime?”

“What,” Kivis asked, turning and looking back at them. “Getting Rafe out of that dress, now that was a crime.”

And Rafe didn't react to that, either. This was *very strange*. Aderyn couldn't think much more about it with the information to hand, and so, remembering to shrug to indicate that she was thinking about something but not much, she turned to Xenops. “I do apologise, but-”

“Oo, wait-” Xenops said, pushing to stand next to Kivis. “Sze king approaches!”

*

The gates of Westminster palace were broad but open, and staffed by guards wearing traditional red tunics, black trousers and shoes, gold buttons, and most oddly, black furry hats made out of bear fur. Well, Vince had been told it was bear fur. There was a conversation transpiring, between Marko, Yull and the guards, but Vince couldn't stop looking at the silky fur. Were bears so long-furred? Why wear so much of the fur at once, even? These were mysteries that he'd never bothered to probe before, as a child.

“Excuse us, sir.” The Guard said, turning to gesture between Yull and the others. “Just the orders I have from the Palace.”

“What's that, law?” laughed the giant of a man. “You don't look like soldiers to me-”

“They call *everyone* sir, Sir,” Marko said, but he was smiling. Vince had not seen this before. Yull treated him, and the other soldiers like grandchildren, but Marko, Marko he looked at like a younger brother. Marko – with that scar on his face and that glorious mane of black hair, he looked like the sort of man Vince would have looked up to, quite a bit, when he was younger. And while he probably had a raging, flinty heart, he wasn't as cute as Stannisfield.

Wait.

Vince stopped his mind wandering to hear the instruction.

“Seems they cannae let us all in the ponce-fest,” Yull said, turning slightly, adjusting his sword belt. “Vince? You’re in. Jame, Gael, Leigh – you stay out here, me law.”

Gael smiled when she was called by name – and Vince could see the tangible sheen of pride in Leigh when she wasn’t addressed as *just* law. It was their moment. A reminder of the people that their General, their commander, knew them to be.

“Wait, who’s Jame?” Vince asked, and he realised who it was just as Marko took his arm and led him past the wrought iron fences. Gael had her hand over her mouth, Leigh had her mouth open, and Stannisfeld was *shocked*.

Every single detail of the red-gravel path and the flanking flowering bushes was *immediately* very important to Vincent.

“Law,” Yull said, as they walked up the path, “When w’get back out, you’re going to give that boy an apology.” Crunch, crunch, crunch went the giant man’s boots. Marko looked uncomfortable, but didn’t comment, and Vince noticed his boots hadn’t been polished in quite some time. “Don’t go trying to explain. You just fucked up.”

Above, the stormclouds rolled, as the doors to Westminster Palace opened before Yull Bachthane, and Vince and Marko followed him in.

Chapter 18

Traditionally the importance of an event is directly proportionate to how many people notice it. Some of the most important discoveries in the history of humanity passed by unnoticed at first, and it's the person who made a fuss about them afterwards that enjoys being remembered by all but the stickiest of nerds.

Just like bloody little struggles that didn't matter to anyone.

"Alright, Vince, was it?" Marko asked, as they walked up the steps through Westminster.

"Sir, yes sir." The soldier was looking all around himself with a fairly reasonable mix of awe and awareness. This kid *was* some kind of middle-classer, had enough money to recognise how important Westminster *was*.

"He's not a *soldier*," Yull laughed, undercutting that *sir* Vince had used. "Marko's retired."

"I'm sorry, I thought you were-"

"I was!" Marko said, turning back, slowing his pace slightly and grinning. "Years ago, though. Another story for another time. Either way. You know your dress parade rules?"

"Well-" he said, hesitating. When had he been last on parade? Probably about a *year* ago. The front was months away and they'd been there for far too long.

"Vince?" Yull asked, adjusting his sword belt. "Just stand by the door and shut up. Don't speak unless I explicitly give you permission."

"Oh." Vince nodded. "*That* I can do, sir."

Yull laughed. "Been months since we were in ranks, Marko. Had to move fast."

"Oh? Anything on the trip worth mentioning."

"Lions, deserters, Djansk soldiers. Nothing particularly interesting."

Marko stopped at the door and smiled, "Alright, then. Okay – we'll talk more afterwards, sir. Or should I say, your majesty?" He grinned, pushing the door open.

"What the *hell* is that supposed to-" Yull began, but Marko's call cut him off. He stepped into the room, sharp and loud, boots *clacking* on the wood of the floor, stepping between rugs.

"Lords of the Noble Houses!" Marko called, loud and proud. "His Lordship and General Of The Tiberan Army, Lord Yull Bachthane Of Lleywa!" Marko stepped to the side of the door, standing sharp and formal, trying to hide his smile.

It was happening.

*

Westminster Palace was one of the few locations in Timoritia Vince had only visited to look at from the outside. His parents had made sure that the museums and galleries he'd visited, he'd spent time inside, you know, soaking up the culture, as they deemed appropriate, but Westminster Palace, when they visited, had just been a set of white buildings on the other side of a very large fence that was still not quite so large he couldn't imagine getting his head stuck between the bars.

It had seemed *far too large* back then, and as a young boy, as a nascent engineer, Vince had tried to do the math behind how much space was involved in the palace. Given its spread and breadth, he'd concluded it must have *hundreds* of rooms, perhaps *thousands* of rooms, and that was assuming the rooms were *unreasonably large*.

The rooms, now he was inside, were not *unreasonably large*. Vince's normal halfway measure of understatement didn't have good tools for referring to this scope; they were *definitely* larger than *unreasonably large*, and some of them were even *unreasonably unreasonably large*? Were they? The language of the middle didn't have a term for it.

Leigh would probably have just spat 'huge' and been done with it.

The room they walked into was about *ten ems* at its shortest side, and *all of that* was window. An *enormous* set of windows, with a central pillar, curtains rolled back on either side. They glittered slightly, with the dull brooding yellow of the sun pushing against the clouds that rolled in reflecting off the bright, shiny metal lines that ran through the glass as supports. The carpet didn't run to the edges of the room, though – it sat on the top of polished wooden floors.

Vince had known a wealthy friend who had a room in his home like that; the carpet was left as a large rug, and rolled up and stored during the summer months. That'd been a demonstration of wealth, though, because you needed a good, clean room to store the carpet in that wouldn't gather dust. For a room like *this*...? Vince had lived in *buildings* which were smaller than this carpet.

The walls were white, interspersed with dark, polished wooden furnishings, upon which sat pale white busts and vases. Artwork and emblems that stood out from the setting of the room behind them, but only really *clearly* shown by their shadows. It was a nice effect, though Vince couldn't help but imagine it would need a *lot* of cleaning to keep from turning grey and losing the impact.

One long table sat in the room, closer to the window than to the door through which Vince and Yull and Marko had entered. It was probably some six ems long, maybe two ems across, and all in that same glossy, polished dark wood colour. There was a drape over it – thick white fabric that showed no sign of dust. Behind it sat four figures, each dressed as the nobles of the city, adorned with a strange formality.

Was this the Vox Coronate? Vince had thought the Vox was formed out of older statepeople from the families – these all looked a bit... young?

Leftmost of the figures was a tall man, with thick black hair pushed back over his scalp, pressed down and tailing a little at his neck. It was a style fashionable amongst the nobles that some thought *rakish*. When a slender man wore his hair like that, it gave him a sting of the loose and wild about him. When *this* man, barrel-chested, wide-shouldered, and with thick black hair on the backs of his hands and forearms, wore his hair like that, it looked more like a tiger being pushed through a narrow fence.

Next to him sat a woman who was, in Vince's mind, sort of handsome? Arresting? She was, well, passably pretty? Lovely red hair, rich and coppery, but more blonde than *red*. After spending time around Gael, whose hair was glorious and vivid, it looked just a little bit *wan*. It wasn't helped by the woman's *outrageous* mess of freckles, bright across her nose, her cheeks, her throat, and down to the backs of her hands. She was dressed in a more suit-like arrangement than most women typically wore in these events, and there was a rifle leaning against her chair. Beyond those most superficial

of observations, though, she had a look that made Vince *sweat* – he felt like she was sizing up the distance between them. Despite the fact she was sitting *next* to the man with a tiger’s demeanour, *she* was the one Vince felt himself fearing.

Next to *her* was a short little man, barely up to her shoulder in his chair, who sat behind a pile of files and paperwork. Inverted names in hard script showed names that Vince could recognise. Leigh, Gael, himself – well, it stood to reason, with the importance of the palace that they’d be careful about who they let in. The man himself was so unremarkable as to be invisible. He had brownish-grey hair, nervous little hands that fidgeted with a small stamp, and skin as pale as an onion. Even his eyes were a little watery, and he flinched whenever anyone raised their voice.

Finally on the end of the table, with the look that he chose that spot because it involved as little travel as possible was a large, rotund man with large, hanging jowls and an extra chin. He was wearing a suit that fit *immaculately*, and the shape of the waistcoat and collar made him look slimmer than he was, but there really was only so much fooling of the eye you could do. If the man at the far left of the table looked like a tiger, this one looked like a housecat – plump and round and perhaps a little too spoiled.

“Ah, General... Bachthane,” said the shorter man, without looking up. “I am Tenner Chilver. This,” he pointed to the woman, “is Ulster Dulf,” and he gestured onwards, to the tiger of a man. “Ligier Rangst, and that,” he said, pointing to the man next to him, “is Asca Gorange. Please, do come to the table.” He raised his head, looking off to the side, and called. “Servant! A chair for the General.”

Vince stepped to the side, and stood by the door, and tried to work out why three of the four nobles were watching him, like they were expecting something. The side door opened and in a rush, a young person wearing a short skirt, but holding a chair in both hands, scuttled in. It was set down on the floor, before the table. Vince looked to Marko for a queue – even as Yull lumbered forwards.

The stitches in his side ached slightly, and Vince tried not to think about how much exertion he’d been putting himself through today.

“Wait, what,” Asca said, as Yull stepped forwards, moving to the front of the chair, not even introducing himself. Marko nodded politely, and gestured with his head to Vince – before moving to stand next to Yull’s right hand side. Well, that left his left, and that had a nice bit of symmetry to it. Vince stepped up, put his hands by his sides, and maintained as easy an attention as he could.

They were still all looking at him.

Weird.

Yull finally sank into the chair with a relaxed grunt, resting his hands on the arms of the chair, scratching one hand into his beard and looking between the four of them. Vince didn’t know what was going on behind the General’s temples, but his eyes weren’t bleeding respect.

“So what do you want?” he said, brusque, his voice low, and massive. And *then* there was a pointed moment of panic.

“Hang on, *you’re* Yull?” Ligier asked, leaning forwards, glaring at Yull. “You?”

Ulster was at least merely looking surprised. A little confused, sure, but just *surprised*.

“Tenner, you sure this isn’t a mistake?”

"Is what-whoaaaaah," Tenner said, looking up from the papers in front of him.

Vince looked at the nobles, then at Yull. Then at the nobles, then at Yull.

What the hell was going on here?

"What the *hell* is going on here?"

"Well," Marko said, clearing his throat. "These ladies and gentlemen represent the Black King's Crown."

"Yes, the **Black** King's Crown, Tenner," Ligier said, thumping his hand on the desk and glaring sideways at the smaller man. "You, General. Oi. I thought you said you were from Lleywa."

"I **am** from Lleywa," Yull growled, leaning forwards. Ligier's aggression was strange, but Yull's reaction was stranger. Still, Vince knew it wasn't his place to speak. "What's your question, *son*?" Yull asked, his eyes flashing.

"You know your *place*?" Ligier shot back.

"On the front lines of the army city pricks like *you* don't have the stamina to *join*," Yull snarled back, but stayed in his seat. "Marko, what are we doing here?"

"Ah, sir, the nobles want to talk to you about—" Marko began.

"Ah, well, we were the letter of the Vox Coronate that sent for you," Asca Gorange said, clearing his throat as he sat. "It was a discussion of the proper value of, oh, of, a—"

"How do you feel about being made General Imperator?" Ulster said, cutting through the air.

Yull stopped, but didn't break his glare at Ligier. It was an obvious start, and his eyebrows knit.

"General Imperator's an old role, isn't it? Lead general of the armies?"

"Ah, yes, that it is," said Tenner, frantically sifting through the paperwork, looking over at Ulster, surprised suddenly. "Um! Well, yes, you see, the General Imperator position does require, um, does require the appointment of a *king*—"

"Yes, a *King*," Marko said, trying to work out where to look. He was clearly expecting something that wasn't happening. Outside, the thunder rolled through the crowds, windows darkening.

Tenner was frantic, trying to find something in his paperwork. "And here, of course, the badge of the General Imperator, with its motto, '*Discernat Ferrum*' – ah, yes, 'in the iron is—'"

"Let the Sword Decide," Yull rumbled.

"Oh, I didn't know you knew Latin." Tenner offered, looking up in surprise.

"I didn't know you *didn't*, you square-eyed little prick." Why was Yull being so confrontational? Vince was *completely lost*.

Silence descended on the room like a fog. That was *not* how it was meant to go.

Yull planted his hand on the arm of his chair, pushing himself up into standing. Dark brown eyes flashed, his nostrils flared, and he gripped the chair's arm while he stood, "A soldier picks up a few things on a few battlefields. You'll talk about anything with anyone, when the cannons are going and you're on your knees in a ditch. And so I learned a little Latin an' I learned a little about Windmills and I've learned a bit about how to grow rosebushes, because I've heard a hundred terrified boys

talkin' and I've sat and listened and we've waited for the mud to run less red." He scratched his chest with one hand and finally released the chair with the other. "Dazzle some other idiot with your fancy symbols. You called me *half way across the world* to arse around with a fancy title and *parades*? Call me back when you've used all those hands to find your own *arse*." He turned, he gestured to Vince to fall in line behind him, and stalked out of the room.

Thus passed the Qisar, dusty footprints on expensive carpet, seeking a servant who could direct him down to the kitchens and maybe the privy. Vince turned and scuttled after him at speed, pulling the door closed behind him.

Well that could *probably* have gone a *lot* better, couldn't it?

*

As first impressions went, Marko reasoned, it really could have not gone worse. He knew the General well – and that brutal, wondrous bluster of the Black Thane seemed to do nothing to the room but ice it over.

"Was that *him*?" Finally, hissed Tenner.

Asca had spent the whole time groping for words; he had that distinct, fishy face of a man struggling for air or for the edges of idea. But when Yull left the room, the words burst free: "**You never said he was fucking black!**"

"Asca, some decorum, please." Ulster sneered.

Ligier was looking back and forth between Marko and the others. "Is this a joke? Is that what this is? You said he's from Lleywa!" His accusatory finger levelled at Marko, fairly vibrating.

"... Yes?"

"*Did you see the man?!*"

"I *served* under the man! What the *hell* are you idiots *getting at*?"

"Someone **forgets his place**," Ulster said, standing up slowly from her chair. Reaching down to take up a parasol, she shook her head, clucking her tongue. "I'm not here to be bellowed at by the help. I'll see you gentlemen tomorrow morning. Tenner, that idea about the General Imperator wasn't free. You owe me for that lifeline."

Asca pushed himself out of his chair next, smoothing down his tunic. "This has been *disastrous*. And this is the man we have to *crown*?"

"We don't *have* to-" Tenner began. "I mean, we didn't *tell* him that, did we?"

"Shut up," Ligier shouted. "Shut up, shut up!" His tone rose, the panicked yell of someone who knew something was going very, very wrong, very quickly.

"Oh Ligier," Asca said, turning to look up at the man. "You didn't."

"I... well after the first fliers went so well, I-"

"You *didn't*."

Tenner coughed. "Ligier, *what did you do*."

"Well, there should be a coronation, right...? I..."

Marko was only dimly aware of the hollering. This was wrong. This was very wrong. Yull was the rightful king, and now all these nobles were acting like he *couldn't* be the rightful king. He rubbed his hands through his hair and tried to gather his thoughts through sound of drumming feet on the sand outside.

Marko looked up, suddenly realising how strange a thought that was – there was no desert outside. It was just the rain. Just the rain. Growling to himself as he stood, Marko made some token goodbye and stormed out the door. They weren't even paying attention. Something about fliers, and a coronation event, and... eugh. His stomach was watery, his brain was on fire.

Where the hell was Wardell? He needed to talk to the man.

*

Out in the courtyard, Yull swung right, down one of the paths the guards lined, but hadn't decorated for the parade. Gesturing to the fence, he waved with one hand – and like the soldiers they were, Gael, Stannisfeld and Leigh broke away from the crowds and moved along the fence. It was only a few short moments of walking, crunching gravel under their feet, before guards were opening a side gate before Yull and Vince, and the giant man swept through it in dudgeon.

“Sir,” Vince began, as they drew back into a single unit. The thronging people filling the streets were melting out of the path as they realised nothing *else* was going to happen today, but the people were still mostly gathered on the other side of the palace.

“Quiet, law,” Yull grunted. The four fell into step, a few brisk steps past the gates, out of earshot of the guards, before he spoke again. “Alright, law, we're back on the clock,” he growled, stomping down the street.

“Special assignment?” Gael asked, visibly shifting in her stance. Vince had seen her throw herself over a trench-top and drag chain through cannon stations, and the same iron was in her shoulders as she walked. “The Vox Coronate need something done?”

“My *arse*,” the giant man grunted. “That's not the Vox Coronate. Maybe they could get the Vox to send a letter, but that's a pack of bored nobodies.” he shook his head, seething, as they walked down the narrow side streets of Timoritia. “We're in the cacky now, law, and the number one order now is *never split up*.”

Vince stopped trying to catch Stannisfeld's eyes and swallowed his pride, looking up at the general's back. “Why, sir?”

“There's a conspiracy afoot. If those useless shites are trying to pull around politics, they're little fish and there's a *shark* in this water. They've got *Marko* involved in this shit!” he spat, stopping at the corner, checking only for a moment. “If I know anything about this, law, I-”

Sometimes something pulled the attention of a whole group at once. In this case, it was one of the big bald walls behind a brickwork building, with a tarp set up as a makeshift awning. Underneath it, wearing a blue cap and coveralls, was a dutiful day worker, brushing glue along the wall with a broom despite the rain. Under the thundering sound of the heavens emptying on the tarpaulin, he just pumped his arms, and slapped up the posters he'd been given. Posters that now sat in a grid on

the wall, out of an enormous stack sitting in a wooden crate by his foot. The soldiers barely noticed him, though – because they were staring at the posters.

TIMORITIA REJOICE!

MARCH 15, BEHOLD THE CORONATION

AS KING BACHTHANE ASCENDS TO THE THRONE

“King... Bachthane...”

“Oh, *hell*,” Gael spat, looking up and down the street. “That's what I think it is, isn't it, sir?”

“Aye, law,” the general said, rolling his shoulder, gesturing for them to follow. “Alright.”

Vince had seen Yull compose a plan on the battlefield in a moment. He'd also seen him stuff his sword through two men in one swing, then literally throw the two bodies into a ditch to land on a grenadier. Vince knew decision when he saw it.

“Alright! Rules. Always have an exit strategy, law. You saw the files on the desk, Vince? They know your names. Me, I'm important enough they're not about to kill me over something like this. But I'm nae going back in there unless I have a sword in my hand and a back-up in yours.”

“They wouldn't just randomly *kill* us, would they?” Leigh asked, trotting faster to keep up, even as she unholstered a spare gun from behind her back, testing the chamber while she walked. “We're just soldiers. Boss us around and send us out, right?”

“Law, these are nobles. I dun' fancy they'd kill you outright, but I *do* fancy that there's someone in that room with a plan for if things go wrong, and I want you *all* to have a plan as well. Jame, Leigh, you two can move fast, aye?”

“Sir, yes sir!” Leigh shot, snapping to attention. Water flicked off her shoulders as she looked up, wearing a sternness that didn't suit. At least here in a city with a sheeting torrent of water blasting down onto her, she didn't look as *miserable* as she had out in the desert.

“Alright. You two need to find your families in th'city.” He stood seriously, gesturing around the circle. “What we're lookin' at here is *fishy*. I trust Marko but I don't trust the rest of them, an' chances are he's been thorough. Boy's a commander, he knows what he's doing.”

“Um, my parents are up in Brighaven.”

“Probably far enough they'll not care. Still, I need a message sent north soon.”

“We can head to the telegraph station, if you can write it down, sir?” Jame offered. No. Nope, nope, nope. He was Stannisfeld. Jame may have been his *name*, but he was *Stannisfeld* in Vince's mind, and Jame just seemed *weird*. “I still have military credentials. Can prioritise cables if they're within the country.”

“Hm. Good law, that.” Yull said, resting his hand on his sword. “Gael, your family...?”

“Not an issue, sir.” she said, curtly. He nodded, just once, and that was that.

"While they take care of the messages, though, what about us, General?" Gael asked, gesturing at herself, and Vince.

"Vince, you able to run?"

"I can try, sir."

"Not good enough. Alright, Gael, you keep Vince safe," and Vince tried to keep his expression from disappointment. "while y'head to the seventeenth district church."

"Safehouse?" Gael asked. "You don't seem the sort to have those, sir."

"Not a safehouse." Thumbing the pommel on his blade, Yull stepped into an awning. "But there's a chance the noble houses are up to something *illegal*, and if *that's* happening, law, that's where you want t'be. If something goes wrong and it comes to blood, I trust Lady Kivis Athene to start killing nobles until there's none *left*. She'll want to come to the coronation for that, at least."

"How... how bad do you expect things to get, sir?" Vince asked, watching the man pulling paper from his pocket and lean against the doorframe to write.

"Vince, this is about *kings*." he drew a long breath. "The die's already been cast – and we have to make sure we are not under it when it falls. Now *go*." he said, putting the tip of his pencil to the paper, scrawling out the first words of a letter.

As they went, Vince couldn't help but wonder if the man was writing a will.

*

"Wardell!" Marko yelled, feeling the rain sluice down his neck. The door wasn't locked.

"Wardell!" the lights were out. Slamming the door behind him stopped the rain, which eased his mind a little.

"Wardell!" he shouted again – god, how loud had he been shouting? It was just to drown out the hoofbeats.

The rain. To drown out the rain.

"Sir...?" came Wardell's voice from the kitchen.

Stomping and shaking his head, shaking the rain off himself as best he could, Marko slumped at the kitchen table, and took a deep breath while he slid his elbows on the table. Deep breaths. Very deep breaths. "I... What are you doing?"

Wardell had a cup of tea, and a folded yellow piece of paper, not to mention a worried expression. Not dressed like a servant for once, he had his vest open, showing a long looped chain around his neck, from which hung... a coin? Not a medal, not like the medal Marko had earned at Heltskruet. No, just a little decorative coin, nothing to do with blood on the sand.

"I'm... I'm nothing, sir." Wardell said, folding the paper. "What happened? You look like everything went a bit... wrong?" Concern radiated off the manservant.

“They... *hated* him. No, no, more than that. Worse than that. They didn't even *mention* it. They tried to tell him he'd be the General Emperor – not the king. I mean, don't-”

“Uhm. Oh dear. Oh- oh no. Do you think...”

“Do I think what?”

Wardell pursed his lips, and leant forwards, whispering. “Is... is this because the general is black?”

Marko's eyes widened. “What? No. No, they- what? What would *that* have to do with anything? Besides, he's the Black Thane, isn't he? Isn't that, I – I mean.”

He shook his head, rubbing his forehead with both hands, trying to shut out the last sounds of the rain with his hands on his ear. Marko's voice was just a *wahnahnwahn*, from outside those hands. But then he leant down, waving the letter in front of Marko's face.

“I... I mean, if... I think you probably want to see this, sir.”

Reaching out with one cautious hand, Marko took the note, and started to unfold it. “Where did you get this, Wardell?”

“Um, well, you remember how I sent the note through the Vox Coronate for the King, sir?”

“... yes...?” Marko said, smoothing out the paper and surveying the thick writing, dark penmarks that spoke of a large man's hands, with the clear signature at the bottom – **BACHTHANE**.

“There's some sorting of military mail that comes with that. It seems they felt we should check up on... on this.”

The words were a smear across the page. Wardell saw the edges of them, snatches, but some of the words leapt out at him.

Calpurnia;

...prepare yourself for another season of war...

...to return to those Djansk colonies, to Heltskruet...

...if I had but the authority...

“Oh god,” Marko said, licking his lips nervously, looking at Wardell. “Oh god, what the hell. Is... does he want...”

“Old soldiers,” Wardell said, leaning forwards. “Often can't stop living out their worst fights...”

“Oh *god*.” Marko wanted to vomit. “He wants to take us *back* to -”

“I'm... I'm afraid so, sir. And if he does it,” he shook his head. “We'll... probably lose the empire. You know better than I what that nation does... it's a rock to smash things against.”

The room was spinning. His hands were tense. Looking up, Marko swallowed tightly. "... Contact the nobles. I think... I think we need to meet one more time. It's... we need to do something about this. Something very, very dire."

"So you say, sir."

*

"Sanctuary!" Gael yelled, pushing at the door of the church with one hand. "I think that's' what this is. Sanctuary!" she called again, holding Vince's hand in her other. "Just stick close," she added, lowering her voice. "We're near the Dims here, and I don't need anyone stealing you to sell your feet to the glue factory."

"What?!" Vince blurted, believing her for too many seconds.

"Oh god, you really are a posh kid," Gael said, laughing, as the door swung open before them.

The main hall of the church was set up with two tables, one of which was covered in paperwork, with a portly priest sitting at one end. He had a round, jolly face, and a sweet demeanour to him, a look that reminded Vince of his father, even though the priest was probably closer to Vince's age.

On the other table, with a small book open in front of her was a young lady, with long pale-white hair, in a braid that fell down her back, wearing sensible, restrained clothes, turning the pages with a very definite *crispness*. Across from her, sitting with his arms on the table, along with his chest, was a brown-haired, incredibly bored looking... probably boy. A bit thin and fey, younger than Vince, but with eyes that *boiled* with barely-contained rage, he looked up at the pair, then over next to the door.

Then Vince saw the metal form of a knight, armour decorated with feathers and owls, hand on the doorframe that served to keep Vince and Gael out. A woman's voice, echoing but still low, came with a tilt of that metal hair. "Yes?"

"We're here with a message for Lady Kivis Athene?" Gael said, looking down at the arm barring her path.

"Which is?"

"I'm not sure I should be telling anyone but her. But General Yull Bachthane sent me."

"Us," Vince added.

"Him too."

The knight drew up her shoulders, and looked over at the priest. "You okay with this, Fratarelli?"

"Good god's sake, Kivis, it's a *church*," the priest said, shifting paper around on the table. "If they want to come in and help me organise these bills, they're welcome to."

For a moment, the woman – clearly Kivis – seemed to scrutinise them with steel eyes. But then she stepped aside. As Vince and Gael filed into the room, she reached behind the door, picking up what looked a lot like a broken boathook, walking behind them as she sat at the table.

Vince trailed along behind Gael, in part because he really didn't want to try exerting himself, with the injury still in his side. When she sat – across from the knight, on the opposite table to the teenagers – he sat next to her, and tried to sit up straight.

“Well?” Kivis asked, her arms folded on the table.

“I don't have any names,” she said, sitting forwards. “But General Bachthane thinks that someone's been sending illegal letters under the heading of the Vox Coronate.”

“... To what end?”

“Not sure. He thinks there's a conspiracy to put him in place as king.”

“Saw those posters,” called the boy from the other table. “Thought that was his idea.”

“It's... it's *definitely not*,” Vince added.

The young woman *slowly* turned around with a deliberate movement, her eyes quite clearly fixed on Vince. “Excuse me?”

“It really isn't!” Vince said. “I mean, when it came up, the first thing he did was send us here-”

“Came up?” she echoed.

“Yes, this afternoon.”

“This... afternoon.” She repeated very, very cautiously.

“Yes...?” Vince tried to not draw the word out too long, but the woman had a very unsettling gaze.

“The General wants Vince somewhere safe,” Gael interrupted, nudging Vince's good side. “And he wanted to make sure you – Lady Kivis – was informed about what might happen.”

“... Is the general a friend of yours, Kivis?” the young woman asked.

“Is *anyone* a friend of yours?” the boy volunteered.

“No, and probably not,” Kivis said, putting metal fingers to her chin. “I don't think I've ever *met* the general, myself. But I suppose I do have a reputation to maintain.”

“Well, there is the coat of arms,” the priest said, turning the paper. “Doesn't it mean something really rude? And you *do* make a point of living here, what with the, ah, asceticism?”

Kivis tapped her chin with her fingertips. “Alright, then.” she said, pushing her bench back as she stood. “Alright. Alright!” Pointing behind herself with her thumb, she gestured at the girl, “Aderyn,” and then at the boy. “Rafe. Rafe's a terrible murderer, and-”

“What, he's a serial killer or something?” Vince asked, feeling his feet sweat.

"No. No, he's terrible at it."

"Hey!" Rafe yelled behind her. "Can I get *any* respect here?"

"Statistically, no," Aderyn said. "And my name is Lady Aderyn DuThane." she smiled, in a strangely artificial way that made Vince remember teachers trying to be polite.

"They're going to be coming and-"

"Er," the priest piped up from the end of the table.

"Oh, and Brother Fratarelli. This is his church. And these are his wards. Wards? Is that the term?"

"It is as good a term as any," Aderyn said, nodding politely.

"Isn't that a little, uh."

"A little what?" the priest asked, looking all smiles.

"Well, I mean, look, I wasn't in prison *long*, but ward sounds a bit... like, Fratarelli's an okay guy but he's not exactly *protecting* me from anything."

"Well, not my business, really," Gael said, as she held out her hand. "Gael Morris. And this is Vincent. We're soldiers working for the general. I'm a mercenary, and he's in trouble with his boyfriend."

"I'm *what!*?" Vince sputtered angrily.

"Oh, come on, forgetting an anniversary is bad, but forgetting a *first name*?"

"Boyfriend?" Rafe asked, sitting up more, with his arms folded on the table.

"Yes, Rafe, it's a term for a romantic partner who's a boy." Aderyn chimed in, clear, little bowl-like smile as she bobbed her head. It was like she'd just scored a point at some subtle game?

The brunette sighed and put his face in his hands. "Oh, I had *no idea*," he shook his head, grumbling. "What *ever* do you mean?"

"Oh! Well, Rafe, you see, it's an issue of sexual orientation and compatibility. Men have a sex organ known as a penis-"

"Not all men," interrupted Gael.

Aderyn blinked at that, looked between Gael and Rafe, and nodded. "Oh! Well, *many* men have a sex organ-"

"I'm sorry I even opened my mouth," Rafe said, putting his face on the desk. "I know what being gay is, good grief."

Vince *had* opened his mouth to say something but the blush filling his features from the nose down seemed to hold his mouth paralysed.

"Well," the priest interrupted. "Kivis, do you think you need to investigate this?"

“The General said he wanted you at the coronation.”

Kivis tapped her chin with a fingertip, and glanced over at the priest. “Fratarelli...?”

The priest pushed himself up into standing. “Yes, yes. I should probably get to work on some more food, if we'll have guests. Rafe? Aderyn? Do please come along to the kitchen.”

When the three left the room, Vince looked between Gael and Kivis, nervously shifting. “Um. Um, I don't mean to be a bother...”

“But?” Kivis asked.

“I may... um. Should we just sit here until tomorrow...?”

Kivis laughed then, voice echoing against the inside of her helm. “Alright. Let's see about getting you some place to rest.”

*

There were quite a few Goranges in the city who could call themselves *Lord Gorange*. Roughly half the people who bothered to wear the surname Gorange did, in fact. That many Goranges meant that these men (and one or two women) had to clarify themselves with a specific name under their title. For example, Lord Asca Gorange.

There were very, very few men in the city who would be content to call themselves *Lord Gorange* and have everyone know the *exact one* they meant.

The senior statesman of the Gorange household rarely left his house. He mostly made do with letters, delivered with his personal seal and signature. Such communiqué were not commonly sent to people outside of the upper tiers of those very same families, but still, as possibly the richest man in the city, Lord Gorange did occasionally send a personal note to someone considered a *little person*.

The letter was sitting on the kitchen table at night, not in the morning when normal mail would arrive. The letter was open – clearly, one of the others in the conspiracy had arrived in the night and opened the letter. Someone had read it. That someone wasn't Marko, though, shuffling around in the half-light. He'd grabbed a bottle of water from the icebox and slouched into the spare room to try and sleep while he waited for the rain to pass and for the nobles to arrive, so he could *fix this*.

The letter was not a very long one.

The Vox Coronate cannot convene without my personal presence. I know I did not convene such a meeting.

You, in this house, are doing something. I know. You know I know. I know you know I know. We know the Dulfs, Rangsts, Chilvers and the rest of the Goranges know, and they know we know it. We're a knowledgeable group.

Just so you know.

*You have two days to clean up this **mess**.*

Chapter 20

Tenner had never dealt with the military before he'd met Marko. He'd read a few adventure books, though, and travelled on the train to visit Hadrian where he'd seen craters in the ground from grenades. In his mind, he felt he held a good image of what it looked like when a grenade was thrown in the midst of a group of people.

That's how the letter sat, in the middle of the table. They'd all read it, and set it down again like they didn't want it on their fingers.

Ten minutes of awkward silence, silence spent waiting for the tea, for small talk, for anything at all *that wasn't* talking about the bomb in their midst. Someone had to speak. Any minute now. Someone, someone who wasn't Tenner.

"What about the brother?" Ulster mused, sitting back in her chair, arm over the back.

"What *about* the brother?" Asca grumbled.

"Well, look, this thing has been a screw-up since Praefoco died. Right now, I want to know that if *Lord Gorange* gets wheeled in through a doorway we've got an *out*. Someone we can point him at. Someone who isn't two ems tall and full of war. *This is our fault, gentlemen.*"

"Get the books." Ligier snarled. Gesturing over at Wardell, he snapped his fingers, elbows on the table. The man's temper had taken a sharp turn for the worse with the letter before him.

A few moments later, Wardell returned from the side room, with the book from Lleywa, the book that Marko had ridden to claim. It hit the table before Tenner, and he flipped it tentatively, flicking back and forth through the pages. He knew he needed to find something, anything. What if there was something in here that connected these Lleywans to the Chilvers? Maybe then he could point that out and run to Lady Chilver, who might be willing to shelter him from Lord Gorange.

"Tenner?" Ulster asked, piercing through the sound of Tenner nervously flipping pages.

"Um, yes?"

"Tenner, can you *read* Lleywa?"

"Oh! Um. Um, no."

"Right, then." Ligier reached across the table, grabbing the book, and sliding it out of his grip.

"Anyone here speak it...?" he asked, picking it up and turning it around on all sides, like he could shake the words out of it.

Marko looked to his side, into the shadows. "Wardell. Come on. You know Lleywa, don't you?"

"Ah, yes, sir, I -" the servant said. The late-night meeting had caught him, clearly – he wasn't dressed for his normal serving duties. A loose shirt, a vest, and an apron over the top. No tie at all. Quite shameful. He was even wearing jewellery, which he probably *did* wear under his uniform, but *still*. *Really*.

"Come on then." he slid the book over. "Find us a prince."

“Well, um...” Wardell, said, pulling up his chair to the table. Running one hand across his forehead, he gestured to the table. “Does, um, does anyone have a pencil?” And after he had one, he turned to the paper, tapping it in places. “Here in the Bachthane... history, there's... Ah. See, there's this idea of *family coins*.”

“I've heard of those.” Ulster said, raising her chin.

“I've not.” Asca sourly interjected.

“It's an old idea, we use it with the nobles of other nations. We give them a certain currency that's meant to show how important they are to the Throne. Since the king's death, we haven't been giving them out, or taking them back – which means most nobles only have a few of these coins, stamped with a symbol to the family...” he turned the page, another indecipherable pile of gibberish, showing a shield with birds on it, and next to them, a coin's design.

The design was a dull bronze-gold colour. Outlined in the centre was a bright, golden set of lines that formed a pointed crown – and that shape was filled in with hard black.

“It seems... twenty-seven years ago, one of these coins went missing. The family records indicate it was just stolen, and the culprit never found... but it was stolen at a night when the Lady,” beat “Bachthane was ... with episode?” he said, gesturing around the word. “It's a sheep-rearer's term.”

“Ew.”

“So, uhm, one of these coins disappeared, the lady was, uh, occupied...” he turned the page, checking. “That's the root of it...” he said, knitting his brows, as he dipped forwards, that medallion in his shirt swaying out while he moved in his chair. “So that started the theory of the Other Lion – a Bachthane who-”

“Wardell?” Marko asked, low and quiet.

“Um?”

“Where did you get that?”

“Get what?”

“The thing around your *neck*.”

“Um, this?” he said, sitting up, and looking down at the golden-bronze disc that hung around his throat. “I... uh. I would rather not say, sir.”

Ligier stood up, fists flat on the table.

“Um! Um, well, uh. I was... um. Well, you see, I was an orphan? I was dropped off at the orphanage, with uh, with this coin?” he said, swallowing, holding it up.

A black crown winked back at the room... and a mighty groan rose up from Ulster's throat. “*Are you kidding me?*”

"I *knew* it!" Tenner said, slapping his hands to the table. "I *told* you! Royalty *will* out! It all makes sense! Wardell's been here since the beginning, and look, here he is now!"

"Exactly!" Ligier said, holding out his hand, his eyes glittering excitedly. "Give me the coin." The atmosphere iced over suddenly, as Ulster and Marko slid in their chairs towards Wardell, Asca and Tenner tried to sit still, and Ligier, like the demanding beast he was, held out his hand. "With that, we can pick *whoever we like* and make them king."

"But..." Tenner murmured.

"But *what*?!"

"Um, but, but – isn't... isn't the coin a show that *Wardell* is king, after Yull...?"

"So what?" Ligier asked, whirling around like a storm, and suddenly, Tenner realised *just how large* the man was. "So... *what*? We're here for a *reason*, Tenner. We're here to *choose a king*."

"Sit down." Marko's voice came from the far side of Ligier, and Tenner couldn't have been more grateful to hear it. "Sit down, Ligier, or I swear to christ almighty, there'll be blood."

"You think you can take me, soldier? You *forget your place*." Ligier whirled around again, stalking around the table. He had head and shoulders over Marko, his grasping fists hard and bunched up, raising his arm, ready to dispense a beating. It didn't land, though – because Ligier stopped dead in his tracks, the room being filled with a suspiciously loud *click*.

Marko had swung himself from his chair to standing, a *gun* tucked up underneath Ligier's chin held in one hand, and in the other?

"Ligier Rangst," Marko said, walking forwards, nostrils flaring, black hair like a *mane*. "You are used to *yelling* at people and shooting *animals*." As he stepped forwards, Ligier moved with him, pushed back by *fear*. "I'm a *soldier*." he drew his breath, thumb on the hammer, finger on the trigger. "And right now we are discussing potentially removing a *war* from the future."

Scarred and tense, Marko glared into Ligier's eyes.

"You touch that coin, Rangst, and I'll add you to a list of bloody little struggles that *do not matter*."

Tenner had never felt more sick than in the moment it took for Ligier to, sullenly, turn and slouch into his chair.

"Alright." The bigger man slumped into his chair, hands together, cracking his knuckles. "... Fine. Wardell gets to be king," he said with the tone of a boy assenting about who could play centre at rugby.

"I... I what, sirs?" Wardell asked, sitting back in his chair, holding the coin in both hands, and looking down at it with a stunned silence.

"... You're going to be king, Wardell. Start practicing now. You're going to have to be a good one."

"Um, this is... this is good, yes, but..." Tenner said, squirming in his chair.

"But *what?*" Ligier demanded, glaring off at the corner behind Marko, like he didn't even want to look the man in the face.

"... We... we do have to... to uh... *remove* Yull, don't we?"

"Hang on, why isn't he black?" Asca wondered aloud, as if he was just catching up.

"Why isn't... why isn't *who* black?" Marko asked, trying to not *sigh* with his voice, and failing. Tenner knew what an exasperated older brother sounded like.

"...Um, why isn't Wardell black, if Yull is his brother?"

Wardell swallowed, and leant forwards. "I don't know, truth be told. But the tomes suggest... that Yull is... something of a *half* brother of mine."

Everyone drew a breath. Half-brothers made for *messy* succession fights.

"You sure this is going to work?" Tenner asked, playing with his fingertips, hoping he didn't have to look up any more.

"It has to work. He's just a man." Ligier grunted.

"Yes, but he's a man who's, uh, he's done quite some things in his time."

"He's *just a man*." Ligier repeated.

"He's a bigger man than me."

"Everyone's a bigger man than *you*, Tenner."

"Can we even *do* that? Isn't he bulletproof?" Asca growled.

"He's a man. He bleeds." Ligier squinted, as if the idea that Yull was a man to be feared was an attack on his already-tender ego.

Tenner shuddered. "Yes, but men bleed an awful lot. Father cut his hand on a sword once, and that was *awful*."

"I swear to christ, am I going to have to do it myself?"

"You're..." Ulster's voice came as if from far away, her fingertip tapping on the tabletop. "... I don't think we *can* do this. I... I mean, we kill him.. I – do we *have* to kill him? Can we just throw this to the Goranges and let them handle it?"

"Asca, they're your family. Is this a serious letter? I mean, do you see this sort of thing often?" Marko asked.

"I... I've *never* seen this." Asca shuddered.

“Lord Gorange's... quite old, isn't he?”

“Almost seventy.”

“Ah, well, I don't imagine he's-”

“He is.”

“You don't even know what I was going to -”

“*He is.*” Asca swallowed, visibly sweating. “I wouldn't. Not even in my best days. Not ever.”

“Yes, but your best days are when nobody notices the butter's missing.” Ligier sneered.

“*Fuck you, Ligier!*” Asca hammered his hands on the tabletop, all of his weight pounding on the tabletop. “You ever heard of the Cork Water Massacre? The Bedlington Terror? *Those were Gorange homes, and they burned.*”

Ligier narrowed his gaze, leaning forwards. “... You're a *mess.*”

“I'm *scared.*”

“I'm not.”

*Not of Gorange, Tenner thought, But you **are** scared of Marko.*

“If you're doing this, sirs and ladies...” Wardell said, pulling in the tea-trolley from the darkness, “Everyone needs a knife. Everyone needs to act. Because if any one of you does it, it's murder. But if *everyone* does it... if *everyone* is responsible, then...” He lifted up from the trolley a tray, on which rested a handful of daggers – dark and threatening.

“None of us are.” Tenner said, swallowing with dry lips. Nothing about the knife looked natural in his eyes. It looked larger than his hand, but tiny in Ligier's as the brute picked it up and tested it. The blade was a dull grey, rather than bright and shiny, and both sides seemed sharp, too sharp for Tenner to bring himself to touch and *know*.

“... All of *us*, Wardell.” Ulster said, pushing the tray back to the servant.

“What, me, Lady Dulf?” Wardell asked, suddenly surprised.

“Yes, you.” she said, standing up, tucking the knife into the back of her belt. “You've been here since this started. You're friends with Marko. You're **going to be king**. You're *in this*, Wardell. And you're going to be part of this at the end, you hear me?”

“... Ah, yes, lady.” Wardell said, swallowing, as he took a knife from the tray. “May... may be a bit of a poor sport with this.” He shook his head. “It's been years since I killed a man.”

“As many as Marko's? Tenner's *never* done it,” she said. “You'll be there tomorrow. Before the coronation.”

"... You're serious? We can just rely on people believing that the coin just showed up? That's a bit fucking contrived! Is anyone going to believe this?" Asca blurted. "I mean, won't there be, uh, lawyers?"

"I... I may know a few Gorange family lawyers," Wardell said, clearing his throat. "I mean, professionally. We may be able to, um, get some of them to smooth things over." He swallowed. "And I would be, of course, as uh, helpful as I could be to... to whatever it was you wanted."

"You'd fucking *better*." Ligier added, as he pushed himself up to standing. Grabbing a knife, he tucked it away, and walked to the door. "This bullshit was better when it was masks and robes. Before I had to *know* you people."

A moment later, the front door of the townhouse slammed.

"Well, um. Well, I think I should... I should probably get home," Asca said, picking up another knife. "We'll see each other again before the... before the coronation."

"Probably not." Marko said, setting the gun on the table, and sliding it across to Ulster's hand, who took it quite calmly.

"Fiver, while I'm in favour of you putting Ligier in his place, do it with your own gun next time."

"Forgive me, my lady."

Tenner watched the pair for a moment more, then looked at Wardell. Wardell, the man who brought the tea. Wardell, the man who sorted the mail and spoke the language, and who had been so handy.

Who could ever have expected *this*? He certainly didn't expect to be jogging home in the rain, with a knife tucked into his belt. Was this flutter in his chest the feeling of history about to settle?

*

Human spirits were only meant to endure so much, in a city like Timoritia. People could be poor and they could be cranky and they could occasionally be bristlingly drunk, but they shouldn't have to feel afraid, properly afraid, very often. This was the philosophy of the city that Patty, or Padraig to the right people, had internalised, long ago, and he was finding himself endlessly uncomfortable with the way he kept glancing over his shoulder. There were only so many minutes in a day and now he was spending a significant number of them looking for the tips of a very big shoe to drop.

It wasn't honest work, this not like burglary or kicking some stranger in the forks and taking his wallet. The money was good, but it'd been good for *weeks* now and it had mostly been for doing *nothing much at all*. Patty knew that that had to be something suspect. *Nothing much at all* was a noble's job, not a job for a Bottle Street boy. Let alone one who had come out atop of the scrapheap after the crossover with the Bottle Lane thugs. Very important stuff, this.

Still, he'd been paid by an old friend, and noble money was *money*. When Luke Cornell had died he'd seen a dozen fences and opportunities dry up because people were too busy taking swings at the top seat. Brokers and fixers suddenly fancied they could be as vicious as the king of the piss river had

been, and since none of them had had a Nebrin to follow through on their threats. Decisive, that's what Luke had been. Oh, and the mobile fortress probably helped a lot.

At least now there was *work* involved. Something *like* work. Sending messages around the city was decent enough, but it didn't fill the hours. This? This stuff with the billfolds and the bank notes, and handing out papers to the streets? That was *weird work* to be making a pound a week on.

It was all making him very nervous.

Stack of faded pink paper under his arm, Patty pushed his shoulder through the crowd, leaving fluttering bits of paperwork behind him. Around the middle of the stack, he'd wrapped some greasepaper, which kept the bulk of the paper out of the torrenting rain that slicked his hair down, and made the discarded papers flutter around and stick to surfaces, thrown around by the wind. That was fine! Fine to let the papers go. They had to get out there, that was what he was paid for. With twine under his fingertips, Patty elbowed a bit further, listening to the murmurs behind him of people caught up in reading.

Patty wasn't a big reader. He'd *read*, sure, he *could read*, that was fine. But things like *Yull Bachthane Pledges National Stipend* were words he wasn't familiar with. The rest of the letters on the paper scrolled down, getting smaller, with diagrams of swords and knives on either side, with some sort of fancy shield and a crown on the page, as well?

Way Patty figured, he could be happier the less he knew about what was going on. The path wasn't really a thoughtful one. Sometimes he'd duck into a building, trailing the papers, hang around for a few minutes, then head out again. A church? Churches were great, lots of space, people went there. Maybe he could leave a stack behind.

Patty swung a hand up, grabbing the top of the doorframe, and yanked the door outwards. The church was warm inside, which got him out of the damn *rain*.

"Why, hello Pratty," said Lady Aderyn DuThane from the doorway of the church.

And *just like that* Pratty felt the shadow of a massive shoe about to drop just over his head.

*

"This is fishy as hell," Rafe said, licking his finger and leafing through the enormous stack of pink paper. He was already peevisish, having woken up on a pew instead of on his bed. Vince, as an invalid, had had the bed in the basement, in the pipe room.

"Why?" Aderyn asked, circling around the table, watching him riffling through papers like he held a grudge against them. She, unlike Rafe, looked as typically perfect as ever. Smooth braid, clean complexion, smelled like soap. *Where did she find the damn time?*

"It's *pink*," he said, digging into the centre of the stack, fishing around. A small stack pulled free into his hand, he started counting corners. There weren't any bank notes hiding amongst the paper so far – that'd change how the stack sat.

"What's your point?" called Gael, from her seat at the impromptu breakfast table.

“Okay, right,” Rafe said, perching on the table, leafing through every piece of paper, fingers flickering fast through the sheaf. “We used to do shit like this all the time. Running papers for the nobs is an afternoon job. You get a stack, you belt around and drop them off someplace. Usually they make you scatter them to a few spaces they have watchers so they know you didn’t just chuck them in the river and hope they’d sink.”

“So you’ve experience with this?” Aderyn, this time.

“Yeh, me and Pratty both,” he licked a fingertip, squinting. “And this ain’t the bog-roll paper they usually get us to throw out. This is *really good* paper. And it’s *pink*.”

“Which,” Aderyn said, with just the faintest tone of irritation, “matters *why*?”

“Okay, right,” Rafe said, slapping another stack down. “You get white for cheap, yellow for cheaper. You can pay a bit extra for some colour,” he said, grabbing another sheaf of paper and flickering through it. “Pink, you gotta dye the paper as well.”

“Naturally. You’re not actually *explaining* things, Rafe.”

“Basically, you wouldn’t be pink *accidentally*. You’d be pink *with a reason*, and that reason has to warrant paying like, an extra three pennies a page.”

“And that’s why you’re *licking* them?” Vince asked. Rafe had been avoiding looking at the man ever since he woke up. Bed thieves deserved no mercy.

“Pratty, how many runners you got?” Rafe changed the topic, glancing at the taller man.

“Maybe six? Seven?”

“Seven?” Rafe looked at the stack in his hand, then looked at the sheaf. “That’s about a quire,” he said, holding up the pages. “Which probably makes that,” a larger stack thudded onto the table, “A ream, an’ that makes *this*,” he thumped his hand on the remaining stack, “Maybe... three thousand pages? You got many of these to distribute?”

“Two more, Rafe, mate,” Pratty said, nervously shifting back and forth. “I mean, back at the drop spot.”

“So that’s seven runner doing about ten thousand pages each expecting half of them to go nowhere because of wind and rain and you’re still looking at distributing thirty-five hundred pages right in the middle of the town the morning of a coronation with an edict from a king that,” he held up the piece of paper and squinted over it at Gael and Vince, “by and large, has no such fucking plan.”

“It... it doesn’t sound like something he’d do?” Vince murmured.

“Why not?” the brother asked. “Seems a good idea for me. Certainly could deal with the poor, if you know, they had money.”

“Yes, but uhm, where would, I mean, where would that money come from? It’s ... I guess I don’t *expect* this to come from the General. He’s much more...”

“Shouty.” Gael said, putting an arm around Vince’s shoulder, re-dressing his grievous wound. “Trust me, I’ve brought stranger things to the general than making him king to his attention. You won’t get a crown on him, not without some deep magic and a letter from his wife.”

“Stranger things?” Vince asked, tilting forwards and holding his breath while the bandage tightened. “Hn. I mean.” A swallow. “How long have you been *working* for the general, anyway?”

“I started a soldier,” Gael said, “And I was a very different soldier to who I am today.” Raising her chin, she gestured with her head to Rafe, who was still fiddling with paper. “How long’s it take to get a print done?”

“Four days. Bare minimum. Maybe two if you’re Lord Gorange or something. No way this – on this paper – gets done *fast*. Oi, Pratty, when’d you get hired?”

“What, me...?” he asked, patting himself slightly, like he could somehow pull a date out of his memory like it was in his pocket. “Um, well, I... uh. I’ve been on retainer, y’see-”

“Retainer? That sounds like something people with money do, y’posh bastard. How long’s that?”

“Three, uh... wait, no, six-”

“Six weeks? Who gets someone like you for six weeks of work divvying up papers?”

“Six *months*, Rafe.”

“... What the everliving hell? Who hires a Bottle street nobody for work for six *days*, let alone half a fucking *year*?” the boy leant forwards, kneeling on the table, peering into the taller man’s eyes.

“Who was it?”

“What... you-”

“You said it was some Bottle Street boy what hired you. Come on. Fess up.”

“Aw, come on, Rafe, don’t be like that, mate,”

“Pratty, right now I and the priest are probably the least scary thing in this room for you, don’t try and snow me. Who?”

“Uh... you... you remember Wozza Cherish?”

Rafe looked like he’d swallowed something gross. “Wozza? That miserable oik? Worked for Mama Cass’ weed shop?”

“Yeah, mate. Turns up out of nowhere and puts me on retainer a few months ago. Wants someone who can run things around the city, that’s all.”

Rafe sat on the end of the table, looking at the paper, then at Pratty, then back at Aderyn. “You want we should let him go?”

“I say, I don’t know why you’re asking me, Rafe.”

“... You’re not in charge?”

Aderyn raised her hands and spread them. "I am in charge inasmuch as is appropriate for a young lady."

Somewhere across the room, her hands holding a book, Kivis let loose a loud "Hah!"

"... Pratty? You probably want to make yourself scarce." Rafe said, looking at the stack of paper, running his thumb over the corners. He'd been *sure* there'd be something hidden in the stack, some clever reason to distribute them all across the city. "... The affairs of kings are afoot."

"Afoot, eh?" Pratty said, nervously laughing as he stepped back. "You talkin' above your station again, Rafe?"

"... Fuck off, Pratty." Rafe said, hoisting off the table.

As the Bottle street thug scuttled out the door, Rafe rested his hand on the stack of paper, and looked around over his shoulder. "Well?"

"Well what?" Aderyn responded.

"Well, uh, what we gunna do?"

"I don't... think we need to do anything today, do we?"

"Oh, come on. There's like... you know. Stuff going on. Aren't we going to go out and...?"

"I wasn't planning on anything," Brother Fratarelli said, shifting nervously, as he set a teatowel on the table. Unwrapping it, and rolling hard-boiled eggs out for breakfast, he bobbed his head and gestured at the food. "I mean, it's not something I feel confident really *acting* on..."

"What are you all talking about?" Vince asked, clearing his throat. "I... did the General send us here because you're..." he lowered his voice. "Are you his secret service?"

Aderyn looked like she might almost laugh at that. "What? No."

"Oh." Vince swallowed, looking around, over at Kivis' back. "I... I mean, I just don't-"

Rafe tapped his knuckles on the tabletop. "Yeah," he said, picking up an egg, "If y're wondering, *yes*, you were sent here *just* because Kivis is that scary." He glanced over at the brother. "You don't feel confident, eh? Well... y'know, Aderyn and I could go check it out. Head to the coronation, have a look at what's going on."

"... Rafe, are you looking to make some money? I can't -"

"What? Nah. Nah, just..."

The priest gave him a stern look, holding it for a long moment. "I... *dare say*, Rafe... that if we were going to do anything at this point, it's best that we not act *rashly*. If you and Aderyn can find the time after breakfast... why not go and uh, see what's going on at the coronation?"

Rafe glanced over at Aderyn. She put on a smile, and he noticed. Good as he was going to earn today.

*

The morning.

The sun didn't rise, through the rain. The clouds just changed slightly in their colour and character.

The rain.

It sheeted down, a vertical river. Standing on the balcony at Westminster felt alright. He could watch the rain, and it felt more real.

The hoofbeats.

They felt real. When he turned back to the building, stepped inside, it turned from the rain to *that*.

The general.

He met Marko at the barracks. He followed. He fell in step behind him. They talked, a little. Distracted. Scattered. Said something about becoming king.

The knife.

Marko gripped the blade tucked into the back of his belt, and tried to clear his thoughts.

The pounding.

It didn't work.

*

"Suppose this is how it has to be, eh, chaps," Tenner said, squirming a little in his seat.

"Shut up," Growled Ligier next to him. The lineup couldn't look much more lopsided. On one side of the room, Ligier stood, tugging on the heels of his gloves. Next to him, without a rifle or pistol – that Tenner could see – was Ulster, facing out to the window, her expression cryptically unreadable. Tenner stood next to her, and next to him sat Asca, still wearing bluster on his features from when he'd elbowed his way in from the rain, and barged past servants.

"We've got very little time," Wardell murmured, pacing over by the door. "Yull enters over there. The lawyers come in through *here*. There's... maybe five, ten minutes." He looked like a picture study in fretting, wringing his hands against one another. Tenner was glad to see someone was more worried than he was – at least outwardly. Well, perhaps he was more worried. Asca might be terrified, but he wasn't showing it, except in sweating more, which he'd been passing off as rain. Tenner could tell. Asca was going to screw this right up.

"So... what's the signal?" Asca asked.

"The signal?" Ligier asked, sneering. "You'll know when I grab him by his black nose and take his head off."

"U-uh, okay," Tenner said, swallowing, "Is... is everyone else okay with that? Wardell, what... what about Marko?"

“He’s bringing the general in.” Wardell said, adjusting his shirt. “And then...”

“Then...?”

“We’ve... maybe four minutes before the lawyers arrive to, ah... crown him?”

“Great.” Ligier growled.

What do you do to fill that sort of time? Tenner had, as a young boy on the train, made a habit of watching the tree-line, and imagined a monkey running along the tops of trees. Making high, elaborate jumps to crest over things in the foreground, or ducking down as the window shade crept down in response to the sun. It’d been a fairly innocent little game, and one he deeply, deeply wished could distract him from the feeling of a knife in his hand.

“Well, guess this is it,” Ligier said. “White king takes black knight, hmm?” he laughed, and there was something gross to it. Something piggish and cruel. Tenner had heard that tone of voice before, mostly with his head in a toilet and an older brother’s foot on his head.

“Think it’s a game?” Ulster asked, looking down at her knuckles.

“All politics is a game, Ulster. Some of us are born winning, that’s all.”

The door swung open, and in stepped the Quisar, the general of an army, a veteran of wars, a *hero*. Yull looked... well. He was wet, because he’d come in through the rain. Marko was also wet, and had that hollow, worried look he’d been wearing since the letter from Lord Gorange. But despite that, he was a *tower*, all tall face and western-walnut coloured skin, with his big black beard groomed down, his hair pulled in against the back of his head, in a short little ponytail. That uniform, with its thick coat, god cutting through a *coat* would be awful hard.

Tenner felt his grip on the knife tucked in behind his shirt go just a bit... too... slack.

“Alright, law,” Yull said, looming over the room, “Seems w’ve got a little window of time to *talk* before all the pears hit the windmill,” and that’s all he had to say before Asca *yelled*.

“Now!”

The next few moments were chaotic in a way Tenner couldn’t accord at first. It was a handful of moments. It was details, all splayed out in a great big mess. Little details stood out to him. The way that Asca pushed back in his chair, literally skidding *away* from Yull when he bellowed.

The bump-bump-screed sound of the big brass buttons on Ligier’s coat. That strange rattling sound that didn’t follow with the man’s momentum. Except it did, because rather than leaping against Yull, knife in hand, Ligier was face-forward on the floor, splayed legs behind him, one hand tucked underneath him, struggling to push himself up into standing while his other hand, outstretched over his head, let go of the knife, which spiralled across the floor.

The shudder that ran up Wardell’s leg when he stepped up to act. Of course, he was a veteran, wasn’t he? Oh god, it was a cruel thing really, for him to have to try this. The man was injured, and he’d served under Yull. But he was also a soldier, he knew what he was doing – and he swept his blade down into Yull’s back as the man turned. The great man threw his shoulders back, casting

Wardell off him like an old coat, one hand clutching at his chest, and stood, putting himself between Marko and his assailants.

“Law,” he began, his arms spread wide. But he didn’t have but a heartbeat before Marko, wild-eyed and soaking wet, stamped forwards, planting one foot on the floor, knife held between both hands, and *lunged* wholeheartedly up into Yull’s chest.

The blade punched through the man’s coat. A wash of hot, red colour blossomed in the front of his cloak. The general, arms wide for the wrong reason, wasn’t fast enough to protect himself from the blade... before he gagged, shuddered, and shook.

“... You two, law...?” the general asked, as he *thudded* to the ground, monstrous frame sending a wave of air out while he collapsed, down to the ground... then fell flat, face-first on the floor.

Ligier pulled himself into standing, a howl of rage in his voice, as he whirled around the room, looking between the group. At Asca, panicking in his chair. At Tenner, who felt himself shrink back under the gaze. At Marko and Wardell, at the prone form... and then glaring at Ulster with rage that seemed fit to leap out of his *throat*.

“What the *hell* was that about?”

“Ligier, behind you.” Ulster’s voice was cool, but her eyes were around his side, peering at the two men that stood over Yull’s body.

“What?!” he whipped around, looking at Wardell and Marko. The brute tempered for a moment, as he looked at the two veterans. The two men who had done the deed. “I...” a deep breath.

“You... you... *you bastards!*” screamed Wardell, waving a blood-soaked blade at the pair. Beside him, Marko was looking at himself, at his hands, at the body beneath him. The dagger fell from his hand, clattered to the floor, and without a word, Marko Fiver, the hero of Heltskruet bolted out of the room.

Wardell glared at them, the four nobles, his bloody dagger in his hand, heaving shoulders betraying ragged breaths. “You... *you shiftless bastards!* Were... were you just going to *stand there*, you useless...” He drew himself up, putting his hand to his forehead. “I. Am going. For some fresh air.”

The last detail that stuck in Tenner’s mind, though, was the shape and colour of the floor, as it swung up into his face, going all grey at the edges, and the pleasant warmth that came during an outright *faint*.

Chapter 21

“So, what do you expect to see at a coronation, anyway?” Rafe asked, shuffling with his hands in his pocket, through the crowds outside of Westminster. Crowds. Why the *hell* were there any crowds outside the palace? Who would gather for this anyway? Some guy gets a *hat*?

As far as Rafe knew, he'd never been in any city in the world but Timoritia, and he was keenly aware that his limited perspective probably accepted a host of things that didn't have to be considered normal *as* normal. There were still things that stood out though. Right now, for example, people were flocked over both sides of the street despite the rain, the gloomy ash-coloured clouds heaving rain down upon rank upon rank of people huddled under hastily constructed tarpaulins and awnings for The Coronation. Some part of Rafe was sure that you went *inside* when it rained and you left the pathways clear for people who had Things To Do.

“I am not sure, truth be told.” Aderyn offered, stepping primly alongside him on the footpath, her steps steady, even, each one a predictable length apart, because he knew if she wanted to, she'd be able to turn any one of them into a run. It was a good trick. He'd seen her do it now. Blend in, hide you weird amongst the normal. “The last coronation was, after all, just over a century ago.”

“Oh? You didn't... like... memorise all those details?”

“Why would I do that?” Aderyn asked, ducking slightly under the waving arm of a man who was offering his flag to the soggy wind a little too enthusiastically, which made it more of a wet-soaked towel being flicked indiscriminately towards anyone walking past.

“... I don't know, maybe you wanted to, like, plan out how you'd assassinate the king.”

“... That's a *fascinating* idea.” Aderyn said, suddenly bringing her hand to her mouth. “Just as a hypothetical scenario, such as whether I would be able to interrupt his public execution in a narrow window of time, give or take two to three minutes? Or how I would respond to the intrusion of the Hadrian if I was mid-way through assassinating him from some position of stealth. Or perhaps—”

“You've already *thought* about this, haven't you.” Rafe shot back, sourly.

“No! This seems like a *really interesting game* though!”

Rafe shook his head, and looked over the fences at the palace, to hide his grin from her. It was weird, the things that excited Aderyn – but he knew what she cared about. “Y'thinking anything's going to go wrong?”

“Well, you said the soldiers were concerned.”

“... You were there, Aderyn. You heard them.”

“Yes, well, I prefer to trust your judgement.”

“... Why?”

Aderyn peered through the bars, tilting her head, and pursing her lips. Leaning up against the fence in the thick of the crowd, Rafe looked at her, not at the building – so he could look around behind her. No point looking where she was looking.

“Something's gone wrong,” she said, her voice low.

“What? How do you know?” he asked, tilting his head to look like he was looking at her, but sweeping his eyes through the crowd. There were dashes of pink all throughout. People had the fliers. People had been reading. There was something dreadful afoot. The crowd was loud and laughing, and he could see fried food being passed around but Rafe saw too many people with blue caps, too many Dims workers, too many people who had clearly come here to see the King as he announced *everybody's going to get paid*.

“The balcony they're using is still closed. They'd have people out giving speeches by now, if the times are right.”

“Could just be off schedule. They're not practiced at this.”

“There's a Palace staff who have had nothing else to do for a century but drill on mindless, pointless details of how to optimally operate a monarchic state, Rafe.”

“And you think that's enough reason to be worried?”

“It's enough reason to be curious.”

Rafe leant back, putting his elbows through the bars. “... Want to get in, get a little closer?”

“It's the largest palace in the city with a hundred-em perimeter around it to walls of the palace. I can see four guards at that one gate and there are patrols within the fence as well. How quickly do you think *you* can get in there?”

“Hadn't thought about it, but...” he looked along the crowd. “Bet I can get *you* in pretty quick.” Plow into a guard side-on and laugh at him as he tried to recover. Then it was just a short bit of keep-away to harass the guard away from the gate long enough for Aderyn to get past the line of the fence. Hell, the fence was low enough she could probably vault it with a small distraction – and the lines of trees were *perfect* for avoiding guards' attentions. He'd seen *little kids* playing games that could get around patrols like *that*.

“Hm.” She responded, turning around and walking away from the fence, the pair falling back into the ground and into each other's space. “Do we have any contract involved here yet?”

“Nah,” Rafe said, shaking his head. Why did she even ask that? It was silly, considering that she had been alongside him the *whole of the way* out to the Palace. Unless she was expecting Rafe to come up... with... something.

Huh.

There have to be rules, she said. But apparently, only for her? This whole affair felt a bit like Luke Cornell again. Something big was afoot, and all she needed was some excuse to take action. Rafe couldn't help but wonder, in the weird friendship they had, that was his purpose. It could be worse. Excuse-Finder General was a role he could manage well enough.

“Then we'll observe a little bit. I don't imagine there'll be any contract soon.” she said, “Unless you find a friend, I suppose?”

Something about that felt fundamentally judgmental, and Rafe wasn't sure *why*.

Maybe he *would* find a friend. A friend with money. A friend who wanted the king dead, and *oh good god, what a stupid line of thought that was*.

*

Everything about the palace was top class. Everything. The walls were top class, the ceilings were top class. The floor, the floor was amazing, and Tenner knew that because he still felt some of the impressions of the floor on his face. The leather chairs were a nice substitute afterwards, too, and he was quite proud of himself for crawling into one with only a minimal bit of help from a servant or two. Probably only one or two. He certainly hadn't needed to be carried, though come to think of it, there was no gigantic blood stain on the floor like he'd imagined would be underneath Yull Bachthane when he fell, and just *thinking* that made him a little bit woozy.

Wardell was here. Good man, that Wardell. Always good with the tea. He'd take care of this stuff, now, what with his position of importance. They could rely on Wardell to handle all the tedious kingy things, and then they, the four families, would just have him do all the really *important* things they wanted to do, as soon as their families could agree on what that was. And arranged in front of Wardell were a handful of lawyers, good men and women too, all stout and robed, wearing their wigs and holding big, heavy books.

It was going well. Tenner was pretty sure it was going well. There was a little glass in his hand, a bit of brandy, maybe, to help calm his nerves, and it was helping him feel a bit better. Certainly better than he had been. And the lawyers were all nodding, looking back and forth between one another, and at the coin.

"Now then," Wardell said, his tone taking on that smooth, easy tone he did when he needed Tenner to move his feet out of the way of the broom, or adjust his seat a little for the tea tray. "With everything in order, I'm sure we can move on to the coronation stage, despite this unpleasantness."

"Oh, well, yes, of course, Wardell," said one lawyer, waving his hand easily. "Well, we've spoken about-"

"Excuse me, am I interrupting?" asked a voice from the far side of the room. Tenner raised his head, muzzily wondering why it sounded so familiar. All the lawyers stopped short at the voice.

Wardell raised his head, and whipped around, flaring nostrils with all the demeanour of a king, pointing to the door. "This is *royal business*, and you will *wait outside*."

The man in the doorway was maybe in his early seventies. He had a short, silver beard, and a tiny little ponytail around the back of his head, and wore otherwise, quite plain dark red and blue clothes. Leggings, flat shoes, a waistcoat, a high collar, and a cane. The man looked like some minor functionary or the like, what with the way his outfit resembled something like Royal Scribe or Keeper of the King's Keys. Something like that.

"Oh, I was just about to, sir," he said. "Just there's Lord Gorange here to see you," he said, gesturing at the door. "And I felt that as long as you were discussing things in here, it'd be best to, you know, get things nice and smart. If you don't mind."

Wardell stopped short at that, visibly irritated with the old man. "Fine. Fine. I- We will talk to the old man. He can witness the coronation, I suppose. Go fetch him."

"As you will, sir. Not the fastest mover in the world, I'm sure you can appreciate."

Wardell stood, with his arms folded, watching the old man shuffle out of the room, while Tenner tried to focus on the little glass of brandy. They at least had some nice chairs all around the room. There was the one Tenner was sitting in, which was nice, and a few grey and brown chairs, from

other rooms, and there was that big, tall, golden chair, in the middle of the room, with the stairs leading up... to it...

Oh it was a *throne room*. That made the lovely thick carpet make sense. It was very nice of Wardell to move him here, too, considering. He couldn't see the other members of the conspiracy around, not Asca or Ligier or Ulster or Marko. The tingling in his fingers around the glass was helpful, at least. Finally, the old man reached the far door, and pulled the little compartment in it closed. The double doors sat undisturbed for a moment.

"God." Wardell raised his head and turned to the lawyers. "The sooner I'm crowned, the sooner we can sort things out. Whatever legal problems there are, we can fix them. You all understand?"

"Oh yes, of course," came the response. "Your majesty," some wag appended.

The double doors swung open, in the middle this time, both sweeping free on a huge geometric arc that left the whole hallway behind them clear and open. There were Gorange guards, with their guns and their armour and their total lack of sense of humour. There were three scribes, holding books and writing desks, who also looked like they'd been tugged from some bookshelf somewhere to fulfill a purpose. And there, standing before the whole group, like the tip of a spear, was that same old man... wearing almost all the same clothes, holding the same cane, and with a brighter red cloak around his shoulder.

Oh.

Of course.

The current *Keeper of the King's Keys* was the head of the Gorange family.

Tenner tried very hard not to faint again.

"Now, you're the man claiming to be the heir of the throne," said the old man, as around him, guards and scribes filled the room, taking up spaces around. One scribe had her table already propped out and set down, scribbling words across the page in swift shorthand. Ah, of course... Goranges did accountancy. "That's quite a thing, and you've one of my... nephews, I think, involved." Tap-tap-tap went the cane before the old man while he looked about the room.

"These your lawyers?"

"Ah, they're the finest lawyers the city has-"

"Ah, so they're Goranges."

"Yes, sir, they are."

The Lord looked at the array of his minor nephews and nieces. "Hm. Don't think I trust any of them."

"Why not, sir?" Wardell asked, stepping back a little defensively, towards the clouds of black robes.

"Because they're Goranges and not one of them told me what was going on in here. Which says to me that they're all on to something. So then," Lord Gorange said, walking past Wardell, past the procession of lawyers, his cane tap-tap-tapping with each step, with an air that Ligier would have *killed* to claim. The old man took only one step up the dais – just enough to reach up, and place his cane down on the throne, where it rested across the armrests. Then, seemingly satisfied with that,

Lord Gorange stepped back down again, and took the small, plain, wooden seat at the base of the steps, and sat down, very deliberately. “Why don't you sit down and we'll have ourselves a *chat*.”

*

The Benjamin was an old, esteemed, stately timekeeping device. It had rung out throughout invasions, it had rung out through fires, it had rung out through two famines, and it had even rung out while it was, itself, completely covered in thousands upon thousands of dead pigeons courtesy of some extremely toxic paint. Ringing out over *riots* was nothing new. It was at the point where people could see a riot coming, and they'd try to orchestrate them around the bells. The bells were the heartbeat of the city, and it was a city where even the poor and the cranky had personal investment in making sure everyone got home on time.

Ten minutes late for the coronation and the announcement of free money, that was acceptable. Half an hour, that was a bit rich. An *hour*? An hour of waiting in the rain, with no king to show, with no order of free money, and with the whispers throughout the crowd, the murmur and growl of the crowd turned from impatience to *danger*.

“I hear...” Rafe almost stopped in his tracks when he heard the telltale whine of a lie wending its way through ears to lips without ever doing much residence in brains. “That someone just *killed* the king.”

“You wot, mate?” came the incredulous response, some barrel of a woman with fists like hammers. “Says who?”

“Oi, you know old Cheever's boy? Works the gates? Says a fight broke out and now the King's *dead*.”

The king. They didn't know who he was yesterday, but now they were talking about him like his death really mattered to them. One day, Rafe would work out what weird magic was worked through heraldry and monarchy, but it sure as hell wasn't today. “You what?” Rafe asked, calling to the seemingly-well informed stranger even as his fingertip brushed the back of Aderyn's elbow. Don't *grab* her elbow – Rafe knew what happened when you grabbed Aderyn without permission.

Unpleasant, unpleasant things.

“Yeah, one of the boys that works the coal chutes. Says that the King turned up and a buncha nobles wanted to stop him and now he's *dead* and they're trying to find his long-lost brother and shit.”

Rafe wasn't a person who thought much about how he thought, but in that instant he could feel two thoughts careen into prominence behind his eyes with such speed and intensity that he was dizzied.

That's such a stupid story and That story is totally going to work.

Aderyn's hand touched his wrist, a tiny signal, and she was already moving. Not running, but proceeding with that knife-edge seriousness that flowed from her when she was going places. There wasn't even any push through the crowd; she was just always stepping forwards, moving in the spaces between people when they weren't watching. Like she was some kind of ghost. It was amazing what you could accomplish in a crowd when you were willing to completely disregard other peoples' typical social rules.

Rafe followed as best he could. Lose her, catch her, keep up, and when he saw that pale braid dart down an alleyway, he slid up behind her as quickly as he could, without touching her. “Y'heard?”

"I did. If the General is dead, then the soldiers will want to know."

Rafe nodded, looking over his shoulder. "We want off the streets."

"Why?"

"The Benjamin's about to ring," he said, jamming his hands in his pockets and hunkering forwards, bracing his body against the rain like a little grey-brown wedge. "And when people realise they've been waiting an *hour*..."

"Ah. Yes. A riot, yes? Like the Lewton riots last year."

"... And the Chenneridge riots before that, and the Djansk Retainer riots few years before that and—" Rafe stopped, looking over his shoulder. "We riot an awful lot, don't we."

"One might wonder if there's some root cause to that." Aderyn was moving quickly, pulling a fold of fabric from her stout dress up, out of the neckline and loosening it so she could curl it up over her head and keep off the rain. Tugging her gloves into place, they had this little moment to prepare – because when they stepped onto the main streets, there was *no telling* what was going to be throwing back and forth.

"You might." he tried to keep his default sneer from showing. "You ready? We don't wanna have to cross Broad Street if we can."

"There's a route that goes through Parcel Street that's probably less travelled in the rain. There are carts in the street, I don't imagine people will riot through them easily."

"Dunno, Bottle street, when we went for the walls, we'd roll right over carts."

"Oh dear. Then we had best be quick."

"As quick as is appropriate for a young lady?" Rafe asked.

"Inasmuch, yes."

Behind him, across the river, and loud enough that all the people, gathered in the squares could hear it, the clock struck two. Closer to Rafe but still behind him, a rock hit a window. Somewhere wrapped in green with a shock of pink, an Assassin of a different calibre made her way to her task. And somewhere closer still, patriotic cheers mixed with the pouring rain to become the start of a squalling, raging bellow of ten thousand confused and unhappy souls.

The worst murderer and best assassin of Timoritia picked up the pace and ran down the side streets back to the church. Everything was about to go to *shit*, and Rafe knew the people that were crushed in days like these.

*

Timoritia's working class as a culture tended towards a very *fair* view of the world, a sort of all-purpose good intention. Unfortunately in any outbreak of public violence, that intention takes on an ugly, unthinking form. The first rocks thrown hit fancy houses, but high metal fences and good brickwork meant the heave of the crowd had to find some *other* place to release its stress.

A hole in the rain, the cold and the discontent, gave people some focus. The gates of Westminster were high as cliffs to the raging and bellowing crowd, crashed against them moment to moment, empty yells at a crownless kingdom.

There wasn't even a chant, no great rhyme, no *reason* for it. It'd *started* like that, at first – sure, there was something about getting paid, or a stipend, or a king? – but eventually it became about *that guy* who had *looked at me funny* and the whole brawling mass of scuffling, outraged people ramming against the limitations the city put around them.

The city could look, from the top down, like a series of pipes. Down through those channels flowed the people of Timoritia, unsure, angry, and loud. Where no general's voice called out, they bellowed and swung and fought – an undirected mass of slow-motion violence, unsure of what even it fought for.

*

"Well, your Lordship," Wardell started, *again*.

"Just a moment, boy," the old man responded, *yet again*.

"This shouldn't take much *time* if you but *listen*-"

"Oh, I know." Lord Gorange said, adjusting his seat, fiddling with his sleeves, watching around the room as clerks and lawyers set up their folding tables and pens and paperwork. "It should be *nice and quick*, if all the paperwork is in order." He tilted his head, slightly off-kilter, and briefly Tenner wondered if he'd fallen asleep. Then he blinked and leant back in the chair. "But that's the important thing. The paperwork *in order*. As I understand it, there was almost something *very rushed*... something some Rangst boy paid for, too. Now we wouldn't want this to be improper-"

"Well, sir," Wardell said, fishing the coin – ah yes, of course, the coin, the coin was trumps! – from his robes. Robes? When did Wardell put on that cloak with the ermine trim? It... it stood to reason the palace would have the garb of a king in it, but it was still a strange thing to see. Maybe he was trying to assert himself over the Lord Gorange.

Tenner shifted a little in his low chair, feeling the soft cushion *squeak* underneath him. Hunkering forwards, he put his hand into his hands, holding his forehead. Behind him, he could feel the push on the waistband of his trousers by that *dagger*, pressing against the wooden back of the chair.

Far away, maybe two or three steps, he heard Wardell trying again. "*Well, your Lordship*-"

"Boy, what *is* your hurry?" he asked.

"Well, there are the riots outside, and a king might-"

"Why..." Lord Gorange sat forward. "Yes. Yes, there *are* riots going on outside, which had *just started* when we proceeded through those *gates*."

"... Ah, yes, well-" Wardell said, drawing himself up. "We do need to stabilise things outside, do we not?"

Lord Gorange sat back, tapping his lower lip with a curled finger. "Yes. But we need not act in haste. A few poors broken windows won't do the damage a misplaced crown might. Who *are* you, again?"

"Ah, yes, that – Sir? I am Wardell Bachthane, the long-lost Bachthane heir, and half-brother of Yull Bachthane."

"Half-brother?" Gorange asked, raising an eyebrow. "Tuxpin Bachthane had a bastard?"

"...Ah, sir, I *do*, I mean, do bear in mind that there are some ladies present."

Gorange leant to the side and looked at the gaggle of lawyers, squinting. "They're lawyers, boy. You think they haven't heard the legal term for a child born out of wedlock before?" he laughed. "Besides, if I don't miss my eye, they're all Gorange stock, aren't they?"

A moment of discussion amongst the cloaks, before one nodded, standing tall as she could, her hand folded slightly at the edge of her black robe.

"Yes, Lord Gorange. I myself am—"

"I don't care," the old man waved his hand. "Fact is, you're looking at a pack of bastard sons and daughters of bastard sons and daughters. What are they doing here, anyway?"

"Well, sir, we were here to ratify the—"

"New king? My my my." He clapped his hands together and raised his chin to Wardell. "Bribed them all, right?"

"What? Sir, no, why, the honour of a Gorange is unimpeachable,"

"Don't blow sunshine up my stockings, boy. If there's a drop of my blood anywhere near any of them they're snakes to a man and *then* they became lawyers." The lord sat up straight, resting his hands on his knees.

Tenner felt a bit like a fly on a bull. Somehow, all that movement, all that motion, had passed, and it looked, at least from here, like everything was going to be fine. Everything, except... except the king knew he hadn't *done* anything during the assassination of Yull. Oh dear. Oh *dear*. Sitting in his own fluids and stewing, Tenner licked his lips and tried to squeeze as far back in his chair as he could.

Wardell raised his hand, stepping forwards, holding a pose almost saintlike as he spoke, his tone deliberate, measured. "Please, forgive me this, my Lord. Forgive my rudeness, for I am a noble born, but lost amidst the city's gutters. As best I've been able to reconstruct, as the books of Lleywan nobility show, I am the long-lost son of Tuxpin Bachthane. The records show that when I was born, my father, Lord Tuxpin was overwhelmed with grief at his infidelity to his wife, and attempted to kill me. It was the mercy of a retainer, who stole me away, along with one of the Bachthane family coins to mark my legacy, and fled here, to Timoritia, where I was raised, lost and hidden, as but a common orphan. I did not know my royal blood until last night!"

Lord Gorange narrowed his eyes as Wardell spoke. Then a little further, then a little further. By the time Wardell spoke the name of the city, he jerked up straight, as if awoken from a slumber, and waved his hand. "I seem to have mentioned to you, young man, to *wait*."

*

"Aderyn!" Rafe yelled through the rain. It was lighter, but not *gone*. "Hey, Aderyn!"

"What is it?" she asked, skidding to a stop, gripping a chimney as the roof slid under her feet. The woman still moved like *art* across the rooftops. Rafe would work out how she did it one day, and until then, he'd just be jealous.

"Over there." He said, pointing across the expanse of the city. "That big, uh. Thing."

Aderyn stood and peered. Looking across the rooftops of Timoritia was like looking through a wood, where even the horizon was hidden by more buildings, more chimneys and smoke. The hills of the surrounding countryside were so low that it was easy to stand on a rooftop and see nothing but

Benjamin and the sea, and not consider the million souls between it and you. A thing had to be large to be seen over the walls.

A very large set of things – such as a towering war machine, constructed of black and red wood, decorated with a white and red flag, and a banner upon which in gold was written *Quia ego sic dico*. It looked like a mighty wheeled wagon, upon which gunners stood, but more worryingly was pulled at the front by *tyrants*. Each Tyrant was about two ems tall, with a head much like a horse's, but wider and longer. Each beast's jaw hung slightly open, showing that unlike a horse, their heads were *almost entirely* a massive set of jaws, in which teeth like *knives* jutted. Upon the back of each Tyrant's head were feathers, dyed paint-black and red to match the wagon. They wore braces around their shoulders, harnesses designed to pull as a dray – without limiting their ability to lunge and snap. Tiny little arms tucked up against their bodies, they were massive, walking maws on legs – each easily eight to ten ems *long*.

"*Quia ego sic dico*, is Gallian for *we're fucked*, isn't it?"

"Latin. And it means *because I said so*."

"Wait, really?"

"... Yes. That's the battle standard of the Hammerjaw Legion."

"Don't know them," Rafe said, as he started to move again, heading towards the church.

"Oh? They're quite famous for patrolling Hadrian against pirate incursions. Led by a Lleywan general, even!"

"Never really been up on my generals. Or my huge fucking bird monsters."

"They're called land tyrants." Aderyn chimed as she leapt from chimneypot to chimneypot. You could run a *highway* across these building tops.

"Oh yeah? And who bosses those tyrants around?"

"Ah, that would be Lady Calpurnia Bachthane." Aderyn said, turning to take in as much of the Hammerjaw legion as she could. This... *complicated* things.

*

"Sir, the *riots*-" Wardell was good at persistence. Tenner liked that about him. Definitely good for a King to have, that persistence thing.

"The riots will-"

"What the *bloody hell* do you people think you're *doing* in here?" bellowed a woman's voice, so hard and proud it shook the windows, rattling metal and glass together.

Tenner turned in his chair and blinked, eyes wide open. What more surprises could this rainy afternoon *hold*?

She wasn't a tall woman, but she moved like a cannonball through people. Two guards made some effort to stop her, then withered in her gaze, before she stormed on through the rest. Wearing burnished copper armour, with inky-black hair pulled into a braid at the top of her neck, the woman stomped like a cavalryman, like a prince – and Tenner felt his stomach do *flips*.

Of *course* Bachthane had some ally or other in the army-

“Gorange,” she said, nodding just once to the Lord. “I shouldn’t be here long. Where’s my husband?”

“Ah, Calpurnia,” the senior family head said, then gestured to Wardell. “Just talking with his brother. It seems there’s been... an unpleasantness.”

Calpurnia Bachthane stood in front of Tenner, ignoring him like the chair he was in. Her hand on her hip, her helmet tucked under her arm, he could only half-make out what she was saying through the churning feeling of his stomach flipping back and forth. Oh god. Oh god, she’d come and she’d probably, *probably* brought the army with her, and she was going to *invade*, and now it wasn’t Wardell’s nice, tidy plan that put him on the throne, it was... it was *something else*.

Tenner looked up at Calpurnia’s back. She was angry. Something about her husband being killed, something about the assassination, about the story. Raising one gauntleted fist, she waved it threateningly at Wardell – and lowered it again when Lord Gorange spoke again.

“So you’re *both* valid heirs?” Lord Gorange said, as Tenner reached behind himself.

This was good. This was his opportunity. Nobody else to mess it up. Nobody else to rely on. And *here*, he could make good on it. Maybe Wardell could take care of Lord Gorange then.

Tenner Chilver, future right hand of the king, stood up slowly at first, reaching behind himself to grab the dagger by its handle. Sweaty hand gripped tight, and he *lunged* upwards.

It took a lot of work to kill a person. Tenner had seen it first hand – the kicking and the stabbing, the sprawling fall of Yull Bachthane. His wife surely wouldn’t take that much.

Tenner’s blade skidded against armour plates; it ripped the edges of a cape.

And then Calpurnia turned around, gun in hand, and that was the last Tenner Chilver thought of anything at all, ever again.

*

Lord Gorange looked at the collapsed form of the smaller man, and the truly hideous bloody spray all over the carpet, mixed in with other... moistness. “Good fucking Christ, woman, what the hell was *that?!?*”

Calpurnia kicked the dagger from Tenner’s fallen hand, watching it bounce across the floor. “... By the sound of things, it’s a very unhealthy day to be a Bachthane.” Raising her pistol in her hand, she popped out a round, glancing between the other two men. “Yull sent a wire north, so I came as soon as I could.” Loading the next round, she fixed Gorange with a serious look. “And I brought the Hammerjaws, since Yull felt *something was up*.”

“Well, I-” Wardell began. This, this he hadn’t planned for. This, he wasn’t prepared for. What the *hell* should he do now? Tenner was out of the picture, which at least meant he had fewer pieces to control for, but... wait. “I was there when this man – along with a coalition of other noble family members – assassinated your husband. It,” he shook his head, sadly. “It was very sad – we’d only just established my relationship to my, to my late brother,” he said, biting his lower lip. “I ... I *knew* that Tenner attacked Yull, but I- as I was trying to *tell* you, Lord Gorange-” he turned, holding out his hand, “we must resolve this *quickly*.”

Calpurnia holstered her gun and nodded. “Right, then. Come on, who does the coronating thing then?”

"You're... um, you're alright with this...?" Wardell asked, leaning back from the woman with bits of brain on her breastplate.

"No, I'm not happy by a long shot, but I've scrapped it out in worse places than this. Come on, crown me and we'll sort this mess out so I can go home and bury my husband."

"Crown *you!*?" Wardell yelled.

"... She *is* the Queen, isn't she?" Lord Gorange asked.

"... Well, no, I mean, she *would* be, if Yull *was* the king, and he could abdicate to her – that's how that works, I'm *sure* of it. Ah, I'm sure the lawyers would be able to—"

Snap.

Lord Gorange sat back in his chair, holding up two fingers. "Ahah. I see. Well." The old man looked down at the palm of his hand, and, after a moment, seemed to decide. "Send a runner. I want Koel Pushanti from the Old Ford."

"I don't know that lawyer, sir," Wardell said, attempting a wheedling protest.

"You shouldn't. Koel's not a lawyer. He's better than a lawyer. We're getting an academic." He smiled, and sat back in his chair. "Remarkably hard to bribe, academics. They tend to like working out correct answers for their own sake."

*

Aderyn was awfully glad Rafe had been able to explain things to the soldiers. It seemed such a simple thing to say but they'd all hung on his words, even with all the swearing. Then *they'd* started swearing.

There had been two soldiers when Aderyn and Rafe had left of the morning. There were four now. Gael, the tall redhead, Vince, the injured engineer, and a boy named Jame and a girl named Leigh, who was quite small. None of them made particularly compelling targets. They sat around the table with Kivis and Brother Fratarelli, a meal of stew sitting in the middle of the group but untouched. They'd been waiting for Rafe and Aderyn to come back – and the news had apparently hurt some appetites.

"... You sure he's dead?"

Rafe shrugged. "Didn't get inside. Can't rightly say. But something's gone really wrong. And there's an army at the gates and there's rioting in the streets."

"Is there anything we can do...?" Jame asked.

"Give sanctuary to those that need it, tend to your friend, and wait on the providence of the lord," Brother Fratarelli offered, his voice trailing off, sighing exasperatedly. The last few words seemed to have escaped more than they were stated.

"... I wanna know who pays for this." Leigh said, resting her chin on the tabletop.

"... We don't really know who *did* anything, you know—" Rafe said, holding up his hands.

"Can we kill all the nobles?"

Aderyn looked over to Kivis. She took a moment, then shook her head, holding up her gauntleted hands. "Hey. I don't appreciate the insinuation."

"I just figured--"

Kivis put her elbow on the table. "You want someone in that palace dealt with, kids, you want to hire an *assassin*."

Brother Fratarelli lowered his head and rested his hands on the sides of his empty bowl. "Kivis--"

"What? Think about it. These days, an Assassin isn't a hired killer. It's a certain kind of professional with a set of skills for investigation and *the like*. Yes?"

Aderyn nodded. "I do believe that *officially*, most Assassins commit very few assassinations."

"Right! So that's what you need. Hire one of them." Kivis said, slightly pleased with herself.

Everyone was watching Aderyn. Except Rafe, but he never looked directly at what he was interested in. "... an Assassin like... me?" Aderyn suggested.

"You're an Assassin?" Leigh asked. Rafe laughed, but Aderyn wasn't sure why. The young lady was a little short, making it hard for her to see much over the table, but it wasn't as if that was inherently funny. "... How much for the bastards that killed the general?"

"Ah, I'm afraid, not," Aderyn shook her head, stepping back from the table. "But my friend Rafe is looking at breaking into the professional side of the business."

"I'm fucking what?!" Rafe began. Then he stopped, looking at the soldiers. Aderyn counted at least twenty seconds of silence before he continued, with those four soldiers all looking at him directly throughout. How strange. "... Look, I'll... I'll go have a look and see if I can find what happened to the general, okay? Aderyn, you--"

"Oh no. I'm afraid I may have to meet with another potential client."

"...A what?"

"I *am* a professional, Rafe," Aderyn said, adjusting her soggy blouse. "I don't suppose it should take me very long."

Rafe stopped short. Drew a breath. Tensed his hand, knuckles flaring white for a moment. Drew his breath *again*, as if he could fill himself up with even more air. And then, he let it all go, tilting his head with a deliberate, almost mechanical ratchet. "Right! Right, yes. *Fine*." Stuffing his hands into his pocket, he turned and moved to the door. "Anything else?"

"Um, Rafe?"

"Yes?"

"You may want to consider collecting payment before you go out to do things."

Rafe sagged at the door, hand on the doorhandle. "Are you *kidding* me." He seethed. "Hey, you guys--"

"I'm not a *guy*." Gael said, leaning forward on the table, elbows on the wood.

"Hey, you folks!" Rafe amended hastily, waving his hands over his head, exasperated. "You got any money to hire an assassination? You know who you want dead? Got *anything* for me?"

The soldiers looked amongst one another, an awkward shuffling, and grumbling. “Well,” Jame said.

“Yes?” Hands on hips, Rafe leant forwards, waiting for the inevitable embarrassment.

“I have two crowns. I mean, I don’t imagine that’s... *much*.”

“It’s more than anyone else has been paying me.” Rafe grumbled. “Fine! Two crowns for... like, whatever I find. No point giving it to me until I know what I’ve done. Okay?”

He made to push the door open and step out – only to find a hand on his elbow. Leigh, the shortest soldier, leant up, gesturing for his ear. Slowly, he hunkered down, resting one hand on his knee, so she could speak, clearly.

“If anyone’s hurt the general, *kill the fuckers*.”

A hand mashed a fistful of coins into his, and then the white-haired girl *shoved* Rafe out the door, whirling around and looking at the group. “... What? *What?! I was wishing him luck! Just- Shut up! Shut up, alla you!*” she scowled as she stomped over to the table. “I want some soup.”

“I didn’t figure you the sort to get a crush on a boy like that,” Gael said, *sotto voce*, as she picked up a bowl to ladle full of soup.

“I’ll crush on *you!*” Leigh spat back, waving a finger at Gael.

“Are you sure you mean-” Vince asked, as he tore a bread roll in half.

“Shut up, Princess!”

Aderyn tapped on Kivis’ shoulder, while the bowls were being filled. “Ah, lady Athene, are you busy?”

“Why?”

“Well, I was wondering if you might want to go meet with this client with me. At least, if I haven’t read the situation wrong, I think you’ll want to talk to her.”

“... Who’s the client, Aderyn?”

“I *think* the client will be calling herself Queen Bachthane.”

Kivis shoved back from the bench and stood up. “... Where are we going?”

“Are you confident on the rooftops?”

“... No, but I can get by.”

“Alright, then.” Aderyn put on a smile and looked over Kivis’ shoulder at Brother Fratarelli. “Well, we’re just going to go for a little walk, Brother Fratarelli!” she called, before turning and starting a trot up to the stairs that led to the roof.

“Wait, where are you going?” The priest asked as he shoved out of his chair to head after them.

“Kivis, you sure you want to-”

Kivis stopped on the stairs, looking up at Aderyn, then down to the priest. “Aderyn, be honest with me... you need me to come along in case things go badly?”

“That... is a possibility.”

She stopped, tapping her chin. “Francis?”

“... Yes, Kivis?”

“Go fetch me my boathook.”

Chapter 22

The busy streets were not a place you wanted to be, unless you were part of that aching, roiling swell of angry people, smashing into and against one another. It was a mass of limbs and shouting, of graceless rage. It was no place for anyone who didn't already approach life full of resentment and spite, but Ligier Rangst fit in *perfectly well*.

"Move it you fucking *peasants*," he bellowed, raising one huge arm, elbow out, pounding and punching his way through the press of people. Bright green jacket flared behind him with every wild swing. A thoughtful man might consider how punching and kicking and fighting everyone smaller than him was slowing him down, but Ligier wasn't really a thoughtful man.

A thoughtful man might notice the two figures in the crowd moving behind him with stout boots tied up high, work pants rolled low and knives in their hands. The push and pull of the crowd, the swell and the slack, they pulled them further away from Ligier at some points and pushed them closer together.

You always got what you paid for in Timoritia. You hired an assassin and you had elegance, a dossier, you had controlled environments and precise timing. These were not assassins. Young men from the Dims with scars on their knuckles, they had a mark and a deed and a price and very little else. You could buy a discount murder in Timoritia, but it always risked being of poor make.

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Brother Fratarelli very rarely came up onto the roof of the church. The little doorway in the back of the steeple that led out onto the rooftop had been painted shut, back before Rafe had come to live here and Aderyn had started using the door as an ingress. Common enough on rooftops across Timoritia, it opened to a pathway that led straight down the back of the church, a flat span maybe fifty cims wide and with a gutter along it, so the rain would sheet off. Once, he'd heard that chimney-sweeps could travel all the way across the city without ever touching a street – the sweep's highway, it'd been called, romantically.

"Are you *sure* you're going to need this?" the priest asked, nervously fingering the boathook's splintered end. "I mean, it is awfully unpleasant."

Kivis was looking out across the rooftops, Aderyn nearby. Brother Fratarelli couldn't be sure that she was looking *at* Aderyn, but it seemed it. The shorter woman was adjusting her dress for the rain, lifting the bottom and tying the sides so she could run more freely. It was a rare moment for the brother – seeing Aderyn briefly conceding to the practicalities and limitations actual humans seemed to have. The girl was an eerie angel, sometimes, with that unflappable mood and practical mind. Kivis' hand waving before his eyes dragged the Brother back.

"We're dealing with the affairs of kings. This is going to *need* unpleasantness."

"You should stay down in the church, Brother. There will no doubt be people coming who need someone who can mend a broken leg or stitch a cut, when the riots come this far." Aderyn called over.

"They're still over towards the palace," Fratarelli blanched, turning to look past the steeple... and blanched again when he saw how wrong he was. The streets were full almost to the mouth of the street on which sat the church, almost at the edge of the river. Rioters rarely liked crowding the edges of the river – like the space itself encouraged some fundamental care.

“As I was saying,” Aderyn repeated firmly, “You should stay down in the church, brother.” Raising her hood and tucking her braid away, Aderyn pointed along the line of the houses. “I will take a careful route so that you can follow, Kivis.”

“I understand. Don’t think I can’t jump, Aderyn.”

“I only think that you cannot jump as far as *me*.” She said, before taking two steps, then a third, and suddenly she was in the air, arcing from the rooftop to the next – catching feet on angled roof-tiles, and darting up the slope to the peak of the neighbouring building.

“Francis? Do take care.” Kivis said, thumping her gauntleted hand into Fratarelli’s and taking the hook with the other. She turned, and huge stomping feet went *crunch crunch* on rooftiles, before Kivis launched herself across the same gap. Aderyn was right – she *didn’t* jump as far as the slighter girl, and Fratarelli felt his heart leap into his throat at the sight of her arcing through the air, knowing she’d *fall*-

THNK

- Kivis swung her boathook out and caught the edge of the building, hauling with her own momentum to swing up, catch the edge of the rooftop and clamber up after. A moment more and she was up by Aderyn’s side, and the pair kept moving, off towards ... *whatever* it was Aderyn had in mind.

Brother Fratarelli shivered in the rain. He’d fancied himself the person *commanding* this little conspiracy, once. It really felt more like they just did *whatever they damn well pleased*, really.

*

Ligier burst out of the line of the crowd well away from the Dims and the palace, unsure of just where he was beyond main details. Near the riverside, near some little church or other. Rangst estates were studded all around the city, piece by piece, all he had to do was find some cousin or other and bully his way indoors.

The press and swell of a riot was like a wave, and bursting free from it and tasting fresh air gave the man a dizzying sensation of freedom. No longer fighting for movement, no longer struggling. Ligier clenched his fists and turned around, watching the people thinning out and moving away from him, no doubt recognising their betters, or at least the expression of a man full of scorn and rage.

Turning back around again, a whorl of callow spite, Ligier adjusted his jacket, pulling it tight around himself, which meant his arms were tense and in the perfect spot *get just lucky enough* when a man wearing a bandanna and with a knife in his hand lunged out of the crowd to try and sink it into his ribs. Instead, the blade skidded into his elbow, and in between his arm and chest. Oh, sure, Ligier yelled – but his assailant was stuck off-balance, his arm extended, his arm *in Ligier’s grip*.

The Rangst looked down, at the knife, at the cuff in his arm, and swung around with all his weight, bringing a bare-knuckle fist *square* into his forehead with the force of a trip-hammer. Something made a moist, wet *crack* under his hand, just like that miserable oik of a butler Ligier had had when he was seventeen, and he felt the satisfying flow of blood that came with it. “What the *hell*,” Ligier demanded, gripping the man’s wrist and raining down blow upon blow, “Do you *think*” pound, pound fist growing momentarily raw, “you’re *doing*,” the numbness crept up the forearm, but it felt so good to be *hurting* that it was easy to ignore. Fumbling, a moment of loss and confusion, and Ligier’s hand clamped around the man’s throat.

“Oi, Help!” the assassin yelled, even as Ligier clenched his hand tight, thumb on windpipe. Some brown-haired, stubbly nobody, someone who thought he was central to his own life story. Just one more of life’s fucking *extras*.

Ten ems away, in the crowd, a Dims-born heavyboy, known mostly as Obrin, one of the rude and rough sorts who would slit a throat for the right price but who could never work out how to make a receipt, watched as someone who’d been hired to do his job, and who he’d had a few beers with down at the pub, was pulled to the ground by Ligier Rangst, the mark. In the middle of the street, Ligier held him down by his throat, while he kicked and flailed, and even as the man’s gurgling slowed, Ligier rained blows down on his face with his free hand.

Obrin watched his coworker’s feet slump. His struggles stop. The clatter of a knife hitting the cobblestones. The wet *splt-beat-splt- beat-splt* of a fist drawing back for more abuse on a dead form.

Obrin slipped his knife into the back of his pants and quietly turned around, heading into the crowd.

He wasn’t being paid *enough* for that.

*

Rafe grumbled as he pulled the church door closed behind him and stuffed his hands into his pockets. What the *hell* was Aderyn even *up to* this time. Nowhere in the rules-set that he’d understood underpinning her worldview had he seen *piss off during a job opportunity* come up, but here she was, gallivanting away and he had no idea *why*. Fists in his pockets, shoulders drawn up, he kept his head down to keep the rain out of his eyes. Rain sloshed in the gutters, washing away the filth and blood and-

Rafe looked up, just in time to walk into a green coated back, and then looked up further still. The man he struck *whirled* around like a rearing horse, his hands red-run with blood and his-

Crack-

Rafe felt the blow hit the side of his head with enough force to throw him to the gutter, which cracked against his temple with another dizzying blow. Then down came the man’s boot, and Rafe barely had time to blurt out “*The Hell!?*”

*

Brother Fratarelli tucked his hands behind his back, looking out across the rooftops and to the thronging force of the enraged. People would riot so readily in this town... sometimes, he wondered if people from the Dims rioted out of boredom. With his hands hooked against the cord that bound his robes closed, Brother Fratarelli let his eye trace down the river, looking down from the high, rainy perch. It was a strangely calm place, up on the roof of his little church. A place to reflect, and to observe the people as they went about unobserved.

Great changes are wrought in people in very narrow spaces of time. The choice to act, or not to act, to stay one’s hand or to indulge in one’s wants. People are so often an elaborate set of justifications and rules designed to stop from doing *that one thing*, and all it takes is the right reason to overcome them, and so much of what is left is unravelled, inexplicable reasoning that serves no purpose.

Brother Fratarelli looked down, and saw a man in a bright green cloak, holding a knife in his hand and with his foot on the side of the face of a prone young man, man crushed into the gutter, wearing

a rain-and-blood spattered version of the priest's own robes. Recognising Rafe a heartbeat later, Brother Fratarelli felt his heart leap into his throat even as he leapt into the air.

*

Rafe knew he'd be able to bounce back from this in a moment, if this asshole could just *lay off* for a second. Bullies were like that, though, they'd always give you a moment. They'd want to hear you whimper as they made you taste mud, they'd want to watch you *squeal* when they put in the boot. This guy? Well, the way he kept kicking Rafe in the middle and yelled at him, that said he was sure *some* kind of bully.

Burbling into the gutter water, Rafe struggled to put himself face up, under the man's boot, even as another hit struck into his side. What *was* he yelling about?

"This Fiver's *plan*, is it? Hm?" the monstrous man bellowed, raising his boot to crush down again on Rafe's face. "Sending people after me once we're *done*, so he can take the coin?!"

Rafe managed to spit and burble, dragging his head up from under the rush of water filling the gutter, his hands gripping the stones, pushing back against the boot pressing against him. "You-What-"

Water in his eyes, in his ears, pain in his chest and hips, Rafe could only make out shapes and sounds dimly. Swinging his hand through the air, he looked for a loose rock, for a point of imbalance. Rafe could solve this. Rafe was *sure* of it. Every bully had a weakness, every bully acted out of a want for power and while Rafe had *no idea* why he'd been targeted, and this man was acting with the energy of *panic*. That wasn't an unfamiliar space. Break into the wrong home and – words cut through the pain.

"Right. Now. Don't you try anything smart, you little *sh-*"

Rafe blinked water out of his eyes, propped up on his elbows, pushing back against the boot on his chest. Then suddenly, it was falling backwards, all the pressure gone. Rafe saw his assailant crumple downwards, then fall to the side, as over a hundred and sixty kegs of priest *landed* on him, elbows and fists. Neck went at the wrong angle, chest recoiled at the impact, and the man *crumpled*. He was a big man. Brother Fratarelli may have been rounder, but in all the ways that counted, he was the bigger man.

As far as last words went, 'you little sh-' was pretty awful but like almost all the last words Rafe heard, they weren't really *planned*.

*

Wardell paced back and forth across bloodstained carpets. Calpurnia had kicked Tenner's body off the carpet and slouched into a chair, taking the knife in her hand from the man's dead form. This was *not good*. This was an extra complication, and one he *should* have had researched. Who bothered to look into wives? For god's sake, though, he needed to make sure she didn't get her hands on that *book* or everything was screwed. Worse, she was probably not going to be swayed by a legal case that didn't have Lord Gorange's weight behind it... she had, after all, brought a *siege weapon* to the gates of Timoritia. It wouldn't be the first time the city was invaded by its own army.

It could *work*, if he could get *rid* of her. The problem was, she was every bit as obdurate as Yull and he didn't have anyone on hand to deal with her. Maybe Ligier and Ulster together would have had a

shot, but he'd have had a *hell* of a time convincing those two to act on anything. The fools had been useless for dealing with Yull, after all.

"Wardell, do settle down. You're looking positively anxious." came that maddeningly calm voice from the seat by the throne.

"Ah, am I, Lord Gorange? I'm sorry. It's just this... waiting is driving me-"

"Lord Gorange!" a call came from the door. "Mr Pushanti from the Old Ford is here to see you!"

"Ah, excellent."

Ah yes. The Academic. A new piece as well. God *damn* that Gorange sense. Just because he almost certainly knew every lawyer in his family was bribed, here he was bringing in someone who no doubt was on a different take indeed. Still – everyone in the city wanted something of kings and nobles. Not to mention that Yull had been black, a detail that was *always* useful to use against the people in positions of power. If Wardell could just get Koel to confirm him, *then* he could follow up on any promises he *had* to. Stopping his paces, he looked to the doors, bracing to see some obnoxious fat tenured-

The man in the doorway was squarely at an average height, skinny in the shoulders. Wearing a dark blue jacket that looked a bit much like a class blazer, and charcoal grey pants, dull brown slip-on shoes jutted from under his cuffs, the man stood with his hands close together and his elbows tight against his sides, holding a folded-over clipboard and stack of paperwork. While the other clerks had walked into the room with a low, businesslike manner, looking for places to set up their desks, he stood, looking around at the high ceilings, at the artworks and the fittings, his mouth open wide. Blatantly awed. Wardell took in his uncertainty, his surprise... and his own heart sank.

Koel was dark as chocolate, with a fine, well-groomed beard, looked maybe twenty-five years old. Up on his head rather than loose hair, he was wearing a dark blue turban, unadorned, with a knot around the back, up near the base of his head – a knot that showed every time he whipped his head around and looked in surprise over his glasses at the latest Historically Significant thing the room hosted, murmuring just loud enough to be heard, "Gosh."

Wardell sagged against the side of Calpurnia's chair. *Bugger*.

*

Four forms splayed out on the street; two dead, two living. Rafe was the first to move, slowly peeling himself up out of the gutter. Nursing his chest with one hand, he checked himself for damage. The rain and the gutter water made it hard to tell bloodstains from rain, meaning he had to feel for the warmth of it. Bruises on his face, a tear by his ear – blood down his neck, but nothing lasting. Hurt, but hurt was fine. Rafe *knew* hurt.

Reaching down, he tested the priest's body, seeking a pulse, hauling him up and over. "C'mon, Brother. You there?"

A low, miserable groan rolled out of Brother Fratarelli. Sitting up slowly, he looked down, at the green coated man underneath him. Seeing the man's shiny face, in the rain, shifting from dazed consciousness to self-awareness to the morbid *shock* that came from sitting on a *corpse*...

"Ohmygod Rafe, what have I done."

“Saved my life, by my eye...” Rafe said, reaching down to help the priest into standing, against his will. Shifting with the unhelpful weight on slippery cobblestones, Rafe braced his legs to stop from meeting the ground again.

“I... I – did I-”

“Yep. You uh, never killed anyone before, huh, father?”

“Brother. Brother. Oh god, oh god. Oh god, this is how you feel all the time? Oh, god, Rafe, I am sure, someone, someone out there can forgive us-” the priest said, his voice cracking in the rain. “I’m...”

“Someone? Aren’t you a priest?” Rafe asked, setting Fratarelli down at the gutter, feet on the road, his rear on the path. “Thought you had someone taking care of that.”

“I- god, you don’t know about that. I-” the priest rubbed his hands atop his head, gathering himself and raised a hand, pointing to Rafe, redirecting all that anguish. “I don’t think you appreciate the gravity of this situation!”

“Neither did he.”

“RAFE THIS IS NOT THE TIME.”

“... Sorry, Brother.” Rafe sighed, patting his hand. Reassurance wasn't his strong suit. The rain crept down the back of Rafe’s neck, his hands clammy. Resting them on the brother's shoulders seemed the extent of what he could possibly do, really.

“Is- is it always like that?” Fratarelli asked, while the rain pattered about them.

“It gets easier after the first one.”

“I hope it doesn’t.” Fratarelli put his elbows on his knees, his forehead in his hands and shuddered.

Rafe put his hand atop the priest’s head. “You really weren’t prepared for this, huh.” The riots were still wracking, out closer towards the palace. There were two dead bodies right there, and he couldn’t leave the priest to deal with them. “Alright, look, brother – you know when you picked me up, down in Draftfane?”

“Yes?” His voice was choked with that subtle, almost-weeping Rafe knew well.

“Right, and you wanted to know why I lied about killin’ people?”

“Y-yes.”

Rafe hunkered forwards. “I didn’t. You understand me? I didn’t lie. Can you *trust* me on that one?”

Fratarelli’s shoulders slumped, and he looked up at Rafe in the rain. “Rafe, *stop* this. Stop *trying*. I *know* you didn’t kill Jandal Wendy’s husband and you *definitely* didn’t kill Harry Fint.”

“How come you’re so sure!?”

“Because that Sunday I heard Jandal Wendy confess to stabbing her husband, and then I heard Harry Fint’s confessing to associating with criminals.”

The rain filled the silence, while Rafe hunkered down. “Yeah?”

“So forgive me if I don’t buy your hard-as-a-nail attitude, Rafe. I *know* you lied about those murders.”

“I lied about those two.” Rafe patted the Brother’s leg. “Right. But I was already nicked. I knew about Wendy’s husband. I knew about Fint trying to disappear from the barneys and from the Kingsways.” He shook his head. “And I was nicked for killing a priest and sledding down a *rooftop* with him.”

Brother Fratarelli blinked, swallowing. “So you’re saying, father Reighland, you-”

“Yeah. I did. Really.” Rafe patted his hand on his thigh, trying to keep him from going into numb shock. “I’m telling you this ‘cos you need to stop thinkin’ everything in the world happens tidily. It’s not all your fault and it’s not all God’s plan.”

“Oh, don’t you think I *know* that,” Fratarelli snapped, then shuddered all over. “Sorry, Rafe. I... I’m just... I’m I don’t...”

“Alright, look! Look, – look, listen to me. This is *how it goes* on the street, Brother. Someone goes too far and you gotta go out and meet them there or someone that matters gets hurt too bad.” He squeezed his hand. “It’s how the Jandals went, it’s how Fint got out of the city, and it’s why Father Reighland wound up in a snow-bank with a knife in him.”

Brother Fratarelli looked to the street, then to the strangely earnest, incredibly grubby boy in front of him, smeared with rain and blood and the mud of the streets. “... I should... I should get the soldiers to help clean these bodies up.”

“Chuck ‘em in the river. They might break the surface. Either way, they’ll be off the road.”

Brother Fratarelli swallowed loudly, and clutched Rafe’s arm. “Rafe, at the palace –”

Rafe shrank from the hand slightly, knowing where *this* kind of thing went. “No, look, no, Brother. People are going to die, Brother. People have *already* died. There’s some bloody business afoot and it’s going to take somethin’ terrible to set right.”

“Just... just not today, okay? Not by your hand.” The rain-slicked grip of the priest pulled the fabric of Rafe’s robe into a tight little bunch. “Please, don’t kill anyone. *Please*.” And the boundaries and rules the priest had in his mind tried to circle around, tried to make this day’s murder into an acceptable sin.

With water sheening off his bald head, looking up into Rafe’s eyes, Brother Fratarelli looked every one of his years twice over, less Rafe’s peer and more likely his father. “... This is crazy, Brother.”

“If it is crazy, Rafe, it is the kind of crazy that is trying very hard to be normal.”

*

Kivis twirled the hook in her hand. Aderyn may have moved like a kingfisher, darting down to lampposts and gutters, but she was at least careful picking a route where Kivis could follow with a long, galloping, hook-assisted leap after her. They’d made their way half-way across the city, which was a useless measurement when the city had such a strange, wriggling border as Timoritia. There were points where the walls of the city folded inwards, points where they’d crossed the river by running along bridge towers’ parapets.

The house down on the ground level broke most of the rules of the homes in Timoritia. Rather than leaning against every other house, pressed into a tiny space, it had a space of around three ems around it on all sides, and a high metal fence protecting it. While the property ran up against a city wall, the wall stood far away from it, and had actual *spikes* jutting out from it to discourage even the birds.

"This the place?" Kivis asked, looking down to the ground level.

"Indeed. One of the Royal Safehouses."

Kivis shrugged, putting her hand on the lip of the building to work her way down, climbing down a complex fasure. "You're sure someone will be here?"

"It's only for the use of royalty, their guests, and for visiting generals." Aderyn murmured, lighting down on a windowsill next to her. Then a handhold to the windowframe, and Aderyn dropped further. The rain meant Kivis had to be careful, but the street wasn't far – and with a *thud*, she landed fine and flat on the floor.

"Alright, how do we get in?"

"Well, traditionally," Aderyn murmured, smoothing out her skirt, untying it from her hips, "we walk to the front door and knock."

"That's how these safehouses work?"

"I understand that's how houses work." Aderyn said, stepping across the road. The riot was far away, the rain was lighter, but still they skittered across the road quickly. Kivis didn't like feeling water under her feet, not when a trip or fall could lead to serious damage to armour that already took plenty of time to maintain.

The gate opened to Aderyn's hand, and it was only a few steps from there to the footpath. The drilling sound of rain on her helmet finally faded, and Kivis could relax from the beating feeling. Leaning against the doorframe, she adjusted her gauntlets.

"Trust gets you only so far, Aderyn. Who are we meeting here?"

"There's a very good chance," Aderyn said, holding her hand up, ready to knock, "that Lady Calpurnia Bachthane will be here, as that is her army outside the gates. If she isn't here now, she will probably come here, and will want to talk to someone about the assassination of her husband."

"... You want an in to the Palace? Why not use the soldiers?"

Aderyn raised her hand *again*, slightly irritated. "There is a certain professional standard and a cost-benefits structure. Rafe can afford low rates, but if I do that I run the risk of being-"

"Oh my god, you're such a snob." Kivis laughed in her helm. "You're looking for someone who can pay Guild Rates?"

Aderyn raised her hand to the door, betraying only the tiniest irritation at the edges of that implacable expression. "I *am* a guilded assassin."

"Yes, but it's not like assassins *do* anything."

"I do things."

"You do assassinations."

"Inasmuch as is appropriate for a young lady," Aderyn said, then sharply rapped.

Kivis looked out to the street, expecting nothing from the door. The district was a higher calibre, with deliberately raised houses from the street level. Small gardens, with walls, with fences *atop* the walls. The occasional grotesque glared down from higher perches, and the sky was clearer here, with fewer rough black smears from chimneys designed for work rather than warming.

The door opened beside Kivis, and the click of a rifle followed. "You lot. Inside. Now."

"Good morning," Aderyn launched into her spiel as Kivis turned. "My name is Lady Aderyn DuThane, and-" Kivis watched as Aderyn, while speaking with that same perfectly-even tone, swung her hand out, underneath the gun, flipping the gun barrel upwards, pushing with what weight she had, stepping into the man's space, stepping up, onto his knee, mashing the barrel of his own gun up under his chin and grabbing with her other hand the top of his head, holding herself there with her foot under the butt of the gun. Not once did she *interrupt* her speech, simply stating every word in the half-heartbeat it took her to ram the man's gun into his own face, "- I'm an Assassin."

Kivis waved off-handedly behind Aderyn. She seemed to have things in hand. The man wasn't dressed military, though. It was the doughty brown work-pants, silver shoulder guards and a grilled face-plate that only came down over the face – and not, conspicuously under his *chin* – of a private guard.

"You mind if we come in for a chat? I think Aderyn would like to speak with Lady Calpurnia."

The man leant back, one hand gripping the doorframe to address the shifting of his balance. Kivis saw her opportunity, and stepped forwards, shoving her boot against his knee, barging on past.

"Aderyn, this isn't a general's guard." She said. As the man fell backwards, Aderyn went upwards – grabbing the doorframe with one hand and pulling the gun up out of the falling man's hand.

He thudded into the floor as Kivis *planted* her boot on his chest, leaning into it dramatically and looking down at him. "Alright, you. Who's *here*?"

Three more rifle clicks filled the hallway. Kivis looked up.

The front room inside the safehouse was *amazingly* designed. The walls were painted a soft yellow, without the adornment or glory that Kivis associated with royal designs. Four pillars sat nested in the very corner of the room, without room to hide behind. The square room had a balcony above it, on three sides, from which guards were pointing rifles down. If Kivis had wanted to design an entryway hard to assault, this would have been it.

"Scuse us, mate, but I rather think it's time you *leave*."

"Lady." Kivis shot back, standing up. Behind her, she heard Aderyn land and step into the room, looking up with an unconcerned air.

"Hello!" Aderyn said. "My name is Lady Aderyn DuThane and-"

"Get the boss, will ya, Durry?" called one of the men on the balcony. "There's a guest."

The prone guard pulled himself up – and after gathering his gun again, glared through his grilled helm at both the women.

“Well then, Aderyn,” Kivis asked, looking up at the guns. Armour wasn’t going to save her against three guns at once. The best defence to those things was not being hit. “Did you have a plan for this?”

“Well, yes,” Aderyn offered, gesturing at the man leaving. “Are you concerned?”

“Three men with guns waiting for us to do something. You’re not?”

Aderyn looked up, around the room, at the three guns, then turned back to Kivis. “No.”

*

It was only a few minutes when the guards led them into the main room of the safehouse, guns lowered, swords at their hips. Kivis’ count ran past five. Five was usually a good number of guards to handle, if they had guns. Guns levelled the playing field in an annoying way, but you could usually use the chaos and the space to pull people in the path of others’ guns.

After the entryway, Aderyn and Kivis were led through a linear path; the building had a very sensible design, where every room had exactly one entrance and one exit, spiralling into the building, up one wide staircase that led to the second storey, layering defences around. Each room had cupboards and closets, but they had no doors on them – linens and crockery were visible. The building was designed by a bygone era, when princesses and princes needed a fortress within the confines of the city itself.

“Oh, that’s the mirror path, isn’t it?” Aderyn asked, pointing up at the ceiling. A jutting, square-edged shape protruded from the otherwise smooth surface – low enough that Kivis could grab it with her hands.

“The what?” asked a guard, in response.

“The central room has windows that show the outside – because they use mirrors to reflect from the outside walls. That’s one of the paths the mirrors reflect down. You can open them up to clean them, I believe!”

“... What?” the guard responded.

“Never mind,” Aderyn offered, tucking her hands behind herself.

The final room had a pair of doors that opened outwards. A bed in one corner; a desk in the other; a weapons locker. A small alcove with a tea tray. It was Spartan, by royal standards – Kivis found herself appreciating it. Maybe at some point, royalty hadn’t been totally useless.

Sitting by the desk, on a short divan with a pen in his hand, was a round, white man who was *maybe* in his mid twenties but who looked like stress had pushed him well beyond that. There was nothing about him that was in any way empirically *wrong*, but he held himself like he was ashamed of everything, his hands resting on his knees and fretting back and forth.

“Why does he still have his sword?” the man said, gesturing over at Aderyn and Kivis, shifting back on the divan. “What am I *paying* you people for?”

Kivis made a show of turning her helm left and right, holding her open palm wide. “Who’s the he?” she asked.

The portly man blinked and squirmed visibly in the spot. “A-ah. You would be Lady Kivis Athene, then?”

“None other.” The helm also hid grins. Which was good. It wouldn’t do to let people know she loved those moments. “And you?”

“Ah, Asca Gorange. I’m just here in, ah, defensive posture against the riots, you see.” He said, shifting back and forth on the seat a little. Defensive was right – Kivis hadn’t said a *thing*.

“You say?” she asked. “We were here to meet with the General,” Kivis reiterated, adjusting her gauntlets.

“Well, you’re not going to meet with anyone while you have that sword. It’s against the rules.”

“We’re not allowed to display weapons?” Aderyn asked.

“No, and your lady will hand over her sword, *thank you*.” Asca growled.

“I don’t imagine you could make her-“ Aderyn began.

“It is one of the laws of the house. Nobles don’t bear weapons inside Royal safehouses.” Kivis noted, sourly, lifting the sword off her hip and handing it over. When had she last even *drawn* it? Swords had all sorts of rules associated with them. Formal structures she didn’t want to bother with right now. They took her sword, while she stood there, tapping her boathook in her free hand against her thigh.

“Content now, Asca?”

“Well, Miss Athene, that ah, hook-“

“It’s not a weapon. It’s a tool. And it’s Lady Athene.”

“Really, compared to *me*, you are a Miss.”

“Compared to you I’m a hammerjaw with cannons mounted on, Asca.” Kivis spat back.

“*Lady Athene*,” he said, drawing himself up as much as he could on his divan. “I’d *like* you to recognise that you are in a *Royal Home*, and as a *Noblewoman*, you are not permitted to cover your head without permission from the monarch.”

Kivis looked left, and right, at all the guards with their helmets, and their weapons and tilted her head as she turned back.

“Yes,” Asca said to the unasked question, “But *they* are commoners. *You* are a noblewoman and should be expected to set an example.”

Kivis clucked her tongue. “We’re doing this? Formal rules and all?”

“Can you think of a better way?”

Kivis reached up with her left hand, her right hand holding the boathook at her side. “Fine,” a buckle undone, a clasp clacked open, and she hauled off the helm. People who thought the helm was an advantage weren’t worth worrying about anyway. “Aderyn, do you need him for anything?”

“Oh, I am absolutely sure I couldn’t think of anything.” Aderyn said.

“Then if we’re getting formal, Asca Gorange, I challenge you to a duel.”

“Wh-why, whatever for?”

Kivis looked around the room, gesturing wide with her arms. "Oh, let's say using the King's safehouse without permission."

"You don't know I don't have permission!" Asca shot back.

"And I don't have to in order to feel insulted." She tossed the helm up in her hand. "You going to refuse the duel?"

"Well, if I *do* refuse—" Asca began, and trailed off. Kivis drew a deep breath and wore as unimpressed an expression she could. Several guards seemed surprised, more than a few blatantly staring. Black hair done up in a braided whorl around the back of her head, she waited for the inevitable comment.

"I'm sorry, um, Lady Athene, I just... wasn't ... expecting... um."

Kivis grit her teeth. "If you *refuse*, Asca, I invoke *Jus Vindictum* and half your family's property becomes mine." Cracking her knuckles she lowered the helmet and tucked it under her arm. "You know, that law designed to stop *major families* from bullying *smaller families*."

Asca looked around the room like he'd realised that whatever reason he'd had to put himself in this room, he hadn't been prepared for people to come *in*. He pulled himself up in his chair. "Well then, um. I don't think I have the *right* to sign over half of all the Gorange estates."

"You do, in this context," Kivis noted. "You'll just have to answer to your family as to why you are alive and they have to surrender half of all their properties."

"... Well, I suppose then," Asca drew himself up again, trying to gather some pride, looking all around the room for an exit, "I *accept*. And my second will be..." he looked around the room. "... All of them."

Kivis looked around. "What, all ten—"

"There are thirty of them." Aderyn said from the back of the room.

"Thirty, huh?" Kivis said, bringing her hand up to her jaw to rub against it. Considering. Thirty. Hrm. "... Fine."

"Well, if you two, and um, you thirty, have some business," Aderyn said, smoothly adjusting her blouse. "I do hope it isn't too rude for me to step outside? I think I spotted a friend and I'd appreciate an opportunity to check up on her."

Asca shifted in his seat, and leant forward, his grip on the arm of his chair. Nostrils flaring, he drew in a loud breath. "Quite *frankly*, Lady DuThane, I've had *quite enough* of Lleywan nobility for a lifetime. You are *excused*."

"Weapon of choice?" asked the first guard, stepping forwards towards Kivis, as around him, his cohorts formed ranks and stood between Kivis and Asca. "We can give y' back y' sword if you want to die standing," he said, spitting a nasty laugh.

Kivis lifted her boathook. "No, I'm good."

*

Aderyn bobbed on her heels, smiling at the guards as she went, stepping down the steps to the entrance room. Once out the front door, she pulled it closed behind her, and turned to the bushes by the front gate.

“Queeny, you can come out now.”

“Aw, cripes, seriously?”

The bush surrendered the Wyndsyr girl reluctantly. Rather than her normal array of riotous colours, she wore an understated tunic of green, bound at the elbows into hard, arm-guarding pads of leather and metal. Atop her head she wore a dark green cloth, wrapped tight around her head, probably to hide her deliberately ridiculous hair. Still, wisps of bright pink hair showed at the edges of her ears, the little details in the bushes that had caught Aderyn’s eye on the way in.

“Hiii Addy.” Queeny said, scuffing one foot disconsolately. “You doin’ this job, then?”

Aderyn turned to look at the safehouse, then at Quynn. Alright. There was something she hadn’t been aware of. “This job?”

“That’s not why y’here?”

“No.” Aderyn imagined she should pinch her nose, to signal frustration, but doing so would provide information she didn’t need to. “I was here to meet with the general.”

“General?” Queeny fished around in her pocket. “He’s a fucking general?”

“... Um, no. Queeny,” Aderyn said, stepping off the path, into the garden. “How about you explain to me just what’s going on?”

“Well, some cobber’s come to th’guild lookin’ for a handful of jobs, real nobs an’ I figured well, if I’m goin’ up North after m’done here for th’year might s’well try out th’ttraining before I go-”

Aderyn blinked very, very slowly. “Ah. You thought you’d perform an assassination on a lark.”

“Yeh.”

Aderyn nodded. Well, that made as much sense as any other way to fill the time for the wealthy.

“And the contract here?”

Queeny shrugged, wrinkling her nose. “I dunno if ‘m s’pos’t-“

“Queeny, we are professionals. You can trust me.” Well, it was half true.

“Asca Gorange? Some fat bastard who’s apparently been playin’ with the wrong crowd.”

Aderyn nodded, looking up at the building. “You know, Queeny, I *dare say* that your contract might be void shortly.”

“Really? ‘E’s got like twenty-five guards in there.”

“Thirty.”

Queeny rolled her eyes and leant back against the bush. “I was just waiting for the night, s’all.”

“After a fashion, so am I.” Aderyn noted, looking to the windows.

The door didn't really *burst* off its hinges – whoever designed it had made the door swing *inwards* rather than out. Nonetheless, when it opened, it opened with a gale of air fierce enough to whip Queeny's cap right off her head, sending her hot-pink-and-blonde hair in a whorl around her.

Kivis stood in the doorway, bloody from the boots down, holding her boathook in one hand, red on her gauntlets. Dark blood on her cheeks, seeming somehow darker thanks to her skin. The shimmering steel of her armour cut a V in the dark blood on her armour, and the boathook was bloody on both ends.

"Aderyn," Kivis said, stepping forwards, gripping her fists tightly. "What was *that* all in aid of?"

"I'm afraid I do not understand." Aderyn responded, putting on a smile.

"Did you *know* that asshole was going to be in here?"

"I did not," Aderyn noted, then pointed to Queeny. "This is my roommate, Lady Quynn Lyzbyth Wyndsr, the-"

Kivis pointed the boathook at her. "She done anything shitty?"

"What?" Aderyn blinked, as Queeny put her hands up.

"I cheated on my exams! Oh god! Please-"

"... Meh. I can let that pass." Kivis shook her head, then grunted, looking back to the safehouse door, which, hanging open as it did, with the smear of blood on the carpet behind it, looked a little more foreboding than safe. "My helmet broke."

"Oh. On what?"

"Back of Asca's head." She shook his head. "He tried to run. I figured throwing the helmet wouldn't kill him."

"Oh, um. Did it?"

Kivis shrugged. "That, or the fall afterwards. When he hit the carpet he bounced."

"Oh." Aderyn would have to make note of that for the future. Staircases would obviously be more dangerous to very heavy people. "Queeny, you can put your hands down. I don't think Kivis is going to hurt you."

Kivis shook her head, and patted her hip. "... Oh, *damnit*, I left my sword in there, too..."

"*What the bloody bloody **bloody** hell is going on here?!*"

The three women looked up at the new voice. Standing at the gate, clad in bronzed armour, was Calpurnia Bachthane – flanked on both sides by two soldiers, wearing formal uniforms. Aderyn considered sighing, to show relief, but General Calpurnia probably wouldn't read it correctly. Stepping forwards, Aderyn made for a small bow. "My name is Aderyn DuThane, and I'm an-"

"What are you doing here?" Calpurnia interrupted, moving up the path, her retainers moving in a sweep with her.

Then, Aderyn felt it appropriate to sigh.

“Well, General, I’d like to talk to you about the possibility of dealing with the people who attempted to assassinate your husband.” Maybe, Aderyn thought, if she said it all in a rush, she wouldn’t. Be. Interrupted. *This time.*

The bronze-armoured woman looked between them... at the pink-haired assassin, the eerily calm Aderyn, and at Kivis, covered in blood, and the doorframe similarly stained.

“... Law, weapons ready. I think we’re going to have to step inside for a bit of a chat.”

Chapter 23

Inside the church, four soldiers sat, wringing the rain out of their clothes and hair. Vince's own hair was remarkably resistant to the rain, but poor Gael, with her long braid, she looked like she'd dived into the river. Brother Fratarelli's seat at the head of the table was still, his hands folded, perhaps in prayer.

Leigh groused as the sound of broken glass tinkled from nearby. "Riots still going huh."

"Where'd you think those bodies came from?" Stannisfeld asked, confused. "I mean, of course the riots are still going on."

Leigh tapped her fingertips on the table, resting her elbow on the table and her chin on her hand. She was sitting on her bag, supplies forming a decent booster. "Can't really *do* anything about them, can we?"

"It should wear itself out in time. Timoritians *are* very punctual people." Stannisfeld said, waving a hand.

"Is that what you think of us?" Leigh poked his.

"What's 'us'? I was *raised* here." Stannisfeld laughed, leaning away, towards Vince. "I mean, I *grew up* in this city, it's just an accident that I was born Djansk."

"Well, the riots I saw growing up sort of just... ended at some point." Vince murmured, waving a hand, edging subtly closer to Stannisfeld. After all, it wouldn't hurt to have a person to lean on, in case of the cold or the uh, the noise. Or something.

"As night follows day, Vince." Leigh snickered.

"No, that's a good point. People heard The Benjamin and realised they'd been rioting for an hour and came home." Stannisfeld added. "It's like they forgot they'd put the kettle on."

Gael looked up to the high windows of the church, as if she could somehow see through them to a tower that was in the other direction across the city. "How long do you think...?"

"Me?" Vince said. "Four, maybe five. That'd put it at what, three hours?"

"God, holding out for hours..." Gael sighed. "It's like the trenches all over again."

"Ick." Leigh grumbled.

"It isn't like we can just force time to run faster, though." Stannisfeld said. "Something like this comes out of nowhere, all you can really *do* is ride it out."

Brother Fratarelli shifted from his position at the end of the table, steeling himself. Since they'd brought in the corpses from the street and covered them with sheets, he'd been sitting somewhat still and shaken, which was nothing Vince hadn't seen before. Most people didn't like seeing their first *real* dead body anyway. He knew he hadn't.

The priest slowly gathered up the plates and places, shaking his head. "You think a riot like this happens out of nowhere? Of course not. Of course not. It's been going on for *months*. Medical care for poor women. The criminals working the river. Nobles buying up property in anticipation of *something*." Sadly, he shook his head, looking at the four soldiers. "You're hearing a very real cry of

pain out there. I don't know what started it – but I think the people thought they were about to feel relief, and it was snatched away.”

“They wanted a king that much?”

The priest shook his head, finally picking up the bowl. “They want change that badly.”

It was hard to really *listen* to people like this. Vince didn't even realise he'd been drifting in and out until Gael bumped his arm. “What're you in, Vince?”

“Um. Well.”

“You okay? Wounds playing up?” she asked, testing his shoulder.

“No, no, I'm fine. Well, no, okay, that's a little s-sore, thanks. Um, no, I'm just... you said we can't force time to move faster?” Vince pointed upwards. “What, I mean, just I think... I *think*, that if you can get me into The Benjamin, I *can*.”

Leigh turned around on her bench seat and *stared* at Vince. “... You wanna mess with the Benjamin?”

“... Well, sure. It's *just* a clock, after all.”

“It's a clock ten ems across.”

Vince shrugged. “It had to be built. Someone had to set gears in spaces that could be interacted with. It *has* to be able to change the time. If... I mean, I'm pretty confident if I could just get into the tower I could change the time.”

Leigh looked back and forth between the three. “I... I mean, it *is* a tower. Guard's probably trying to contain the riot right now, not defend a landmark.”

Stannisfeld had his bag on the table already, idly fishing out weapons, setting his pistol on the counter. “Well, I mean...” he idly unloaded it. “I don't think I'll *need* a gun to push through a riot...”

“Speak for yourself,” Leigh said, snatching up the bullets from the table. “There's going to be doors that need opening.”

It took a few scant moments. Vince redressed his bandage. There wasn't anyone in charge, there was just a mission. Gael checked her bag, set aside her sword. Stannisfeld did up his boots. Leigh swept the last of her bullets into her bag, and buckled it up, tying it to her belt and slinging it back.

“Father? Close the door after us.” Gael said.

“Um, it's brother, actually.”

“Oh, okay. Close the brother after us.” She said with a grin, patting Leigh on the shoulder. Then, like a tense spring, Leigh kicked open the church door, glaring at the press of people fighting and storming outside, swinging fist and elbows as she forced her way into a space that wasn't there before, like a high-speed ball bearing shredding into a wedding cake.

“Move it, ya arseholes!”

*

“Get me the book.”

It'd been a snappy order from the future King. Straight from his mouth to Bottle Street ears. Zudd wasn't a long-standing member of this crew, but he knew how to do what he was told. To think, they'd invited him onto the palace grounds, up to the king's room, where Lord Gorange and all sorts of fancy folk was goings-on. He'd had to drag out a dead body, sure, but as he was leaving, he got an order from Wardell, who was going to be the king. That was pretty special, all things considered.

Zudd jammed his hands in his pockets and watched the street. There was a riot going on, and while he'd had his time moving through them in the past, it seemed a pain in the arse. Better to sweep around behind it. The trick was heading out one of the far exits of the palace and taking a long way around, through the quiet and calm spaces where the poor folk didn't live.

Why'd they always riot near where they lived? Was a bit weird. Maybe the guards were better in the richer areas. Hard to say. Probably Wardell's orders too, keep them away from anything the rich might want to keep intact.

Still, it wasn't a far walk to make and he could keep under the awnings. Thick rain sheeted down, and Zudd barely noticed anyone on the streets. With so much happenings-on in other places, Zudd didn't have to worry overmuch about guards, either – plenty of the Barneys were over somewhere else, dealing with a faceless mass, people he didn't know about and didn't have to know about.

Zudd stepped off the kerb, jammed his hands in his pockets and shambled on towards the Safehouse location he'd been given. Most of the drops from the boss had been in other locations – parcels left in spaces, the occasional bit of a hack-job to move things around. Most of the time he remembered dealing with Nebrin and shifting goods between Cornell and the nobility. This time, however, to retrieve 'the book' he had to head to the safehouse proper. The novelty was wasted though – after all, heading all the way out there and back to the palace was a detour away from where the rest of the Bottle Street boys were hanging, in the crowds, with the yelling and the crowing.

The safehouse proper. What a todo that was being. Nobles and their plans, and their discovering lost kings, all in quiet spaces. Who'd have thought the king had grown up in Bottle Street? Zudd wasn't so sure what was going on, but he did have it pretty clear in his head that if Wardell got the book, he'd become the king, and if he became the king, then the Bottle Street boys would *probably* benefit from Wardell's generosity. After all, he wasn't so bad back in the day, was he?

Zudd shrugged under a fallen tarpaulin that gave the water a little more distance to sluice, and trotted down the street. With his hands in his pockets and his shoulders drawn up he was the very figure of a Bottle Street kid, someone who knew that the only way to handle the rain was to present as little of yourself to it as possible.

Zudd reached the safehouse, a nice little safe alleyway off from a larger street. The address worked, and he tested the key in his hand in the door. Nice place like this might have a few things worth nicking after all. Wasn't like the king'd mind much about some trinkets in an old place. Hell, he'd probably set the place on fire when he was done, to hear what he was doing to the other folk Bottle Street had been called to know.

The door rattled a bit in his hand, and Zudd lanced down at the lock, only to notice a hand resting on the handle, keeping it closed.

"Christ!" he blurted, realising there was someone else in his personal space. "How the hell'd you do *that*?"

The boy up close to him – boy, yeah, probably boy – gave a sneer and shoved him away from the door with a surprisingly strong hand. After a moment of squinting Zudd peered forward, recognising something familiar about his manner, about his stance, even while his hands automatically bunched into fists. "Oi, I know you?"

The boy tilted his head and gestured at the door. "You're Zuddy Thumpers, right?" he asked, thumbing over his shoulders, as if gesturing to some eternally-present building they all escaped. "One of the Bottle Street boys used to run with Wazza Cherish for a few pennies a week?"

Zudd grinned. "Hey! Yeah! You ah-"

"Rafe." he said. "Think y'all were a bit older than me?" a shrug, leaning on the door. "Cha up to?"

"Eh, just doin' what the boss wants, same old, same old." Zudd grinned. "Don't see many Bottle Street boys these days, what since..."

"Since we could *leave*?" Rafe grinned. Sure was something familiar about the kid. Not just the Bottle Street signs, not just *knowing* him. "What's the boss after?"

Zudd laughed, and reached for the door handle. "Just a book, mate, nothing you need to worry 'bout."

"Yeah, but," Rafe said, gesturing again with his thumb. "Patty told me to swing by and pick it up so you didn't have to bring it back. Split the fee with y', half and half."

Zudd grumbled. That did sound Patty's style of fussing. "What, he want me out with the leaflets?" a guffaw. Of course he did, this scrawny kid wouldn't be any good in a ruck. "Okay, squirt. S'just this big fancy book in there, all written about on Lleywan. You know how to read that?"

"What, me? You think I know how to *read*?" Rafe laughed.

"Hah! Yeh, uh, it should be in there on the desk, um, up in the main room. Don't read it, just, y'know, grab it and take it back to the boss." he shook his head, patting his pockets. Where was that key. "Ah, 'ere."

Metal token passed from hand to hand, and Zudd rolled his shoulders. "Don't waste time tho'. Don't want either of us to get in the cacky." He grunted, turning on his heel and running up the alleyway.

Thank god he'd get to do something *interesting* today. He wondered, as he hitched up his belt and braced into the wind while he ran, if there was anything *fun* going down in the Dims already.

*

When the riots hit the Dims, they picked up speed. Personal vendettas could only amplify what was already a bellow of rage. The instigators in the crowd could only do something to *start* things, directing it after they'd done their jobs was entirely a different beast.

Aina huddled under the counter. Mama's Obliteratum was a business with stout doors and a fearsome reputation, and Mama had felt shuttering the windows and weathering the storm would do. But that didn't mean there weren't going to be broken windows, or maybe even damaged shutters. Surely nobody would be fool enough to come through the doors...

Aina took her cap off and bit it. Screaming wouldn't do any good, but upstairs, in her room, she could hear every tell and scream. Down here, under the counter, it was at least dark. It was at least a little quieter.

Then the door rattled on its hinges.

"... *plenty of money in here...*" someone grunted.

"*Here, let me.*"

Mama Cass had invested in good shutters, because a thrown brick could go wild and the Dims was known for That Sort Of Roughness. The door, on the other hand, had a stout lock and a bar and that was it. Mama Cass had an expectation of the people of the Dims, and so far, it'd been fulfilled, throughout the years.

The outer door burst open, letting the roar of the street bellow in. Aina huddled down deeper, trying to squeeze herself into a low space designed to hold shoeboxes. Down below the edges of the bar, she saw feet, saw the shapes of rough and ready men. Holding her breath, she pulled the cap over her face.

There were customers who'd been inside when the riots broke out. Mostly, they were unconscious – curled up asleep upon benches or halfway there on clouds of green smoke.

"They got wallets?"

"Nah, don't bother," said one voice. "Just get the cashbox behind the counter."

Aina rolled over, biting her cap and clenching it in both hands at once. Breath held, she listened past the footsteps of the opportunists, around the clamour of them shuffling past people and making their way to the counter, for the sound of salvation. It was a low, grumbling sound, the dull scrape of an axe on stone. It wasn't the scrape of a whetstone on a battleaxe, a tangible demonstration, a preparation for war. What it *was* was the scratchy, tooth-itching sound of a well-used tool being drawn from its keeping place for just another job.

Mama Cass really wasn't the best kind of person. She short-changed her patrons, she was rude to the serving girls she saw as beneath her, and she'd given Curly the sack for getting pregnant when it was no business of hers beyond being annoyed the girl had had some fun in her life that she herself hadn't had in years. She wasn't a good woman, not a hero. She wasn't a bad woman, either, not a villain. Mean, perhaps? No matter what you called her, though, this was *her* place of business, these were *her* customers, and that made it part of *her* territory. And she came out of *nowhere*, the side door swinging out with the same force that brought the axe down.

The axe swung down through an arm without fanfare, guided downwards by the natural folding the elbow did as she broke his arm with the weight, then lopped off the forelimb when the axe-blade crashed down through sinew and gristle. Assassins knew how hard it was to actually remove bits of people, since people are probably attached to their own peopleness more than they are to anything else. The way the limb twitched and flexed as it was liberated from its former owner spoke volumes for the madness that drove Mama Cass as she swept the axe around, a single justified arc of blood moving with it into the face of the second invader. Every sense was dulled by the first man's screaming, which was no doubt *waking other guests*.

They outnumbered her, which was very comforting for them, but comfort was all it could be as the axe-head turned half-way in its arc and broke into the side of a face, carried with the kind of fearsome momentum with which a madman drives his fingers through a plank. Spit and teeth and blood filled the air and splattered onto the wall above and behind her, while she shifted the axe methodically in her hands and started in her steps towards the third man. Her dark little eyes glaring and beady, her curls bouncing along with the rest of her rotund self, Mama Cass didn't yell or threaten or say *anything*. Why would she? They already knew what she'd say, if she spoke:

GET. OUT.

The door swung on its hinges as the three bolted through it into the street, trying to gather their wits.

Be wary of Mama Cass.

Aina slid out from under the counter as quickly as she could, reaching for a hammer. They'd need to nail the door shut until this was all over now.

*

Rafe turned the key over and over in his palm while he unlocked the door and stepped inside. He stepped over the mat, pulled the door almost closed, but let the latch hang open, putting the key away.

There were dozens of houses like this. Rafe'd been in a few. Small, dark hallways with narrow windows, big facing windows in large, lower-storey rooms. Homes of the middle class – they'd have been shop-fronts if the people owning it needed to *make* money. The carpet that ran to skirting, flush and warm, the way the floor *didn't* creak despite the moisture outside.

First door on the left was a kitchen. Single wooden table in the centre of a room, a stove in the corner, an icebox, cupboards all around the room. A larder, stocked, with food in tins and in big blocks, wrapped in greaseproof paper. Fruits that lasted sat in bowls, and a tray of potatoes that rolled back and forth on a nice metal runner, in a deep wooden box. The breadbox was full, only a few days out.

Down the hall, to the right, a single large room. Once, it'd probably been a divided room, with maybe a shopfront on one side. Instead? One large room, with a switch by the door for the light. Rafe circled around a room with a circular wooden table, a single book sitting in the centre of it. The lights pointed down at it, a metal cone around them – with the light on, it'd be impossible to see anything outside that circle. Creepy. Circling around the room, he stepped past a tea trolley, over to a door in the side of the room. Inside, a stack of white masks and robes, and Rafe felt a chill down his spine.

Praefoco had had those. In that creepy little room with the book, full of notes, he'd had a cloak and a mask, white clothing that... Rafe looked over his shoulder at the table. It probably stood out pretty well – if you were sitting at the table, someone in the white robes could stand outside the circle of light and still be 'seen' – if in a really creepy way.

Atop the robes was a note – *These robes are ridiculous. We're adults here. Don't use them – M.*

Stuffing the fabric back into the cupboard, he darted over to the table and scooped up the book. Across the front the letters *Mae Cyrchfan y Brenhinoedd* stood crisp and clear, outlined in gold leaf.

Rafe flipped the book open, flicking through the pages with a single thumb – watching as elaborate diagrams of beautiful heraldry and painstakingly hand-written lines of text showed, in a language he couldn't read, things he didn't understand. Maybe Aderyn could read it. Hell – she was probably *in* this book somewhere.

Folding the paper over the book, Rafe briefly wondered if Zuddy would be okay. Most of the Bottle Street boys were like him, these days – low-end crooks. Folk that the Barneys would drag into a cell when they needed a victim, kids who hadn't managed to step into a job. You had to have real ambition, some real spark of cruelty in you to take the lead from Bottle Street and make something of yourself.

They liked to call it drive, or winning personality, or maybe a drop of nobility, something Rafe had never believed. The people from Bottle Street *he'd* seen go anywhere with their lives had been vicious little bastards. The most successful name out of Bottle Street he remembered was Wazza. Wazza'd gotten a job with an apothecary selling cherish patches when Rafe was about six, and used his pocket money earned through that job to hire bigger boys on Bottle Street to push people around.

It was always about bullies. It was always about the bigger boys with the bigger boots. Maybe it was a year of age on you, when you were young. You needed a mad violence to push yourself through the pain. It either broke something inside you, or something grew there, *inside*.

Rafe knew something had grown inside *him*. It wasn't a nice feeling, to kill someone, but Rafe knew what dying felt like and he figured he'd trade one for the other gladly. It'd been a mess, gory and tragic, but oddly serene. Nothing really *felt* until everything was done... and at the end of it all he was standing there in a gutter, again, in the rain, covered in blood, with a dead body in front of him. Familiar patterns, weirdly. Since then he'd heard of men crow of their first kills, always with knives and swords and the like. Nobody ever beat someone to death the first time. That was... strange. It didn't fit the duelist narrative.

But then, Rafe figured a lot about himself was strange. First kill stories weren't the sort of thing he'd found himself swapping anyway. Aderyn probably had some truly morbid tale of a nanny who pissed her off, Kivis *almost certainly* could trump everyone with a guillotine and the Priest...

The Priest would be fine. Chances are it'd be a thing that happened once, and never again. With god on his side and all that. Give him a few months and he'd rationalise it all away, they always did. Most people who only ever killed once would do that, they'd build a structure.

Rain sluiced down Rafe's collar as he ducked out, into the street, pulling the door closed behind him and locking it. Cloaks and masks, secret identities and conspiracies. There was always someone *in* back in the day. Someone who knew the secret, and that always meant *they* had power. Seems that people didn't grow up out of that schoolyard bullshit.

Rafe remembered the feeling of a fist against the back of his neck. Remembered boys like Zuddy, holding him face-first against cobblestones, punching him in the back of the head over his hair or

how skinny he was or because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time or because *any of it* and Rafe realised his hands were clenched into fists against the book's surface, behind his back.

Deep breath.

The book would get him into the Palace, then he could look around and work out what was actually going on at the heart of this. Right now he felt like he was sliding down a rooftop covered in snow, without a body to break his fall.

*

Once they'd escaped the rolling swell of the riot, they'd only had to make it a few blocks before they had the streets to themselves, heading straight towards The Benjamin. The building loomed overhead, with a bailey around it, with red-and-black clad guards standing to each gate. Two to a gate, that was plenty to keep people away considering it didn't have anything up in the tower except an inordinately large set of gears. The building loomed on high at the end of the street.

"Is this, um, illegal?" Vince asked, leaning against Stannisfeld.

"What, visiting The Benjamin? Never." Gael asked.

"They going to have guards?" Stannisfeld ventured, slowing to a stop a block away from the tower. Tools, he had tools in his bag.

"During a riot? They'll just pull up the gates and stop anyone getting in." Leigh yelled. "Guards'll probably be inside hiding."

The Benjamin was part of one of the great bridges that spanned The The river. Once, it'd been part of a palace, one of the many the mad monarchs had dotted around the city. When a fire claimed the palace, the tower had somehow stood – and been repaired, and slowly grown into the infrastructure of the city.

Really, Vince was proud of the thing, as if he had a right to be. It was a work of craft, something that had been damaged and resisted. It was like the city itself, in a way – something that hadn't been *made* to last and be important, but now was part of the landscape.

"Yeah, I'm not seeing any guards." Gael said. "We got a breach kit?"

"Sort of." Leigh laughed, patting her bag.

"Hey, boys – " Gael said, putting one hand on Vince's head. "You two need to get up that tower fast. We'll cover your back and stop guards from getting to you, okay?"

"Alright, but—" Vince gestured at his side. "Running's, ah... uhm. Yes."

Stannisfeld closed a hand over Vince's shoulder. "I'll take care of it, okay, Vince?"

Vince wasn't sure what he'd been expecting when they breached the doors. Breach. That was a really polite way to refer to throwing Leigh at it. As an engineer, Vince knew that breaching was, technically, one of his jobs, or rather was one of the jobs the soldiers had sappers to do. He'd sit there with a small explosive and pack it into the forelock, then detonate it to free the door from the lock, with a little bit of wire, and it fell to the, to the, uh.

Vince realised he had no idea what to call the soldier that kicked the door in and led the charge. The doorfighter? That sounded familiar but somehow wrong.

It had a protocol and rules and Vince liked those.

Rather than following the rules, though, Leigh produced a wide-barrelled gun, one of the crowd-clearers they used to smash planks in barricades, from her bag. It was about the same size as her. Vince hated using them in combat – they were *awful* for penetrating through armour, and they took *forever* to reload. Stepping up to the secured double doors of the bailey, she crowed just once –

“Oi!”

And then pulled the trigger.

The gun shuddered and blew a mighty gout of hot smoke and burning metal in a wide hole into the wood. That close it didn’t burst into flame but scorchmarks showed around the muzzle and *massive* cracks erupted in the wood up and out from the point of impact.

“Gael, you –“

“On it.” The redhead called, stepping back just once and *slamming* her shoulder into the door. A second slam, a *third*, and something holding metal and wood together in the door’s fixture *burst*.

When the door blew inwards under Gael’s assault, they went with a loud thud of bodies behind it. The doors opened enough as Gael forced her way in, yelling –

“Hello, law! We’re here for the time!” –

followed quickly by Leigh and Stannisfeld. The shift from the gloom of outside to the gloom of inside left him momentarily dazed. When he adjusted, he saw a tableau of goodnatured violence, with Leigh swinging her gun in both hands by the barrel, smacking the handle against guards’ knees and into their guts, while Gael whirled around, bare-knuckle pounding against faces and chins, throats and chests.

The last time he’d seen Gael work like that she’d been head down over a trench moving towards a cannon at a side angle, with a *chain* trailing behind her.

“You two, up.” Gael said, picking up the batons the guards carried. “Leigh and I’ll keep the door barricaded.”

“Scuse us!” Stannisfeld yelled – and in a *sweep*, Vince was off his feet, being princess-carried as Vince put a foot to the stairs and started to *run*.

Chapter 24

Trot past the guards, look like you belong there. Rafe unslung the book from his back and pulled it up underneath his armpit, throwing his hair back over his shoulder while he went. With an alarming efficiency, people moved out of his way – pushing open doors, stepping out of his path. Always the same basic conversation snippet.

“Ah, you’re sent by-

“And that’s the book-

“Ah, that way, then. Lord Gorange is waiting for you.”

And he was off. Once, twice, three times, from the outside pathways to an upstairs balcony, and then he was inside, and then, a door, gesturing him onwards. Servants, all of them, part of a carefully constructed machine that seemed to be entirely about minimising footsteps on their carpet.

Lord Gorange wasn’t exactly famous enough that Rafe knew the man, but he at least had reputation enough that Rafe knew he was about to step into a room with an old man he didn’t want to underestimate at the best of times, and... who knew what else.

Rafe opened the door, and found himself face to face with history.

Wardell hadn’t changed much since Bottle Street. A little bit taller than Rafe, a little bit wider at the shoulder, he’d always had *enough* muscle to do his own work when he needed to. Supposedly, he’d joined the military after he’d crawled out of the gutter, and done *reasonably* well there. Hadn’t become particularly important, which was a shame. Always had a talent for bossing people around – especially in that wheedly way that implied it was your idea all along. Raising his head to look up at the taller b- the other man, Rafe couldn’t help but look at those hard, birdlike eyes. He’d always had that smug, unsympathetic look. Like it was your fault he was stepping on your hand.

“Allo,” Rafe said raising his chin, turning the smile into a grin. “Got a book delivery?”

“Do I *know* you?” Wardell demanded, standing suspiciously close to the door. He reached down to the book tucked under Rafe’s arm, and as if on a pivot, Rafe felt himself turning back away from him, keeping the book out of his grasp. *Nope*. That was how it went. The other boy wanted it, and it didn’t *matter* why, all you knew was the push and the pull. You *only* knew you had to *stop them having it*. It was a tiny drop of power, the last shining bead of civility Rafe knew the room had. It was going to break down.

Wardell had never been the best thug. Military life probably gave him some more tricks, but soldiers fought with weapons. Rafe knew, if it came to blows, he had to be better than Wardell. He *had* to be. And it *was* going to come to blows. Sure, Brother Fratarelli might be a *bit* upset to hear it, but what he didn’t know didn’t matter. Whatever was going on in this room still stank of bullies to Rafe – just the sort that pushed around whole *countries*.

You always made the other boy swing first. That way you weren’t the prick starting fights. You just pushed them, pushed them as *hard as you could*. Make them swing. Then you could feel justified letting *it* out of its cage made of ribs.

“Maybe you do, Wazza,” Rafe mumbled. You only had moments, on days like these. You had to decide to act, then act. There wasn’t much time to *plan*. “Got the book, sirs,” Rafe said, raising his

chin and elbowing past Wardell. As he stepped, he turned to keep the book out of his Wardell's reach, staggering his steps slightly to look like he was off-balance, rather than deliberately evasive. "And euh, uh, ma'ams. And others, too, come to think." he stopped short on the soft carpet, looking down at the massive, spreading bloody spot. "Oh, bloody hell," he asked, gesturing back and forth between Lord Gorange and Wardell. "This uh-"

"Bring the book here," Lord Gorange said – a lean, whiplike man with years of silver on his shoulders, gesturing. "Do *not* let that man touch it."

"That man?" Wardell drew himself up. "I am a *royal heir*," he said with a seething grunt in the back of his voice. "And, Gorange, by the end of the day, I must remind you, I *will be king*."

"Yeah?" Rafe said, looking down at the book, immediately recalculating his approach. Wardell Cherish, king? *That* prick? Considering *everything* that he'd seen in his time? A bottle street boy with royal blood in his veins was as likely as a sheep that could dance. Officially, Rafe had no idea who was responsible for the death of Yull. In his gut, though, he was already putting together a plan to take out Wardell... Maybe if he pissed him off enough to start a fight? "That's what's in May Sirch-fan aye Brayn-hin-oed-d?"

"That's pronounced *Mae Cyrchfan y Brenhinoedd*,you-" Wardell began.

"Oh!" Rafe asked, grinning cheekily as he held the book out to Lord Gorange. "You, uh – you speak Lleywan, sir?"

Lord Gorange looked at the book in his hand, at the cover's florid script, and rested his elbow on the chair's arm, chin on his hand. "Koel?"

"Me? Gosh. Um. No, sir, no, I'm afraid I don't. I mean, I can do some translation work but it's of much more archaic-"

"Right." He raised a hand, snapping his fingers. "One of you useless pen-holsters, go fetch me a Lleywan translator. You, stay here."

"Me, sir?" Rafe asked, stepping to the side.

"Yes. Fewer moving parts flying around out there the better. Go stand in a corner or something."

Rafe briefly wondered just how much trouble he could make out of killing one of the four major royal houses while also assassinating the probably-sort-of-king, if things went *properly* pear-shaped. Especially on a day Brother Fratarelli had asked him not to kill anyone *at all*. That might be a bit of a lift to get out of Drafftane. Shrugging and tucking the book under his arm, Rafe turned to *grin* at Wardell, as he slid over to the corner.

"Lord Gorange, if I may-" began one lawyer, moving towards the man's chair, somewhere behind Rafe. The writing desks were clattering as people took notes, moving to the least obviously obnoxious part of the room. The place reeked of something he didn't want to deal with, and the windows *were* pretty large. It wouldn't be hard to dive out of here if he *really* wanted -

then Rafe saw Wardell *glaring* at him and Rafe knew he didn't want to go *anywhere* as long as he was making that jumped-up prick *that mad*.

Pulling up a little plain wooden chair, Rafe sat next to the writing desk at which the young man Lord Gorange had called Koel sat.

"You been here long?" Rafe asked, shrugging and folding his arms across his chest. Koel was a fairly normal looking fellow with a more refined beard than Rafe was used to seeing. Folk in the Dims tended to shave just so opponents would have fewer handholds in a scrap. Skinny and timid, Koel looked like a slightly nervous bird that nonetheless did not want to fly away for anything in the world.

"Oh, no, no, gosh. I just got here." he smiled, gesturing with a little glass jar. Tiny green beads sat in it, pale and bright. "Mint?"

"Oh, um." Rafe shook his head. "Nah mate, thanks." he glanced around the room. "You mind filling me in...?"

"Oh, well..." Koel spread out the paperwork in front of him, gesturing down at the set of lines sweeping in a paintbrush hand across the page. "There's the lineage of the Bachthane family, which is the Black Thanes, you see? I mean, that's *a priori*, it's – I mean, I don't have the full genealogy yet."

Rafe waggled the book in his hand. "... Can't read Lleywan, eh?"

"Can you?" Koel asked, eyes brightening, big smile forming.

"No." he shrugged.

Koel's smile faltered a little but hung around out of politeness. "Right, so that's... that's a bit of a barrier until the translator gets here."

"Oh, okay." Rafe looked at the page. "And...?"

"Oh, yes! Well, you see here, this is Yull Bachthane," Koel tapped his fingertip with his nose, then the name in florid script, *Yull* on the page. "And then there's his half-brother, Wardell. When the senior lord Bachthane found he had sired a son out of um, wedlock, he was overcome with grief and attempted to kill his son, to extinguish his sin? Very unpleasant, there. A retainer of his family, a good-hearted man, fled the family home with the baby and hid him here, in a Timoritian orphanage."

"Bit of a tale, isn't it?" Rafe asked.

"Oh yes – but he has a coin, you see, that he'd been left with as a child at the orphanage?" Koel turned the paper, gesturing at a diagram on the paper that made Rafe's hand's clench. "It's the one he wears around his throat there – very classic tale, you know?"

"... Yeah," Rafe said, leaning to the side to look over at the would-be king, narrowing his eyes and checking for details. A coin, huh.

He pointed his paintbrush across the room. "That much seems *relatively* straightforward, really. *But*," he then pointed to the dotted line off Yull's side. "Yull's *wife* Calpurnia. Lady Calpurnia Bachthane, General of the Hammerjaw Brigade and Siegebreakers at Ranthelm."

"Oh, that's the problem?" Rafe asked, shifting forwards and looking down at the page.

"Sort of, yes!" he said, smiling brightly, visibly happy to be talking to someone in the room who wasn't glaring at him. "You see, there, that man – Wardell – he claims that he's the royal heir, and Calpurnia claims she's the heir. Also, Yull wasn't *crowned*, which complicates matters as well."

"Howso?"

“Alright, so the crown – the crown is a little bit like a bird. It's a bird that always flies to its *best possible* nest. You can be a bad nest if you're Athlan, for example.”

“Right, and if you're dead?”

“Right! Or even if you're not *dead* dead, just *legally* dead.”

Rafe blinked. *Hang on.* “Oh, legally dead, yeah, I know this one. That's if you commit treason or serve in another army?”

“Yes!” Koel smiled brightly. “Yes, that's perfect. Now the problem is, the *spouse* of an heir is just as good a nest as a *child* of an heir. Normally they solve this through either abdication – the heir passes their crown on and chooses where it goes – or the earlier heir indicating the legitimacy of one or the other.”

“You... ask your dad?”

“Well, I mean it's not quite *that* silly, gosh.” Koel swallowed, adjusting his beard nervously. “Though yes, it's pretty silly.”

“... Okay, right...” Rafe leant forward, gesturing at the paper. “You're... okay, you tell me if I'm totally wrong here?”

Koel smiled. “It's very silly and complicated, trust me, it's okay if you have a question.”

“Okay, so...” Rafe pointed at the page. “This guy, the Lord Bachthane, attempted to kill his son.”

“Yes.”

“... Doesn't that make *him* legally dead?”

Koel folded his fingers and leant forwards, elbows on the paper as he squinted down at the page. “... Well. Yes. And that means that neither Yull... or... uh. Oh. Oh dear. Gosh.” Koel looked up and called across the room. “Um, Lord Gorange, we may have a problem.”

*

When they'd entered the central room, Kivis gestured around her at the room with its bloody smears and its collapsed forms, her boathook in hand.

“This business yours?” Calpurnia asked.

“It's more theirs. Mostly theirs. Some of theirs is out in the hall.” Kivis looked around at the prone bodies, the staining carpet. “I feel I should probably help cleaning up.”

“Well, it would be polite.” Aderyn put on a smile. Sidestepping Kivis' path, she followed Calpurnia. The general walked to a chair, flipping it back up onto its feet with her booted foot, and sat after a moment's investigation to ensure the thing wouldn't collapse. Aderyn looked across the room at the chair's cushion, and sighed. An arm was resting across it. No doubt replacing it on the chair would be awkward by now.

“Alright, out with it.”

Calpurnia had a wonderfully intense manner. Aderyn appreciated the way she disregarded things. Most people would be concerned about all the blood but she seemed completely focused on what Aderyn had to say.

Aderyn also appreciated the way she moved. Calpurnia kept her arms by her side as she walked, her sword barely swaying. Her armour was mostly unadorned, too, and the handle of her sword showed recent rebinding. All very good signs for a woman to take seriously. If Kivis had left the city to patrol the coastline against pirate incursions, she might well have looked something like General Calpurnia.

"About what in particular."

"You said *attempt to assassinate*."

"Well, it is at this point an unconfirmed assassination, by guild rules. There's no receipt."

"... Girl, what the hell do you mean? My husband was stabbed to death by some nobles. Thought he was going to become king and seize too much power, and now they're panicking and trying to put his half-brother in place."

"Well, I'm not sure if that's how events played out," Aderyn said. Dusting off her blouse, she held her breath. This was very important. She had to make sure that she said these things the right way, or maybe she would seem like she wasn't very normal, and that would be suspicious.

"... Humour me, Ms DuThane."

"It's Lady DuThane."

"For now." Calpurnia hunkered forwards, elbows on her knees. "I'll be Queen soon."

"I'm rather afraid you won't," Aderyn responded. "For three reasons."

"... I'm listening, girl. But this is a day for bloodshed, and I'm not a patient woman."

Aderyn let the breath go. Putting a tremble in her first sentence, to sound anxious and fearful, she *ran* through the words. "First of all, you're a Hadrian-born noble, which means political will works against you. In Hadrian being a woman is not considered the same way, but here in Timoritia, a woman will always be considered a second option after a man who can be chosen for the same task. It would take some sort of bomb explosion to propel you to a political position like that."

Calpurnia barely blinked at that, her nostrils flaring momentarily. It was a worthless argument. Calpurnia wouldn't let what men thought of her slow her down. She came here with Tyrants, if she thought she deserved the throne, she'd just take it, and probably have anyone opposing her thrown to beasts with teeth like swords. But arguments were like sword-fights. You had to put people under *pressure*.

"Second, you're here with the Hammerjaw legion which means if you *did* ascend to the throne it would be perceived as a military action. The conquest of Timoritia, even by a friendly army would send ripples through the local area. I am fairly certain Emralt would rebel, and Djansk wheat tastes as good as Tiberan wheat."

Angling for her attitude as a general was pointless, too. If nothing else, her husband had quelled Emralt before and she'd do well given she wasn't a Timoritian.

"Third, and most importantly, you can't be Queen because Yull Bachthane isn't a legitimate heir of the Black Thane in the first place."

Kivis stopped. The soldiers stopped. The whole *room* stopped.

"*What?*" Calpurnia asked, through grit teeth.

Well, Aderyn reflected, that ‘dramatic’ reveal had worked out quite well. She’d have to thank Rafe for the trick.

*

The next two minutes were a *blur*. Rafe watched as Koel, with that deliberately polite manner, moved over to Lord Gorange’s chair. He saw the polite man with the tidy beard and the blue turban talk in a low voice. At the very end, he seemed to run out of steam, pointing at paperwork and books, finishing up with, “... well, gosh.”

Then Gorange had rubbed his forehead, finger and thumb to forehead, and *yelled*. He’d yelled for the lawyers, he’d yelled for a courier to go fetch Calpurnia. He’d yelled, he’d yelled, and he’d *yelled*, and he’d yelled at the lawyers and he’d yelled at Wardell and he’d yelled at the ceiling with his cane in his fist. And Wardell had stood there on the carpet, in his royal robes, paling as Lord Gorange’s voice shook the rafters. At first he’d been defiant. Then he’d been angry. Then he’d looked at Rafe with venom fit to kill a horse, and *then...* as that cane-tip waved at his chest, he’d swallowed.

Rafe knew that moment. Any second now, Wardell was going to take a swing – he’d been pushed far enough. Bullies didn’t change.

Rafe wondered about the odds of an old man versus a soft bully.

But - *then*

Against all of Rafe’s expectations... Wardell *sagged* in his elaborate cloak, and turned, and *ran* out of the room, dropping shoulders and letting the cloak fall to the floor. He elbowed past a guard, shoved out into a side hall and then there was nothing but the footsteps.

Koel came back to his chair looking *embarrassed*, and sat next to Rafe quietly and folded his paperwork up, packing up bit by bit.

“What, that’s it?” Rafe asked. “Ain’t there... a duel? Or something?”

“What? Oh gosh no.” Koel shook his head, giving a bright smile, teeth contrasting with his beard.

“No, that’s all there is. I’m an expert consult, my expertise has been called, and the lawyers can’t find a way out of it.” He shrugged, offering his hand to Rafe. “You saved us a lot of work with that.”

“Oh.” Rafe pulled up to stand. “Well, was nice to meet you.” *Did I just kill someone with a technicality?*

“You’ll want to go talk to Lord Gorange now. He doesn’t like to be kept waiting.” Koel said, sliding his brushes into their little wooden case and undoing the desk’s supports.

The room was slowly emptying; Lord Gorange’s clerks and guards were packing up, and the old man shifted on his chair as if he was slowly unstacking himself for later.

“So you’re the Assassin of Kings, then?” Lord Gorange said, resting his fingers by his upper lip, narrowing his gaze as if he could crush Rafe with his eyelids.

“I mean, I didn’t-” Rafe began.

“Boy, while you’ve been sitting there talking with Koel, I’ve had three guards and a lawyer come in to identify you. You’re from Drafftane, yes? The shitty murderer. And here you are, just coincidentally here when a king *wasn’t* assassinated.”

“... Guess so, sir.”

“... that judge might be right. You might just be the worst murderer in the city.”

Rafe laughed at that.

“You got a weapon on you, boy?”

Rafe shrugged. “Are you asking if I came here to kill Wardell Cherish?”

“... You know his surname?”

“I know what we called him back in Bottle Street.”

“Ah *hah*. There’s a loose end on the run now, young man. I don’t know the kind of man you are, but I can tell the kind of man *he* was. An artful little shit who spent years crawling across the board – and who I have no doubt will try crawling across again. So if you plan on following him and doing with a knife what Koel did with a pen, you’ll not find any of my guards stopping you.”

What would Aderyn do, Rafe mused to himself. “I ain’t just gunna kill the guy. M’ a *professional*.” The word tried to strangle him as he said it.

“Alright, then. What’ll it cost?” Lord Gorange asked.

“Got a penny?”

“I am not a man prone to carrying small change.” He sunk back in the chair, bringing the cane to his chin. Narrowed eyes, that surly overtone in his expression: *Don’t trifle with me boy*.

“Shame,” Rafe said, turning, his hands in his pockets. With a sway in his step, Rafe walked out of the room, his back to one of the most important living people in Timoritia.

*

“It’s simply a matter of names,” Aderyn said. “Everyone in this city seems to think that the Lleywan name Bachthane means ‘Black Thane.’”

“It doesn’t?” Calpurnia leant back. “I’ve never bothered to learn the language. It’s more useful to know Cornish or Iber when you’re riding the northern borders.” She paused for a moment. “Well, that, or one of the Norsk languages, but they’re *hard*.”

“Ahem.” Aderyn adjusted her sleeves and resettled in her own seat at having been interrupted.

“Oh, right, of course. You were saying, about the name. Uh, and how it doesn’t mean Black Thane, right?”

“No, that’s not what that means,” Aderyn said, feeling an odd thrill at that.

“... And it *does* mean...?” Calpurnia gestured for her to continue.

Another odd little thrill. “Bachthane is a family whose name comes from *fealty* to the Black Thane. Bach Thane means *Servant of the Thane*. In Lleywan names, there’s not a lot of reason to change, and they are quite literal – so it’s almost guaranteed that General Yull’s family was knighted *by* the Black Thane.”

Kivis was outside, dumping bodies in a trench. Soldiers stood about the room, pointedly *not* commenting on, or being involved in their general’s doings and dealings. Riots still raged on in the city, far from the safehouse, and rain sheeted down outside, fit to drown all the blood and the

bruises. It was a loud, chaotic, and unpleasant day, but it was all working *normally*. This business – with Lleywan nobility and names and kings – it all spoke to Aderyn of a *plan*. For months, Aderyn had been seeing signs of people trying to very, very slowly tie up part of her city, and she had found, finally, one of the knots. Untying it would be hard.

That's why she'd come to someone who carried a sword.

After a long, groaning moment, Calpurnia leant forward in her chair, elbows on knees, hands clasped together in a way that made her gauntlets crack loudly. She rubbed her forehead and spoke slowly. "Are you telling me that someone tried to convince a kingdom on the basis of an *assumption* about a *name*?"

"Yes."

"And this was enough to *kill* my husband...? To... we..." fists clenched in metal guards. "They killed him to dupe *an empire*?"

"Not really," Aderyn said. "They don't need to convince an empire. They just need to convince a handful of people, who are willing to say with confidence what they know to be true."

"... Provided those people are important enough."

Aderyn nodded. "Nobility are very easy to manipulate when they are assured that someone above them and someone below them are doing what they are meant to do." Aderyn held her breath again. It was important to make this look like she was *surprised* by the revelation, and hadn't come here knowing it. "The person you want to find, at the root of all of this, is someone in a position to do things that nobles *want* done, but don't want to *look at*. You want their assassin, or their personal guard, or, perhaps, the person who makes their tea."

*

Heading down to the streets would put him in the path of the riot. The Wardell Rafe knew would have kicked and punched and bullied – and really, paid other bigger kids to punch and kick and bully for him – through that crowd, but the Wardell Rafe knew wouldn't have *run away* from a legal technicality.

Nah, Wardell fancied himself an alpha dog. He stood over people, he put himself up on the soap box. So...

The rain pounded against the rooftop of Westminster palace, while Rafe slowly sauntered to the figure standing at the edge. Glowing lights from the crowd below, burning stalls and hollering people, with the figure of a man standing on the edge.

Rafe walked through the sheeting water, his hair slicked down to his head. Hands tucked behind his back. When his wet footprints drew close enough, Wardell turned... and sneered at him.

"*You*." Wardell spat. "I don't remember hiring *you*. One of your arsehole friends bring you in when you got out of jail?"

"Friends?" Rafe asked, walking to stand next to him, looking down at the riot. "... Wazza, you thought I had *friends*?"

"They liked you more than they liked me." He shrugged. "Even though you yelled like a girl."

Rafe shook his head. “Holy shit, Cherish, are you seriously mad about that shit? It was... what, twelve years ago?”

Wardell turned and glared at him. “You were a little *kid*, Rafe. You were happy to run around in the gutters and sell shit for pennies. I had some *ambition*. I wanted to *be* someone.” A hand shoved against Rafe’s chest, and suddenly, Rafe was nine again, staggering back, paralysed by the moment. “So I worked and I saved and I hired help to protect myself and what did you little *shits* think of me *then*? I joined the *military*. I’ve worked for *lords*.” He drew himself up, spreading his arms wide. “Look at me, Rafe! Look at where I am! This is *Westminster Palace*! You’re only *here* because I came here *first*!”

“... Standin’ on the edge of a slippery rooftop?” Rafe asked, rubbing his thumb against his breastbone.

“You little *ponce*.” Wardell growled. “Why’re you up here? Come to have a look around before you have to go back down *there*, into the *gutters* again? I’m still a war hero. I’m still *connected*. I can still find another four useless fucking nobles and do this *all over again* if I have to.” Shouting over the rain, he leant forwards, forehead pressed against Rafe’s. “So *take a look*, Rafe. Look at what ‘Wazza Cherish’ has *fucking done with himself*.”

Some sensations people didn’t really expect. Wardell clearly *felt* the snap of fabric around his throat, of a leather knot being yanked hard enough to tear open and fall free in the wet air. His eyes went wide, like he’d expected blood, a blow, as if they were both back to being kids in the gutter... and Rafe held up his closed fist. The coin’s trailing leather straps hung over his fist. “This is *mine*.” Rafe spat in his face, shoving with his weight. The only thing that surprised Wardell more was how surprised *Rafe* was.

“... Fine. It’s worthless now anyway, what with that stupid stunt downstairs.” Wardell turned, storming away. “Have your stupid fucking token.” He made it ten steps away, before he called over at Rafe. “You’re still *worthless*, you fa-”

Bong.

Bong.

Bong.

Bong.

Bong.

Bong.

Wardell’s words died in Benjamin’s bell, and both men turned to look at the tower.

“... What... the...” Wardell gripped at his chest, then looked down at the riot, looking for something, looking for some signal. “*Shit!*” Rafe watched him rush past, towards the stairs, haring down and away, off to the street.

The coin in his fist felt cold and clammy in the rain. He slipped it into the pocket of his robe.

Twelve years stolen, Rafe had given up on the coin as lost for good, pawned by some Bottle Street nobody or maybe swapped for some booze by that spiteful old nun who ran the orphanage. A

meaningless token to him, but something that had been *his* as long as he'd known he existed, the one thing he'd arrived in the orphanage *with*.

Chapter 25

The safehouse wasn't *clean* per se, and it probably wouldn't be until some royal functionary, with their proper permissions and appropriate bottles of royally-appointed bleach turned up to get the blood off the walls. There was a royally appointed cleaning product for such things – Aderyn had used some, for a school project, once. It wasn't particularly effective – and certainly not when compared to setting evidence on fire. Still, the bodies were outside, in a pile, by the wall, and the guard had been notified about the ruckus. Soon, a cart would come, and the soldiers Calpurnia assigned the task would load the bodies onto the cart, which would inevitably take them away to be sorted out and dealt with as some other person's problem, eventually reaching a morgue probably no worse the wear if not for the *death* problem. This was, after all, a good neighbourhood – dead people would probably not lose their teeth or boots on the way to a slab. Probably. Unless they were *very* nice boots. And maybe then, a Gorange would find Asca's body and he could be interred appropriately in his family grave.

Nice and tidy!

"Any idea why Asca Gorange was even *here*, though?" Calpurnia asked.

Rather than standing inside, amidst the blood and unpleasantness, they'd taken to the garden out the front of the safehouse. It was flat and smooth, with a well-kept lawn that flattened distressingly under Calpurnia and Kivis' large metal boots. It had a stone bench, which Calpurnia sat on, which was under an awning, as were Kivis and Queeny.

"Don't rightly know," Kivis shrugged. "But he was scared enough to hire thirty heavies with guns." Another, equally apathetic shrug. "Shitty nobles doing shitty things."

"You know I'm a thane of Hadrian and married to a thane of Lleywa, young lady."

Kivis shrugged. "Good to know when Tiber runs out of nobles I'll still be able to import them."

Calpurnia's hand whipped up, and she *probably* would have said something like *listen, you-*, if Aderyn hadn't interrupted. "Actually, Queeny can probably field that one."

"I *can*?" the pink-haired girl asked, pointing at herself. "I'm not in this, y'ken all just bein'-"

"Queeny, don't talk like that. Nobody's impressed." Aderyn cleared her throat. "Just tell them what you told me about Asca Gorange."

Queeny kicked at the grass and gave a lopsided pout. "This is *real* unprofessional."

"Queeny," Aderyn said, drawing in a long breath, which would convey irritation, if done right. "Can you name the three stages of a professional assassination? It was in the final exam, after all."

She slumped. "Well, like..." Grit teeth, fold arms. "Well, *fine*. Like, I was hired to take out Asca Gorange."

"By?" Calpurnia asked, leaning forward.

"Surely *that's* unprofessional." Queeny muttered defensively.

"Young *lady-*"

"Lady Quynn Wyndsyrr, *thanks*," Queeny shot back with a snort. "Christ, you people. Some bloke – semi-anonymous. Payment through a guild fiddy,"

"A fiduciary," Aderyn offered. "Independent clients who move money between the guild and the clients to preserve anonymity."

"Yeh. Anyway, contract for four names, I took Asca because he didn't move around much. Come out this morning and he's belting from the palace out here and holing up like he's got the devil behind him so I figured he heard about the contract."

Kivis tapped her boathook on the stone bench. "Excuse me, but you said Asca would be easy. Who were the other contracts?"

Queeny reached into her back pocket, fishing for a moment, pulling out a wadded pink piece of paper. "Hang on a moment," she said, unfolding it and holding it spread.

"Aderyn," Kivis said.

"Yeah, here we are. Asca Gorange, Tenner Chilver, Ulster Dulf and Ligier Rangst." Queeny read off the paper. "Bit of info about where to find 'em, and their prices."

"Aderyn," Kivis said again, reaching over the bench to nudge her arm.

"Ligier had the highest bid on him and all but I don't think anyone took it. Hell, I don't think anyone took *any* of these except me." Queeny shrugged. "Weird though, I mean, maybe the class was just a bit- what?"

"Aderyn, the *paper*," Kivis repeated.

Aderyn tilted her head and looked down at the piece of paper Queeny was holding. "It's the same type of paper Rafe was looking at this morning?"

"Looks it to me," Kivis said. "Think that's common?"

At the gate, some commotion rattled, and a voice called over the rain. "General! There's word to want you at the Palace of Westminster!"

Calpurnia gripped her sword reflexively as she stood up. "I bet there is. Alright, let me go sort this out."

"Mind if we come with you?" Kivis asked, adjusting her belt and gesturing with her thumb over her shoulder, like the palace was only a block away.

"Aren't you Kivis Athene?" Queeny asked.

"... So what?"

"Wouldn't letting *you* into a royal palace where there are nobles to duel be some kinda war crime?"

Aderyn wished momentarily she was good with words. Kivis smiled, but she did it in a way that did not fit well in just those two words.

"You, girl, the Lleywan. You can come with me to the palace. You? No. And you, get that pink out of your hair. You look ridiculous." Calpurnia grunted dispassionately as she stomped towards the gate.

Kivis looked across at Queeny's note, down at the paper still in her hands. "Think we'll get this back to the church and check."

"I doubt you'll need to," Aderyn began – as the Benjamin *bellowed* out over the sky. Six powerful, echoing notes, hard and loud enough to break the sky.

“... Nice.” Kivis grunted. Clapping her hand onto Queeny’s shoulder, she gestured with her head. “Come on, you. We’re going to church.”

“Do I have to?” Queeny asked, her voice sliding into a familiar whine.

Aderyn trotted over the side of the woman who Would Be King. Killing her would have been quite unfortunate – there were not many people who could command a unit like the Hammerjaw Legion, not to mention losing *two* generals in the same day would be *dreadful* form. It was a relief that she had been reasonable.

The cobblestones crunched beneath Calpurnia’s feet. Aderyn fell into step beside her, pulling up the hood on her coat, tucking her hands into her pockets. Knife handles rested under her grip, and the city started to flow past them.

“Why’d you even come here, girl?” Calpurnia finally asked. Again, that wonderful *directness*. “You weren’t here for the Gorange boy.”

Crunch, crunch, crunch. If she answered quickly, it would seem too planned. Kivis and Rafe made people wait for answers. “Because you have an army at the gates of Timoritia. Even if you did not win the city, you would still hurt it trying. If you were unreasonable, it would probably have been wiser to assassinate you.”

A nod. No fear. “... And why’d you bring Kivis?”

“Because she has a strong sense of justice, but she also has money.”

“... What’s *money* got to do with anything?”

“If I had needed to assassinate you, I would have needed a client, and it would be reasonable for me to offer Kivis an incentivised rate.”

The general shouldered under her cloak, laughing low. “Well, you’ve met me, now. Think you could have taken me?”

“No, General.” Aderyn lied.

*

Rafe reached the bottom of the Westminster palace steps. Guards didn’t stop him – nobody was really looking for him or at him at all. Strange feeling, to be in one of the poshest parts of the city, and feel like nobody was about to throw him out. It wasn’t like there was a chance anyone had told anyone else about him. Wardell hadn’t known he was coming. They’d sent out Zuddy, runners had flit from the palace to lady Calpurnia, there were clerks packing up books and desks, and there was even a carriage with the Gorange family crest on it, smug and proud, sitting in one of the carriageways well in from the gate. For a palace to no king, for a place that was, most of the year, completely silent, there was such a bustle of activity that...

Rafe clapped his fist into his hand. Of course.

There was nothing strange about him *being* there. The strangeness had been *entering*. If you were inside the palace walls, you clearly belonged, no matter how strange that looked, no matter how grubby or dirty or girly you were. There was enough strangeness going around with the would-be king and the academic and the... well, the murder of a general, that Rafe didn’t even stand out.

Maybe this was what it was like being posh. You only had to get over the wall, then whatever it was you did was eccentric, not filthy criminal behaviour.

The willowy boy stopped by a row of eerily uniform trees, and looked at his spoils. A book of Lleywan stuff, and a coin. Somehow, he imagined, they'd be important, to someone else. Still...

It was like a strange opportunity. If he *left* he'd probably never see this side of the fence again. All wrought iron and white brick, a barrier that was maybe as thick as his forearm at its widest point... but never, seemingly, worth the crossing. Just today, with it pounding rain and its strange, sad spatters of blood.

Rafe turned around, looking up at the palace, and started to slowly circle the building. Maybe a little loop around it, to remember how it looked, up close. After all, with one exception, there probably wasn't a Bottle Street lad who could ever say they were so close to the place.

And *he* was an arsehole, so hell with him.

*

Gates rolled open, as they would, before the General and the Assassin. Soldiers fell in file behind them, and the crunch of cobblestones turned to a finer sound, higher, with boots and shoes meeting ornamental stone, scoria chosen to be finer. Scoria like that was a nice easy red flag for leaving behind a false trail – people spotting it at a scene would assume that you'd travelled through the palace, rather than stolen a little handful of dirt months earlier.

"You spend much time at the Palace, young lady?" Calpurnia asked, looking up at the looming building. Crunch, crunch, crunch

"Not much time, no," Aderyn confided, her hands tucked behind her back. "It isn't really a place worth visiting."

Calpurnia sighed as she went. "... Not really, no." Then she did something strange with her voice. Aderyn would have to ask Rafe about it later. "I thought I'd come here to meet Yull... gather our forces. My army, his law... I haven't even met them. Then I thought I'd take the crown, put down the riot, and find whoever had killed my husband, execute them and ... and take Yull home to his parents. *Now*... Now I'm afraid I'm about to walk into a room and watch his half-brother try some legal bullshit that ends with my sword through his head."

"You think so...?" Aderyn asked, looking up at balcony where the King would be announced. At the darkness behind the doors. "If you'd like I..."

"Hey, Aderyn." Rafe said.

Rafe did not, typically, look like that. Well, he still looked like Rafe, but he very much looked Rafe-like, cocky and angry and with that peculiar narrowness that never seemed happy with itself. Right now, though, with the rain sheeting down around them, he looked something like a puppy that had fallen in a puddle. Bruises on his cheeks and hands, and looking around and past in a way he didn't normally. He had just walked around a corner, emerging from the elaborate gardenwork that stayed close to the sides of the palace.

"... Who's this drowned streak?" Calpurnia grunted, hand on her hip, stopping short on the pathway. Aderyn could see him about to spit something in response, then... sagged.

“Hello, miss. M’name’s Rafe. Friend of Aderyn’s.”

“Really.”

“No, he really is,” Aderyn said, putting on as bright a smile as she could. “Rafe, what are you doing outside? Is everything okay? Did you – you didn’t kill anyone you weren’t paid to, did you?”

“What?” Rafe blinked and leant back, and *that* was all back to normal. “You are *weird*, you know? I didn’t kill *anyone*.”

“Oh. Um, well, I’m sure you tried your b–”

“Oh, *shut up*.” He groused. Rafe rubbed his forehead with his temple. This was good! This was more familiar than the strange way he’d looked before. If he could change to this mode easily, whatever it was probably wasn’t very lasting. “I’m just...” he waved with one hand. “You’re...?”

“General Bachthane, young man.”

“The living one, right?”

“What’s *that* meant to mean?!” Calpurnia flared.

And then, Rafe told them. He told them about the room with the four robes, about the tea trays and the kitchen. He told them about places you could unseal a wax seal over a stove and reseal it, unobserved. He told them about a conspiracy that clearly was designed to thrill and appeal to foolish people who felt unimportant, despite their privilege. He told them under the balcony that would announce a king, about the Bottle Street boys who were running around, obeying an old veteran. He told them about the veteran, about ‘Wazza,’ about a book that gave authority and a coin that gave *more* authority, and of watching a technicality in a tale throw both Bachthanes out of the running for the throne.

The rain slowed, and Aderyn watched Calpurnia’s shoulders sag. A woman as strong as that was made for wars and bloodshed. The morning’s tide, she’d been ready to invade the wealthiest city in the world to protect her husband, then to avenge her husband, and now, she seemed so very sad.

Aderyn looked up at the building, turning away from Rafe and Calpurnia for a moment. It was so *strange* to have done things this way. Asca Gorange wasn’t particularly good at anything in the time she’d seen him. What had he leant to a conspiracy?

When she turned back, Aderyn had to take a long moment to double check what she was seeing.

Calpurnia and Rafe were embracing, but very awkwardly. He had his arms around her chest, and she had one arm around his shoulder. It highlighted the height difference between them – Rafe’s face against her shoulder, even while she was leaning forwards. One of her gauntleted hands was up against her face, and just for a moment, her shoulders shuddered. Really, if Rafe could arrange more people to be in positions like *that*, assassinations could be amazingly easy. Still, he had his head down and his hands were empty, pressed flat on her back.

How odd.

It was barely a moment, and she put her hand atop Rafe’s head, pushing him back, and he unfolded easily, looking off to the side, not directly at her. “Yes, well,” Calpurnia said, and her voice did that thing again. “It has been *quite* a day.” She drew herself up, sharp intake of breath, and did a fairly good loom over both of them. “You, young man – you know a lot of what’s going on around here.

I'm due to talk to Lord Gorange about this puddle of shite, but while I'm doing that, I want you two to do me a favour and find me something."

"I know where you can get some peppermits." Rafe muttered.

"No. No, boy – *Where's Yull's body?*"

*

The hoofbeats weren't stopping, not for Marko Fiver.

The riot had been *cleansing*, to be honest. To be surrounded by bodies, the press of violence, to hear people shouting and yelling over the rain, to hear anger and spite and rage, even if he couldn't find the places where words began and ended, it was a *relief*. It was a relief to be fighting an *actual battle*.

He'd lost the knife somewhere. Probably in Yull, in the general, in his f- in the man he respected. No sword by his side when he'd fled the palace, no weapon, which it seemed, had been for the best. Nobody had died in his chaotic whorl throughout the city's lowest places in his lowest moments. The feeling of rain on his cheeks had cut lines of emphasis for the tears that followed, and nobody seemed to want to fight him when they looked him in the eyes.

In the press of violence, with the swinging fists and the bloody knuckles, Marko Fiver staggered from the palace, past churches and stores. Up Long Street, through the Dims. Out the other side of the Dims, with mud and blood on his boots from those who weren't so fortunate as to scrape on past. Over the hollow of the old, collapsed cathedral. Through Parcel Street, and out to the crest of the river, to one of the many other criss-crossing river bridges.

The booming of the Benjamin had slowed the riot; had worn out enthusiasm. People heard the clock, looked to the sunless sky, and slowly pulled away. Those who were in fights finished them. Those who were on the edges slid away more readily, and the mass of hands and fists and feet slowly unravelled, spilling down in on itself and turning to nothing, like sugar in the rain.

Marko stood on the edge of the bridge, his hand on the railing.

It had been a very bad day.

But better to fight the streets here, than meet the war still pounding in his memory. Over and over again. Hoofbeats. Cannons. The smell of hot horses and bloody sand. The ache of the sun in his mind, laying prone on a field. The weight of a medal pinned to his chest.

Marko clenched the rail, bent forwards, and threw up.

The river was so far away... so dark and inky. Without the sun to make it glisten, it shimmered below him like an abyssal womb. Even watching the ripples outwards from his own spit it seemed oddly hypnotic.

Gripping the rail, in that instant, there was nothing Marko wanted more in the world than to launch himself forwards and make the sound, the sound, the drumming in his head, of the rain, *stop*.

"Fiver! Sergeant!" The voice sounded like it was coming from underwater. Fists white-knuckled, Marko looked down, as if peering in the depths could show him what he'd heard.

"Fiver! Over here!" Louder, closer. Not from the water. From... from up.

Marko lifted his head, swallowing the foulness remaining in his throat, and looked about. Squinting at the crowd, looking for anything that didn't make his head ache, his teeth twitch. That *feeling*. That *sound*. It was never this bad before. It was a bad thing, when it rained, but it was *so much worse* today.

He'd done something *terrible* and he couldn't put his finger on *why* any more.

Wardell pushed out of the crowd moving across the bridge, calling once more. "Fiver! Fiver, are you – is that you?" he stopped short, trotting slower as he drew close to the hunched form of the old soldier. The war hero. The broken man.

"Good god, Fiver, are you alright?"

Slowly, Marko drew himself up, resting elbows on the rail. "I'm... I'm really not alright," he said, swallowing slowly. "Wardell... Wardell, what did we *do* today... I'm... did we *kill Yull*?"

"... Sarge, where... where did you get *that* idea?" Wardell asked, reaching out, stepping close. One hand on Wardell's shoulder, one hand holding his chest. "... I mean, I don't know... what did you... what did you *think* happened today?" And it was *so reassuring*. It was the voice of days past. It was the voice that brought the tea and it was *warm* and-

Marko felt his feet leave the earth and a fresh, fertile panic burst through his arms, as Wardell shoved him, shoulders first, over the railing. And the hand that still held the rail squeezed tight as Marko found his desire to die clashing against his own body's desire to *not*, and it was all a rush of air and breath.

Wardell was bent forwards over the edge of the bridge, one hand pressed flat against his face, pushing downwards, his eyes *rageful*, his hand *shaking* with frustration. The good arm, the one that didn't twinge in the cold. The one that he hadn't injured in the war, with the *sand and the blood and the-*

Hanging by the bridge in one hand, Marko considered just how easily he could just let go...

"Oi! What the devil's goin' on, mate!?"

The voice didn't come from miles away. That voice came from *right overhead*, and Wardell's arm twitched as someone easily half his weight again grabbed his shoulder. All Marko could see, dangling from the bridge, was a blue cap and a huge hand – which *lamped* into the back of Wardell's head hard enough that he swept forward, face-first into the metal railing. A *clang* like a bell *rang* through Marko's fingers and he screamed, feeling his grip slip. A fall, a moment –

and that massive hand swung down to catch his forearm.

"You meddling *arsehole*–" hollered Wardell, even as the bigger man elbowed against his face. Not enough distance to really make a hit, but enough to shove him a little. Hauling bodily, the man – some farmer, maybe? – Leant over the edge of the bridge, bracing himself with his other hand, and *pulled*, while Marko scabbled to put his other hand on the rail.

Then Marko saw the knife.

The knife just like the knife Marko had given him last night.

The knife that he'd seen sink into Yull's heart. It had been his heart, right? Right? He hadn't... messed up and... he hadn't...

Wardell lunged, knife in his hand, at the farmer. The farmer didn't even see it – he just got off Marko's arm for a moment and swept his arm out behind himself, in a mighty parabolic arc, swatting at the smaller man.

The weaker arm bent. The knife turned.

Wardell may have had a last word, but his own knife sank into his throat, and he tumbled back onto the bridge while the bigger man wasn't even *looking*. Hand clamped around Marko's, he *lifted* again, brought his other hand down, and with the strength of a ploughman, hauled Marko Fiver up over the rail. When Marko had his feet again, the farmer looked down – and gave a sudden blanch.

"Bloody hell, pardon my Gallian."

Marko slid down to his knees, looking down at the broken form of Wardell, collapsed and crumpled on the roadside. They were good quality knives, Marko could appreciate that. And somewhere in the flailing and the screaming, the rain had stopped.

Looking up at the man, wet black hair in his eyes, Marko gave an apologetic grunt. "Sorry, sir... hn... my name's Marko Fiver... I... Thank you."

"Come on lad. You look like you've been through the wars. Let's get you something warm. We'll let the Barneys handle this rough piece of work." The farmer kicked Wardell's still foot. "Just call me Mister Bauer."

*

When you dropped something off a height, it fell. Whether it was a vase, a book, or a priest. It tumbled down in the eddies of the air and struck the ground. Chunks flew this way and that. With the general inside, Rafe and Aderyn compared what they both saw, what they both knew. Aderyn showed him the diagrams of the four nobles in the conspiracy. Rafe told Aderyn of the man whose death was occasioned by falling priest.

Rafe's brief annoyance spiked again when Aderyn asked a servant to lead them to the body of the general. After all, asking servants to do things, typical noble. Then the servant indicated they didn't know where the body was, and Rafe's annoyance spiked in a different direction. God damnit, he was a big bloke, wasn't he, how hard could it be to find him? And *then* Aderyn asked where the general had fallen, and *that*, the servant could help with.

Some room. A bloodstain on the carpet. Some stuff that people could nick on the walls. A bust big enough to break someone if you hit them with it. Chairs, pushed out to the edge of the room. A spatter on the carpet that led to another spatter on the carpet, newer but still dry. Another.

Following the lines on the carpet, little dribbles of blood, wasn't very hard. Noticing the point where they stopped, and the little greasy handprint on a doorhandle also wasn't very hard. Finding the little scabble of footprints through the dirt of an external garden wasn't hard. None of it was hard, none of it was *difficult*. It was a line that a blind dog could follow, that led across a hallway, down some stairs, out to a garden path, down another set of stairs, and down further still. Always down, always sloppy steps, always as if someone was struggling with an immense weight.

Aderyn took off her hood as they stepped under the stone awning outside, stepping past lit torches onto the smooth, clean flagstones of a place that probably stored some ancient historical *whatever*.

Rafe shuffled after her, grunting as he went, checking each step with a foot, making sure he wasn't going to slip.

"Rafe, I've seen you run on a wall in the rain. How are you so *meek* here?"

"It's been a long day, alright?"

The words echoed and bounced off stone and mingled with the crackling of torches that had to have been lit recently enough. The roar of the rain had dulled, slowly wending into silence. The whispering of the river it made in the gutters murmured low and steady to the stone. It whirred above, the sound slowly rising higher, higher still, as Aderyn led Rafe down the stairs.

A short pathway. A line of lights. An empty crypt. And there, lying on a slab, was the enormous frame of a man, prone on a stone slab. Rafe'd never seen a man so big, so still. But no sooner did Aderyn enter the room, then another sound echoed off the stone: The click of a revolver being cocked.

"Stop right there." Came a woman's voice from the dark at the end of the crypt.

"Why is *nobody* ever happy to see us?" Rafe grumbled.

"We're Assassins, Rafe." Aderyn responded, tone prim and polite. "Hello! We're here to ah, retrieve the corpse of the general, if you'd be so kind as to lower the gun?"

"Two of you?" called the voice back. "Well, I've got one bullet loaded. Stay where you are and you won't have to decide gets hit."

"Oh, definitely Rafe," Aderyn said, clearing her throat. "I'm afraid we don't have any, ah, 'beef' with you, madam!"

The gloom of the tomb was a close one. Rafe could see the end of the barrel of the gun, hanging in the air, steady as a rock. He looked at Aderyn, who was staring at it like she could intimidate the *gun* by not blinking. In his head, he could see this countdown getting very messy, very fast. He needed-

"Hey, is he still breathing?" Rafe asked, blinking in the dark.

"Long as I'm here. So why don't you two piss off back to Wardell and tell him you didn't find anything and you don't have to learn how many times I miss on purpose."

Aderyn cleared her throat. "Ah! I see, a misunderstanding!" she raised her hands, shaking them in the air like she was trying to be... charming? "We're not assassins sent to *kill* anyone-"

"Yes, we're the nice kind of assassins." Rafe grumbled. "Hey, you got a name over there?"

"... You don't even know who I *am*, do you?"

"Well, at a guess I would hazard that you are Lady Ulster Dulf, actually." Aderyn offered. "And that this man here is Yull Bachthane who isn't... apparently... dead?"

Rafe laughed short. "Wardell really is having an awful day."

The barrel wavered. It raised, ever so slightly, and the voice in the dark took on a tired edge. "... He's not the only one. You're not here to finish the job, then?"

"No, not at all," Aderyn said, bright and cheerful. "We've been asked to find the General by his wife, Lady Calpurnia Bachthane, who-"

"The Hammerjaw Legion commander?" The gun barrel pointed at the pair again. "Good fucking Christ, I'm *dead*."

"Uh..." Rafe cleared his throat. "You mind if I... uh... look at the general?"

"... Sure. I did what I could." A low laugh. "Just give me some time to escape, alright...?"

"Don't think you'll *need* time to escape if the general's *alive*..." Rafe said, grumbling as he wiggled past Aderyn and walked by the slab. The huge man lay still, but with a slow, rhythmic motion to his chest. Rafe leant close, looking at the unconscious form closely, slowly, gingerly pulling at his clothes.

"... Who the hell did this?"

"What do you mean? It was all of us..." Ulster said, from her seat in the darkness. "I mean, we all killed him."

"With what, one knife? He's only got one cut on this side of him..."

"Um. Um, Wardell stabbed him in the back, and... Well, I did trip up Ligier..."

Aderyn took the barrel of the gun out of the air, pulling on it sharply; the rifle swept wide, the hilt arcing over the general's chest, and released the gun at the zenith of its arc – throwing the whole rifle out of the chamber. Her other hand grabbed a torch from the wall, and she spun back around, stepping into the dark, with a simple: "Do tell."

Ulster Dulf looked like Rafe felt. Her eyes were weary like she'd been... well, sitting in a crypt for hours waiting for the knives to come. And now she had Aderyn to deal with, and Rafe as well. There really was no justice in a world like this.

She stood, leaning back, with Aderyn's hand on her shoulder. Nobody had a weapon, but the pose was clear. If the DuThane girl wanted to kill her, she could have... and Aderyn had no idea how to *not* be threatening, when people were already seeing past her mask.

"... Lookin' at him," Rafe murmured, "... Probably going to be fine. I mean... bloke's got what feels like some broken ribs... probably fainted in shock. Lost a *bit* of blood too, but..." Rafe trailed off, his hands testing the exposed parts of the General's skin. "... Seems to me, Lady Dulf, you get to give General Calpurnia some really good news."

The laugh seemed all the more hollow in the little crypt. "I do, do I? I was part of the conspiracy that killed him. We all had to do it, you know. It had to be all of us, or it'd just be murder."

"What I can see," Rafe grunted. "... It wasn't even *that*."

Ulster swallowed and leant back further out of Aderyn's grip, pushing herself to the corner of the room. "So that's that, is it...? Sort of pathetic, really. All of us... all four of us were just in that silly little club because we had to be somewhere. Because our families told us we should be contributing *something*. Ligier was too vicious. Tenner was incompetent at what his brothers were good at. Asca was lazy. Do you know why my parents sent me there? Do you know what my crime was?" she laughed again and it sounded like a sob. "I didn't want to marry a man. Any man. I thought I'd come to a useful compromise, honestly. I meet the boys, I find a reason they can't marry me. Usually a bullet wound."

Aderyn stepped back, sharp as a knife, and stepped over to the doorway. "I think that moving the general is best left to a medic from the Hammerjaws."

"And... hey, Lady Ulster?" Rafe offered a little smile. "You don't seem to be one of the bad guys t'day."

"This morning, I was." She sighed, rubbing her forehead. "... Come on, then. Let's bring the Qisar back from the dead."

*

Lord Gorange didn't like days like this.

It had been, for a start, busy. His was a role that had worked best when it emphasised minimal effort. The intricate work of nobility was a vast and careful clockwork that worked best when it was well-kept, and he much preferred oiling its works to replacing whole parts.

Still, there had been high points. Nothing of *his* was smashed in particular, out in the streets. The whole guild's worth of lawyers that populated his family had watched him emerge from the depths of his business and tear Wardell apart, which did the reputation some good. And he'd met with Calpurnia, a fairly important general who basically never came to the city, and now, could attribute him with *not* being someone she wanted to invade. That was something of a win, too.

Still.

The last desks were packed up. The palace was going to be unoccupied shortly. He rotated in his chair to look over his shoulder, up at the throne. The academic, blue turban and white smile, was standing next to it, pointing down at his cane. He'd been fidgeting around and not leaving because every time someone needed a hand with something, he'd offered his.

"Do you need this, sir?"

"Oh, yes, Koel. Good man that." He raised a hand and gestured for it.

Trotting down the stairs, cane in hand, Koel gave the tip a visible check, seeing if that little tarnished patch was something that could be wiped away. "Thank you very much for the opportunity today, sir. I never would have seen Westminster Palace if not for today, I don't expect."

"Probably would have, lad. You're a researcher, someone would have let you in eventually." Lord Gorange pushed himself to standing and took the cane, leaning on it. "What *do* you think of all this business today, hm? A king out of nowhere, all these riots and mess and the clock running fast, hm?"

"Well..." Koel looked thoughtful for a moment. "It's a bit like the city itself, really."

"... Elaborate, boy, do come on now."

"Well, it was a lot of movement, from a few small sources. Little wheels turning bigger wheels, you know? We take the concentrated and combined efforts of many people and focus it through devices designed to minimise differences, to take care of the automatic components of any process – it's industrialisation. They say ours is the first great industrial city, with the first industrialised manufacturing and that we waged the first industrialised war. It all starts somewhere, though, doesn't it? Us and ours, and someone with a dark little want, who can connect to that interconnected industrialised system."

"Rotten to the core, huh?"

"Hm?" Koel blinked in complete surprise. A rumination on the concept of the immortal engines of the city itself, boiled down to five words – and wrong. If he'd been ever inclined to demonstrate irritation, that would have made a perfect opportunity for it. "Gosh, no."

Epilogue

When the great wheels of The Benjamin were set right again, few people talked about it. There was just that one strange day, where three hours vanished in one, and one hour stretched out to make up the difference. To most of the people of Timoritia, that's all they'd remember, of the day that they almost had a king. Some would remember their parts in the riots, which were over taxes, or over the nobles abusing people, or over the farming collective in Parcel Street, or some such business. They'd remember throwing punches and laughing with the people they hit, two months later. They'd remember breaking business windows in the Dims, but it was all in sport.

For the *most* part, Timoritia did exactly what The Benjamin itself did: It took its little deviation from *the norm*, and went back to its cycles. Gentle, steady, repetitive cycles, working into the future a minute at a time, without some great and dreadful lurch into the past.

Yull Bachthane, the dread general of the southern expanse, had to take two months to recover, coupled with the six months he'd been away from the front. Eight months without a push, and the expansion in the Holy Land had had to flag, to stop, to pull back. The city that was known as Bartholomew was renamed – again – to Medina Al-Bab. The people there that had lived there before it was Bartholomew went about their days; the people who lived there when it had become Bartholomew complained about the bloody immigrants, but quietly, because they knew in their hearts they were being pretty silly.

The General himself had been given two months, and thanks to the company of his wife, he actually took it. Two months, however, was enough time for people who had been fighting all their lives to realise how little fighting they needed to do any more. The Hammerjaw legion returned to Hadrian, to patrol and protect against invaders, but Calpurnia didn't go with it. The Eastern front, across desert sands, drew back, ever so subtly, and the great machine of Timoritian conquest was slowed. When General Calpurnia left for Hadrian, it was with her husband, to try and find some job he could do where nobody would stab him.

For a while, at least.

Four soldiers, which is to say, three soldiers and a mercenary, which is to say, two soldiers and a messenger and a mercenary, which is to say one and a half soldiers and a mercenary and a messenger climbed The Benjamin and came down with their pockets full of stolen hours and a hell of a story. The story, unfortunately, did not do much to pay the fine they incurred for their crime. The fine was, to say the least, steeper than a soldier's salary would pay, but Gael had a plan to deal with that. A mercenary company of four left the city, moving not for the armies, but in their wake – finding the people who should have been guarded by the strength of the Empire, and who weren't. Bandits' spoils were coin as much as anyone else's, after all.

Koel had a happy life, during which he was kind to people, studied inheritance law, and more than once was called upon to consult by courts on very strange edge cases of the law. Yet he still always had that *one* story about how strangely the crown had flown far, far away from a man who was almost king, a woman who was almost king, and a man who was almost dead.

As for Marko Fiver, the hero of Heltskruet, the fields of northern Kernowek were sunnier than the city. He wasn't much of a farmer, not really – but it was work that used his hands and filled his belly, that kept him far from the movements of nobles and further still from the ambitions of unscrupulous men. Script on a shingle by his door was an oath, *Be Wary Of Men Who Seek Kings*, and whenever

Mr Bauer came up from the city to meet with the collective, he checked in with his friend. Sometimes, at the pub, they'd laugh and tell the strange story of the day someone tried to shove Marko off a bridge and was killed in passing.

It was a nicer place to be.

Rain on hills didn't sound like hoofbeats, and a roof of thatch didn't hammer like a roof of shingles did.

Lady Ulster Dulf was caught between spaces. The conspiracy wasn't, officially, a crime. That would have required something extra to it. It was just a research group, a study circle set to find people, that happened to find out about a strange quirk of inheritance, the legitimate line of royalty that ran from the Black Thane, and tried to act on that, albeit in a mistaken way. An error of judgement. A mistake. On the other hand, she had given Lord Gorange a big, unpleasant and boring day to deal with and he was not a man without pettiness. Thanks to the strange black mark on her record, her unreliability and her propensity for shooting people, *and* the fear of Lord Gorange inflicting some eventual revenge marked her as ultimately unmarryable.

But a month after the whole fracas, there was still one last little space to know. Off along the river, towards the edges of the Dims, there stood a church, in which four people sat down to dinner. A priest, a knight, a failed murderer, and an Assassin. Bread rolls and a beefy stew, while outside, the colder days of Timoritia's winter slowly crept against the windowsills, leaving long, white fingerprints.

"What are you planning next year, anyway?" Rafe asked, dipping bread into bowl and letting it sit there, watching the gravy soak up into the whiteness.

"Hm, me?" Kivis asked.

"No, not you. Aderyn. I figured you were going to stay here and keep an eye on the nobility. You know, in case anyone else does something stupid."

"It's not a bad plan. And Brother Fratarelli does always need a spare pair of hands."

The priest gave a laugh. "Well, yes, quite. And uhm, I can't exactly ... I mean, I wasn't *planning* on hiring either of you for many more things. Really, it was ... it was something of a special year."

Aderyn very primly took a spoonful of soup and made it disappear without any slurping sounds, which Rafe was *sure* took some form of magic to do.

"Well, for myself, I was planning on returning to Lleywa just for a little while to return that book of peerage."

"Oh, yes, that?"

"Mm, yes," Aderyn said. "I have not yet had a chance to read it, but it seems as good a reason as any to visit my parents, and it is around Yearturn, too."

Rafe gave a little laugh, glancing over at the priest. "You going to turf me out on the street, then?"

"You could try going with her?" Fratarelli suggested. "I mean, there's a little coin in the coffers and I'll not begrudge you some fun after the year we've had."

Rafe glanced over at Aderyn, raising an eyebrow. "Lleywa nice?"

"It's wet and it's cold." She put on her smile, but it was very easy. "I am quite fond of it."

The rejoinder was interrupted by a knock on the door. Rafe glanced over at Aderyn, who lifted her bowl and sipped from the edge, eyes closed, rather than stand up to get it. The standoff was only a moment longer, before Kivis, sighing and shaking her head, hoisted around the bench, metal shoes creaking on the stone, and opened the door.

Behind the door, with subtle snowflakes drifting down, stood a curvy young woman with hair in two colours, bright pink and blonde. "Um, is Aderyn here?"

"Hey, Aderyn, it's that Queen friend of yours."

The blonde girl slipped from her chair and trotted over to the door, still wearing her best smile.

"Hello, Queeny. What's on your mind?"

"I'm just wondering," Queeny asked, scratching her fingers through her pink hair. "If, um, if someone's parents, lets say, hypothetically, wanted them to lay *real low*, and uh, you only really had *one friend* in the city, and the boarding house rates at the Assassins Guild weren't being paid because of uhm, an *expulsion*... would it... be okay... for her to help out?"

Rafe leant to the side and tried to peer out the door, past the two women in the way.

"They learned you cheated on your exams." Aderyn answered.

"Um, Yeah."

"... Come in, Queeny. I'm sure we can find something for you to do." Aderyn stepped to the side, permitting her entry. "Maybe even study!"

"Ah, szat is..." a voice called from outside, anew, and the footsteps of someone scurrying to catch the door before it closed followed. "Ah, anon?" Xenops called.

Brother Fratarelli looked to Rafe. "... Maybe a larger trip to Lleywa than I'd have expected?"

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In Lleywa's fields, sheep watched another season turn, and knew no better nor worse for it. For the sheep, it had just been another cycle of days and nights, some warmer, some colder. A book, a name, and a coin held a secret that nobody had bothered to unravel, or if they had, they had not told anyone at all.

Because really, it didn't matter all that much.

Certainly not to the sheep.