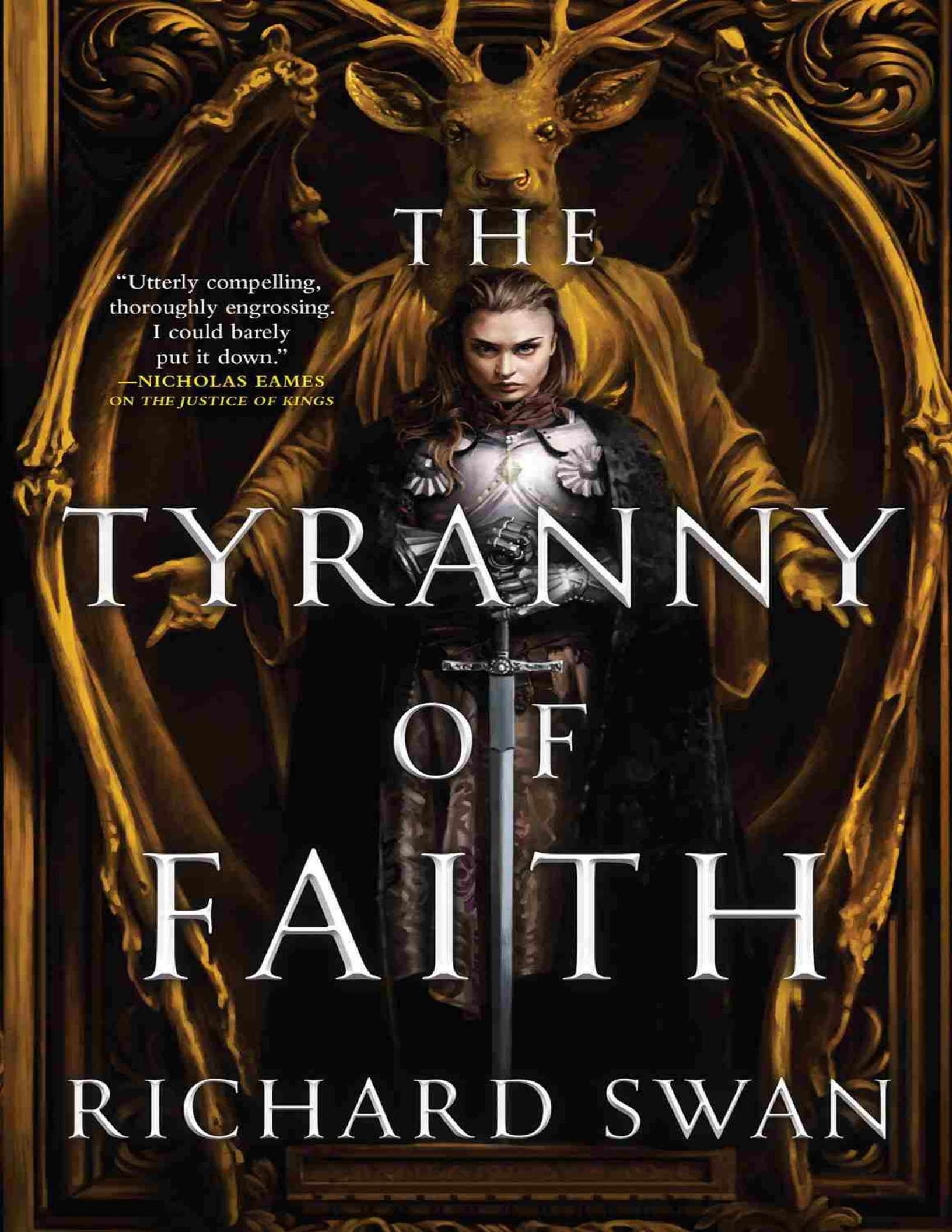
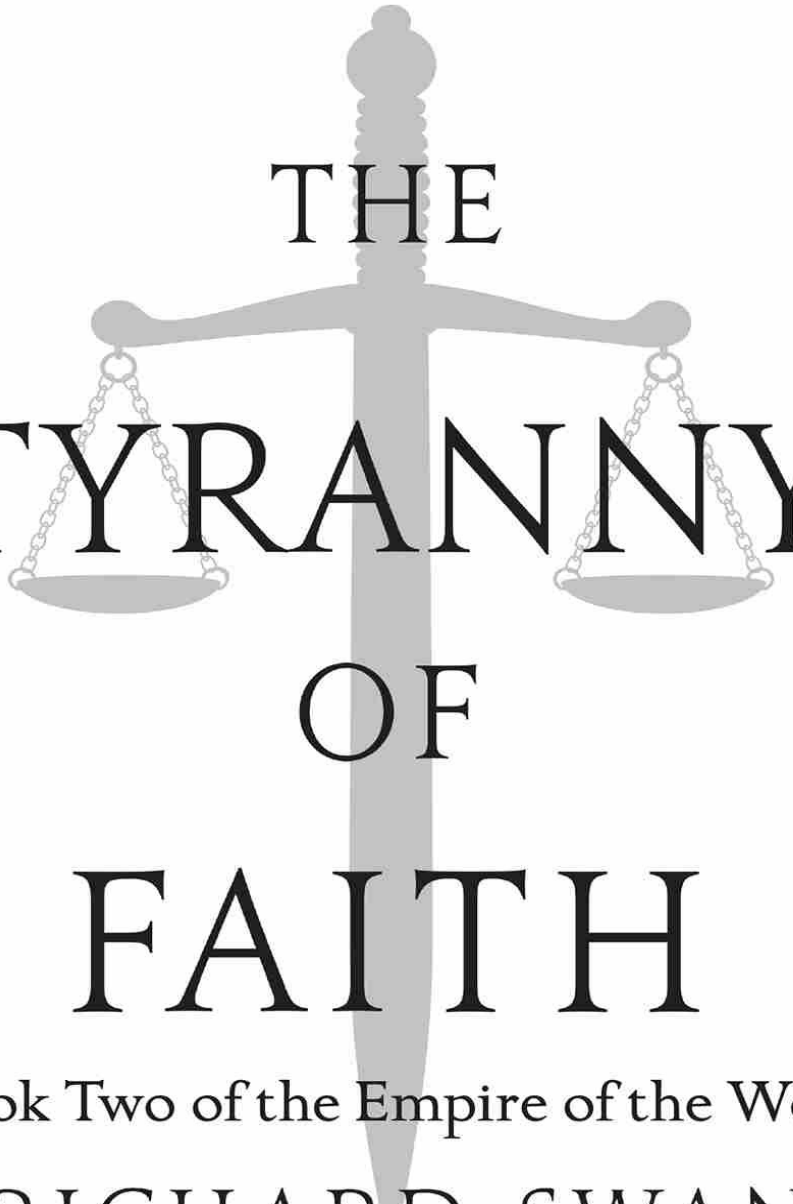

THE
"Utterly compelling, thoroughly engrossing. I could barely put it down."
—NICHOLAS EAMES
ON THE JUSTICE OF KINGS
TYRANNY
OF
FAITH
RICHARD SWAN



THE TYRANNY OF FAITH

Book Two of the Empire of the Wolf

RICHARD SWAN

orbit

orbitbooks.net

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2023 by Richard Swan

Cover design by Lauren Panepinto
Cover illustration by Martina Fačková
Cover copyright © 2023 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.
Map by Tim Paul

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Orbit
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10104
orbitbooks.net

First Edition: February 2023
Simultaneously published in Great Britain by Orbit

Orbit is an imprint of Hachette Book Group.
The Orbit name and logo are trademarks of Little, Brown Book Group Limited.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to hachettespeakersbureau.com or email HachetteSpeakers@hbgusa.com.

Orbit books may be purchased in bulk for business, educational, or promotional use. For information, please contact your local bookseller or the Hachette Book Group Special Markets Department at special.markets@hbgusa.com.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022944323

ISBNs: 9780316361682 (hardcover), 9780316361880 (ebook)

E3-20230114-JV-NF-ORI

Table of Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Map

I: On the Road to Sova

II: Master of the Magistratum

III: The Wolf Gate

IV: The Emperor

V: The Beating Heart of the Civilised World

VI: A Quiet Purge

VII: Sparring

VIII: Into the Master’s Vaults

IX: The Order of the Temple

X: One Door Closes, Another Opens

XI: An Untimely Distraction

XII: Life Guard

XIII: Unsociable Trades

XIV: The Talents of the Order

XV: Locking Horns

XVI: A Light in the Darkness

XVII: In the Temple of Nema

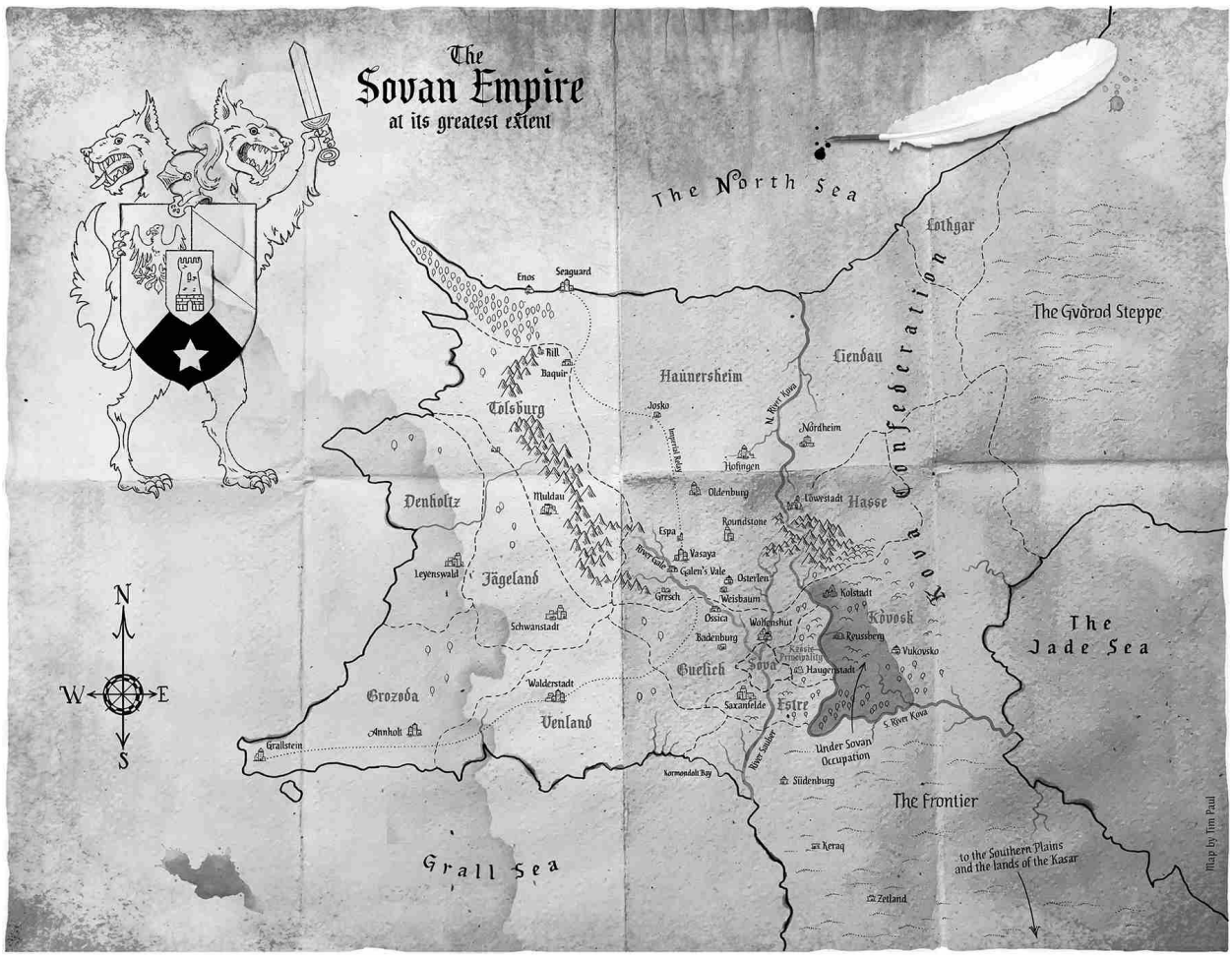
XVIII: The Muphraab
XIX: The Second Estate
XX: The Investigation Founders
XXI: To Kormondolt Bay
XXII: Planning the Trap
XXIII: Springing the Trap
XXIV: In Hot Blood
XXV: Leaving the Empire
XXVI: Lessons on the Afterlife
XXVII: Rekaburg
XXVIII: On the Shores of the Ossian Sea
XXIX: Südenburg
XXX: Revelations
XXXI: Daughter of Nema
XXXII: The Battle of the Agilmar Gate
XXXIII: Keraq
XXXIV: The Inner Sanctum
XXXV: Forbidden Lore
XXXVI: The Death of Hope
XXXVII: A Commingling of Misfortunes
XXXVIII: Reunion
XXXIX: More Questions than Answers
XL: Unfinished Business
Epilogue: The Decline Before the Fall

Acknowledgements
Discover More

Also by Richard Swan

Explore book giveaways, sneak peeks, deals, and more.

Tap here to learn more.


The Sovan Empire
at its greatest extent
The North Sea
Lothgar
The Gvörod Steppe
Lendau
Haunersheim
Tolsburg
Denholtz
Jägeland
Grozoda
Venland
Grall Sea
Hasse
Kövosk
Sova
Guelich
Estre
The Jade Sea
Sovan Confederation
Under Sovan Occupation
The Frontier
to the Southern Plains and the lands of the Kasar
Map by Tim Paul
N
W
E
S

I

On the Road to Sova

"No event simply occurs. Each is the culmination of countless factors that trace their long roots back to the beginning of time. It is easy to bemoan an era of great upheaval as a sudden commingling of misfortunes – but the discerning eye of history tells us that there are few coincidences where the schemes of man are concerned."

JUSTICE (AS HE THEN WAS) EMMANUEL KANE, THE LEGAL ARMOURY: ENTANGLEMENT, NECROMANCY, AND DIVINATION

"Do you think he's dying?"

"Sir Konrad?"

"Aye."

"The way he carries on you'd think so."

It was a warm, drizzly spring morning in the Southmark of Guelich, and Sir Radomir, Bressinger and I were standing fifty yards from a tumbledown herbalist's cottage. Vonvalt had been inside for most of an hour, and the three of us were trading bored, tired jibes, trying to get a rise from one another.

"There is certainly something the matter with him," I said.

Both men turned to me.

"You said yourself the man is easily het up on matters of health," Sir Radomir said.

"Nema, keep your voice down," I muttered. Bressinger looked at me chidingly. He had always had a reproachful streak, but since the loss of his

arm his humour had worsened. Now his hackles were quick to rise, especially when he felt Vonvalt's character was being called into question. Once these non-verbal reprimands would have plagued me with guilt. Now I was beginning to give the chastisements short shrift.

"I don't think anyone can sensibly argue he is not," I said, glancing at Bressinger. "But this is different. I have not seen him like this in a long time."

"Aye," Bressinger murmured eventually, in what was a rare concession. "This is not his usual fussiness."

I turned back to the cottage. It was a ramshackle place, a daub and timber construction sagging under the weight of its thatch. The place was mostly concealed behind a riot of wildflowers and other plants, and a strong herbal scent, intensified by the drizzly wetness, suffused the air and had led to no end of both human and equine sneezing.

We had been on the road from Ossica for most of the month of Sorpen, and were now but a few days' ride from the outskirts of Sova itself. Guelich was one of the three principalities that surrounded Sova like the white around a yolk, and was ruled by the Emperor's third son, Prince Gordan Kzosic. His castle, the fortress at Badenburg, was just visible on the distant horizon, a towering fastness of grey stone that caught the sun – and the eye – from thirty miles away.

Our journey was not supposed to have taken this long. Had Bressinger not lost an arm in Galen's Vale, we would have left our horses and equipment in that city and then taken the Imperial Relay for a hundred and fifty miles south as far as the Westmark of Guelich. From there we could have simply taken the Baden road due east to Sova itself, for a total journey time of perhaps a week with good weather, or ten days in bad.

In fact, had Vonvalt not insisted on tracking down and then murdering Obenpatria Fischer, we could have simply hired a ship to take us down the Gale, since the river was a tributary of the Sauber which flowed directly to Sova (and which itself was in part a tributary of the Kova). But this is as much a digression as the route itself.

In any event, Vonvalt's illness had scuppered any plans to make haste. It had come on suddenly one night. He had complained of light-headedness, which we had all attributed to the wine, but it had persisted the following day. Vonvalt, learned as he was in ailments, blamed vertigo – until he began

to suffer, too, from a deep-seated sense of dread, which he could not place. The emergence of this second symptom had confused all of us, since fearfulness was not amongst his faults. But the nebulous dread continued, and then, not long after, tiredness, which itself turned into bouts of crippling fatigue.

The Empire was lousy with self-proclaimed medical men, and Vonvalt could pick out a quack – and prosecute them, since displaying the blue star without proper training was a crime – in seconds. But this particular herbalist had a good reputation, and so after our infuriatingly slow journey south, we had diverted another few tens of miles so that our lord and master could be plied with medicines.

"What he needs is a good fuck," Sir Radomir proclaimed with great sincerity after a period of silence. He took a long draw from his flask, which I knew to contain watered-down wine.

I said nothing. I liked Sir Radomir, but I didn't really want to engage with such vulgarities.

We continued to wait. There was no way to tell the time beyond our innate sense of its passage; even the sun was obscured by banks of raincloud, each one intent on testing the limits of our waxed cloaks. And then, eventually, Vonvalt reappeared, carrying a parcel no doubt filled with powders and potions. He looked pale and drawn, and his bearing reminded me of the way he looked and acted after a séance.

"The herbalist has found you a cure?" Sir Radomir asked. His voice was gruff, but there was a trace of optimism in it. As with Bressinger and I, Sir Radomir took great comfort from Vonvalt's stable and predictable temperament, and the man's abrupt decline had unnerved him.

"We can but hope," Vonvalt muttered. It was clear the ailment embarrassed him, particularly given that the rest of us rarely took ill.

He swept past us to his horse, Vincento, and stashed the parcel away in one of the saddlebags; then he mounted up.

"Come, then," he said, sitting upright with some effort. "We'll make Badenburg tonight with a tailwind."

The rest of us exchanged a brief look at this absurd optimism; then we too mounted our horses. My attention was stolen by the harsh caw of a rook which had perched on the rickety fence at the boundary of the herbalist's land.

“’Tis a portent of spring,” Sir Radomir remarked.

“’Tis not a portent if it has already come to pass,” Bressinger said with scorn. He nodded towards the bird. “A single rook is death.”

I scoffed. “I didn’t think you were superstitious, Dubine,” I said. I tried to inject some levity into my voice, for we had become a miserable little band, crushed under the weight of our mission and the doom and gloom it represented.

Bressinger simply smiled thinly, and then kicked Gaerwyn to a trot.

“Nema,” Sir Radomir murmured to me as his own horse trotted past. “He needs a good fuck and all.”

We did not reach Badenburg until almost noon the following day, thanks in large part to the Duke of Brondsey, our donkey, and the cart full of legal accoutrements and our own personal effects that he pulled. With the benefit of hindsight, it is a burden we should and could have done away with, but I think Vonvalt thought that, like Bressinger a month before, he might have needed use of it as a litter – or worse, a bier. Besides, Vonvalt had long before arranged for a liveried company of messengers to dispatch the ill tidings from Galen’s Vale – and we were hardly the sole source of the news.

The countryside here in the tip of the Southmark of Guelich was a hilly, rocky, forested place, the earth not quite as fractured as the Tolsburg Marches, but nonetheless full of feature. Guelich had long had a reputation as a province of exceptional beauty, filled with fragrant pine forests, clear rivers, and abundant wildlife to which lords from all over the Empire made pilgrimage for an unparalleled hunting experience. The castle of Badenburg reared up into the sky out of all of this beauty like a carbuncle, a jagged, blocky, functional fortress of grey stone. Cast in the unimaginative pre-Imperial style, it lacked all modern gothick ostentation – though what it lacked in beauty it made up for in impregnability, designed and located as it had been to keep the Hauner armies from penetrating into the Grozodan peninsula. Given Haunersheim’s subjugation a half-century before, and the subsequent vassalisation of both Venland and Grozoda, the castle had become all but obsolete as a base for military operations, and now existed

mostly as a dwelling for the Emperor's third son.

By the flags above the keep, however, it was clear that Prince Gordan was not in residence; and by the churned mud of the fields outside the front gates, the wild pigs and foxes rootling for bones in the muck and the unmistakable stench of a mass latrine, it was also clear that a great host had marshalled there until very recently.

"He has gone east, Milord Justice," the duty serjeant said. "Not a day ago. Left with the 16th Legion."

"The 16th Legion?" Vonvalt asked. "Nema. Where were they garrisoned?"

"As far as I know, sire, they came from Kolsburg."

"How many men?"

"Thick end of five thousand, sire. I believe the Prince is to take on siege specialists from Aulen and then make sail up the River Kova."

"Siege specialists?"

"Aye, sire. They are making for Roundstone, in Haunersheim, and then on to Seaguard. The Emperor has had word that some of the lords in the north have turned traitor. Baron Naumov is one. I believe Margrave Westenholtz is another."

Vonvalt grimaced at this. "Aye," he said. He tapped himself in the chest. "It was me who sent the news. We have come from Galen's Vale directly."

"I heard the Vale was sacked," the serjeant said. "'Tis true, then? The Prince could scarce believe it."

"Indeed," Vonvalt said absently. He looked up about the battlements. "I need to leave some things here. My donkey and cart, for one."

The serjeant nodded. "Whatever you need, sire."

"And you say the Prince is heading east?"

"Aye, sire. Are you heading to Sova?"

"Mm."

"I daresay you'll overtake him in a day or two. They are keeping to the Baden road."

Vonvalt nodded. "Thank you, Serjeant," he said, and we moved off.

Despite Vonvalt's illness, we now rode hard down the Baden road. The evidence of the 16th Legion's progress was everywhere: farms stripped bare; food waste picked over by scavengers; human, horse, and donkey shit in vast quantities; and of course the sides of the road trampled to stinking, cake-soft mud. Given we were but four people, mounted and riding on a paved road, I expected to reach the tail end of the army within a couple of hours, let alone the day that the duty serjeant had guessed. Five thousand men – around four thousand of them on foot, if the 16th Legion were a typical one – would normally be a cumbersome host, after all, lucky to make ten or fifteen miles a day in rainy conditions.

I was wrong. Vonvalt had often talked about the capabilities of the Imperial Legions, and I had often privately dismissed what I considered to be the more outlandish claims. After all, they might have had a reputation as an élite force, but they were still human beings, with all the fallibilities that came with it.

But we rode for the balance of the day, made camp, struck camp before dawn, and rode on again for another half-day before we caught up with the rearmost section of the baggage train. By that time the countryside had opened up considerably, and we were on the final approach to Sova itself.

Another half-hour's riding saw us to the head of the host, clearly identifiable by the knot of flag bearers, musicians, and Imperial Guard – and, of course, Prince Gordan himself. We had to come off the road and urge our exhausted horses through the mud to get past the long tailback of dismounted knights and soldiers. I marvelled at how uniformly well equipped they were, with mail, surcoats in the bold red, yellow, and blue Autun colours, and kettle helms for the majority. The knights, a fraction of the total force, all owned plate of varying expense, but did not wear it on the march since they did not want to die of exhaustion or otherwise overburden their horses.

Prince Gordan himself had the classic red hair and beard of the Haugenate line, the former of which was covered over by a flat-topped helmet and crown, the latter close-cropped. He wore a mail hauberk with an expensive-looking surcoat quartered in the colours of the Empire and resplendent with a black Autun rampant. He had a pleasant, handsome face and appeared to be in a good humour as we approached, laughing at a comment or joke from one of his retainers.

"Your Highness," Vonvalt called out. He drew the attention of Prince

Gordan, as well as every man in the immediate vicinity.

The Prince squinted at Vonvalt for a few moments whilst Sir Radomir, Bressinger and I made sudden and energetic obeisance; then his face broke into a grin. “That’s not… Konrad, is it? By Nema!”

“The very same, Highness,” Vonvalt said, touching his forehead out of respect rather than requirement – as a Justice, after all, Vonvalt outranked even the Emperor’s third son. Even after years of travelling with Vonvalt, and becoming fully acquainted with every aspect of his practice, it was still easy to forget just how much power he enjoyed.

“Faith, man, it’s been, what, three, four years? When were you last in Sova?”

“About that,” Vonvalt said, nodding in the direction of the capital. “But I make for it now.”

“And not a day too soon,” Prince Gordan replied. His tone was serious, but his face retained its levity. It is easy to forget, having long since met and rubbed shoulders with the highest-ranking nobles in the Empire, that initial sense of awe and fear; but at the time I was near breathless with it. Riding but ten yards from me, after all, surrounded by all the extravagant trappings of state and tailed by an Imperial Legion, was one of the three princes of the Empire.

“You make for Roundstone?”

“Aye,” Prince Gordan said pleasantly. “Baron Naumov has apparently the will to suicide and has chosen a curiously long and expensive way to commit it.” The lords and retainers around him laughed with varying levels of sincerity.

“And then on to Seaguard?”

“Aye, you are well informed.”

“It was me, Highness, who uncovered the treachery,” Vonvalt said, “and sent word to His Majesty.”

“Ah!” Prince Gordan said. “My father did not mention you by name, only that a Justice had tipped him off to the rebellion being fomented in the Hauner lands. You are in his favour, Sir Konrad; you would do well to capitalise on it, for ’tis a fleeting thing!”

More bombastic laughter. I wondered if being the retainer of a prince was exhausting.

“I plan to pay your father a visit soon.”

“Good man,” Prince Gordan said. “Though I wonder if you would not prefer to accompany me? Your reputation as an accomplished swordsman precedes you – and I always have space for wise counsel.”

Vonvalt bowed deferentially. “Would that I could, Highness. Alas it would appear the Order is in some turmoil – and I myself am no spring chicken.”

Prince Gordan gave him an appraising look. “Aye,” he said. “You do look a little green around the gills. Have you eaten something bad?”

“I know not what ails me, Highness – only that it is not contagious.”

He added the last part to assuage the Prince and his men, for armies were far more susceptible to a rampant pox than they were to any enemy action.

“Well, see that you avail yourself of the Royal Physician, sir, though I daresay she will do little more than have half your blood out and give you a good gulp of piss to boot.”

Vonvalt bowed again. “I am grateful, Highness. May I ask, is that the sum of your plans? Has there been any news of further rebellion? Westenholtz is hanged, but Naumov may have drawn others to his banner.”

Prince Gordan shrugged. I could tell in that moment that he was a simple man, capable of commanding a Legion in battle, but someone who did not trouble himself to ask too many questions or seek to understand wider events. I imagined him as one who enjoyed hunting and carousing with a close circle of friends more than the daily burdens of government.

“I sometimes forget that you Justices are lawmen in your bones, with your questions! I know not the intricacies of the traitors’ movements or plans, sir, only to kill them and confiscate their lands.” He waved a hand dismissively, and for the first time in this encounter I saw the stirrings of discontent amongst the Prince’s retainers – an exchanged glance, a raised eyebrow. “You would do better to speak to my father; I have not his shrewdness I am afraid.”

“I am sure that is not the case,” Vonvalt said.

Prince Gordan chuckled. “Well, do not let me detain you further, Justice,” he said. “Give my regards to my father, would you? I imagine it will be a year before I am back in the capital, perhaps longer.”

“I will, Highness,” Vonvalt said, touching his forehead once more. The Prince tapped the rim of his helmet in reply, and then we were back on the Baden road and charging ahead to put some distance between us and the

inexorable advance of the 16th Legion.

“Well, that takes the sting out of it,” Vonvalt said as we slowed to spare the horses.

“What do you mean?” Sir Radomir asked.

Vonvalt gestured back down the road. “A Legion to crush whatever remains of Naumov and Westenholtz’s rebellion and restore order in the Northmark of Haunersheim.” Already I could see the effect this piece of good news was having on Vonvalt. He looked calmer and more relaxed – and healthier for it. I wondered then whether his ailment was simply the result of the incredible stresses on him.

“I am surprised it can be spared,” Bressinger muttered.

Vonvalt shook his head, patting the side of Vincento’s neck. “Haunersheim is the spine of the Empire. Were it another province I would agree with you.” He took in a deep, invigorating breath. “There is still plenty to be done, but at least we can stop worrying about this. It is precisely the sort of decisive intervention I had hoped for.”

Vonvalt’s sudden optimism was infectious. I remember looking back at the five-thousand-strong host of Reichskrieg veterans, with their expensive arms and armour and led by one of the Emperor’s own sons, and allowing myself to feel some of that good cheer, too. After all, the Emperor was known to have around fifty Legions of Imperial troops in varying states of readiness across the Empire. What damage could Claver, the Mlyanars, the Templars, or anyone really do against such a weight of numbers?

In fact, it was the last we – and most others – would ever see of both Prince Gordan and the 16th Legion. In a few short months they would disappear into the forests of Haunersheim, and thereafter from the face of the earth.

But I must not get ahead of myself.

II

Master of the Magistratum

“Sova is a marvel to behold, a city without parallel in the known world.”

LORD PREFECT ANSGAR REINHOLD

Sova.

I could spend several volumes simply on its description and it would still not be enough. I have seen tapestries, mosaics and frescoes from celebrated artists, heard a hundred – no, a thousand – stories and songs of Sova, and read volume after volume on its history, its architecture, its culture…

But nothing compares to seeing it. To feeling the hot cobblestones under your feet on a summer’s afternoon; of being in and amongst the people of all different races and creeds, going about their lives without interruption or abuse, united by their common Sovan citizenship; of hearing the thunderous roar of the crowd in the arena; of craning to see the tips of the spires of the huge temples and palaces which seem to clamour for light like trees in a forest.

Thinking back to that first approach on the Baden road, as the vast pine forests of Guelich gave way to the grassy Ebenen Plains, I can remember feeling a sense of sudden, overwhelming awe. Even from ten miles away, perched as we were on an escarpment, the sense of scale of the city was breathtaking. How could anyone pose a threat to such a powerful place? In Galen’s Vale, Westenholtz and his force of five hundred men had seemed

unstoppable, a large and terrifying company of soldiers against which the city was helpless. To storm Sova, one would need an army a thousand times larger.

"There it is," Vonvalt said. He had been to Sova many times – indeed, he had a house there, on the Summit of the Prefects – but I could tell that even he could not keep his wonder in check.

The rolling, golden-green Ebenen Plains stretched away from us, a vast plateau of grassland broken up by the huge, sun-silvered River Sauber, half a dozen major roads, farmland, and a sprawling mass of buildings which had grown around the walls of the city like a vast, smoking lesion. There was activity everywhere in spite of the dark curtains of rain which swept intermittently across the plains: dozens of trading ships on the wharf-lined Sauber, farmhands in the fields, people on the roads… I baulked at the thought of how much food the city must import every day.

The city itself rose up like a beehive, with the yolk of it home to the largest buildings in the known world. The towering spires of the temples and palaces in the city's distant centre seemed… *impossibly* huge. The tallest structure in the Empire was the Tower of Saint Velurian, part of the Temple of Savare, the God Father, and I could see it rising up to the western edge of the centre – a *thousand* feet tall. A mile to the east was the Imperial Palace, a pyramidal fortress of black marble, festooned with turrets and statuary. Its tallest peak achieved three-quarters of the height of the Tower of Saint Velurian. They were but two of the colossi there; the rest were arrayed about like mighty funeral monuments to princes of the universe.

"Nema's blood," Sir Radomir said. Like me, he had never set eyes on Sova. "I never thought I would see it in my lifetime." He took a drink of wine. "I didn't know human hands could construct such marvels."

"They can't, now," Vonvalt said, somewhat cryptically. I could vaguely recall Vonvalt having spoken about some sort of ancient magickal infusions which anchored these vast constructions to the bedrock, back when the practice of magicks had been more common – but we had never spoken about it in any detail. "The book-lore remains, of course, somewhere in the Law Library. But the knowledge and means to wield it has long faded from memory."

We sat atop our horses and drank in the view for a few moments longer, before eventually, Vonvalt said, "Come; let us be about it. Rough deeds

await.”

Sova was surrounded by twenty miles of wall fifty feet high at its lowest, and there were only four ways to get in – a gate at each of the compass points. The Baden road entered Sova from the north, through the largest and most impressive fortification: the Wolf Gate.

“By Nema,” I murmured as we passed beneath it. Here the flanking wall was even higher, sixty or seventy feet, formed into a forbidding gatehouse which in and of itself would have put most provincial castles to shame. But the most impressive aspect was a colossus of the Autun rendered in black stone, its paws gripping the top of the wall, one head looking north, the other to the east. I felt as though it were looking directly at me, and could not suppress a shiver of awe.

It was evening by the time we were urging our horses through the Wolf Gate, the way lit by the honey-coloured light of the fading sun and a dozen bonfire-sized braziers. Armoured guards in Imperial colours and wielding pikes watched from atop the wall, ambling amongst dozens of carriage-sized ballistae. Around us and ahead of us, hundreds of people of all colours and creeds and wearing all manner of outfits bustled – commonfolk, highborn, merchant princes and their retinues, senators in their formal white robes, Southern Plainsmen in their unfamiliar outfits and hairstylings, Neman monks and nuns, Templars, liveried soldiers, and every other type of person one could call to mind. Some were mounted like us; most were not. I had seen a handful of non-native Hauners in the wharf of Galen’s Vale, but here they were as common as Sovans. There was every shade of skin, every colour of hair, every form of dress – and all of them moved about like bees in a hive, the sense of purpose, of sheer… *activity*, overwhelming. I felt like a piece of debris adrift in the centre of a vast ocean, swirled by the human currents.

“I… I have never seen so many people in one place,” I said, a faltering attempt at conversation. None of my companions could hear me. The noise was incredible. Conversation filled the air, alongside the clop of horses’ hooves, the rattle and squeal of wagon wheels, the tramp of armoured boots, the shouts and cries of a thousand people.

“Stay close to me,” Vonvalt called over his shoulder as he pressed on through the crowds like the hull of a carrack barging through plates of ice.

Past the forbidding fortifications of the Wolf Gate was a large open space of well-worn flagstones, an unofficial continuation of the Baden road which bridged one of the three branches of the Sauber where the river split in the middle of the city, then ended in front of a gigantic building of Saxan gothick design which I would shortly learn housed the Royal Imperial Courts of Justice. To the left was the city’s main market, now closed for the day but still rife with bustle, whilst beyond it, nestled in the lee of the Estran Wall, was a vast, stinking tangle of buildings and warehouses that housed the city’s unsociable trades district – tanneries, iron foundries, butchers, and armourers.

To our right, the ground climbed up to form a natural plateau around a half-mile squared – with the fortified wall commensurately higher – the top of which was covered in ostentatious, palatial homes of stone, brick, and timber. This was the Summit of the Prefects, where the city’s wealthy upper and governing classes resided, and where Vonvalt himself had a relatively modest manor house and staff.

But we did not travel up the Summit’s broad, tree-lined street, itself gated and guarded. Instead, we carried on down the remains of the Baden High Way – for it was so called within the city walls – and made for the Creus Road which would take us to the Grand Lodge, home of the Order of the Magistratum.

“You mean to announce yourself to Master Kadlec?” Bressinger asked Vonvalt.

“Aye,” Vonvalt replied. I could see his ailment was troubling him again. His good humour, which had followed our encounter with the 16th Legion, seemed to be dissipating. The conversation with Kadlec promised to be a difficult one.

“Are you feeling all right?” I asked him quietly – but not too quietly, since the ambient noise was akin to standing next to a waterfall.

Vonvalt glanced over to me. “Nothing that a good night’s rest won’t rid me of,” he said.

We walked on, now beyond that wide-open space adjacent to the Wolf Gate and into a thicket of shops. Most of the northern quarter of the city seemed to be given over to trades, and the air above our heads was filled with such a tangle of signs that it was like walking through a forest. I was struck

by the sheer quantity and diversity of wares on display. I could not help but pause and look through one shopfront of almost completely faultless plates of glass, to see beautiful, colourful dresses with cloth-of-gold inlay, scandalously plunging necklines, and slit thighs. They were modelled on polished wooden mannequins, and there was not a headdress in sight – still a fairly common styling in the provinces, especially for older women.

"Helena!" Bressinger called to me sharply, the gap between us widening rapidly.

I followed, but was soon distracted by another shopfront, this one filled with more dresses, and then another displaying rows of expensive leather shoes and boots, and a third filled to the rafters with riding breeches. The quality and craftsmanship was beyond compare. These goods were like nothing I had ever seen before. Even expensive clothes Vonvalt had bought me from the various merchant towns in Haunersheim and Tolsburg were nothing compared to these.

Looking through the windows, I was immediately reminded of my childhood in Muldau, shivering in the darkness, my feet in cold agony from trudging through drifts of snow in soaking shoes. Now before me were a hundred sets of fine leather galoshes, any one pair of which would have lasted me ten years or longer.

A strange sense of conflict overcame me. Part of me wanted to return to that simple, honest version of myself that I had been in Tolsburg; a much more rational part of me remembered how horrible that life had been, and how lucky I was now. But even though I could comfortably afford almost anything in these shops, for some reason it left me feeling little except resentment.

"Helena!" Bressinger called again. They were well ahead now, over the Baden Bridge and turning onto the Creus Road.

I hurried after them, ducking in and out of the evening shoppers, to catch up with them on the Creus Road.

"That's the Philosophers' Palace," Vonvalt said as I reached him, pointing out a gigantic building rendered in the gothick Saxan style – buttressed, gargoyled, gloomy. It was not unlike the arena in the south-east, except it was covered over in a great copper dome and dedicated to one of the great Sovan civic pursuits: debate.

"What's that one?" I asked, pointing to a circular building of white marble

that was surrounded by a ring of flying buttresses, each one crowned with a statue of some important Sovan noble or gargoyle.

"That's the Senate House," Vonvalt said.

"And that one?" I pointed across the river to the east.

"That's the Temple of Nema, and that's the Temple of Savare – we shall be paying that a visit, fret you not – that's the Temple of Creus and that's the Grand Lodge," Vonvalt said, picking out a sequence of imposing edifices. "Those are the Royal Courts and that is the Emperor's Palace."

The last two were directly in front of us, both impossible to take in in one go without craning my neck up to the cloudy, twilight sky.

"It is something to behold," I murmured. I had pictured the city of Sova in my mind's eye for years, since I was a small child. But I had never imagined it to be so… *frightening*. Overwhelming and awe-inspiring, of course, but also a place of such gloom, of such despondent, oppressive gothick architecture. It was like being in an enormous graveyard. Being amongst such great organs of state was wondrous but crushing, like the city was a sabaton pressed against my throat. The constant flow of people, too, did nothing to alleviate that sense of claustrophobia. My senses were being overloaded, and I could not get a grip on my emotions, vacillating as I was between giddiness, resentment, and fear.

"Aye, it is," Vonvalt said, sighing again, then added, "Give it a month and you will be sick of the place."

We rode on to the approach to the Grand Lodge. The footfall here was as heavy as mid-morning on market day in Galen's Vale, except instead of commonfolk and merchants, here were clusters of lawmen in their formal court blouses and robes from a day at the Royal Imperial Courts, as well as so many Justices that there had to have been more in that half-acre of pavement than in the rest of the Empire. These were not, however, the roving Justices that I had become accustomed to, like Vonvalt or Lady August; rather these were jurists, Justices who had become too old or infirm to travel, or who had given up that aspect of the practice for another reason. Few did so voluntarily, for the roving Justices formed the Order's core, and enjoyed the largest share of the organisation's esteem.

The Grand Lodge, being the seat of the Order of the Magistratum, was another huge building that was mostly formed of a single square tower several hundred feet high that sat on a box-shaped construction of white

stone, honeycombed with lodgings and legal chambers. At the top of the tower was a bell, and above that an Autun colossus, since one of the heads of the Autun represented the common law. The inscription *"No one is above the law"* in High Saxan was rendered in black iron on the edifice.

I felt a shiver run through me as I took in these imposing words, the colossus, and the Lodge itself. This was the centre of order in the Empire, a monument to the secular common law, and it was a humbling, frightening structure. It was as though it occupied two dimensions, the mortal plane, where it was a simple construction of stone, and the astral plane, where I imagined great arcs of corposant energy flickering and crackling away from it; where law was not just an abstract concept but a physical force, bludgeoning the citizens of the Empire into obedience and submission.

The feeling did not fade as we approached its fortress-like façade, but rather intensified. When taking into account his powers, his swordsmanship, and his authority, Vonvalt could be a frightening man; we were now about enter a building full of such people – and we were anticipating conflict, too. Kadlec was alleged to have been consorting with the Neman Church, giving away its powers for the sake of a quiet life. This had the potential to be a difficult – even violent – conversation.

We entered a small door set inside a much larger gate. For the first time I noticed the other Justices stop what they were doing and look at us – or rather, look at Vonvalt. I had never seen Vonvalt in this, his native environment, and I had no idea how his peers viewed him. But seeing these early reactions, it seemed like no small measure of deference, even awe.

"Sir Konrad is well respected within the Order," I whispered to Bressinger.

"Sir Konrad is the foremost Justice in the Empire," Bressinger replied quietly. "You are about to see just how much authority he truly enjoys." It was with these portentous words that he passed into the Lodge's atrium.

"The Hall of Justice," Vonvalt said in wonderment, taking in the height of the tower. I had not imagined the huge boxy pillar of the Grand Lodge to be hollow, but it was. "It has been a long time since I have seen it."

Bressinger grunted absently. It was easy to forget that Dubine, as Vonvalt's long-serving taskman, had seen all of this already; that he was just as familiar with the wonders of Sova as Vonvalt was.

"This way," Vonvalt said, and we all continued on across the chilly

marble floor to the other end of the hall. Here began the many offices and chambers of the Lodge's Justices.

"Who resides here, then?" Sir Radomir asked. "All Justices like yourself, Sir Konrad?"

"Tell him, Helena," Vonvalt said. "See how much of my lessons you recall."

"Every Justice has chambers here," I said, performing a sort of skipping run to keep up with Vonvalt. "Travelling Justices like Sir Konrad are but one part of the Lodge. Those who no longer travel become jurists."

"Bookmen," Sir Radomir said, dismissive.

"If you like," Vonvalt said.

"There will be the head clerk's office here too. Clerks are responsible for maintaining the Law Library and recording the judgments of the travelling Justices."

"More bookmen," Sir Radomir said.

"I fear you are going to find the Magistratum a very dull place," Vonvalt said.

If only that had been true.

"I think the Imperial Draughtsman resides here, too?" I said, now a little unsure.

"No," Vonvalt said. "She is in the Palace."

"What does she do?" Sir Radomir asked.

"She turns the Emperor and the Senate's decrees into law," Vonvalt said.

"So, a scribe?"

Vonvalt let out a small, incredulous laugh, but did not reply.

We moved briskly through that ancient warren of hot, wood-panelled corridors that put me in mind of the labyrinthine tunnels of the kloster in Galen's Vale. There was ostentation here, as one would expect of a wealthy, august legal practice, with busts and gilt-framed oil paintings crowding for space.

"Some of these people wear different robes," Sir Radomir remarked with a hint of distaste as he looked through what open doors there were. The sheriff seemed to share Bressinger's disdain for authority, which was ironic given that both of them enjoyed a great deal of it.

"The lay wardenship resides here too – the Sovan judiciary. Not every lawkeeper is a Justice; in fact, the reverse is true," Vonvalt said. "Crown

prosecutors, too, are lay lawkeepers. You will see plenty of them about, here, though there are those who maintain private practices like the defenders."

"And they do not live here?"

"The defenders?"

"Aye."

"No. There is a legal district in Sova where you'll find them. It used to be just Zobryv Gardens, but there is a whole precinct now."

Vonvalt took us to the rear of the building. Here a second hall opened up. Opposite, flanked by two enormous windows that looked out east across Sova to where the Imperial Palace reared into the sky, was a large staircase which split into two and doubled back on itself twice to a mezzanine. We surmounted the stairs and then went back through another, shorter corridor. Ahead of us was a large door, bracketed by two marble pillars and crowned by the Sovan device.

Vonvalt walked straight up to the door and rapped sharply on it. "Nathan. It's Konrad."

We waited for a few seconds. Anticipation gnawed at me. All manner of scenarios played out in my head.

"Enter!"

We went through. Inside was a large chamber which looked out across the city of Sova. At the far end was a huge desk of polished dark wood, and behind it, sitting in a large, throne-like chair, was the Master of the Magistratum, Nathaniel Kadlec.

"By Nema, *Konrad*," Kadlec said, standing. A smile split his wizened face. He was a stooped old man, squat and powerfully built, but sagging under the weight of his age, responsibility – and treason. He wore the black robes of a lawman; but expensive ermine linings, ruby-encrusted rings around his fat fingers, and the silver medallion he wore – a displayed codex overlying the Autun rampant – marked him out as a high lord and the Lord Prefect.

It was not what I – or any of us – had been expecting. I thought Kadlec would look cowed, nervous – frightened, even – not this picture of avuncular pleasure.

What surprised me even more was Vonvalt's behaviour. He also smiled and walked forward to embrace his master and former mentor.

"Nema," Kadlec said, clapping Vonvalt on the back roughly. "You smell

like a horse. Still riding that destrier? What did you call it, Vincento?"

"The very same," Vonvalt said, turning and gesturing to the three of us by way of introduction.

"Dubine Bressinger, as I live and breathe," Kadlec said. "How are you, son?"

Bressinger bowed a little stiffly. "I am well, Master. Well enough."

"I do not know this man. Who are you, sir?"

"I am Sir Radomir Dragić," he said, also a little uncomfortable. It was frustrating that he and Bressinger did not get on better. They were so alike in many ways.

"Sir Radomir is the former sheriff of Galen's Vale, and is now one of my retainers."

"Ah. Of course," Kadlec said, with the first hint of discomfort. It quickly passed. "And you must be Helena," Kadlec said, his eyes resting on me.

I felt my nerves jangle. "How—?"

"You did not think Sir Konrad could take on an apprentice – and pay one from the Magistratum's coffers! – without me knowing about it, did you?" He spoke with a twinkle in his eye, and I found myself completely disarmed by his manner. This was not the difficult confrontation I had anticipated.

Kadlec bade us all sit, and he called on a servant for drinks.

"Well, Konrad. You have been gone from us for well in excess of two years now. I heard of your misfortune in the Southmark," he said, his eyes flickering over to Sir Radomir. "And I heard of the murder of Resi. A despicable business, and a sign of the times, I am afraid."

Now Vonvalt's composure fractured slightly. "Despicable is the right word for it," he said. I glanced over at him, expecting him to clarify that Justice August was – in a technical sense – still alive, at least in body, and being taken care of in the Galen's Vale hospice. But he did not.

"Resi warned me that the Order was in trouble. Political trouble," Vonvalt clarified. "I have heard many rumours." He paused. It was odd; in spite of the difference in their age and experience, it already felt as though Vonvalt were the master. "A great deal has concerned me, though I am sure there is little enough behind it," he added with a smile of affected warmth.

Kadlec was about to reply but took advantage of the drinks arriving to gather his thoughts. I myself accepted a goblet of wine, which I drank a little too quickly.

“Yes, well,” Kadlec said. “Life in the capital has been rather thorny this past year or so.”

“Oh?”

Kadlec nodded. I wondered what his powers were. Vonvalt had said he was an accomplished necromancer, and he would be able to wield the Emperor’s Voice like all Justices. Was there a third string to his bow?

“You have no doubt heard that the Senate and Neman Church are arrayed against us?”

“You forget I hanged Margrave Westenholtz,” Vonvalt remarked.

Kadlec chuckled darkly. “Oh I know,” he said. He gestured expansively. “The whole city knows of *that*. The Mlyanars have been exercising themselves into a fury. They have been making life very difficult for us. And this alliance with the Templars is only emboldening them.”

“I have spoken with a senatorial colleague. He painted a fairly… *disquieting* picture of the Order. It seems less impartial than when I was last in the city.”

Kadlec looked at Vonvalt. Both men were dancing around the issue, trying to be civil in the same way lawmen in the courtroom tried to be professionally courteous to one another.

“Who was the senator?” Kadlec asked, slightly more sharply than I expect he’d intended.

“It matters not. I trust his judgement.”

There was another pause.

“We have had problems, aye,” Kadlec said. His gregariousness had evaporated. “It was the clerks who noticed it first. Inconsistencies in judgments. Undue leniency being granted to Mlyanars, or associates of the Mlyanars – especially in Haunersheim. The Emperor has been taxing lords to fund the eastward expansion of the Legions across the Kova, but you know as well as I do that that is a military endeavour which has failed. Many in the provinces who took the Highmark expected their fortunes and holdings to increase, not to throw away what remaining coin they had on further subjugation. The situation has left a dearth of loyalty in the Imperial hinterlands, and predatory men are being quick to capitalise on it.”

“So, what?” Vonvalt asked. “They have decided to spend their money on the Savaran Templars instead? That is not exactly a cheap venture.”

“No, pay attention,” Kadlec chided. “Many lords across the Empire have

stopped paying Imperial taxes. Stopped *altogether*. That money is funding the Templars in *lieu*, not *as well as* the Legions. They are organising a force on the Frontier – you must know this."

"I do know this. At least, the broad strokes. And the Nemans are getting involved because they want the Draedist arcana back."

Again, a flash of anxiousness past over Kadlec's face. "The Mlyanars have realised that being bold has paid off. Before the invasion of the Kova Confederation, the Emperor was untouchable. Now he is pissing away his Legions and his enemies grow in strength every day. The Neman Church has seen the success of the Mlyanars and they want a piece of the action for themselves. An opportunity has arisen for them to secure their own political objectives: as you say, the repatriation of the Draedist arcana."

Vonvalt sat back and clasped his hands in front of him. "These matters could not have come to pass without the enablement of the Magistratum."

Kadlec sighed. He did not seem to grasp that he himself was under suspicion.

"There are Justices who are helping them, I am sure of it, but you must remember, Konrad, that we are not the foremost lawkeepers in the Empire any more. Lay lawmen outstrip us ten to one. And it is much easier to bribe and control lay lawkeepers and wardens in provincial courthouses than a Justice. The Empire has expanded too quickly. The ranks of the Magistratum have not kept pace."

"Who are the Justices who are helping them?"

"I do not know of any individuals. But you know we are not above factionalism," Kadlec said. "The Cyrillians have always been funny about the canon law."

Vonvalt despised factionalism, but for all he liked to pretend otherwise, he knew it existed. The Cyrillians were a group of Justices within the Order who believed, in spite of everything they had been taught, that the Natural Law – the idea that certain moral absolutes existed irrespective of man-made rules and ethics, and which formed the bedrock of the common law – itself derived from the will of Nema. I recalled Senator Jansen telling us in Haunersheim that he had heard rumours of Justices recusing themselves from cases, or giving precedence to the canon law. Now the Master of the Magistratum himself was confirming it. The Order was eating itself from the inside out.

"You think they have been assisting the Neman Church?"

“I am certain of it. They treat with patrias and matrias here in the capital. They attend temple. They convene with the Mlyanars. I have even heard rumours that they have been assisting our enemies, training them to withstand the Emperor’s Voice, passing them the secrets of the Order.”

There was a long pause. This was the nub of it. This was what Justice August had warned us about. What Senator Jansen had warned us about. The information was the same, we were just hearing a different slant on it. With so many vested interests, it was becoming increasingly difficult to know who to believe.

“The rumour I have heard, Master,” Vonvalt said carefully, “was that *you* were responsible for this… double-dealing. Personally.”

To our surprise, Kadlec did not seem particularly bothered by this revelation. “Of course that is what you heard! That is what our enemies want people to believe. And they have been very successful in spreading it about. It has certainly driven a wedge between the Magistratum and the Emperor – which was always the point. I have been trying to counteract the disinformation, but we are losing power, Konrad.” He nodded to the door. “Our best and brightest are out there, keeping the peace, enforcing the law. You yourself have not been here for over *two years*. And we are speakers of the truth. We deal in intellectual rigour, balance, fairness. Our enemies speak mistruths gleefully, even in the most sacrosanct of situations. They lie in the Senate. Words mean nothing to them. And it is *working*. The commonfolk believe it. Kasivar, the *Emperor* believes it.” Kadlec took a long draw of wine. “Thank Nema you are back, Konrad. You have always been a favourite of the Emperor. With you here, we can put matters straight.”

Vonvalt smiled, but I could see the insincerity behind it.

“That rogue Justices have been trading away the Draedist arcana is not simply a rumour, Nathan. You have heard of Patria Claver.”

“Yes,” Kadlec said, quickly and without emotion.

“He was able to seize me using nothing but his mind.”

“Seize you? How?”

I watched the Master of the Magistratum carefully. He seemed truly surprised, but that did not mean anything in itself. Emotions could be convincingly faked.

“In precisely the manner I have said. As though he were holding me, using only his mind. I could not move nor speak. He was able to maintain the

power for only a short time, but that he had it at all is… problematic."

"I have no idea how he could have gained access to such power," Kadlec said, turning to look out the window behind him. "Nema," he added quietly.

"You and I know, of course, that the Magistratum sits upon a vast corpus of magick. Much of it has not been used for centuries; more still will never see the light of day again. We are custodians of those powers, and there is only one known source – the Master's Vaults in the Law Library."

"Are you seeking to lecture me, Konrad?" Kadlec asked, his tone suddenly sharpening.

"Nathan, I am trying to tell you how this *appears*," Vonvalt said earnestly. "If there has been some misunderstanding, some miscommunication, then I will do everything in my power to assist you in rebuilding the Order's standing. But if there is even a grain of truth as to your involvement in this…"

Kadlec sighed wearily, as though he had not just been threatened. "I am afraid I am not going to be able to give you the answers you seek," he said.

Vonvalt frowned, wrong-footed. "What do you mean?"

"I fear I am rather losing my grip on the Order and its machinations. The powers arrayed against us are tenacious and malign. It is taking its toll on me. I do not seek to underplay the significance of these developments, to the contrary. But I fear I have become a foolish old man, ignorant of matters taking place around me. But if what you say is true—"

"It is."

"—then we are in deeper waters than I realised."

Vonvalt mulled this over for a while.

"Nothing is missing from the Master's Vaults?"

"How could it be?" Kadlec snapped, the first real slip of the mask. "I am the only one with access."

Vonvalt sighed, and then feigned another smile. Clearly, the problem was not going to be solved that evening. "Well, we shall put matters to rights soon."

"I hope so," was all Kadlec said.

III

The Wolf Gate

"It is said that Sova will use any person who can be used, but never forget: not every person can be used."

FROM CHUN PARSIFAL'S TREATISE *PENITENT EMPIRE*

We did not then leave, as I thought we would. Both Vonvalt and Kadlec seemed to be at pains to talk further, contriving to discuss other matters as though forcing their way through difficult terrain – for the return of a roving Justice generated all manner of administration. In fact, with the unpleasantness dealt with, some uncomfortable truths swept under the rug, and with more wine brought in, Vonvalt and Kadlec began to speak as old friends and colleagues, talking for a good while about all manner of things.

As the light drained from the sky we made our way down to the dining hall, a common mess for all members of the Order, not just Justices, and there Vonvalt was quickly surrounded by colleagues and associates. Sir Radomir, Bressinger, and I were left to one side as more wine was produced, and food, and the conversation dived into the realm of oblique wit, banter, and references to cases, people, and minor scandals which meant nothing to us. Sova, it appeared, along with its dark intrigues, could be forgotten for one night.

"Here," Bressinger said, poking me roughly in my shoulder as I tried to follow the increasingly loud and drunken conversation where Justices, jurists, wardens, prosecutors, clerks, and draughtsmen each tried to elbow their way

into the discussion, desperate to join this inner circle. It was as rambunctious a clamour as I had ever come across, and here in one of the most prestigious institutions of state.

I turned to Dubine.

“Come on,” he said, jerking his head towards the door.

I gave him a quizzical look. There was no point in trying to make myself heard over the thrum of conversation.

“Just come on,” Bressinger said a little irritably, and he, Sir Radomir, and I left.

Our places at the table were eagerly taken up.

“That will be you one day, ruddy-cheeked on expensive wine and spouting off in High Saxan,” Bressinger said as he led Sir Radomir and me back out of the Grand Lodge and into the street. It was a warm evening, and in spite of the darkness and late hour there were still plenty of people about.

I had not known what to make of the experience, but I could not deny that I had felt some sort of eagerness to be part of that club. There was something – literally – intoxicating about it, watching a group of erudite people with shared knowledge and experiences engage in such raucous mirth. But neither Bressinger nor Sir Radomir would ever be part of that inner circle, and I found their slightly contemptuous attitudes quickly rubbing off on me. Suddenly I was more eager to impress them with my Tollish, salt-of-the-earth credentials.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

Bressinger gestured randomly into the city. “There is a public house called the Wolf Gate. Sir Konrad will be occupied for the balance of the night; we might as well enjoy ourselves before we are overburdened with matters of state. He will not miss us,” he added, as he caught my expression.

“Sounds good to me,” Sir Radomir grunted, and I sensed that it was very sincerely meant.

Bressinger led us down a warren of streets. Almost every town and village I had hitherto been in had closed with the dying light. The commonfolk would quickly eat their evening meal over a cookfire and then simply turn in.

The wealthier urban classes might fill their houses with candlelight and enjoy a longer meal, or read for a while, or undertake some other pursuit; but come the tolling of the temple bell at midnight, these places would be as silent as the grave.

Here in Sova, there was little to distinguish night from day. Everywhere was activity, everywhere were people. I had never seen so many drinking establishments before. Entire streets were given over to them. The population of Sova, swelled by itinerants, was gigantic, and such a vast quantity of people all required food, stabling for their horses, lodgings, and drink. And as all of the chambers and guilds and stock exchanges and merchant trading houses and foundries and tanneries and apothecaries emptied for the day, so began the night cycle of what seemed like a constant carnival. The people of Sova, whether native or not, seemed trapped on a waterwheel of hubris, drinking and dancing and whoring by night, and working by day.

In the moment it was captivating. As we walked down the cobbles in that warm night air, breathing in the smell of exotic foods and drinks, listening to conversations in all manner of languages, watching Sovans enjoying games and dancing in the streets, was enthralling. Despite my earlier misgivings, and no doubt thanks to the wine suffusing my blood, I found myself enthralled by the city. It seemed there was no end to the pleasures and experiences to be had.

We reached the Wolf Gate, a wryly named public house that had above it a wooden simulacrum of its namesake. It fronted onto a broad public square, where I could see a light-skinned Hauner and a dark-skinned Southern Plainsman sparring in front of a crowd of delighted onlookers. The sound of coin rattling in hands and purses and tinkling against the cobbles filled the air. I heard shouts and a glass smash, and a sarcastic cheer go up.

Bressinger led us into the public house. A wall of noise and the smell of people and stale beer hit me. The press of bodies had warmed the air more efficiently than any fire, though there was a roaring log fire and hundreds of candles too. The place was simultaneously cavernous and dense, packed with mezzanines which rose up three or four storeys.

We pushed our way through the crowd. Bressinger led us to the far end and then down some stairs, and grabbed a free booth just as a group of patrons was leaving. The three of us squeezed in, and after a few minutes, we had each been given a large pewter tankard of ale and a small cup of spirits.

“Right,” Bressinger said. He held up his cup, and Sir Radomir and I followed suit. “To Sova, and the Two-Headed Wolf, which will eat you whole and shit out your bones. *Yura*!”

He swallowed his down, but Sir Radomir and I hesitated. “What the fuck does that mean?” Sir Radomir asked. “*Yura?*”

“What do you think it means?” Bressinger snapped. “It means drink!”

I swallowed the spirits down, a sort of reduced wine that merchants had developed to transport greater quantities of it at a lower cost. I had never had any before, and was not prepared for the harsh taste, which burned my gullet. My eyes swam and I immediately fell to coughing, much to the delight of Sir Radomir and Bressinger, who laughed.

“Nema’s blood,” I said, putting the cup back on the table. Coupled with the two goblets of wine I had already had in the Grand Lodge, I could feel myself becoming rapidly drunk.

“Come then, Helena. Tell us of your impressions of the city. It is said that no one forgets their first time in Sova,” Bressinger asked me. His Grozodan accent, already thick, was thickening further by the minute thanks to the drink.

I shrugged. When I spoke I was already beginning to slur. “I have never seen anything like it in my life. ’Tis oppressive. There are people everywhere at all hours of the day. And everything is so large, so tall.”

“’Tis the magicks,” Bressinger said. To my astonishment he drained his tankard of ale and signalled for another.

“Hold on,” Sir Radomir said to the serving man, draining his own. “Make that two.”

I took a few gulps of my own in a very misguided effort to keep up. “I do not understand it, though I remember Sir Konrad having spoken of it before. How are there magicks in the buildings?”

“Runes, inscribed into the foundations,” Bressinger replied. “The buildings are too large. They would collapse under their own weight. The runes prevent this. I know not how. What does it matter? It does not get used any more – the magick, I mean. The old stuff. The good stuff,” he added with a conspiratorial wink.

“I do not like it,” I said, thinking of Claver. It seemed to me that the world would be a better place if the magicks were simply banished entirely. The risk of them falling into the wrong hands outweighed any good that could

come of them.

“Aye, nor do I,” Sir Radomir agreed. “’Tis unnatural. No one should be wielding any of that old pagan rubbish.”

“Not even the Justices?” Bressinger asked.

“No one,” Sir Radomir said firmly.

“I have heard it tell that the magicks from the runes seeped into the soil. It is what gives Sova its feel. You walk around it and it feels as though the whole city is pressing down on you. It makes you feel insignificant,” said Bressinger. “Apparently the old emperors liked it that way.”

Three more tankards of ale clattered onto the table. Both men began to drink straight away.

“Anyway, Helena,” Bressinger said, wiping his beard roughly. “You never answered my question.”

“What question?” I asked.

“About joining the Order. Drinking fine wines instead of this piss. Playing word games in High Saxan. Being a fancy man –” he stifled a belch “– fancy woman, I should say.”

“Plenty of them about,” Sir Radomir murmured.

“You are in Sova now,” Bressinger replied mildly. “Sova is more than happy to use women, same as it uses men. Sova uses everyone. It does not care what you look like, nor what you think like.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Only that Sova will find a place for you, too, in spite of your… limited mental faculties.”

Sir Radomir did not say anything for a moment; then he tossed his empty tankard to Bressinger’s left side. “Catch,” he said dourly, watching as the tankard hit the bench and clattered to the floor.

Bressinger looked down at the stump of his left arm, then at the tankard, then up at Sir Radomir.

“That was—” I began angrily, but to my astonishment both men burst into laughter. I looked between them, appalled, as they laughed until they cried. Bressinger reached across the table and clapped the sheriff on the shoulder, and Sir Radomir gripped Bressinger’s arm in response.

“Nema’s tits,” I muttered into my own tankard. I didn’t really like this Reichskrieg gallows humour, which was a shame because I was in for a great deal more of it.

“Come on then, Helena. You have dallied for long enough. Will you take up Sir Konrad’s patronage? Begin training to be a Justice?” Bressinger pressed. He must have been feeling emboldened by his drink, for although Bressinger and I spoke frankly on many matters, this was not one of them.

I shrugged. I myself was feeling really quite drunk. I continued to ill-advisedly see off the rest of my ale, and grabbed the last full tankard which had been earmarked for me.

“I know not,” I said. “It is alluring but—”

“You would rather be his wife than protégée,” Bressinger interrupted with a smirk.

I reeled as though I had been slapped. “Enough,” I demanded. Next to me, Sir Radomir was guffawing like an adolescent boy.

Bressinger winked at me, and hid his smile in his tankard. There was a falseness to it, though, an insecurity. It was not the first time he had brought it up. I felt as though he were trying to goad denials out of me, though ironically the more he raised it, the more it focused my thoughts on the matter. Privately, I thought he was worried I would take Sir Konrad away from him.

I set my teeth. “My relationship with—” I began, but I was once again interrupted, this time by a large man who had shuffled closer to our booth and who now stood at the very edge of the table.

“Where are you from, friend?” the man asked, pointing at Bressinger. He was a brute, bald and bearded, and half-cut from the way he swayed slightly. He looked like he was from the southern provinces of the Empire, perhaps Grozoda itself.

Bressinger flashed a cocky smile and set his tankard down. “Grozoda, chum,” he said, the last word a low Saxan colloquialism which sounded ridiculous in Bressinger’s accent.

“I can tell,” the man said.

“What you mean by that?” Sir Radomir asked angrily, but Bressinger calmed him with a gesture.

The man pointed to Bressinger’s missing arm. “You lose that in the Reichskrieg?”

“No,” Bressinger said, his humour undinted.

“What do you want?” Sir Radomir asked the man. “We are having a private conversation.”

“We don’t get many Grozodans here,” the man continued. His eyes were glassy and I felt as though I could smell his breath from where I was sat.

I fixed him in the eye, reckless from the alcohol. “Can you go away, please?” I said, irritably.

Both Bressinger and Sir Radomir laughed. The man did not.

“Were you at the Kyatakan Forest?” the man asked Bressinger directly.

I frowned, my features screwed up in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“Shut it, little dormouse,” the man snapped.

Sir Radomir made to get to his feet, but Bressinger held out a hand. “No, I was not,” he said. “I missed it by a whole year.” He gestured to the bar. “Come, let me buy you a drink.”

“I recognise you,” the man pressed. He shifted unsteadily. “You killed my companyman. Cut his throat.”

Bressinger made a show of looking behind the man. “Are you here with anyone, friend?”

“Admit it!” the man suddenly shouted. I started, but Bressinger and Sir Radomir remained impassive.

“Go on, mate, fuck off,” Sir Radomir said, nodding to the door. “We’re not here to discuss ancient history with you.”

The man loitered for an excruciating minute, then eventually slouched off. The three of us turned back to each other.

“What in Kasivar’s name was that all about?” I asked.

Bressinger shook his head, his mood dark. “Veteran. Probably lost his mind.”

“What was the Kyatakan Forest? A battle?”

“Aye. I’m guessing he was Vennish, from the look of him. Put it from your mind, Helena, just a poor sod with his mind turned inside out.”

We sat for a little while longer, but the confrontation had sapped our mood.

“I’ve never had that sort of trouble here before,” Bressinger said after a while. “You expect it in the provinces, but not in Sova.”

I could not help but think of our first meeting with Sir Radomir, and the way he had spoken dismissively of Bressinger and me. He had fought my countrymen in the Reichskrieg, and it had coloured his opinion of Tolsburg and everybody from it since. We were close friends, now, but would he treat

other Tolls with the same respect? Thinking about it still put my hackles up.

“That’s what happens when the political classes begin to stir shit into the pot,” Sir Radomir muttered. “I care not for Sovan politics, but while these so-called ‘Mlyanar Patricians’ are spewing out poisonous waste in the guise of discourse, do not be surprised when the commonfolk do the same. They will take their cues from their betters.”

Bressinger grunted and drained the last of his ale. Sir Radomir did the same, and I followed suit.

“Come on,” Bressinger said. “Let’s get some air.”

We headed back outside. Once again we followed Bressinger, and it was not long before he had led us to the banks of the Sauber. Here was one of its branches, as deep and wide as the rest, still fairly well trafficked by wherries, though the place where we stood was dark and clear of people.

“How long have you spent here, all in?” Sir Radomir asked Bressinger.

Bressinger shrugged. “Somewhere in the order of years,” he replied. “I don’t think I shall ever get used to the place.”

“It is something, that’s for certain,” the sheriff murmured.

I realised that both of them were having a piss, and took the opportunity to relieve myself too.

“I don’t know what shithole you three have come from, but here in Sova we have public privies,” I heard a voice say from behind us. In my haste to right myself, I slipped in the mud, and fumbling and cursing, I pressed myself to my feet.

A city watchman emerged from the shadows, a woman in light armour and carrying a spear. She eyed the three of us, steaming drunk as we were, through features creased in contempt.

“I hope you’ve coin on you; public pissing carries a fine.”

“It’s my fault,” Bressinger said, spreading his arm wide. He was wearing his biggest, most disingenuous grin, his Grozodan accent practically impenetrable.

The watchman cocked her head. “What’s your fault?” she asked.

Bressinger broke into a sudden run. He darted straight past the watchman

and back into the streets.

“Come on!” he shouted giddily.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” I heard Sir Radomir curse.

I charged headlong after Bressinger, drunk and feeling dizzy and sick, but at the same time laughing so much I could barely breathe. I do not think the watchman even attempted to chase us, but from the way we ran you’d think an Imperial Legion was bearing down on us.

We darted through crowds of people. Shouts and catcalls followed us. Bressinger led us on a merry dance. We ran down cobbled alleys, nearly turning our ankles; we sprinted down wide, flagstoned boulevards that ran between huge buildings of state; we shouldered our way past nobles and commonfolk alike. It felt as though we ran for hours, though it could only have been a few minutes.

Eventually, we drew to a stop a few backstreets away from the Sovan Arena. Here the crowds were thick from the evening games, and even if we had been pursued, there was no hope of us being caught now.

Sir Radomir caught up with us, red-faced and sweating and looking miserable. He bent over and spat on the floor, swearing.

“I am a sheriff,” he said. “I can’t be seen to do shit like this.”

Bressinger simply laughed and clapped him on the shoulder.

I promptly hunched over and vomited all of the alcohol I had drunk that evening. A mixture of groans, laughter, and cheers erupted from the nearby punters.

“That’s it, girl, get it all up,” Bressinger said with uncharacteristic tenderness, his hand grabbing my hair away from the stream of vomit. It was still only long on one side, where Mr Maquerink, the Galen’s Vale physician, had cut away the rest in order to tend to the wound I had sustained there. But it was growing out, slowly but surely.

I straightened myself up, hot with embarrassment.

“I think I need to turn in,” I said. It was past midnight and my head was spinning.

“I’ve a better idea,” Bressinger said, gesturing about. It was only then I saw that he had brought us to one of Sova’s insalubrious districts. Women and men in various stages of undress loitered in doorways enticingly, and above each establishment were ribald signs, each a more dreadful pun than the last.

“What do you expect me to do in a brothel?” I asked tiredly.

“Helena, you are in Sova now – for better or worse. They have brothels for women too.” Bressinger pointed to one such establishment, which had above it a large wooden phallus. An extremely muscular man, oiled and wearing nothing but a loincloth, gave me a smile.

“Nema, Dubine!” I said, though I was too tired and too drunk to feel much in the way of outrage. “Did you actually think I would want to come here?”

“*Coming here* is what it’s all about,” Bressinger said, appallingly, and even I had to laugh at that.

“I don’t want to go whoring, I want to go to bed,” I said.

“Suit yourself,” Bressinger said sullenly.

“You stay. I’ll take her,” Sir Radomir said. “I’ve not the stomach for it tonight.”

Bressinger sighed, exasperated. “What happened to you both? Sample the delights of the capital of the Empire! Take what pleasures from life you can! You heard our master; rough deeds await! Time to get our ends away.”

He spoke loudly and with great confidence, though there was a hint of desperation underneath this façade of rambunctiousness.

“Another time, Dubine,” Sir Radomir said.

Bressinger looked as though he were about to say more, and I saw a flash of anger pass across his features; but after a few moments, he simply shrugged, turned smartly, and headed off in the direction of the nearest brothel.

“Come on,” Sir Radomir said, watching our companion go. “I do not know what Sir Konrad has in store for us tomorrow, but it will be bad enough even without a hangover.”

IV

The Emperor

“Spend with prudence; govern with equity; punish with clemency.”

FROM THE VUKOVIĆIAN CARDINAL VIRTUES OF GOVERNANCE

We all regrouped at the Grand Lodge the following morning.

Sir Radomir and I had found a cheap inn and slept there, and I awoke with a pounding headache, my mouth stale and tasting of vomit. After a quick breakfast of plain bread and plenty of watery marsh ale, we made our way through the warm streets back to the Grand Lodge, pausing only to pick up a salt and mint leaf paste to freshen my breath. I still felt lightheaded and nauseous, but Sir Radomir, a sot, appeared fine.

We were not immediately granted access to the Grand Lodge, and had to wait whilst a succession of servants verified who we were. Then we were taken to Vonvalt’s chambers, a surprisingly small but well-appointed office in the upper levels of the Grand Lodge.

“Good morning,” Vonvalt said as we entered. Bressinger was already there, washed and dressed, though his eyes were bloodshot. Vonvalt himself looked somewhat haggard, and it was not just a hangover he was undoubtedly nursing. His ailment seemed once again to have flared up.

“You shall both have to wash and change before we go to see the Emperor. You smell like a tavern floor.” He looked at me. “And, Helena, you have mud all over your kirtle.”

My gut surged at the mention of an audience with the Emperor.

“We go today?” I asked.

“Aye,” Vonvalt said. “I probably should have seen him before Master Kadlec, but…” He shrugged. “There we are.”

“How was the rest of your evening?” I asked. I lowered my voice, and took a step forward. “I thought you said Master Kadlec was a traitor?”

Vonvalt looked up sharply. “It is a complex matter,” he said. He paused for a moment, busying himself with the effects on his desk. “The situation is fragile. I cannot just charge in here accusing people of treachery. We must unpick it slowly. Master Kadlec may know more – may have *done* more – than he is letting on, but we are not going to get to the bottom of it in one evening.”

I thought of Vonvalt lying on the cobbles in Galen’s Vale, bloodied and beaten, convinced that Kadlec had betrayed us all to Claver. Now that he was here, back amongst his colleagues, I could see that he was once again unwilling to believe the worst of his fellow Justices.

Sir Radomir and I left to prepare ourselves for the Imperial Palace. The Grand Lodge had extensive facilities for washing and laundering, since it acted as a base for over a thousand travelling Justices. We separated and bathed. Our clothes were laundered, too, though we were provided with fresh, formal outfits anyway.

We dressed ourselves, regrouped once more, and exited the Grand Lodge. There, Vonvalt summoned a carriage, and we were taken back through the streets to the Imperial Palace.

I had not known what to expect from our time in Sova, but this was certainly not it. I think I had anticipated something more akin to our lives hitherto. After all, Vonvalt had plenty of coin, and enjoyed unlimited authority and privilege, but our lives had not been filled with luxury. Most of our time and money had been spent on subsistence, not extravagance.

In Sova, Vonvalt seemed to enjoy the trappings of a royal. The fare alone for the carriage ride from the Grand Lodge to the Imperial Palace was more expensive than most peasant houses. The clothes I had been provided with, pulled off an old rack in the Magistratum with complete indifference, were some of the finest garments I had ever worn. It was too much for me. It felt unearned. I had done nothing to deserve this opulence, save embroiling myself with Vonvalt’s affairs. I had gone from the poorest it was possible to be to amongst the wealthiest, not just in the Empire, but in Sova itself. I felt

fraudulent, like it was all some great cosmic joke. These were not my people. For all the Autun's talk of equality, I would never truly be accepted as a Justice. Even Vonvalt, who was not a native Sovan, had still been an aristocrat in Jägeland.

I found myself in a strange, sour mood as we approached the Imperial Palace. These thoughts, mixed with a severe headache, had put me off balance. I did not feel mentally equipped to meet the most powerful man in the Empire. I had had my fill of powerful men.

"Listen to me, all of you," Vonvalt said quietly to me, Bressinger, and Sir Radomir as we dismounted the carriage. "The Emperor's reputation is one of wanton cruelty. You will all have heard this, not least from my lips. It is often beneficial to me to propagate it and other unpleasant rumours as it means bending people to my will without having to resort to more tiresome measures." He looked pale and drawn as he spoke. "The Emperor is no shrinking violet, and he has a severe comportment which tends to inspire fear in people; but he is, in my experience – mostly – reasonable. Pay the man the respect he is due and you will not have a problem."

"You mean…" Sir Radomir said, and cleared his throat. "You mean to take us to see him? The three of us? In there with you? I had imagined you would leave us to wait outside."

Vonvalt shook his head. "If I was going to do that I would have sent you to my residence, or left you in the Lodge. It is likely this meeting will take some time. And besides, the Emperor will want you with me, as witnesses."

"Witnesses?"

"Does not the fact that he has tasked his son with taking a Legion north to Roundstone suggest that he has full faith in your words alone?" Bressinger asked.

Vonvalt nodded. "Of course. And nor will my message be the only one to have reached him. One does not sack a city in Haunersheim without many voices shouting in chorus. But you are all missing the point. The Emperor is a shrewd man. Hearing my views on a matter does not mean excluding others."

"'The man who hears but one voice speaks with one; the man who hears a thousand speaks with all the world,'" I said, quoting Rothsinger.

"See?" Vonvalt said. "Helena has it and she is half your age."

Already I regretted saying it, but the urge to be clever and earn Vonvalt's praise was often an overwhelming one. I could see Bressinger and Sir

Radomir give me sidelong looks.

Vonvalt gestured to the huge, vaulted entrance to the Imperial Palace. “Come, we are wasting time. Remember your obeisances. A single bow at the waist is fine. If the Emperor rises, you must drop to your knees – but that will be the end of it. If you are over the top about it, you are as like to annoy him as if you had done nothing at all.”

The three of us must all have looked blank, for Vonvalt rolled his eyes. “Just do as I do, for Nema’s sake. Come on.”

I was amazed at just how much of the Imperial Palace was one vast chamber. From the outside one would be forgiven for thinking it was stuffed full of tens of miles of labyrinthine corridors and rooms. And whilst that might also have been true, certainly a huge portion of its internal space was given over to the Hall of Solitude – the Emperor’s throne room.

I could not help but gawp as we entered. As we walked across the blue-black floor of glossy marble, our bootsteps echoed like stones tossed into a canyon. Such a cavernous interior had the strange effect of seeming larger than simply being outside. It was as though the sky itself had been covered over by a vast ceiling.

The throne itself would have been breathtakingly impressive in almost any other setting, but as it was it was dwarfed by the sheer scale of its environment. Nonetheless, as we approached – a walk of several minutes – it resolved into a gigantic chair, its arms wrought-gold Autun, its base a pyramidal plinth of white marble steps, its back a huge circle embroidered with the famous Kliner tapestry *War of the Unification of the Three Original Sovan Provinces*. To either side lounged three of the Emperor’s infamous Sovan war shepherds – bulky, thickly muscled black dogs, pointy-eared and red-eyed and well known amongst the enemies of the Empire, whilst to the left was a statue of a seven-foot man with oiled black skin and the head of a wolf, clad in white robes and wielding a ceremonial halberd that looked as though it could split a man in half. A cabal of advisers, lavishly dressed but stooped and old, had been pre-emptively dismissed, and was making its way out of the throne room as we approached.

Almost lost in and amongst this ostentation and profligate immensity was the Emperor himself.

“Sir Konrad Vonvalt,” he rumbled.

“Your Majesty,” Vonvalt replied, bowing low. Next to him, and in spite of his advice, Sir Radomir and Bressinger collapsed to their knees, unable to hold in the overwhelming need to abase themselves entirely. For myself, I was able to execute a bow, but I was unable to stop myself from trembling, and the urge to collapse to my knees was a strong one. It speaks volumes of Vonvalt’s character that he was physically able to stand and converse with the man as something approaching an equal.

“It has been too long, my errant son,” the Emperor said. He spoke pleasantly. I could immediately see Prince Gordan in him. He had the same collar-length dark red hair and close-cropped beard, though his skin was rougher and more creased with age and the stresses and strains of commanding a wartime empire. He had a prominent brow and cheekbones and a large, down-turned nose, all of which conspired to give him a stern, regal bearing. When he spoke, his voice was deep and authoritative, and it was easy to see how the Emperor’s Voice had come to be named.

“It has,” Vonvalt said. “Might I take a moment to present my retainers?”

“Please do,” the Emperor said. “I am always keen to meet those who suckle like cubs on the royal teat.” I sensed a wryness in his voice, but I could not be certain enough to relax.

“This is my clerk and protégée, Helena Sedanka,” Vonvalt said. I baulked. I had not expected to be introduced first, though of course in the hierarchy of our little band, protocol put me directly after Vonvalt. “If I have my way, she will one day join the Order, and become a Justice in her own right.”

The Emperor turned to face me. I felt his gaze like a physical force, as tangible as the heat and light from the sun. It fixed me in place like a statue.

“If you ‘have your way’, Sir Konrad?” the Emperor asked, not shifting his eyes from me.

“The girl is torn on the matter,” Vonvalt said.

I would have happily died in that moment.

The Emperor regarded me. “She is wise, then,” he said, his mood darkening. “You and I must grasp that nettle today, I am afraid, though you look like you are rapping on the gates of Hell. What ails you, man?”

Vonvalt cleared his throat. “I am not certain, Your Majesty,” he said.

“Some affliction which has come on suddenly these past few weeks.”

“Hm. Well, see that you engage the services of the Royal Physician. Nema knows she is paid enough.”

Vonvalt grunted. “Your son, the Prince Gordan, has so directed me.”

The Emperor sat back, a thin smile on his face. “You encountered him?”

“To the east of Badenburg, Majesty, at the head of the 16th Legion.”

“Good,” the Emperor said. “His engagement in that regard is your doing. But we shall return to that matter in a moment, too. Tell me of these two of your men.” He directed his attention to Sir Radomir and Bressinger. “Get up off the floor, would you both?”

They both leapt up like jerked puppets.

“This is Sir Radomir Dragić, formerly the sheriff of Galen’s Vale and now one of my taskmen.”

“Well met, Sir Radomir. Your town has had trouble from one of my margraves, for which I apologise.”

Sir Radomir opened his mouth, but he was unable to form any words, and he choked like a fish pulled from water.

“Hm,” the Emperor said, having evidently wearied of this effect long before. “And this is?”

“Dubine Bressinger, Majesty, my first taskman.”

The Emperor looked at Bressinger. He narrowed his eyes slightly. “Have we met before?” he asked.

“Not directly, Your Majesty,” Bressinger replied. “But I have been in your presence on several occasions. I have been Sir Konrad’s taskman for many years.”

“Indeed,” the Emperor said. He nodded to Bressinger’s stump. “You’ve lost your arm.”

“Aye, Your Majesty.”

“How?”

Bressinger cleared his throat. “In Galen’s Vale, Your Majesty. One of Margrave Westenholtz’s men.”

“You killed him?”

“And a few more besides.”

The Emperor looked back at Vonvalt. “You have not seen fit to knight this man?”

Vonvalt looked uncomfortable. “It is not a reflection on his character,

Majesty. Dubine has refused the honour in the past."

The Emperor looked back at Bressinger. "You are loyal to Sir Konrad."

"Unto death, Your Majesty."

"But you cannot countenance Imperial patronage and what it represents?"

Bressinger squirmed. In an inn, a few marsh ales down, Bressinger was an arrogant and ardent critic of the Autun and lamented the annexation of his native Grozoda. But in front of the Emperor, he was as meek and pathetic as the next man.

"I—"

"No doubt your experience of the Reichskrieg bred the resentment you feel?" the Emperor interrupted.

I looked between Vonvalt, Bressinger, and the Emperor with increasing alarm. None of us had expected such candour. I was sure in that moment that Bressinger was about to be beheaded.

"Your Majesty, I—"

"I'll not have it said that I do not value the loyalty of my retainers – for you are my retainer if you are Sir Konrad's."

"Your Majesty, I did not mean any disrespect."

"And yet, you *have* disrespected me," the Emperor said. It was only then that I felt as though the Emperor was jesting with us, but still I could not be certain. Vonvalt, however, was visibly unfazed.

Bressinger fell to his knees again. The Emperor stood, and so then we all dropped to our knees as Vonvalt had instructed.

"Well, Dubine Bressinger, I am afraid you have earnt an Imperial knighthood whether you like it or not." He descended the marble plinth, resplendent in his fine clothes and cloak, and placed a hand on Bressinger's head. "You are now Sir Dubine Bressinger, a Knight of the Chivalric Order of the Autun." He removed his hand. "You may style yourself however you wish," he added with a distasteful wave of his hand, as if suddenly bored of the whole endeavour. Then he turned back to Vonvalt. "And now, Sir Konrad, come with me. Bring your clerk, too, if she is to join the Order. We have matters of state to discuss." He turned over his shoulder. "Kimathi?"

The wolf-headed statue moved. I gasped.

The Emperor shot me an irritated look. "See these two out, would you?" He gestured to Bressinger and Sir Radomir, whose counsel – contrary to what Vonvalt had anticipated – was not required. "I'll not receive anyone else

today.”

The wolf-headed man inclined his head, and left his post to take Sir Radomir and Bressinger out of the Hall of Solitude.

V

The Beating Heart of the Civilised World

"'Tis nothing but a good thing that the pagan magicks have all but departed these mortal planes. The forces of civilisation, of the supremacy of the common law, of liberty and equality – a person may take all the succour they need from these earthly forces alone."

SIR WILLIAM THE HONEST

"Sir Konrad did not tell you about the Imperial Warden?" the Emperor said.

We were in the Emperor's private strategium, a room which sat at the very top of the palace and which was filled with maps of the various territories of the Empire and beyond – including of places I had never seen nor heard of. We had achieved this summit by virtue of an elevator suspended on chains and operated by a horse-powered winch. The black tiles of the gargoyle and spire-ridden roof of the palace sloped away from us vertiginously. Here, the morning sun filtered through the fully circular aspect of the strategium and filled it with warm, honey-coloured light.

The Emperor threw off his cloak and removed his crown, and I became suddenly and acutely conscious that I was seeing the man in a setting that almost nobody in the known world was privy to – except presumably that cabal of advisers I had seen being dismissed in the Hall of Solitude. Sova had been described by many people as the beating heart of the civilised world, but in reality it wasn't the city itself, or even the throne room beneath us; it was

this chamber, the strategium, where the Emperor could talk most freely and directly to his closest retainers.

"I did not think to," Vonvalt admitted.

"A whole race of wolf men, living on the Southern Plains. The Kasar Kyarai. An empire of them. The *real* Empire of the Wolf." The Emperor chuckled darkly.

"How did they come to be?" I asked.

The Emperor fussed about with a bottle for a moment. "Wine?"

"Allow me, Majesty—"

"By Nema, sit down, Sir Konrad, before you collapse."

Vonvalt obliged, taking a seat next to a huge, circular table that was itself a map of the Empire. The map had been cut into the wood with extreme precision; each province was marked in a different colour, and every town, city, river, forest, and wayfort was written on with a level of care that would have shamed the most skilled monastic calligrapher.

"You know of the great magickal cataclysm," the Emperor said, looking at me.

"I have heard of it," I said, for Vonvalt had mentioned it in his history lessons. I knew it had taken place many centuries before, and was the thing that had introduced magicks to the world. "I know not its true nature."

"No one does. But it is said that it was caused by the unification of the mortal plane and the holy dimensions. An alignment, akin to those of the heavenly bodies, that opened gateways between realms of existence and allowed magicks to spill into our world. That is all we do, after all, when we channel the arcana – tap into the energies of the afterlife." He shrugged, and handed Vonvalt and me a goblet of wine each. I was so flustered by all of this that I did not even abide by the protocol that insisted I wait until the Emperor – and Vonvalt, for that matter – drink first.

"What do you think?" the Emperor asked me.

I blushed furiously, immediately realising my mistake.

"Your Majesty, I did not—"

But he waved me quiet. "I asked you what you thought, not to apologise to me," he said, annoyed. "Come, tell me what you think." He took a long nose at his own goblet.

"It is… the best wine I think I have ever had," I said, entirely truthfully.

The Emperor nodded. "Yes, I should imagine it is," he said. "It's a

Klokanpolje. Sixty years old." He took a draw and swilled it around his mouth. "Good," he proclaimed, then sat opposite us. He exhaled loudly. "The magickal cataclysm bred the Kasar – and others, besides, such as the Stygion Mermen – binding together human and animal. And my many-greats grandfather, Valent Saxan, adopted the first wolf device that would eventually become the Autun, and a Kasari bodyguard to protect him during a tour of the Southern Plains, and – well. That is how traditions are started. And now, centuries later, Kimathi is the Imperial Warden, and I his ward."

He took a draw of wine and turned to Vonvalt. "Thank you for your warning, Konrad, about Galen's Vale," he said. "I do not know what news of Sova has made it up north to you, but there is no small amount of hysteria gripping the city."

"Justice August intimated that the Mlyanars and the Templars have been making mischief."

The Emperor nodded. "Resi is well informed. She is one of my very best."

Vonvalt cleared his throat. "*Was*, Majesty. She is, for all intents and purposes, murdered."

The Emperor looked at Vonvalt sharply. "Murdered? You made no mention of this in your message!"

"Her body lives on, in the hospice in the Galen's Vale kloster. But her mind is dead. Margrave Westenholtz and a Neman priest by the name of Bartholomew Claver conspired to trap her mind in the body of a fox with the Rune of Entrapment, and then cut its throat. I did not have a great deal of time, Majesty, and I did not want to risk the news of it falling into the wrong hands."

"Blood of gods! The Rune of Entrapment? The conspirators have hold of old Saxan magicks?"

"Aye, Majesty. I know not how Claver came to be in possession of it, but I assure you I intend to find out."

The Emperor rubbed his face with his hands. "Prince of Hell, what a mess. I have a network of spies that would make a Caudian king green with envy, yet not a one of them seems to be able to keep track of it all. I am pleased you are back."

"Majesty, what is happening in the Senate?" Vonvalt asked, putting his goblet down, the wine untouched.

"A great deal, thanks to your hanging of Westenholtz," the Emperor said,

casting Vonvalt a sidelong look. “Nema knows the man deserved it, but blood of gods, Konrad, I wish you had sent him back here.”

“He was a traitor to the Crown,” Vonvalt said, surprised. It was the first time I had ever seen Vonvalt face any kind of censure, and immediately I could tell it had stung him.

“A *popular* traitor to the Crown,” the Emperor said. “You may well have martyred him.”

Vonvalt shifted in his seat. “Would hanging him in Sova have changed that?”

The Emperor made a vague waving motion at Vonvalt. “Let us not be precious about it. The Senate has been looking for an excuse to devour itself for some time. I daresay if it wasn’t Westenholtz, it would have been something else.” He levelled a finger at Vonvalt. “Though you should not have *hanged* him.”

“I had revoked his titles. He was—” Vonvalt began, his back now well and truly up, but the Emperor silenced him with a shake of his head.

“We are not in the courtroom, Konrad. You know as well as I do that you should have given him the sword.”

Vonvalt lapsed to silence. The reprimand filled the room like a bad smell, but the Emperor was not in the slightest bit bothered by his prodigal son’s sour mood.

He placed his hands on the edge of the map table, gripping the wooden rim. “All of these branches have a common root,” he said. “The Mlyanar Patricians have been agitating for years, and they have always enjoyed the support of the Templars. It is a state of affairs that has never troubled me, for short of dissolving the Senate there is no cure for factionalism. But it is this man, this Neman patria, *Claver*. He has managed to rally lords and lands to the cause of the Templars like never before. Men and women from the northern provinces are flocking to his banner. And as the Templars’ fortunes swell, so too do the Mlyanars’. Now the latter are the predominant force in the Senate. They think that having these Templar armies gives their demands more bite, as though the Legions have somehow just evaporated. The loss of the *talismanic* Waldemar Westenholtz will be a blow to them, but I fear you have made the Order even more of a target than it was. And whilst our enemies seem brazen, they are capable of great subtlety, too, Konrad. They move in sophisticated ways.”

“But what is it they *want*?” Vonvalt asked, close to exasperation.

The Emperor picked up a pair of wooden army markers and threw them across the map table like a pair of dice. “They want power. Specifically, legislative and executive power – to be vested within the Senate,” the Emperor sneered.

“Which they control,” Vonvalt murmured. It was what Senator Tymoteusz Jansen had told us weeks before.

“Indeed. They would reduce my position to that of an elected monarch, and then they would look to give precedence to the canon law. That latter part is my theory anyway; the involvement and backing of the Neman Church makes little sense otherwise. The Patricians and the Church are working in concert, but they are uneasy bedfellows. Each considers themselves to be the puppetmaster, not the puppet.”

“And it would also explain why the wider Church has been mute on the matter,” Vonvalt said. “Unless I am mistaken, and they have condemned Claver and his cronies?”

“No, you are quick to grasp it,” the Emperor said. “Claver has convinced the Neman Church that they need and deserve the old Saxan powers back. Of course, there are churchmen who renounce Claver, and plenty within Sova see him as an irritating upstart. But the lure has been dangled, and whilst Claver is making headway they are happy to play out the line and see how far he gets before they declare for one side or another. The equivocation infuriates me. Would that I still controlled the Church as my great-grandfather did, rather than the bloody Prognosticators’ College.”

Vonvalt spoke his next words carefully. I could tell he was reluctant to bring up the question of the Magistratum’s duplicity. “Justice August suspected that Master Kadlec was leaking the secrets of the Order to the Nemans for the sake of a peaceful life.” He paused. “I interrogated the obenpatria of the Galen’s Vale kloster myself. He confessed there was at least one Justice working with the Church.”

“Kadlec is a coward and a fool,” the Emperor said with vehemence. “He has been treating with the Patricians in Sova, of that I am certain. I have made my displeasure known, and to hear the bloody Mlyanars you would think I had issued some kind of formal denouncement of the Magistratum as a whole. But the truth of the matter is I have been reluctant to move against the Order until now. Of the three Imperial Estates, the only one I currently

truly control is this one." He tapped himself on the chest as he spoke. "But with you back, Konrad, I can start to purge the Magistratum of its rebellious elements too. Then we can turn our attentions to the Senate. There are people in the *streets*, Konrad. Complaining. Massing. Chanting. Sova is a powder keg. The Mlyanars must be brought to heel, and quickly."

Vonvalt cleared his throat. The Emperor's talk of a purge had clearly alarmed him. "Majesty, I fear it is not just the martial backing of the Templars which is emboldening the Mlyanars."

"There is some other factor?"

"Patria Claver himself has become very adept at wielding several of the Order's powers. Not only is he immune to the Voice, but I told you that he was able to conjure and inscribe the Rune of Entrapment. He was also able to…" Vonvalt searched for the right words. "*Grip* me, Majesty, using only his mind, and even raise me into the air as though using an invisible rope. With great physicality. Helena tells me that the effort drained him completely, but given the speed with which he has been able to learn and command these powers, it will not be long before he is able to wield it with little expenditure of energy. There are elements he will struggle to grasp without tutelage, but he is proving to be a preternaturally gifted adept. He is becoming much too powerful, Majesty; certainly he is approaching the equal of any Justice."

The Emperor took a moment to pour himself another goblet of wine. He took a few sips.

"So. Claver has armed himself with all sorts of old Saxan sorceries. Now he seeks to install himself at the head of an army of Templars. And then what? Move north on Sova?"

Vonvalt shrugged. "That is my fear, Majesty. Or perhaps cut out an enclave in the south of the Empire? Take the Frontier lands in his own name. The Templar fortresses would be formidable obstacles to any army, even the Legions."

The Emperor sighed. "In other circumstances I would dismiss it as risible. But with the Senate against me, the Church sitting on its hands, and the Order staffed with craven old men…" He sighed again. "'Tis as though someone has the Autun's neck in the crook of their arm and is slowly strangling the life out of it."

The strange turn of phrase jolted me, as though someone had tolled a

temple bell two feet from my head. The vision of Lady Karol Frost strangling the two-headed wolf cub, the one that had plagued me as I had exited the séance with Fenland Graves, filled my mind's eye with a stunning and visceral clarity. I glanced at Vonvalt, and he briefly met my eye. I thought for a moment he was going to tell the Emperor about Master Kane, about his theory of Entanglement, and how we had been swept up into great, world-shaping events.

But when he spoke, it was about something else.

"You have sent a Legion north to deal with Baron Naumov," Vonvalt said.

"Aye. And then on to Seaguard. I intend for Prince Gordan to take up the margraveship temporarily, for it will not be long before the North Sea is calm enough for the northmen to start their summer fighting season. Once the Northmark of Haunersheim is secure, he will return."

"Have you had word of any other rebel lords in Haunersheim?"

The Emperor shook his head. "None beyond Westenholtz and Naumov. If it is some kind of open revolt, then it is a shabby one to be sure."

Vonvalt pursed his lips. A month ago he might have agreed with the Emperor and said nothing more on the matter, but his recent experience in the Vale had made him more reflective, more cautious.

"Majesty, is it not the case that the majority of the Empire's fighting men and women are tied up in the east along the Kova?"

The Emperor gave Vonvalt a look that was difficult to read. Eventually, he said, "Two-thirds, by now. Kòvosk is a thorny province. I'd have thought Tasa taking Iliyana as a wife would have quelled it, but it seems not to have made a modicum of difference."

Kòvosk was one of the largest and wealthiest nations in the Kova Confederation, a collection of states that existed between the Empire's eastern boundary and the endless plains of the Gvòrod Steppe. Now that every acre of land west of the Kova, from the tip of Haunersheim to the southern Frontier, had been conquered, the Confederation had been the next logical step in the expansion. But the easterners had had decades to prepare for the inevitable Autun invasion and had spent millions of marks in fortifying the borders and raising and training large armies and militias. Now tens of thousands of men from the Legions were stuck in Kòvosk, garrisoning a dozen new castles constructed at unimaginable expense to try and tame the

land. Justice August had been right: of the quarter-million Imperial men and women in arms, most could simply not be moved from where they were without losing – in a matter of weeks – gains that had taken many years to get a claw-hold into. And the strategic marriage of the Emperor's firstborn son, Prince Tasa Kzosic, to the Duke of Kòvosk's daughter, Iliyana of Casimir, seemed to have made no appreciable difference to the volatility of those provinces.

"Can any be spared to make south to the Frontier?"

The Emperor waved him off. "Do not trouble yourself with that, Konrad," he said dismissively, evidently tired of talking about the Empire's ills. "There are many steps to take before we grasp that nettle. I am not concerned with a few thousand Templars. Nema knows they die often enough."

"Majesty, I—"

"No, thank you. I've had my fill of counsel this morning."

I tried to conceal a flash of alarm at this. Vonvalt was hardly pressing the man with idle chatter. These were important matters of state, and from a trusted subordinate. But I was young and naïve, and still coming to grips with the monumental bureaucratic indolence of Sova.

"I shall take my leave, then," Vonvalt said, wrong-footed.

"No," the Emperor said. "Wait there. There is something else that I will have you do. Two things, in fact."

Vonvalt sat. I could see that he was exhausted. His face was pale and his brow was sheened with a thin layer of perspiration.

"Anything, Majesty," he said.

"Master Kadlec is weak and ineffectual at the very best and a traitor to the Crown at the worst. I mean to remove him."

Vonvalt took a moment to consider this. "I expect Master Kadlec is grappling with matters he is unused to having to deal with." I felt sorry for Vonvalt. This matter put him in a difficult position. Kadlec was his master and mentor, but at the same time, it was clear that his position was completely untenable.

"You are being much too generous," the Emperor said. "Our enemies cannot grow powerful without the laxity and complicity of our friends. On the very best assessment, Nathaniel simply does not have the fortitude required to helm the Order. On the worst, he has been actively working against me for the past year. Unfortunately, there is only one way to make

sure.”

Vonvalt sighed mightily. “In the circumstances, Majesty, might I counsel discretion? Perhaps allowing him to quietly retire? He is the head of the Order, yes, but I have the feeling he is at the mercy of its more malign elements.”

The Emperor scoffed. “Sir Konrad, you do not have a reputation for being a soft touch. It is a reputation I intend to leverage. The rot in the Magistratum is too deep. I am well aware that Kadlec is not acting *in vacuo*. A purge is required, and you are going to be the one to lead it.”

Vonvalt had evidently anticipated this, but even so, it was plain the thought did not please him. “Who will you install in Kadlec’s place? There are a number of candidates I am happy to recommend—”

“Plainly, you, Konrad,” the Emperor said, and poured himself another goblet of wine. He did not offer us any more.

Vonvalt sat back. A silence seized the strategium. I do not think that Vonvalt expected to be the one to be picked. He was relatively young, for one, and had just spent the best part of three years touring the Empire. The Emperor could and did appoint Masters, but usually on recommendation from within the Order itself; and those who were recommended were much older, had spent many years within Sova, and had several volumes of jurisprudence to their name. Such a state of affairs cut two ways: the men and women were infinitely learned and wise, and moreover understood the political nature of the appointment even if the Order was supposed to be apolitical. But conversely they tended to be unadventurous, preferring the status quo instead of modernising, and were often more interested in whiling away their days deep in the Law Library and the Master’s Vaults than representing the Order and bringing the light of the common law to the darkness of the Imperial hinterlands.

“Majesty… there is a long list of people who have precedence. And besides, I have not been in Sova for a very long time. Dare I say that I am out of touch?”

The Emperor looked irritated. “Yours is not the reaction I had expected,” he said reproachfully, and in that moment I realised just how much the Emperor valued and relied on Vonvalt. I did not know a great deal about their history, only that Vonvalt had been amongst a group of Reichskrieg draftees honoured for their wartime heroics by the Emperor himself. I didn’t really

know of, nor had Vonvalt ever really spoken about, the fifteen years in which he had been a touring Justice and skilful political operator, assisting the Emperor with a number of tricky legal matters which had seen his reputation as a Justice, and his relationship with the Emperor, sealed. For whilst it was true that all other Justices enjoyed the same legal standing vis-à-vis the Emperor, none enjoyed this level of confidence.

It also meant that Vonvalt's demurring smacked of false modesty.

"I am not ungrateful, Majesty, it is a singular honour."

"It is not a request."

Vonvalt smiled awkwardly. "No, I did not take it as such. It is just that I fear my return after a lengthy absence, coupled with a sudden and dramatic purge of the Order's most august members, will not enamour me to the other Justices."

"Nema's blood, man, such considerations are well past us! Not five minutes ago it was you trying to impress the gravity of the situation on me! What is this, mummery? Am I now to convince you of your own position? I give not one jot for the feelings of the Justices. Frankly, a bolt of lightning such as this is just what the Order needs!" He took a deep breath, and a deeper draw of wine. He spent a few moments calming himself. "The Justices can drink brine. The time for action is now." The Emperor performed a lazy simulacrum of the sign of Nema in Vonvalt's direction. "You are, by Imperial decree, the new Master of the Order of the Magistratum and Imperial Lord Prefect."

The Lord Prefect. The most senior lawkeeper in the Empire. I had to stop my jaw from dropping. There were three Imperial Estates – the Emperor himself, the Senate, and the Order of the Magistratum. Since the Emperor had ultimate executive authority, it meant the leader of the Senate and the head of the Order were the two highest-ranking appointees in the Empire. It should have been a singular honour, the culmination of Vonvalt's career. Instead, he accepted it like a man accepting the post of captain on a ship that is already half sunk.

"I am honoured," he said.

"You *are* honoured," the Emperor said, "and your first order as Prefect is to go with the warden and a host of Imperial Guard and have that *traitor* Kadlec arrested."

Vonvalt bowed his head. "At once, Majesty."

“No, not at once. In a moment,” the Emperor said.

I could tell Vonvalt was getting frustrated. “What else would you have me do, Majesty?”

“I am creating a new special procedure for cases of treason. The situation in Kòvosk necessitates it.”

“How so?”

“The Confederation has acquired blackpowder.”

Vonvalt looked alarmed. “I did not know that,” he said.

“And why should you? You said yourself you have been out of the capital for nigh on three years,” the Emperor snapped. He too was getting annoyed. His talisman had returned, but he was weary, sickly, and ungrateful.

“A point well made, Majesty,” Vonvalt said.

“They do not have it in great quantities, but they have a steady supply of it, which is in many ways worse. My margraves tell me they use it to great effect in the countryside, concealing it at the roadsides and detonating it as Imperial patrols pass. It is a singularly dishonourable way to wage war, and clumsy to boot, but the efficacy of it is beyond question – no amount of plate will protect a man from the force of the blast. My Legions cower in their castles, afraid to dominate the land which is mine by right, whilst Confederation agitators move about freely, their plans undisrupted and unhindered.”

“You have a plan, Majesty?”

“The common law is ill suited to dealing with practices such as these. The Kòvoskan saboteurs take advantage of our law and the protections it offers. They know that they must be granted quarter on surrender, be treated fairly, and ultimately face trial. Such matters can take years given the state of the lists. I, and my father, and my father’s father spent the better part of our lives bringing law and civilisation to the dark places of the world, and yet these people would use those same laws against us. Hopeless cases of treason tie up the courts for months, whilst lawmen seeking to make a name for themselves champ at the bit to represent the accused. The news spreads and each captured saboteur becomes a martyr to the cause. And it is all for nothing; juries drawn from the Kòvoskan province acquit their countrymen without fail. I will not have it.”

“What is the special procedure, then?” Vonvalt asked.

“I shall give you the decree. There is no sense in me wasting time and

breath reciting it all here and now. I shall let the document speak for itself."

Vonvalt inclined his head. I could tell that he was pleased not to hear more.

"The special procedure is to take effect immediately. I shall leave it to you to see that the rest of the Magistratum is informed – or what is left of it after you have cut out the treachery there."

"Yes, Majesty."

"Root and branch," the Emperor warned.

"I understand," Vonvalt said tiredly.

"I know for a fact you do. Do not disappoint me, Konrad. The security of the realm is at stake."

"Yes, Majesty," Vonvalt said.

"Yes, Majesty, indeed," the Emperor said. "You are dismissed."

We were returned to the ground floor of the Palace. I expected Vonvalt to lead us to the exit, but instead we detoured away from the vaulted entrance halls and into a labyrinthine sequence of corridors. In that regard, the Imperial Palace was a little like the Grand Lodge: a termite mound of halls, passageways, and chambers, the home of a vast body of retainers and staff that kept the wheels of the Imperial apparatus turning.

"Where are we going?" I asked, almost running to keep up with Vonvalt.

"The Royal Physician. I might as well avail myself of her services before we leave. I do not expect there will be much time otherwise in the coming days and weeks. You yourself look as though you are sickening."

"'Tis only because I drank a skinful last night," I said hurriedly.

The shadow of a smile played over Vonvalt's lips.

The Royal Physician resided in a large, east-facing chamber several storeys above ground level. On the door was no crude painted blue star; instead, there was a sapphire the size of my palm, set in gold, over an Autun wrought from obsidian.

Vonvalt rapped on the door, which was quickly pulled open by a grey-haired woman wearing fine clothes overlaid by a filthy, floor-length leather apron. A pair of spectacles perched on the bridge of her nose, the thick lenses

giving her a bug-eyed look and frenetic air.

“Yes?” she asked briskly, listening impatiently as Vonvalt introduced us, and explained that he had been sent to see her by the Emperor. “You’d better come in then,” she said, pulling the door all the way open and gesturing for us to enter.

Beyond the threshold was a chaotic mass of medicines and implements. I was surprised to see not only floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with all manner of ointments, salves, and unguents, but a vast collection of astronomy equipment, too, as well as mason jars filled with vinegar and body parts, and a truly staggering number of plants. The smell of herbs was overpowering, so much so that I felt my gorge rise.

“Ah,” the physician said as she noticed. She looked around quickly, then snatched up and passed me a drink that had to have been her own but a few moments before. “Drink.” To my surprise, I found myself obliging without a breath of protest. “Sit over there in that corner,” she said, pointing to a chair surrounded by wooden crates filled with bones, and I sat.

“Now,” she said, planting her knuckles on a wooden trestle next to her. “What can I do for you, Sir Konrad?”

“I… Well, actually it’s rather difficult to explain,” he said. “I feel physically unwell, but that is only part of it.”

The physician frowned. I could tell he had immediately piqued her interest. “Tell me your symptoms.”

Vonvalt gestured vaguely around his head and body. “Malaise. Sometimes I feel feverish; other times I suffer from chills. On some days I have difficulty in concentrating, as though my mind were fogged. And…” He paused again. “I feel this strange sensation of… dread. Or perhaps it is more like anticipation. I suffer nightmares, too, in a way I never have before.”

I found myself listening to this list of ailments with not a little anxiety. But it was an anxiety of several parts. The first was simple existential discomfort; the kind one feels when something that was previously stable has become unstable. Vonvalt was my master, mentor, and employer. If he became ill – or worse, died – then my day-to-day life would change completely.

But there was something else, too, some other element which went beyond selfish worry. I felt an anxiety for him and his well-being which ran much deeper. It was a more urgent anxiety, one which I had not really

experienced before. It frightened me with its intensity.

The physician, oblivious to my silent turmoil, regarded Vonvalt for a while. “Have you done anything recently that disturbed you? Some undertaking which affected your emotional state?”

Vonvalt chuckled darkly. “I am a Justice, milady. Seldom a day passes when I do not encounter something which disturbs me. The citizens of the Empire are capable of great evil.”

“When did the symptoms start?”

“Perhaps a fortnight ago.”

“Could you have contracted a pox?”

Vonvalt, who was as learned as most provincial physicians in matters of ill health, shook his head. “No. I am careful in my dealings with corpses, and I have not been bitten by anything. And besides, the ailment is intermittent. Some days it will be close to debilitating. Other days I will not be affected at all.”

The physician nodded to herself. “I will need some of your urine, and blood.” She nodded in my direction. “Perhaps your companion would like to wait outside?”

“Yes, of course,” I said quickly. I stood and made for the exit, turning back briefly to see Vonvalt rolling up one of his sleeves, whilst the physician began to pull out large, leather-bound scrolls of astronomical charts.

“Helena,” Vonvalt said to me as I opened the door. “Ask Dubine to take you and Sir Radomir back to my house. I shall see you when my business here is concluded.”

I dallied on the threshold, unsure of what to say.

“Was there something?” Vonvalt asked me.

I shook my head. As always, there was too much to put into words. “No, nothing,” I said, and left.

I met up with Bressinger and Sir Radomir outside the Royal Palace, and together the three of us made our way to the Summit of the Prefects.

“The Emperor has made Sir Konrad the head of the Order?” Bressinger asked as I related to them what had come to pass.

“Unless I have grossly misunderstood what just took place, then yes,” I said, still unable to shake that feeling of anxiety that had settled in my gut.

“Fuck me,” Sir Radomir said.

Bressinger sucked his teeth. “Nema, and here I thought we were about to divest ourselves of some of this burden, not become its sole custodian. When does the Emperor expect Sir Konrad to move against the Magistratum? He will have to do it with a host of armed men.”

“I know not,” I murmured, and the three of us lapsed to silence.

We moved through the streets, the late-morning air warm and with a hint of spring drizzle. Eventually we reached the Summit of the Prefects, and after some back and forth with the gate guards, seals, and written warrants of office, we made our way up the hill to where Vonvalt’s residence was.

The house itself was an impressive two-storey manse of crenellated grey stone, L-shaped, with clear glass windows and tall, sloped roofs of dark red tile. The whole thing was smothered in climbing plants, and was set back from the street within its own well-kept grounds, which appeared to include a peach orchard he had never mentioned.

Per the instructions he had sent ahead, the place had been restored to full working order. Bressinger knocked on the door, and the housekeeper, a stout Hauner woman by the name of Hilda, opened it. She pulled Dubine into a rough, overly dramatic embrace and made a great lament about his missing arm. She was considerably more reserved with me and Sir Radomir, but polite enough, and invited us in.

We ducked in out of the rain. I had not known what to expect from Vonvalt’s house, but it was nothing remarkable. That is to say, it was clearly an exorbitantly expensive manse, filled with dark wood panelling, tapestries and rugs, multiple hearths, stained-glass windows, mounted hunting trophies from the forests of Guelich and staffed by at least five people that I saw. By any account it was a luxurious and ostentatious manor – but it was just another lord’s house, with nothing to mark it out from a thousand others like it. After all, Vonvalt spent almost no time there. It made sense that its furnishings and decoration would conform to the prevailing style.

We made ourselves comfortable in the main hall, where we were plied with victuals. Hilda was unable to hide her disappointment that Vonvalt was not there – she was the kind of person who thrived on subservience, and was curiously haughty with anyone who wasn’t the man himself – but she bade us

help ourselves to the ridiculously profligate spread that she and the staff had laid on. There was enough roasted meat, bird, pastry, cheese, and bread to feed twelve lords, and enough wine to drown them, or at least keep Sir Radomir red-faced for an afternoon.

We tucked in, and either ate in silence or talked idle nonsense. We talked about Sova, and the Emperor's warden, Kimathi, the wolf-headed figure whom I had taken to be a statue. But it was clear that we were all preoccupied with the thought of the impending violence in the Magistratum, and the conversation was stilted.

We finished lunch in silence and went our separate ways. After securing myself a bedchamber, I went to Vonvalt's extensive private library, and passed the afternoon trying and failing to read, much too anxious to really concentrate on anything.

Vonvalt did eventually return late that evening. He had spent most of the day with Haugenate senators, husbanding his allies, preparing them for the upheaval to come. He met me in the library, and summoned Dubine and Sir Radomir. To the former he handed a parcel, which contained an unguent for the man's arm stump.

"Apply it as often as it troubles you," Vonvalt said. He looked tired.

"Thank you, sire," Bressinger said, and I could see that he was touched by the gesture.

Vonvalt bade us all sit, and we did. He produced and lit his pipe.

"We will attend the Grand Lodge tomorrow. I warn you now, this will be an ugly business. The Magistratum has always held itself above these manoeuvrings. But Resi was right. She was right about so many things." He paused. "The Order is political whether it wants to be, and if the Empire is to survive – if the rule of law is to survive – then we must remove its… recalcitrant elements."

"What is the order of the day?" Bressinger asked.

Vonvalt took in a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "The Emperor will provide us with a contingent of Imperial Guard. Their role will be twofold: to protect us, of course, and to detain the rogue Justices." He spoke the last two words with distaste.

"Could the Justices not simply use the Emperor's Voice?" Sir Radomir asked. "Have the Guards discard their weapons, or worse? Before they can be detained?" he added.

Vonvalt shook his head. “The Imperial Guard is the Emperor’s personal bodyguard. They are as immune to the Emperor’s Voice as any Justice. It forms part of their training. That is why we are using them, and not simply the city watch.”

“Have you not friends within the Order? People to call on, people who could assist you in this?” I asked.

I could see that the question had not pleased Vonvalt. “If I had any friends within the Order then this decree will ensure I lose them. Hearts of iron must prevail now. They need leadership, not a friend.”

The four of us sat in silence for a few moments.

“Nema,” Sir Radomir swore after a while. “I did not expect this. To be having to do… *this*. I have led raids on places before, illegal stills, wharves, whorehouses. But not one of the Imperial Estates.” He instinctively reached for a drink that was not there. “This may be too rich even for my blood.”

“Oh, this is but the beginning,” Vonvalt said darkly. “Debriding the Magistratum will be one of our lesser challenges.”

It was with these portentous words that we were – to our shared surprise – dismissed. Vonvalt did not have the appetite for a long evening of company. The Emperor had tasked him with deposing his master and mentor, and a good number of colleagues besides. He wanted to brood, not field our questions.

I loitered at the threshold after Bressinger and Sir Radomir had gone. “Sir Konrad?” I called to him.

He looked up sharply, already lost in reverie. He offered me an insincere smile. “Helena,” he said.

“Are you… all right?” I asked. I had meant to ask him about his mental state – a topic we almost never broached – but he took it to mean his trip to the Royal Physician that morning.

“Oh, more potions to apply,” he said, waving his hand dismissively. “She was as vexed as the rest of them. Trouble yourself not, Helena. It will pass.”

I paused. “What will happen to them?” I asked quietly.

Vonvalt cocked his head to one side. “What do you mean?”

“To the Justices. The ones we go to arrest tomorrow. Will they stand trial?” It was something that had been bothering me since our meeting with the Emperor and his talk of this new “special procedure”. Arresting and trying these people was one thing; slaughtering them like cattle was

something else entirely. I feared that this operation, whatever form it was about to take, would be the latter.

"Ah," Vonvalt said softly. "That is in the Emperor's hands." He smoked his pipe, and after a while it became clear that he would say no more on the matter.

"Sir Kon—" I tried, but he cut across me.

"Get you to bed, Helena." He turned to where a goblet and bottle rested on the table next to him, and poured a large measure of wine. "Tomorrow is going to be a long day."

VI

A Quiet Purge

"When a wound becomes pustulent, it must be debrided; and if it festers further, the limb must be removed. A painful and dangerous process, to be sure, but a necessary one to save a life. The same can be said for the preservation of the state: sometimes, we must cut out those which would enpox it – lest the rot spread."

MARGRAVE ISBRAND ORTRUN

The following day I woke with trepidation, dressed quickly, and ate little. On my way out of the house, Bressinger took me to one side and handed me a Sovan short sword, a fine weapon nested in a lacquered black scabbard and inlaid with silver ornamentation.

"Here," he said. I took it, nonplussed, and buckled it about my hips.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"Just in case." He retrieved a peeled shallot from one of his pockets and winked at me as he popped it into his mouth. "Come on," he said, and I followed him outside.

It was a cool, grey morning, and a fine drizzle misted the air. Vonvalt and Sir Radomir were standing at the end of the pathway that led to the front door of Vonvalt's residence, armed and talking in low tones. They looked up as we approached.

"Ready?" Vonvalt asked. His jaw was set, his expression inscrutable, though I could guess well enough at the inner turmoil he must have been

feeling.

Bressinger and I both nodded.

“All right. Let us be about it.”

We walked quickly to the base of the Summit of the Prefects, where a large armed host of perhaps thirty Imperial Guard awaited us. I marvelled at these legendary soldiers. The Imperial Guard was made up of élite soldiers from across the Empire, though its membership was not confined to Legionary veterans. Men and women of all colours and creeds were represented, unified by a fanatical dedication to the Emperor and an unparalleled skill at arms. Each was clad in elaborate black plate chased with gold and ostentatious surcoats in the Imperial colours. Unlike their Legionary counterparts, they wore sallet helms which obscured much of their faces, though they did carry the classic Sovan short sword and sohle shield. Like the Templars on the southern Frontier, the Imperial Guard, as an entity, was the subject of many rumours, from bizarre initiation rites to arcane and forbidden magickal practices. I imagined many of these rumours had some kernel of historical truth to them, but I was far more prepared to believe the more modern rumours of an organisation mired in corruption and political posturing.

“Women may be admitted? To the Guard?” I asked Bressinger quietly as we approached, eyeing the soldiers.

“I told you, Helena,” he replied. “You are in Sova, now. If you are skilled, you will succeed, no matter what’s between your legs.”

I started as they gave Vonvalt a hearty and impressively choreographed salute, and then fell into step either side of us, splitting into two columns, unsmiling and implacable like magickal automata.

We were marched through the streets at a steady pace. What attention there was to be drawn at this early hour honed in on us like a thrown javelin. We turned away from the Summit and made for the wide, pillar-lined Creus Road. Ahead of us, rearing out of the jumble of buildings, were the Temples of Nema and Creus, huge vaulted basilicas of white stone rising up into the heavens, festooned with statues and gargoyles, roofed with domes of copper, ornamented with elaborate cornices and balustrades. Their upper reaches, towers of ivory and silver, caught a little of the early morning’s red light like blooded spears. It was a beautiful, breathtaking sight, a far cry from the gloom down in the streets where the cold winds rose, swirling with smoke

and stink and drizzle.

In spite of the circumstances, it was difficult not to feel a thrill of exhilaration. Surrounded by these vast, storeyed constructions, escorted by a cohort of élite soldiers, I felt intoxicated with power. But the grubbiness of our purpose – however urgent and necessary it might have been – could not be ignored, and there remained within me a deep reservoir of uncertainty and trepidation. If I were to join the Order, could I not one day find myself at the sharp end of such a purge? The Magistratum was an old and powerful organisation, and old and powerful organisations were riven with belligerent factionalism.

We reached the Grand Lodge. Despite the early hour, Vonvalt was confident that all the relevant people would be in residence. The place, after all, functioned as a literal lodge for the Empire's lawkeepers, as well as a headquarters.

Any notion of exhilaration now evaporated. I realised that in a few short minutes we would be performing the arrests themselves. Already lawkeepers preparing for court eyed us warily, unsure of what was about to take place but certain it was not good.

"Make way there," Vonvalt said briskly as he shouldered past a couple of robed lay lawmen and into the Hall of Justice. The sound of thumping bootsteps and rattling of armour and weapons was calamitous in that broad open space. A pair of Guardsmen peeled off from the main body and stood either side of the main gate. Already I could hear lawmen angrily demanding to know what was going on.

We pushed through the corridors. It was only now that we began to meet with challenge. Justices, suddenly appearing in doorways, shouted at us, affronted by the presence of soldiers. Given the strict separation between the Estates, and the sacrosanct independence which the Magistratum enjoyed, their reactions were not surprising. But there was nothing they could do. It must have been a strange reversal for them, for they themselves were the ones used to barging into places and commanding immediate and unquestioning obedience.

More Imperial Guardsmen hived off the main group to hold strategic junctions of passageways. By the time we had surmounted the stairs at the rear of the building and were standing outside Master Kadlec's chambers, our escort had dwindled to just a few remaining soldiers. Even with just Sir

Radomir and Dubine, I felt like Vonvalt would have enough support, but who knew what Kadlec was capable of?

Vonvalt bade the Guardsmen wait with a gesture, then pounded on the door. “Nathan; it’s Sir Konrad.”

“Yes!” Kadlec called expansively from within.

We entered.

“Konrad, again! What is it I can do for you at this early hour?” Kadlec smiled, looking only slightly uncertain, for he must have heard the uproar outside.

“Nathan,” Vonvalt said. He did not smile. In fact he looked wretched.

Kadlec’s face immediately fell. He craned his neck, looking over Vonvalt’s shoulder as if he might be able to see through the solid wooden door behind us. “I heard a commotion.”

I wondered what other powers the man might possess. Could he, like Justice August, commune with animals? Could he, like Master Kane a century before, divine the future? Or could he physically command people with his mind alone, as Patria Claver now seemed able to do?

“I see,” Kadlec said. He nodded to himself. “I see.” He sat down slowly and let out a long sigh. “The Emperor does not believe me. I suppose it was only ever a matter of time.” Another long sigh. “Just a matter of time.”

When Vonvalt spoke, it was with a sudden exasperation. “What were you thinking, Nathan? Treating with these people? The Mlyanars! The *Templars*, for Nema’s sake? You have the temerity to act disappointed! Melancholy! How on earth did you think it would end? You are lucky to be breathing!”

Kadlec shook his head angrily. When he spoke, there was desperation in his voice. “I told you, Konrad, it’s the Cyrillians!”

Vonvalt clenched his fists. “Piss on that, Nathan! You discredit yourself with this raving!”

“No!” Kadlec thundered. I winced as the force of it hit me. “Don’t you see? This is precisely what our enemies want!”

Vonvalt shook his head. “No,” he said firmly. “This is the *opposite* of what our enemies want. They do not want the Magistratum stripped of its rogue elements, strengthened, and realigned with the Emperor. They want it to fester – to *continue* to fester.”

I was surprised by Vonvalt’s anger; but then I had been surprised by the cordial nature of his and Kadlec’s first meeting, too. Perhaps Vonvalt had

never really believed in his master's innocence. I do not know what he had discussed with the Haugenate senators the previous afternoon, but it had evidently hardened his mind. To see him now, trembling with fury – well, frankly, it frightened me. It was a side of Vonvalt I did not see often.

"If you are mixed up in something, Nathan, now is the time to make a clean breast of it. You will not be given another opportunity."

Kadlec sneered. "So. It is as simple as that, is it? A quick conversation with the Emperor, and you run here to do his bidding?"

"If you are innocent, then—"

"Oh, blood of Nema, spare me!" Kadlec said, laughing bitterly.

Vonvalt set his jaw. "Last chance, Nathan."

"No," Kadlec replied. "No, Konrad. I see your mind, and those of your retainers, empty vessels though they might be. I think I shall keep my counsel on these matters."

I frowned. I was sure that was an insult, but the conversation had taken a turn for the opaque.

"You will not speak with me?" Vonvalt said. "They will take you to the palace."

Kadlec said nothing. For a while he would not even meet Vonvalt's eye.

"For Nema's sake, Nathan!" Vonvalt erupted. "People are dying! Justices are dying! Our enemies command the Draedist arcana for their own ends! You would take us back to the days of the Reichskrieg? Why?"

"You have no notion of what it has been like," Kadlec said. His voice was venom. The room seemed to shift, to darken and creak. A dull throbbing sound, almost imperceptible, filled the air. "The roots of it are so deep they are wrapped around the core of the earth. The Emperor is finished. It is but a matter of time. I have seen it all."

"You have seen nothing," Vonvalt snapped.

Kadlec fixed Vonvalt with an apprising eye. "You have seen it too."

Vonvalt said nothing. My gaze shifted from one man to the other.

"That explains why it is you. Why you are here. I suppose the Emperor means for you to replace me, too? Should I give you this, now?" Kadlec grasped the medallion and thrust it out.

"You may remove it and leave it on the desk," Vonvalt said icily.

Kadlec snorted. "You are an instrument of chaos," he sneered as he removed the medallion and tossed it onto the desk in front of him. "You

would see the known world picked apart and destroyed."

"No, Nathan. It is you who has sought to all but guarantee it. It is up to me to try and undo it before you set civilisation back two centuries."

"Oh, spare me, you fucking *upstart*!" Kadlec suddenly roared. Spittle flew from his lips. A few of the glass panes cracked. For the first time I felt afraid. It was easy to forget that these men, these Justices, were not mere mortals. They had the powers of demigods. Their will was a physical force, and although I was becoming somewhat used to it, I was far from immune.

Vonvalt was unmoved by this outburst, though I was becoming increasingly concerned for his safety. I looked surreptitiously to Bressinger and Sir Radomir. The latter was resting his hand on the pommel of his sword. I moved to do the same.

"Nathaniel Kadlec," Vonvalt said quietly. "The Emperor has seen fit to revoke your Prefectship. You are disbarred from the Order of the Magistratum and all your ranks, titles, and lands are forfeited to the Crown."

"And on to the gaol under the Imperial Courts of Justice, yes?" Kadlec sneered. "To await a meeting with my lawman to discuss the allegations?"

"Oh, shut up," Vonvalt muttered. He turned to Bressinger. "We are finished here. Get the door."

"Sir Konrad?" Kadlec said loudly. "Please confirm that I am being taken to the gaol beneath the Imperial Courts of Justice."

I looked at Vonvalt.

"You are being taken to the palace," he said.

"Oh? And to the Truth-taker, yes?"

Vonvalt said nothing. I watched as Imperial Guardsmen clattered into the room and seized the old Master by the arms.

"Get him out of here," Vonvalt said.

"*Get your hands off me you bloody great apes!*" Kadlec shouted as the Imperial Guardsmen seized him. The Emperor's Voice. It hit the room like a psychic thunderclap. Bressinger and Sir Radomir reeled. My hand instinctively went to my nose to feel for a bleed that wasn't there. Vonvalt weathered it like the bow of a ship through a wave.

It was the reaction of the Imperial Guard I was most surprised by. They were indeed immune, as Vonvalt had said. Some shifted uncomfortably. Some flinched. But for the most part, they held firm. They gripped Kadlec by his upper arms and marched him smartly out of the room. The man quickly

gave up on struggling. He might as well have been held by iron clamps. By the sounds of it, he soon would be.

We waited as the Imperial Guard filed out. Vonvalt had a brief, quiet exchange with the serjeant; then the four of us were alone.

“Nema,” Sir Radomir muttered. “I have had my fill of this already.”

“If you cannot handle this, you’ve not the stomach for our work,” Bressinger said. I looked sharply at him, but I could see he was tense. Nema knew I was, too.

“What’s that?” Sir Radomir growled.

“Shut up, the pair of you,” Vonvalt said. He seemed to have aged ten years. He moved forward and sat in Kadlec’s seat. Then he lifted up the medallion without ceremony, as though the great honour of it meant nothing at all to him, and rather than placing it around his neck, pocketed it.

“You will not wear it?” I asked.

“No. Not for the moment,” Vonvalt said.

“What happens now?” I pressed. I felt so tightly wound I was about to snap. Even with the Imperial Guard escorting us, I had not felt so vulnerable in a long time.

“Now,” Vonvalt said, producing a list from his pocket, “now we move on to the rest of them.”

The commotion that followed was incredible. The Imperial Guardsmen were blocking all entrances and exits, barring corridors and passageways with their bulky armoured frames and heavy sohle shields. Justices and lay lawmen, many still clad in nightclothes, ranted and raved at their implacable gaolers. The stuffy hallways and chambers were filled with a clamour of angry demands. Where there had been outcry before, now there was outrage.

Vonvalt, who was expected to preside over these people as their lord and master, now faced the unenviable task of thinning out their ranks. But it was not a prosecution, not in the traditional sense. This was the elimination of political dissidents. Only the new special procedure decreed by the Emperor made such a thing possible. It was as though the common law were a sandbank and His decree the rising tide.

Sir Radomir, Bressinger, and I followed Vonvalt and his guards as he swept through the building. The first on the list was a woman called Ellanher Boda, a youthful-looking Justice who nonetheless occupied a position of great seniority within the Lodge. Her door was locked, likely as a consequence of the very loud upset taking place outside. An Imperial Guardswoman made short work of it with a well-placed kick, and Vonvalt swept inside.

"Put it down!" I heard him shout. I followed him in as soon as I could, to see the woman standing behind her desk. She held a dagger in her hand, and her face was twisted into a venomous glare.

"Where is Nathaniel?" she demanded angrily. In her emotional state, she had used the Emperor's Voice, but only we three of Vonvalt's retainers seemed to be affected by it. Even then, it was only mildly. It had none of the bite of Kadlec's, which had hit me as surely and squarely as a punch to the face.

"Lady Justice Ellanher Boda: you have consorted with enemies of the Empire and have conspired to do injury to the state. In so doing you have committed the crime of treason, and I so indict you."

"What is going on? Is this a fucking joke?" Boda snapped, incredulous.

"On this charge, His Most Excellent Majesty the Emperor, Lothar Kzosic IV, by me, his Justice, Sir Konrad Vonvalt, does adjudge you guilty."

"Konrad, for Nema's sake, what you talking about? Where have you *been*?"

Vonvalt turned to the Imperial Guardsman to his right. "Take her downstairs," he said quietly.

The Guardsman moved forward. Boda tried the Emperor's Voice again, loosing it like an errant arrow, but this time it had no effect, even on me.

"Drop the dagger," the Guardsman said. He was a big man, a head taller than her least, but she did not seem cowed.

Vonvalt's hands balled into fists. "Drop the dagger," he repeated. "It is over, Ellanher."

"Oh, it is *over*, is it?" Boda said with a trill of maniacal laughter. She looked about for a moment, assessing her options.

She turned back to Vonvalt as the Guardsman closed in. "Nathaniel was right about you. He saw this coming."

"Then he was a fool to remain here," Vonvalt said simply. "Drop the

knife, Ellanher. I shall not ask again."

Boda took another moment to weigh her options. Faced with Vonvalt's implacability – not to mention a group of Imperial Guardsmen armed with swords – I had expected her to fold. She might have been a Justice, and susceptible to all the pride and narcissism that went with such, but she was also a mortal woman, and presumably had a healthy fear of being killed. But, like everybody else about to be swept up in the Emperor's dragnet, she faced detention, torture, and death. Compliance merely prolonged the inevitable.

"Don't—" Vonvalt shouted, taking a step forward. Boda brought the knife up in a sudden jab, hesitating at the very last moment as her nerve failed her. It penetrated the flesh of her neck to a depth of about an inch, and she dropped the knife quickly and clutched at her throat. A wretched, choked howl escaped from her lips as she grappled with what she had done to herself.

The Imperial Guardsman darted forward, discarding his own short sword in a great clatter of steel against wood, and grabbed hold of Boda. He stretched her out and then ground the heel of his hand into her neck to plug the wound. He looked over to Vonvalt.

"If you have anything to ask, milord, I would do it quickly. I do not know if she nicked the vein."

Vonvalt walked over to the prostrate form of Boda. She thrashed ineffectually against the weight of the Guardsman, her eyes wide and frenzied with fear and regret.

Vonvalt let out a bitter sigh. "No. I have nothing to ask her."

The Guardsman shrugged and stood. A sudden rush of blood flowed from Boda's neck at the release of pressure. Her eyes widened, and she expired in moments.

"What a bloody waste," Vonvalt muttered. He turned to the Guardsmen. "Come. We have many more to get through."

Vonvalt swept down the corridor. I could hear angry shouts from every corner of the Grand Lodge. Once or twice a shrill scream penetrated the air where a Justice or lawman tried to test their civic rights against an Imperial Guardsman's steel.

I felt heartsick. Everyone around me wore a comportment of hard iron, and I did my best to mimic it; but even if these Justices were guilty of treason, I could not bring myself to hate them. All I could see were frightened people – frightened of being killed, of being tortured, of being disappeared underneath the Imperial Palace. Their guilt was presumed, with no account made for error. The Emperor had decreed it, and so it was. Vonvalt was conducting no questioning or interrogation. He made no effort to substantiate the accusations. He was simply a force of nature, a vessel through which the Emperor acted – and through which the Emperor's actions gained legitimacy. It was the shabbiest of practices.

"Justice Wilhelm Sigilind," Vonvalt said as we barged into the man's room. By now most of the traitor Justices – these so-called "Cyrillians" – had realised what was coming and had either locked and barricaded their doors, or armed themselves, or both. It was difficult to know whether taking pre-emptive actions such as these spoke of a guilty conscience, or whether they thought the place was being set upon.

Sigilind was standing on the sill of his open window when his door was kicked open. He was a man of middling age, with dark brown hair and a dark brown beard that was manicured into a disagreeably neat style.

He looked frightened. All of them looked frightened.

"Sir Konrad," the man said, in an absurd, bright tone, as though he routinely teetered on the edge of his window. He nodded to the door. "What is going on? Where is Master Kadlec?"

I saw Vonvalt's hands bunch into fists. "Why do you want to see Kadlec?"

"I—"

"You *what*? And why are you standing there? Just taking some air, were you?"

Sigilind shifted awkwardly, but still did not come down. "I do not know why—"

"No," Vonvalt snapped. "Nor do I. I do not know *why*, Wilhelm. Did life here suddenly become difficult? Here amongst these comfortable furnishings? Or perhaps it was simple boredom that drove you to treachery?"

"Sir Konrad, I—"

"No, *tell* me. Was it cowardice, or boredom?"

Sigilind deflated. "They threatened me," he said quietly.

Vonvalt took a step forward. “Who *threatened* you?” he demanded.

Sigilind shook his head wretchedly. When he spoke, it was quietly. “You have no idea what it has been like here.”

“You are an Emperor’s *Justice*!” Vonvalt snapped. “You are clothed in the Emperor’s authority! You have the power of life and death in your hands! To threaten a Justice is to commit *treason*! If someone threatens you, you put them to the sword!” He snapped his fingers. “In an instant! You bloody *coward*! All of you, snivelling cowards. Holed up in here, writing your books, giving away the arcana because it is convenient. Because it was expedient. Because it was the *easy* thing to do. To the *Templars*! To the Mlyanars! Bad men, evil men! What is this insanity? What—”

He stopped abruptly. Sigilind had turned out of the window and leapt to his death.

Vonvalt stood there for a long time in silence, breathing heavily through flared nostrils until his anger had dissipated.

He turned to the nearest Guardsman. “The list,” he said quietly.

The Guardsman produced the list and Vonvalt snatched it from his hand. He studied it for a moment. “Prince of Hell, Ansobert too,” he muttered. He handed the list back to the Guardsman. Outside in the grey morning light, the drizzle turned to warm spring rain. It splattered against the sill where the window swung open, wetting the books and candles there.

Vonvalt rubbed his face with his hands. “Let us be about it, then,” he muttered, and turned back out of the door.

It was a long day. Long and exhausting.

We moved from chamber to chamber, sometimes opening doors, sometimes smashing them in. Some of the Justices resisted angrily, affronted, as though it was somehow their right to commit treason with impunity. Others folded in on themselves, crumpled by the weight of their treachery. Some were subdued and arrested; others died, either by their own hand or by those of the Imperial Guardsmen who accompanied us.

Of the twenty names on the list, just over half survived for long enough to be dragged away to the Imperial Palace. The last we dealt with was a man

called Justice Leutwin Veremund, an old and supposedly wise man who in other circumstances would have been a serious contender for the title of Master of the Magistratum.

The Grand Lodge had long since fallen silent as Vonvalt opened his door. It was not locked. Veremund sat behind his desk expectantly, a white-haired and white-bearded man with a crooked back thanks to years of hunched reading. He wore an expression of jarring serenity.

Vonvalt, exhausted, strode into the centre of the room.

"Leutwin," he said.

"Justice *Sir* Leutwin Veremund," the old man corrected chidingly.

Vonvalt shook his head. "No. You have been stripped of your title. You are nothing. You are barely a man. You might as well be a chattel of the Empire at this point. And know, Leutwin, that it was all by your own hand."

Veremund shook his head patiently. "Not my hand, Sir Konrad. The hand of Nema."

Vonvalt endured a sudden spasm of rage. "Then why are you *here*? Why not pick up a sword and head off down to the Frontier? Do you know what bothers me the most? The hypocrisy of it all. The *hypocrisy* of your treason."

"With respect, Sir Konrad, you are wasting your words. Neither of us is going to convince the other of anything. So do what it is you came here to do, and let's get on with it."

Vonvalt seemed to spend a few moments wrestling with himself. Bressinger saw it before any of us.

"Sir Konrad," he murmured. He turned to the nearest Guardsman, wearing an urgent countenance. "Arrest this man," he said. "Be quick about it!"

But Vonvalt shook his head. With a sudden, feral shout, he snatched his short sword out of its scabbard and chopped Veremund's head in half. The top of it, everything from the eyeballs up, flopped onto the desk like a hand-sized piece of unleavened bread. Veremund, missing the cap of his skull, let out a grunt of surprise, as his death took a few moments to catch up with the rest of him; then he slumped over, brain swilling out of the wound like a yolk tipped from an eggcup.

Shock, horror, and exhaustion combined to cause me to suddenly retch. It was that which jolted everyone in the chamber from the horrifying spectacle before them.

"Prince of Hell," Sir Radomir muttered, taking a step back.

“Leutwin Veremund,” Vonvalt said to the man’s corpse. Everything he said came out as a loud whisper, as he regained his breath. “You have consorted with enemies of the Empire and have conspired to do injury to the state. In so doing you have committed the crime of treason, and I so indict you.” He wiped and sheathed his sword, and mopped the perspiration from his brow.

“On this charge, his Most Excellent Majesty the Emperor, Lothar Kzosic IV, by me, his Justice, Sir Konrad Vonvalt, does adjudge you guilty, and I sentence you to die by beheading.”

VII

Sparring

“Stupidity loves company, whilst wisdom must prepare for a lifetime of solitude.”

SIR WILLIAM THE HONEST

It was not until the mid-afternoon that Vonvalt bade us leave him. He would remain in the Lodge for some time yet; the purge marked the beginning of his work as Master of the Magistratum, rather than its end.

By the time we left, the weather had closed in and the rain was approaching torrential. It seemed the only thing that could clear the Sovan streets of people. Bressinger swore as we ducked into it, rubbing his arm stump. He often complained that the vicissitudes of the weather affected it more than anything else. The salve that Vonvalt had provided him with did not seem to have much effect – not that Bressinger would say anything.

None of us felt like talking, and we returned to Vonvalt’s residence in silence. Hilda greeted us at the door once again, but read the mood and quickly melted back into the servants’ quarters. Despite there being a few hours of daylight left, I felt neither like eating nor reading. I went up to my bedchamber, feeling lightheaded and listless, wanting nothing more than to erase the day’s events from my memory.

I stripped off my wet clothes and lay on top of the bedcovers, staring at the ceiling for a long while. There seemed nothing else to do except sleep, but every time I closed my eyes, all I could see were their faces. I watched as

Justice Veremund's brains spilled out onto his desk; as Justice Sigilind leapt to his death; as Boda clutched at her self-inflicted neck wound, her face pale and frantic. I watched all of these and more. Every one of those Justices had a life and career as rich and storied as Vonvalt's – and in the space of a long morning, all of it had been rendered obsolete, as null as if it had never existed in the first place. Whilst I lay amongst the comfortable furnishings of Vonvalt's residence, they were languishing in cells, or worse. But for a few turns of Fate's wheel, it could have been me down there. I could not shake the thought.

I lay there for a long time, until well after the light had drained from the sky. No one came to see me. Eventually I dressed in my night clothes and pulled the bedcovers over me; but in spite of my exhaustion, a fractured and unsatisfactory sleep awaited – and a portentous dream about a dark entity that left me with a lasting sense of unease.

Vonvalt woke me after dawn.

The chamber which I had been assigned had a window of stained glass which faced eastwards, and bright sunlight filtered through. In an hour it would be obscured by the huge gothick buttresses of the Senate House, but for now it filled the chamber with kaleidoscopic colours.

I sat up in bed. I had changed into a loose nightdress, for it was still spring and chilly even in expensive houses such as this one, but in summer I would sleep naked like most everyone in the Empire. Of course, Vonvalt had no way to know this, which made his entry somewhat alarming.

"Sir… Konrad," I faltered, hands planted on the mattress either side of me. My heart thumped in my chest.

"I am sorry to wake you," Vonvalt said. He was clad in a loose white shirt that was unbuttoned almost to the navel – and I saw there both the ripple of muscle and a scrollwork of pink Reichskrieg scarring – and a pair of black breeches. His hair, shoulder-length and dark, was tied back.

"You look restored," I said, somewhat lamely, though it was true. There was some red in his cheeks, and he looked fuller, less drawn. The mystery ailment had subsided again; I allowed myself to hope that the Royal

Physician's treatments were working – though of course, as we would come to discover, they were not.

"Some food and wine has seen me straight," Vonvalt said tightly.

There was a pause. It was clear that there was something the matter with him. His blood was up, and he was restive. It was hardly surprising, given what had come to pass in the Grand Lodge, but even taking that into account, there was something else, some unspoken thing that was vexing him.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

He glanced at me, his gaze briefly resting on my breast, before he turned to fixate on something beyond the window. "No, I—" He cleared his throat. "It was a wretched day. Yesterday," he added, as though it were not obvious. "I wished to see you. I knew doing so would… bring a little light into the darkness." For the first time in a long time I heard a hint of his native Jägelander accent. It caught me off guard; it only ever made an appearance when Vonvalt was particularly stressed.

My heart was pounding so strongly now that my breath trembled in my throat with each beat. I knew there were certain things I could do, such as pulling up the bedsheets about my chest, that would deflect any rash action Vonvalt was about to take. But I found myself leaving them about my waist. I think the sense of events unfolding about me, the luxurious surroundings, the intoxicating sensation that came from being in Sova, and – to be frank – the dashing figure that Vonvalt was cutting at the foot of my bed, were conspiring to make me feel bolder – and all this in spite of the destructive cleansing of the Grand Lodge. Or perhaps because of it?

"Is anyone up?" I asked. It was little more than a whisper, and I had to repeat myself to get the words out.

Vonvalt shook his head. "No."

My guts felt as though they were tied up in knots. I waited, unable to do or say anything – un*willing* to do or say anything. All the while the bedclothes remained about my hips, and I could think of little except the loose nature of the nightdress.

"I—" Vonvalt began, his hands reaching for something – the lower buttons of his shirt, perhaps – but then we both jumped like startled cats as, somewhere in the residence, a door slammed loudly.

Vonvalt sighed, his hands falling away. They bunched into fists. When he spoke, it was once again to the window.

“I hear that Sir Radomir has been taking up some of the slack in your swordplay tutelage.”

I nodded, swallowing hard. It took a moment for the feeling of tension to pass. “Yes,” I said. Now I did start to fuss about with the bedclothes.

Vonvalt nodded. “We’ve a little time.” He gestured to me. “Why don’t you get dressed and meet me in the orchard.”

Whatever had passed between us – and a great deal had gone unspoken in those few tense moments in my bedchamber – it had evaporated completely by the time I met with him outside. Since we were going to spar, I wore a simple blouse, kirtle and a headband.

The peach orchard was a beautiful place, a small oasis in a crowded city. Thanks to the positioning of the trees and the overgrown and crowded nature of the garden space, it also provided a great deal of privacy.

“Here,” Vonvalt said. He handed me a Sovan short sword. The thing was about two and a half feet long, blunt, brutal, and basic, not at all like the one Bressinger had given me the day before. I pulled it free from its scabbard. On the floor next to Vonvalt was also a pair of Sovan sohle shields, so named because they resembled the flat underside of a sabaton.

“What has Sir Radomir been telling you?” Vonvalt asked, nodding to the weapon.

“That the Empire was built on the Sovan short sword,” I said, doing a facetious impression of the sheriff’s voice. I was in an odd mood; after the strange bedchamber exchange I was feeling a sense of anticlimax and unspent energy.

Vonvalt affected not to notice my sarcastic tone. “Aye,” he said, admiring his own. “That it was. And do you know why?”

“Because it killed a lot of people who didn’t want to be subjugated?”

Now Vonvalt looked a little irritated. “*Because* it is a weapon that is only useful if everyone works together. You know a sohle shield?”

He stabbed his weapon into the ground and picked up one of the shields. It was green, with a horse rearing up on the lower half and two peach trees in full blossom on the upper, separated from the horse by two wavy bars of

silver. It was curved across the front, flat across the top, and about three-quarters of the way down tapered to a shallow point. When braced against the shoulder it could protect as far down as the knee, depending on how tall you were.

Vonvalt pulled the shield into his shoulder and then snatched the short sword out of the earth and brought it up into a high guard. “The shield wall. Every man either side of you interlocks his shields, forming an impenetrable barrier. Then you…” He took a step towards me. “Advance as one…” He took another step. “And when you are in range…” He reached me now, for I did not move. “You thrust, *here* under the armpit. Go for the man to the left, rather than the front.” He took a few steps back. “This is a stabbing weapon. The shield lets you get in nice and close, and then you… *stab*.”

“Not a chopping weapon then?” I asked, waving it about.

Vonvalt shrugged. “In the heat of combat people will swing it just about any way they can. But you must learn the form first; then you can improvise.”

“And what if I don’t have a shield?”

“Then you’re in trouble,” Vonvalt said without irony. “Against an opponent with a short sword, the stronger and faster will win. But against anything else longer – Bressinger’s side-sword, for example – you will die. In those circumstances, retreat is your only option.”

“Great,” I said dourly. Sir Radomir had been much more aggressive in his tutelage, much more adaptable and improvisational.

Vonvalt let the sword drop and cast the shield aside. It clattered to the ground. “You do not want to learn?”

I made a frustrated gesture. “I want to know what is the *matter* with you,” I said. It was incredibly impertinent, but like mine and Bressinger’s relationship, mine and Vonvalt’s relationship was changing too.

Vonvalt frowned, but he was as cognisant of the changing dynamics as I was. When he spoke, he did not look at me. Instead, he swung his short sword at imagined enemies with a careless expertise.

“Helena, you must understand that when the security of the realm is at stake… matters are altered somewhat. Treason has its own jurisprudence. It does not sit well with the common law, common freedoms and liberties. There is a… *malleability* to the procedure which has hitherto been unwritten.”

“You have not mentioned it before,” I said. “This ‘separate jurisprudence’. I thought that was the point of the common law – it is *common* to all of us.”

Vonvalt took a vicious swipe through the air with the blade, dismembering a spectral opponent. “I have trained you too well,” he muttered. “Always asking questions.”

“I am your apprentice. ’Tis my job to ask questions.”

“I know what an apprentice is, Helena.”

I paused. Vonvalt was agitated in a way that he almost never was.

“You said ‘hitherto unwritten’,” I said. “You are talking about the new procedure the Emperor decreed?”

Vonvalt nodded.

“I thought that was to deal with saboteurs in the Kova Confederation?”

“That was the decree’s genesis, not the bounds of its scope.”

“So the Justices yesterday – those that survived – will be subject to the new special treason procedure?” I asked.

“They will.”

I turned suddenly. A rook had landed in one of the nearby peach trees. Its harsh caw had drawn my attention.

Vonvalt nodded to the bird. “A solitary rook is death,” he said. “Not that any of us needed reminding,” he added, muttering. He was not superstitious; he said it for want of anything else to say.

The rook seemed to watch the two of us for a while; then it took to the air. As I had predicted, the sun had now gone behind the Senate building and the peach orchard was bathed in cool shadow.

“That’s the second one I’ve seen,” I said.

“Hm,” Vonvalt grunted, uninterested.

“Did Master Kadlec read our thoughts?” I asked suddenly. “Yesterday morning.”

“Kadlec cannot read minds,” Vonvalt said, dismissive. “And he is not the Master of the Order any more. You should not refer to him as such.”

“He said he could see our minds,” I said.

Vonvalt shook his head. “He did not mean it literally. He can… sense the truth of matters. He can read expressions and moods and make very acute deductions. It is from the old Draedist magicks, for sure, but much of it is human intuition with a façade of sorcery.”

“What are the Saxan magicks?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“The Emperor yesterday in his strategium, he referred to the ‘old Saxan magicks’. What’s the difference between them and the Draedist magicks?”

“They are one and the same,” Vonvalt said. “Different terms for the same thing. The Saxans preceded the Sovans for centuries before the Haugenate line took the throne. They practised Draedism. Then Eydis Kzosic was converted by Creus and the Neman Creed became the new Imperial orthodoxy. Now Draedism exists as an outlawed pagan religion, practised on the fringes of the Empire. You remember the Witch of Rill?”

“Of course.”

“There is no more to it than that.” He shrugged. “Just interchangeable names.”

I swung my own sword idly now. It seemed impossible not to. “What happens now?” I asked.

“They will question Kadlec and his people.”

“The Emperor must have great confidence in you if he has waited for your return before making his move,” I said.

Vonvalt looked grim. “That is what troubles me most.”

“You do not think you are worthy of the task?”

Vonvalt shook his head. “I’m not sure I ever saw myself as becoming Master of the Order. You must remember, Helena, that I am not a naturally born Sovan. My father took the Highmark. And though that is not supposed to mean anything, it does. I’ve never really seen myself in this role. I prefer to be out in the countryside, dispensing justice, not in this vipers’ nest.”

“You told me once that men who seek power are rarely fit to wield it.”

“Aye.”

“Perhaps the Emperor is of the same mind.”

“Oh, I know he is,” Vonvalt said. “He is the one who said it.”

We stood in silence for a moment. I did not know what to do. To see Vonvalt, a man who I admired and deeply respected, brought to such a low affect by the current state of affairs – well, it was impossible not to be affected by it in turn. And who was I to suggest that there was any cause for optimism? I did not know Sova and its nature, not really. I could only take Vonvalt at his word. And though Vonvalt was undeniably a pessimistic man, in this instance it was well justified. Sova was a city – and an Empire –

teetering on the brink. That quality of being doomed hung in the warm, smoky air like a cloud.

“Prince Gordan will take back the north,” I said, trying to cajole some reassurance from Vonvalt. “If Hangmar has not already.”

“It is not the north I am worried about; it is the *south*. It is the Frontier. That is Claver’s domain now. And that is where I need to be; not here, helming the Order.” He looked up. Bells were tolling the time around the city. “Speaking of which, I should head to the Lodge. There is much work to be done.”

“Should I accompany you?” I asked.

Vonvalt shook his head. “Not yet. I will take only Dubine for now. In fact, the most helpful thing you can do for me is to organise the move to the Lord Prefect’s palace. I know such administrative work is beneath you, Helena,” he added, as he caught my expression. “I will take on another servant soon, one to replace you in all menial tasks. Once matters have calmed down, I will look to your formal education in the Order. It may be a month or two, but you have my word that if it is what you still desire, then it is yours. You are ready.”

I forced myself to smile and nod. It did not seem like an appropriate time to bring up my misgivings about joining the Order; and, on reflection, I was rather looking forward to some menial work to take my mind off matters.

For it would not be long before everything we did was freighted with consequence.

VIII

Into the Master’s Vaults

“Knowledge is the key that unlocks all doors except that which leads to the halls of contentment.”

JUSTICE LADY FRIDA SUERIUS

It was easy to forget, in and amongst all the drama, that as the Lord Prefect and Master of the Magistratum, Vonvalt actually had a lot of work to do. Not only that, but there were ceremonies to attend and formalities to endure, for one was not invested with tremendous power in Sova without all its attendant pageantry.

There is no doubt in my mind that Vonvalt would have liked for it all to have gone unnoticed, but of course that was impossible. He did not have to do anything as drastic as address the Senate, but there were senators that he was expected to – and did – meet, temples he had to be seen to pray at – most notably the Chapel of the Judge in the Temple of Nema – and there was of course the heavy administrative burden that came with helming one of the Imperial Estates.

This would have all been bad enough by itself, without the fact that Vonvalt’s mysterious ailment kept picking away at him, in spite of the Royal Physician’s ministrations. He was like a trencher slowly absorbing gravy, breaking down into sludge. Over the course of the next few days, I did as Vonvalt bade, organising the move to the Prefect’s Palace and taking on as much of the administrative burden of the Master’s office that I could; but the

brief glimpses we had of our lord and master told of a harried man, one being crushed between the heavy hands of illness and responsibility.

The installation of Vonvalt into the Prefect's Palace did not take long thanks to a cadre of servants and workmen who had been put at our disposal, and in the late afternoon on the second day the process was complete. The palace was a grandiose manor, several orders of magnitude larger and more ornate than Vonvalt's own manse. Though the Summit of the Prefects was a large plateau, in fact at the southern tip it did elevate slightly, whether naturally or by design. It was on this secondary summit that the Lord Prefect's Palace was situated, walled off from the rest of the hill and set back in its own extensive grounds. Unlike Vonvalt's house, which could have been a provincial manor just about anywhere – albeit a large and lavish one – the palace was a deliberate emulation of the vaulted Saxan gothick style which I found both overbearing and sinister. It was four storeys tall, with steeply sloped roofs of dark slate, turreted, vaulted, buttressed, and with its own share of gargoyles rendered in black marble, as well as other overbearing nods to the pantheon of Sovan gods, all faded and smoke-stained with age. It came with its own staff of approaching twenty, including a permanent rotation of five Imperial Guardsmen who had a few slavering Sovan war shepherds between them. I could see that above the main entrance, the same device which had emblazoned the green sohle shield in Vonvalt's orchard – the prancing white horse, the bars of silver, and the two peach trees – was being installed, and it struck me that that was *Vonvalt's* device, which, as a knight, he would have received many years before.

We approached the entrance and were waved through by the Guardsman who recognised us, but then we stopped short when we heard a cry from behind us. I turned to see a young lad, clearly a messenger from his garb, running at the palace. He seemed quite unintimidated by it until one of the war shepherds started barking; then I was half sure he shit himself, for he paused for quite a long time before attempting the gate. I could not blame him; the war shepherds reached my waist – and I am not short.

"A package for the Lady Helena," the lad gasped to one of the Imperial Guardsmen, a big olive-skinned brute who snatched the message from his hands.

"All right," he said, and tossed the lad a coin, whilst the dog did its level best to rip out the iron bars of the outer gate. He quickly checked the contents

of the package, and then, apparently satisfied, approached me and handed it over. “Milady,” he said.

“I’m not a lady,” I said, “but thank you.”

The Guardsman looked confused. “You are the Lord Prefect’s clerk?” he said.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Then you are a lady.”

I frowned at this surprise social promotion, and affected not to care, largely to earn Sir Radomir’s approval, who disdained almost anything in that vein. But secretly I was thrilled.

There was a message in the small parcel which I took in quickly. Unsurprisingly, it was from Vonvalt.

“What is it?” Sir Radomir asked. He looked sun-browned and relaxed in his casual wear, and, like me, had welcomed the divertingly menial task of moving Vonvalt’s residence.

“Sir Konrad,” I said. “He wants us to look for some books. Here, there is a list.” I handed it to him and unwrapped the package. It was a large key and Vonvalt’s Prefect medallion.

“The key to the Master’s Vaults,” Sir Radomir said, reading the message. “What is that?”

The key seemed to suddenly grow heaver in my hands. “Nema,” I muttered.

“What?”

“The Master’s Vaults are where all the old lore is kept,” I said. “All the old Draedist codexes.”

“Where are they?”

“The Law Library,” I said. I pocketed the key and looked up at the sky. We would start to lose the light in the next hour or so. “We’d better go now.”

The Law Library was on its own small spur of land where the Sauber split a second time south of the Creus Road. Like the other major legal and administrative hubs of the city, the library was a gigantic and impressive building; but unlike the others, which were largely built of stone and iron,

large portions of the library were given over to huge structural lattices and domes of glass. Aside from aesthetics – and it was a beautiful structure – the reason for this was simple: to allow as much light in as possible and so to remove the need for lanterns amongst all that paper.

"Here," Sir Radomir said, nodding to a crowd of people who were gathered within a stone's throw of the library. They were listening, rapt, to a man in senatorial robes. He was stood atop the plinth of a large marble statue, gesticulating angrily and shouting to the assembly. Most of the latter seemed to be formed of commonfolk, but there were plenty of merchants and lords there too.

"… cannot be trusted to maintain the security of the Empire any more," the senator spat. "We need *soldiers*, not *lawmen*. The Emperor wastes the lives of his Legionaries on a fool's errand in Kòvosk, and seeks to levy taxes on every man, woman, and dog to fund this folly! And who will pay for it?"

"We will!" the crowd shouted back, angrily.

"Only the Templars have the best interests of the Empire at heart…"

I stopped listening. Sir Radomir and I moved past the crowd quickly, hoping that they would not notice us entering the Law Library.

"Nema's blood," Sir Radomir spat. "A wild Mlyanar."

I laughed, but I could not help but feel uneasy as we pushed our way through the library's entrance. For all I had heard of the Patricians, the senator had seemed like a regular man of middling age; but there was no denying the power of his oratory – and we had only had a glimpse of it. Once again my mood soured. I just wanted Sova to be *fixed*, the world put to rights. I struggled to derive pleasure from anything knowing that the Empire could collapse at any moment.

We reached the front desk. Fortunately for us, Vonvalt had sent word to the librarians to expect us, for they were a fussy bunch of sticklers who made a great show of inspecting the medallion, as if anyone in Sova would risk the capital offence of trying to forge it. By the time we were eventually allowed access, it was nearly dusk and most of the library's patrons were heading home.

There were of course some lanterns allowed. These had to be carried in a special case, along with a bucket of sand, which I gave to Sir Radomir to lug around. Bored fire wardens sat in alcoves at frequent intervals, too, whose sole job was to watch for the first hint of flame. It was not difficult to see

why such precautions were taken; the library contained centuries' worth of approved Sovan legal precedent. The work of thousands of Justices and lawmen through the ages was contained within these tomes, a dozen lifetimes' worth of reading on some of the most interesting (and more of the dullest) jurisprudence and legal argument in the known world. To be in the Law Library was to be in and amongst the history of the Sovan Empire.

The Master's Vaults were deep underground and could only be accessed by the Master or pre-approved representatives. We were taken by an elderly librarian through a maze of corridors and then down a pulley-operated elevator into a low, dark chamber. Ahead was a stout wooden door that was watched by a single Imperial Guardswoman. There was no doubt in my mind that she had heard the clatter of the elevator and leapt up to attention, for Nema only knew how many hours she had been whiling away down here, completely undisturbed, and presumably in total darkness. I hoped for her sake that she was on a rotation.

The librarian traded a few quick words with the Guardswoman, evidently some kind of code, and she stood aside.

"I am not permitted to enter," the librarian said to us. Though she spoke softly, her voice crashed around in the deep silence of the gloomy stone chamber. "When you are finished, inform the guard and she will arrange to have the elevator lowered."

I nodded, eager to get on with things, and slipped the key into the lock. Despite the size of it and of the door itself, both opened with ease.

"What is the significance of this list?" Sir Radomir asked as we ducked into the room. The space beyond put me in mind of the chambers beneath the Galen's Vale kloster, a sequence of low, pillared barrel vaults, generously proportioned and stretching off into the darkness. The lantern I carried seemed almost powerless against the gloom, but what we could see was clearly old, expensive, and rather beautiful. The ceilings above us were lavishly frescoed, the floor was carpeted with ornate rugs, and between the bookshelves were gilt-framed paintings and tapestries, as well as hardwood reading desks. It was a reading chamber fit for an Emperor, and it was a shame that such beautiful ostentation would only ever be seen by a handful of people. I was suddenly imbued with a keen sense of history and privilege.

But those were not the only things I was imbued with. There were tangible, eldritch energies in the musty air, too. The feeling was not unlike

being around Vonvalt when he used the Emperor's Voice. It gave the air a coppery tang, my hair stood on end, and the magicks interfered with the surroundings – extinguishing candles, cracking windowpanes, and so on. It was as though the mortal plane was somehow rendered thin, as if I merely had to concentrate to break the fabric of the air around us and slip into the holy dimensions.

"Blood of gods," Sir Radomir muttered. His hand idly pressed against his chest. "There is something at work here."

"Aye, I feel it too," I said. My skin was all gooseflesh, and I could hear the same subliminal whisperings I had heard when Claver had used his mind to freeze Vonvalt in place. One thing was certain: I did not want to spend any more time in this gloomy chamber than I absolutely had to. "You have the list?" I asked.

"Aye," Sir Radomir said. He handed it to me. There were twenty or so books written out, all grimoires of one stripe or another. Some I had heard of; the titles of some of the others weren't even written in Saxan. I peered at it, but my eyes kept trying to unfocus, as if the words themselves didn't want to be read.

"Let's get on with it," I muttered, trying to ignore all these small signs of the wrongness of my surroundings, and moved deeper into the vaults.

The books were arranged alphabetically and meticulously indexed, so there was no difficulty in locating them – or rather, locating where they should have been.

"This one is missing," I said, checking the list and then checking the gap in the shelves. It was Aimbald's *The Justice's Armoury, or Draedist Magicks and the Enforcement of the Common Law: Practice and Procedure*. It was one of the more modern tomes, only a hundred years old, probably written to coincide with one of the Order's periodic reorganisations.

I had a sinking feeling that this was a pattern that was to repeat itself, and I was not wrong. In a few handfuls of minutes, Sir Radomir and I, having torn the list in half, agreed that not a single one of the books on the list was present. What was worse was that there were clearly more that had gone, too, including some which had been removed from locked strongboxes.

"A book locked in a strongbox in a sealed and guarded vault in the basement of a guarded building – in a city surrounded by the tallest and thickest walls in the known world," Sir Radomir murmured. We both

inspected the chest. It was a thing wrought of black wood, strapped with iron and engraved with snarling beasts. Whoever had done it had had a flair for the dramatic, and in other circumstances it would have been tasteless. But here, in this place, it rattled me. “Bloody faith, what is it?”

I looked at him, then back into the empty, velvet-lined chest. “More to the point: *where* is it?”

We decided to keep the fact of the missing books a secret from the librarians, and Vonvalt’s relief at this small bit of circumspection was tangible.

“It is as I expected,” he said. He looked pale and drawn, and both Sir Radomir and I instinctively kept a healthy distance from him in case he did indeed have some pox. It felt rude, but I knew Vonvalt himself would do the same.

We were standing in his chambers in the Grand Lodge. Beyond, street lanterns and braziers succeeded only in giving Sova a wan, reddish glow. The rain was holding off, but in our brisk journey from the Law Library to the Lodge, the air had felt warm and moist and the clouds above were low and pregnant with rain. The Mlyanar and his tame crowd had thankfully gone.

The Lodge itself felt much like the rest of Sova: subdued. There had been plenty of reproachful looks cast our way as we had made our way to the Master’s chambers. It was clear that, whatever grand investitures Vonvalt had had to endure across the city, his reception at the Lodge – and ours, by extension – would remain frosty.

“We should send word to the Palace,” Bressinger said. He was standing by the window. The stress and strain of watching his friend and master succumb to his ailment was taking its toll on him, too, not to mention the heavy workload Vonvalt had placed on him as his primary taskman. And that was to say nothing of the loss of his arm, which troubled him more than he let on. He looked as though he had aged a decade.

“Aye,” Vonvalt muttered darkly.

“Where are they?” I asked.

“I do not know,” Vonvalt said tiredly. He twitched, and suddenly pounded a fist on the desk in front of him. “Fuck!” he barked.

My eyes widened. I think it was the first time I had heard him use the profanity. I glanced over to Bressinger, who looked back at me grimly. His expression told me everything I needed to know. The thought of Vonvalt dying had occurred to me frequently in the past month, but I realised that it was not something I had really seriously contemplated. The thought of him gone, extinguished from the world, filled me with a sudden and profound despair. I could imagine me, Bressinger, and Sir Radomir, our only intrinsic value in being Vonvalt's retainers, cast adrift in Sova, with nothing to do and no sense of purpose as the Empire collapsed around us.

Vonvalt took a minute to compose himself, embarrassed at having lost his temper. He put the Prefect's medallion back around his neck, and pocketed his seal. "Was there anywhere in the palace – the Prefect's Palace – that you saw, any secret chambers of passageways or vaults, when you were moving my effects over? Anywhere that could have been used for storage?"

Sir Radomir and I looked at one another, and then back at Vonvalt. "We weren't really looking for anything like that," I said. "There could have been. 'Tis a huge manse."

Vonvalt nodded to himself. "All right. Listen to me. Go back there now. Speak to the staff. Search the place high and low. I need these books found."

There was a pause. "What is in those books?" Sir Radomir asked. "Magicks, yes, I understand that, but what precisely? The power to control things with one's mind?"

Vonvalt rubbed his face with his hands. "Those grimoires contain a great deal of what we call the *old* lore. They are manuals, sets of instructions on the magicks and how to wield them. You have to understand… Justices have many powers, but only those which are used to enforce the common law. Powers such as the Emperor's Voice, the ability to turn animals into witnesses, the ability to question victims of murder, to trace evidence, to tell if a person is lying. These are the powers that we have allowed ourselves to keep and maintain as investigative tools. But there are other sorceries which are more powerful and violent in nature. You mentioned Claver's lifting me with nothing but his thoughts; that is one, yes, but there are others besides: the power to summon and converse with spirits and elementals. With demons. The things that the old church used to do before the Order was given sole custody of these things.

"It is obvious that Kadlec – or someone very close to the man – has been

feeding at least some of this information to Claver, for there is simply no other way to learn these powers except from the codexes in the Master's Vaults. But I had not expected this… *evisceration*."

"But surely," Sir Radomir said, clearing his throat. "Surely 'tis not enough to simply have the books. You could dump a magickal tome in front of me and I could read the words, but I wouldn't have the first clue in how to wield it." He threw his hands up about him. "I thought you fancy men spent years locked up in here learning how to do it all."

Vonvalt shook his head. "It takes years because the programme of study is taught carefully and rigorously, and because there is a huge volume of law and procedure to learn within terms of academia that last months at a time. Initiates are assessed on which powers they have an aptitude for and then they are given careful tutelage in those arts. There is the matter of ethics to consider as well; initiates who show even exceptional promise in practical law and jurisprudence will be dismissed from the programme if there is the slightest hint that they will not be able to wield the old Saxan magicks with complete dispassion and evenhandedness." Vonvalt turned to look out of the window. "But a dogged and dishonest person, seeking only to learn how to wield one or two powers, instructed by someone as powerful as, say, Master Kadlec, could get a decent grasp on it in a month or two. Perhaps even a few weeks, if they approached it with a singular determination. If they were left unmolested, it would not take them long to become very powerful indeed."

There was another silence. It had been almost too easy to forget our purpose for being in the capital at all. And though steps were being taken to address the glowing embers of Westenholtz's rebellion with the dispatch of the 16th Legion, the real threat lay south at the Frontier, where the Templars were amassing and where, with each passing day, Bartholomew Claver grew more and more adept in the ancient Draedist magicks. And now Vonvalt was all but shackled to his desk in the Master's chamber, clearing out the Magistratum's dead wood and helping the Emperor to get his house in order.

Knowing what was to come, all of the violence and death and the ultimate collapse of the Empire, you, reader, must feel like gripping these pages and shouting at this apparent inaction. Why did we not charge south at the head of an army? Why was the Neman Church not burned to the ground? Why were the Savaran Templars not proscribed and disbanded by Imperial decree? Why did the Emperor not simply abandon the Kova Confederation and satisfy

himself with his already extensive provincial holdings?

History is neat. It is packaged, artificially broken up into epochs, and dissected remotely, both geographically and temporally, with the benefit of long hindsight. The reality of living through these turbulent times was much different. Matters are insidious. They build up over time, like small pieces of wood being chipped out of a supporting beam. Complexities and nuances are lost in the retelling of the story. Even this personal account omits a great deal. Yes, there was a growing sense of urgency, but in the capital, the fringes of the Empire seem very remote. One is surrounded by literal and metaphorical walls and Imperial Guardsmen. The sense of security is palpable – the sense of doom dangerously lessened. Vonvalt had said once, quite accurately, that the Empire faced half a dozen rebellions a year, and weathered them like a cliff weathers the pounding of the tide. To many, this business seemed no different, just another difficulty to be overcome in the inexorable spreading of the Two-Headed Wolf.

We in that room appreciated the danger. We had a sense of what was to come. We knew that we were not dealing with the ordinary trifles of Imperial life. But we were a few small voices in an ocean of Imperial apathy and bureaucratic complacency.

“Go and search the palace,” Vonvalt said. “We must go south, but the Emperor will not release me until I can exhaust all of his arguments against it. And to do that, I need to be sure that these books have been taken out of the capital.”

“Where do you think they are?” Sir Radomir asked.

“The logical assumption is the Frontier, since that is where Claver is. But I need to rule out the palace. So go, the pair of you, now.”

“Sire.”

“And I need not tell you to keep looking through the night.”

IX

The Order of the Temple

“Heraldry can be compared to the colourful markings of poisonous toads in the Qareshian rainforests; those who display it most proudly are often those it is best to avoid.”

THE PRINCESS CUNIGUND OF ERMENSTADT

We searched the Prefect’s Palace through the night. The staff were recalcitrant and so we sent them to bed, and not for the first or last time did I wish that Vonvalt had been able to bring his own staff over from his old house. Alas, there was a hierarchy amongst the serving classes as strict as that of the nobility, and these odd and suspicious characters who were clearly loyal to Kadlec lingered about the place like disapproving ghosts.

We went through each room, knocking on walls, measuring internal and external spaces like the Neman witch hunters of history, painstakingly checking for signs of disturbed plaster or loose panels. Sir Radomir fetched a length of iron from the groundskeeper’s lodge, and he prised up floorboards. A seasoned investigator, he even pulled up privy coverings and checked waste chutes and outflows.

We spent many hours rigorously checking every conceivable space, pausing only once to take some food and for Sir Radomir to stave off the shakes with another good draw of wine. The man seemed to need alcohol the same way crops need the sun, and I found it remarkable that he was able to keep any kind of critical faculty about him considering the volume of wine he

took in. It would kill him as surely as whatever Vonvalt's illness was, and it was only due to the fear that I could lose both him and Vonvalt in short order that I felt compelled to say something.

"You drink a great deal," I remarked as I worked at a loosening board with the tips of my fingers.

"Aye," he grunted, ear pressed to the plasterwork to my right. That he did not deny it felt like permission to press the point.

"You are reliant on it."

"You may be Sir Konrad's favoured child, Helena, but you'll not speak to me like that."

"I am concerned for your health," I said softly. "And, if I am honest, I worry about how it impacts your mind."

"My mind is not impacted at all," he growled.

"Why do you do it?" I asked.

"Do you think it is something I enjoy?"

"I think it is a compulsion."

"Aye, that is the right word for it."

"Why did it start?"

Sir Radomir took a deep breath. He was about to take another draw from the skin, but he brought it short just shy of his lips. He shot me an irritated look. "You have not been in battle."

"I was there in Galen's Vale."

Sir Radomir paused. "Yes," he said eventually. "Of course. In my mind you are secreted away somewhere, out of the thick of it."

"Would that I had been," I remarked.

Sir Radomir sighed. "I forgot too that you killed a man. Sir Konrad told me afterwards."

"He did not speak to me about it at all," I said, still filled with resentment about Vonvalt's silence on the matter.

"Oh, he was proud of you all right – if his approval is what you seek," he added in a knowing aside. "But the man was desperately ashamed he could not protect you."

"'Tis all done with now anyway," I said dismissively.

Sir Radomir let out a brief, incredulous laugh. "By the gods, Helena, your mind is steel. How is it that such an act does not affect you?"

"It did affect me," I said, "profoundly. I have thought about it almost

every day since it happened."

"You do not seem to be troubled by it – or, at least not in a way that has lingered."

"No," I said. "But I think I know why. I have heard it said by some physicians that what we experience in childhood dictates who we are as adults. If that is the case, then my mind was hardened many years ago, long before I came into Sir Konrad's service. I think it has given me some measure of… *capacity* to deal with certain things." I shook my head, suddenly conscious that I had begun to make this conversation about myself, and draw parallels with my experience and Sir Radomir's, a valueless and potentially offensive exercise given the narrow personal lens through which we all perceived the world. "But I was not pressed into the Legions as an adolescent. And you are right; I have not been in battle, not in a strict sense."

When Sir Radomir spoke, it was to the floor, and it was clear that time had not dimmed his memories in any meaningful way. His affect reminded me instantly of Vonvalt and Bressinger when they talked about the Reichskrieg – a vanishingly rare occurrence, and rarer still in my presence.

"The battlefield is a brutal thing. There is nothing like it. In the heat and rage of it, the men are your sworn enemy. Then… after it all, you stop and think, and you realise they are just lads, like you. Frightened lads. And then you are filled with a deep regret that does not fade." He shrugged. "And there are other things, too. I was not married, but my beau was killed when my hometown was sacked."

The sheriff was displaying such vulnerability that I could not help but confide in him what Vonvalt had told me about Bressinger. "Dubine lost his wife in the Reichskrieg, too."

"Aye, we have spoken of it. And his twin babes. That the man has not taken his own life is nothing short of a miracle. I know plenty who have over less."

I could not help but be stung by this. I had known Bressinger for years, and he had never confided in me. I had wrung the information out of Vonvalt – though Nema knows I should have been able to deduce it myself – and had been warned in no uncertain terms to never bring it up.

"I… did not know you knew. Sir Konrad warned me never to mention it."

"I am not surprised," Sir Radomir said. "I have no doubt Dubine sees their ghosts every night. You should not take offence. It's no reflection on your

character.”

“I suppose my grief isn’t the right sort of grief,” I said, gripping the board and yanking it loose. “I have lost too, you know.” I thought of my parents, who I had barely known, and Matas, who in many ways I had barely known, too, though I had loved him fiercely. The sorrow I felt was as visceral as anyone else’s, but I hadn’t lost a wife and two children, like Bressinger, nor had I been abducted as a child and forced to do awful things, for years, in the name of conquest. I had a sad history, but everyone else had a sadder one. I did not feel able or entitled to complain and gripe and weep, and that in itself was frustrating. I was angry that my grief did not meet the threshold of my friends’ grief, such that I could not be included in their drinking sessions.

“Helena, it is not like that. You know Dubine is more fond of you than anyone else in this world.”

“Is that what you are trying to do, then?” I asked, ignoring him, hot with resentment. I gestured at the wine skin. “Drink yourself into an early grave?”

Sir Radomir looked at me with such sudden and ferocious anguish that I could not help but recoil.

“Kasivar, Prince of Hell, you are impertinent!” he spat.

I felt myself coming to the verge of tears. “I have but three friends in this world, Sir Radomir: you, Dubine, and Sir Konrad. To lose any single one of you would be to lose entirely one-third of everyone I care about. Our work is dangerous enough without us being reckless with our lives.”

There was a pause. We both took a few moments to calm ourselves. It was certainly not how I had anticipated the night going.

Sir Radomir sighed, long and loud. “You have been drunk?” he asked me eventually.

“Of course,” I said, hastily wiping away an errant tear.

“And how do you sleep after a skinful?”

“Very deeply. And dreamlessly,” I added, latching on to what he was driving at.

“There you have it. I am not looking to kill myself, Helena, merely to cheat the nightmares. It started with just a few nights a week, then every night. And the water was not up to much at Perry Ford, so I drank smallbeer in the day, and then wine, and then you drink because it’s the only way to stop the hangovers…” He shrugged again. “You stop noticing it yourself after a while.”

He sat in silence for a moment, then stood up. I was suddenly filled with a sense of guilt and shame, and terror that I had irreparably damaged our relationship; but I knew that there was nothing more to be said that night.

"Come on," Sir Radomir said, making for the door. "We are wasting time."

We found one small hidden alcove just after dawn. It was the only thing we did find. It was located in the top of one of the manse's turrets, a small octagonal room that overlooked the centre of the city. To me it seemed like one of the least ingenious hiding places in the whole house, and we felt oddly cheated that all our clever searching was useless only for a cursory tap on the wall to reveal a little concealed nook.

"No books," Sir Radomir grunted as he contorted himself to see inside. He had insisted on checking everywhere before me in case anything was booby-trapped. "Just a few religious bits."

He withdrew from the crawlspace and showed me his findings: a few small, crude Savaran idols, and some religious pamphlets. I took one of them and read it. Across the top was written "The Order of the Knights of the Temple of Savare", and below some religious screed about the heresy of the Order of the Magistratum and the repatriation of its powers back to the Neman Church.

"Well," I said, sighing. "If there was any doubt about Master Kadlec's guilt, then I think this does for it."

Sir Radomir sat on the floor with his back against the wall. "I wonder what they are doing to him in the Imperial Palace," he mused idly.

"The Truth-taker has him," I said with a weary sarcasm, doing a half-hearted attempt at mimicking Vonvalt.

"The 'Truth-taker'," Sir Radomir said, weighing the words. "That is a very Sovan name for something, aye?"

"I don't think 'Official Torturer' would do, would it?"

Sir Radomir grunted, and spat. "Bloody fancy Sovans," he muttered. He looked up at me. "It bothers you, does it? That they are giving him a poke?"

"Of course it bothers me! It bothers me because it goes against everything

the Order and the common law are supposed to stand for. Nema, it is *supposed* to be illegal! Sir Konrad would hang a man for committing the crime of torture. Now it turns out it takes place within the very organs of state."

"Faith, girl, calm down," Sir Radomir muttered. "I thought you lost all of your rights if you were a traitor, anyway."

"If you are *convicted* of treason," I said. "Not accused. If he is found guilty then fine. Have all his fingers off one by one. But there is *procedure* in place. A year ago, Vonvalt would have been furious to learn that a man was being detained without conviction, representation, or a pending trial. Now he has all but authorised it."

Sir Radomir shrugged again. I could tell that for all his moral fibre – and he was generally a decent and upstanding man – the idea of torturing a dissident was not something that he was going to lose any sleep over. "Justices kill people all the time without representation and trials."

"Justices *are* the representation and the trials. That is the point of them. They are all of it in one. Their word alone carries the weight of warden, jury, and lawman."

"Well then; is the Emperor not effectively the ultimate Justice? Can he not simply declare Kadlec a traitor and then do with him what he pleases? After all, a Justice is only a Justice with the Emperor's say-so."

I opened my mouth to speak, and then closed it again. I realised I had just been utterly out-argued, and not by some silvertongue, but by an old sheriff's tired and idle questions. It hit me like a slap. I hadn't realised how cocky I was being – had been – until that point. I had started to see Bressinger and Sir Radomir as beneath me, rather than experienced lawkeepers in their own right. And though it smarted at the time, I can say with retrospect that it was much needed.

"Come on," I said as I heard movement in the palace. "We might as well question the staff now that they're up."

Sir Radomir nodded, too magnanimous or too tired to press the point. "As you will," he said, pushing himself up.

The household staff were as disobliging as they had been the night before, and we churned through them in less than an hour, each with less to say than the one before. The last one we spoke to, a plump, bony-fingered woman who worked in the palace's extensive kitchens and whose name I have long forgotten, was downright rude, and I was actually about to reprimand her for her sullen and standoffish answers when everyone's attention was drawn by a stifled cough emanating from one of the cupboards by our feet.

"Kasivar's flaming arsehole, Finn Becker, if that is you I'll have you up in irons!" the old woman shouted with a sudden and powerful rage. So forceful was it that Sir Radomir and I actually stepped back as she shoved past and threw open one of the doors. Inside was a young lad, a boy I recognised as the ostler's apprentice. A faint smell of horseshit wafted out.

"Easy!" Sir Radomir said as the woman grabbed the boy by the hair and dragged him out. "He's just mucking about."

"*Spreading* muck about more like it!" the lady thundered as the boy shrieked.

"Fucking hell, here," Sir Radomir said, swatting her hand away. The woman drew it back as if he'd stabbed it with his dagger.

"Prefect Kadlec will hear of this!" she shouted, eyes wide with theatrical horror.

"I very much doubt that," Sir Radomir said, grabbing the boy by the collar. "Come on," he said, handling him as roughly as the cook he had just reprimanded.

"Where are you taking him?" the woman demanded.

"Never you mind, you miserable old hag," Sir Radomir said, and I saw a couple of scullery maids turn away, hands to mouths.

"You mind your tongue, Becker! You hear me!" the cook called after us.

We took the boy outside, and back to the stables. It was a warm, breezy, pleasant morning, with small banks of white cloud scudding across the Ebenen Plains. The air smelt fresher than usual, and I found it amazing how restorative some good, clear weather could be.

"What was all that about?" Sir Radomir asked the boy.

He shrugged insolently.

"You like it here, lad? You like the pay? And the opportunity?"

The boy, Finn, nodded.

"You know who I am?"

“Radomir Dragić.”

“*Sir* Radomir Dragić,” he snapped. “You know I work for the Justice? For the new Prefect?”

“Yes.”

“*Sire*.”

“Yes, sire.”

“You know I can have you turfed out on your arse and no one would bat an eyelid?”

Finn looked as though he were about to cry now. “Yes, sire.”

“What are you doing, spying?”

The boy shrugged again. “Just something to do, sire. Only so much horseshit I can shovel.”

“Well hearken to me, Finn Becker. There are serious things going on in Sova right now. Important matters of state, you understand? Your former master has put everyone to no end of trouble, and he’s having his guts pulled out in the Palace as we speak. You want to go and join him?” Now the boy did start to weep. “Now listen to me, and listen closely. Your former lord and master has stolen some very important books from the Law Library.” He gestured to the Prefect’s Palace behind us. “You like crawling about, eh? Going through secret passages and hiding places? Have you seen anything like that stashed about the place?”

The boy shook his head.

“Think!”

“I haven’t seen anything, sire,” the boy said through his tears. “No books.”

“You are not in trouble for spying,” I added. “Or for being where you shouldn’t. We are only interested in finding the books.”

“I swear to Nema and Savare, milady, I’ve not seen any books!”

Sir Radomir straightened up. He sighed. “And what about people?” he asked. “You see lots of people coming and going, hm?”

The boy shrugged. “Prefect Kadlec had lords and ladies over all the time, sire. T’was his business.”

“Any that seemed unusual? Out of place? Anything you weren’t expecting?”

The boy shook his head. “What passes for unusual in Sova? There are all manner of people here. Nema, look at the Imperial Warden; a wolf-headed

Kasar, wandering about the streets."

A thought suddenly occurred to me. "What about from the south? From the Frontier? Any Templars?"

The boy's expression changed. "Aye," he said, slowly. "There was one of those. The ostler commented on his horse. A Zetlandish destrier. A really fine beast." He nodded to himself. "That was out of the ordinary. Plenty on the Southern Plains, but not this far north."

Sir Radomir and I exchanged a glance.

"When was this?" Sir Radomir asked.

The boy thought for a moment. "I couldn't say for sure. Half a month? Perhaps a bit over."

"Who was it?"

The boy shrugged. "I've no idea. I did not see the person."

"What about the horse?" Sir Radomir pressed. "Did it have a caparison?"

"Aye, a fancy one at that."

"Describe it to me, as much detail as you can."

The boy thought for a moment. "It was blue, like a sky blue. And there were white crosses on it, and in the middle of the crosses was a bird with its wings out."

"What kind of bird?" I asked.

"I don't know, milady. Sorry."

"That's enough to take to the Herald," I said.

"Aye," Sir Radomir said. He turned to the boy. "Go on; fuck off. And if you spy on Sir Konrad, I'll put your eyes out."

The ostler's apprentice ran away.

"We should go now," I said.

"Aye. Go on, I'll follow you."

We threaded our way back through the streets to the Imperial Palace, where the Herald resided. We were redirected by a guard from the main gate to one of the many other side entrances, for the Imperial Palace was not simply the residence of the Emperor, but the headquarters for one of the Imperial Estates, filled with a huge number of Haugenate retainers. Very few were

accessible via the Hall of Solitude.

The Herald was an imperious woman in her late middle age, grey haired and with a sage comportment. She resided in a set of book-lined chambers overlooking the Ebenen Plains. I told her of the device we needed identifying. I did not know the fancy formal terms that she did; sky blue, white crosses, a bird in the middle with its wings out, was the best I could do.

“And you said the device was on the caparison of a Zetlandish destrier?” the Herald asked.

“Yes,” Sir Radomir and I both said together.

“Well, your account has missed off two pieces,” she said, recovering a volume from one of the shelves. “One is the white star emblazoned on a black background, which would be in the top left of the cross. The other will be the flames in the top right, which symbolise the Eternal Fire which burns in the Temple of Savare the God Father. But in the circumstances, I have no doubt that I know the man you mean.”

“Who?”

With a practised eye and thumb, she flicked to the relevant page and placed the book on the bench in front of her. She tapped the lavishly illustrated device there.

“‘Sir Vladimir von Geier, the Margrave of Keraq and Master of the Order of the Knights of the Temple of Savare’,” I said out loud. I looked up at Sir Radomir.

“Shit.”

We delivered the news to Vonvalt in the Grand Lodge. The morning was wearing on, and the Master’s chamber was hot and stuffy with the sun. He listened to our account with little interruption, clarifying a few matters, but otherwise letting us both speak. When we were finished, he sat back in his chair, and let out a large sigh.

“Well, that certainly accords with what we know,” he said, rubbing his beard. He considered matters for a moment. “Kadlec takes the volumes from the Master’s Vaults, palms them off to Vladimir von Geier, and the latter whisks them away to Keraq.” He clacked his tongue. “And the boy, the

ostler, said that the margrave's visit was a few weeks back?"

"Yes," I said.

"Hm," Vonvalt said. "It is not a short journey to Keraq. At least a week, and more like two. Claver cannot have had the codexes for long."

"But he has had others," I said. "Judging by what he was able to do to you in Galen's Vale. And von Geier may not be the only one taking the volumes south. Nor were they likely to take all twenty books at once. They might only have taken a couple at a time."

Vonvalt thought in silence for a few moments. "Aye," he said, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "This damned illness is like a fog in my brain," he muttered. "I cannot think straight."

He stood, abandoning whatever task he had been tending to, and fixed his sword about his waist.

"What do you mean to do?" Sir Radomir asked.

"I mean to go to the temple," Vonvalt said simply.

"Which temple?"

"The Temple of Savare. Here, make sure you are armed." He opened a drawer at his desk and tossed me a belt with a large dirk fixed to it. "Fetch Dubine," he added to Sir Radomir.

The old sheriff paused. "I am not well versed in the intricacies of politics in Sova, Sir Konrad, but does the Order of the Temple not enjoy some immunity to aspects of your practice?"

Vonvalt's features were grim-set. "Oh yes," he said, walking towards him. "But it has been a while since I paid my respects to the God Father."

Sir Radomir cleared his throat. "Sir Konrad—"

"Peace, Sir Radomir. Every Sovan citizen is entitled to attend the temple. Now, find Dubine for me. I shall meet you at the entrance."

Vonvalt fussed about his office for a few minutes, and then he and I made our way to the Temple of Savare, which lay to the north of the Sovan arena. Vonvalt had often said that hot weather made for hot tempers, and evidence of this old adage was in great abundance that morning. Every street corner seemed to be home to some amateur preacher or Mlyanar, yammering away

about the Emperor's missteps, crusades to the Frontier, the godlessness of the Empire, and the repatriation of the Draedist arcana to the Church.

"This would have been unthinkable when I was last in Sova," Vonvalt said, nodding to some Neman matria in a threadbare purple habit. A crowd had gathered and was listening to her speak, but it was not long before a pair of Imperial Guardsmen waded into the mob, grabbed the priest, and dragged her off to the city watch house. A great outcry followed, and a sense of unspent energy loitered in the air; but no one was about to lose an arm or head to an Imperial Guardsman's sword – yet.

Vonvalt shook his head. "The Emperor needs to get a grip on this city, and quickly," he muttered. For a man who was used to commanding absolute obedience at every turn, I could see why Sova, and its catastrophically unwieldy state apparatus and entrenched political factionalism, frustrated him so much.

"Aye," I muttered, "though with all this –" I gestured to the dispersing crowd "– shit going on, it is easy to see why he has overlooked Claver."

"Indeed," Vonvalt said.

Bressinger and Sir Radomir were standing a few hundred feet from the temple entrance.

"Sir Radomir tells me you mean to enter the temple," Bressinger said as we came within earshot. His eyes were fixed on the pair of Templars standing guard outside its entrance.

"I do mean to enter the temple," Vonvalt responded. He did not break his stride, and both taskmen had to walk quickly to keep up with him.

"If Margrave von Geier—"

"If Margrave von Geier has been helping Kadlec pass volumes from the Master's Vaults to Claver, then I shall take his head and those of everyone who has helped him." He nodded to the doors ahead of us. "And I will warrant that some of those heads are sitting on shoulders in this temple."

He drew up before the two Templar guards, grim-looking men whose cheeks were ruddy and peeling from too much sun. Their black surcoats, though clean, were still ingrained with red dust. From their appearance, they might have arrived from the Frontier that very morning.

"Stand aside," Vonvalt said as the men – unthinkably – moved to bar his path.

"There is a private ceremony within," one of the men said gruffly. "No

one is permitted to enter at this time."

Vonvalt folded his arms. "Stand aside. I shall not ask again."

To their credit, the Templars remained unfazed. "The city ordinances permit the temple to be closed when—"

"The city ordinances do not permit anyone or -thing to interfere with the duties of the Lord Prefect," Vonvalt said, and moved to push past the men.

One of them ill-advisedly laid a hand on his chest. "Milord, I cannot—"

Vonvalt punched the man squarely in the nose. Bressinger, moving with feline speed, had the second pinned to the door in a flash, his dagger pressed to the Templar's throat.

"Mi*lord* is right," Vonvalt said. "Your *lord*. I am your lord, and an Emperor's Justice, and the Lord Prefect, and if I want to walk into the Temple of Savare, no one save the Emperor himself may stop me." He stooped low to where the Templar wiped the blood from his broken nose. "And you have just committed the crime of battery by touching me, you idiot, which is a *capital* offence."

"Please, milord, I was just following my instructions—"

"I have some new instructions for you. Go to the watch house gaol. Hand yourself in to the Sheriff of Sova and tell him you are to await the pleasure of my attendance. Do you understand me?"

The Templar pressed himself up and away from Vonvalt. "Aye, milord," he spluttered, and moved quickly away.

Vonvalt turned to the second guard. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

The man shook his head.

"Careful," Bressinger said, where the man's neck chafed against his blade. "It's sharp."

"Nema, please," the Templar said. "We were told to—"

"By who? Who was the progenitor of these mysterious 'instructions'?"

The Templar squirmed. "One of the serjeants. I know not his name."

Vonvalt nodded to the door. "Open it, and take me to this ceremony. Now."

The Templar did as Vonvalt bade, and we walked through into the vast interior of the temple. Savare was the God Father, consort of Nema, and in most Sovan iconography was wrought as a human man, though sometimes he had the head of a bull more in line with Irox, the Draedist god. He was often

portrayed as wielding a sword, responsible for the physical preservation of the Empire where his wife, Nema, was responsible for its spiritual salvation. It was why the many martial orders tended to claim Savare's patronage.

In the centre of the temple was the Flame of Savare, a large bonfire contained in an intricately wrought iron brazier. The extinguishing of the Flame of Savare was supposed to herald the end of the Empire, but for now the eternal flame burned hot and bright and showed no signs of being without either of those two qualities.

Our footsteps rapped and echoed against the beautiful mosaic floor. The centre of the main hall was a huge marble colossus of Savare, standing next to a two-headed wolf, together fending off several invisible enemies. Would that I had time to take in this astonishing piece of sculpture; instead, the Templar led us briskly across the floor and over to an ambulatory where a couple of women in formal robes stood.

In spite of years of skilful politicking, neither of them could quite conceal their surprise at the scene which greeted them.

"My Lord Prefect," one of them said, the younger of the two. She had shrewd, unkind features, or perhaps it simply seemed that way because she was a Mlyanar, judging from her senatorial robes. What was unequivocal was her dislike of us. "What brings you to the Temple of Savare?"

Vonvalt ignored her and turned to the Templar. "I told you to take me to the ceremony," he said. "Not to whoever these two are."

Both women smiled thinly. "That ceremony is private."

"Nothing is private from me. *Where is it?*" he thundered in the Emperor's Voice.

Both women gasped, but it was the younger – and evidently more weak-minded Mlyanar – who vomited out the answer.

"*In a private chamber behind the Chapel of the Soldier!*" she shrieked, and immediately clapped her hands over her mouth, eyes wide in horror. The elder Mlyanar looked at her in sudden fury.

"Blood of gods!" she snapped, and rounded on Vonvalt. She pointed at him, about to unleash some torrent of rubbish, but then had to move awkwardly aside as Vonvalt marched straight past her, his Templar guide no longer required.

"Stop them!" the woman shouted at the Templar. "For Nema's sake!"

The Templar pulled out his sword.

“Milord Prefect!” the Templar attempted, but snarled in pain as Bressinger’s side-sword threaded between the two bones of his forearm at the wrist. His sword clattered to the floor, and the Mlyanars both shrieked instinctively.

“Let us be about it, before we herald our approach even further!” Vonvalt snapped.

We fell into step behind him as he swept down the ambulatory, and then cut left down another vast, arched gothick corridor which branched off the main hall. The Chapel of the Soldier was at the end, in the rearmost portion of the temple, only accessible via the way we had come. Neither the Mlyanar senators, nor the Templar, attempted to follow us – wise in the circumstances – though I could hear their frantic mutterings and running footsteps as they no doubt left to corral support.

We reached the chapel and barged through. There were more Templars in here, lost deep in prayer. In fact, the commotion had not roused them from what appeared to be a trancelike state.

Vonvalt looked at them with contempt, but did not dally. He swept past them just as they began to stir from their low mutterings, and stopped short of a low wooden door half concealed behind a number of hanging flags and pennants. Without being asked, Bressinger stepped forward and planted a solid kick where the lock was, and the door was flung open.

I do not think any one of us was prepared for the scene beyond.

“Prince of Hell,” Vonvalt said, sword in hand.

“Break the bond!” a familiar voice shouted.

It was Bartholomew Claver.

X

One Door Closes, Another Opens

"Lawkeeping and the pursuit of justice must take place in the light of day. The prosecution of criminal activity is a house of glass built on the bedrock of public scrutiny."

FROM CATERHAUSER'S *THE SOVAN CRIMINAL CODE: ADVICE TO PRACTITIONERS*

The tableau that confronted us was only something which fell into place with the benefit of hindsight.

In a centre of the room was a shirtless man lying on a wooden slab which had been covered over with a cloth, like an altar. He had the handle of a dagger protruding from his chest, and appeared to be very much dead. Around the corpse were arranged several people. None of them were Claver. Some were obviously Savaran Templars; others wore formal senatorial robes, and had to have been more Mlyanars. But there were others, too, who I had not expected to see. One was an olive-skinned man who wore expensive-looking clothes which did not conform to any Sovan styling that I was aware of, and had a trimmed, greying goatee and striking green eyes. The other was a woman who was ostentatiously blind, with a tattooed face and bald head. She wore robes of a confronting orange and yellow style, whilst an ornate staff lay near her.

All of the attention in the chamber was now fixed on Vonvalt, and for a horrible ghastly moment, no one said or did anything.

Then, the corpse's head began to move frantically, its eyes open and

casting about the room. “Break the bond!” it snapped, now with great urgency.

I gasped with revulsion. The *corpse* was being *controlled* by Claver.

“An illegal séance,” Vonvalt declared, his features grim set.

Still no one moved. Claver called out once again, “Break the bond! Prognosticator!”

The blind woman tried to speak, but the words caught in her throat, too stunned by the interruption.

Vonvalt moved quickly. “Shut the door!” he shouted to Sir Radomir. He smacked the prognosticator in the throat with the flat of his sword, and she clutched it, wheezing and choking wretchedly. Then he turned to Claver.

“*You* have overreached yourself,” he sneered at the priest.

The corpse’s eyes and head continue to roll around frantically, but there was no one else in the room who could assist Claver.

Vonvalt reached out a hand, and placed it on the corpse of the Templar and muttered a few words in a language I did not recognise. The air suddenly felt heavy and close, and a sense of unease permeated the chamber.

Claver gnashed the corpse’s teeth in frustration. “What have you done?” he screeched.

“I have bound you to this body,” Vonvalt said, almost mildly. He looked about the chamber, into the eyes of all present. Nobody was armed, or certainly not in a position to arm themselves before being cut down by one of Bressinger, Sir Radomir or me, and sat in frozen silence, aghast.

“Shall I do to you what you did to Resi?” Vonvalt asked. When Claver did not respond, he pressed the tip of his short sword into the neck of the body. “Where are you?”

Claver looked venomous. “You still do not know? After you questioned and then murdered Obenpatria Fischer? Not much of an investigator, are you?”

“I know you are in Keraq,” Vonvalt sneered. The tip of his sword drew a trickle of blood from the body’s chin.

“Would that I could applaud.”

“I also have Nathaniel Kadlec in custody, who is enjoying a spell with the Truth-taker.” Even in these fraught circumstances, I didn’t like that. I didn’t like to hear Vonvalt… *bragging* about Kadlec’s torture. “And I know that von Geier has been assisting him in stealing the Draedist arcana from the

Law Library. How's that? Getting to the kernel of it, am I?"

Something happened. The body that Claver inhabited spasmed for a moment, the bones cracking and popping. Black ectoplasmic goo trickled from the corner of his mouth.

"You know – *hrk*! – nothing," Claver grated. "Your reputation is very ill deserved. A…" He spasmed. "*Gnn*… *child* could have deduced those morsels. You have spent so long staring at the trees, you are yet to see the woods. Do you have any notion of what is *really* moving against you?" A grin, brief but freighted with malevolence, split the dead Templar's face. "Tell me: how are you *feeling*, Justice? *Thin*? Somewhat faded? Nema knows you look a little green around the gills."

Vonvalt could not conceal his surprise. "What have you done?" he demanded.

Claver laughed. "Oh, just making some friends. *Powerful* ones. I recommend you do the same. Nema knows you are going to need them, soon enough."

Something had changed. Claver's tone had gone from frantic and frightened to suddenly calm and confident. The way he had said "powerful" sent a chill through me. I looked over to the prognosticator, who continued to clutch at her throat. Vonvalt must have nicked it slightly, for blood ran through her fingers, but he had certainly not slashed the windpipe or a vessel. Whatever had happened to Claver to imbue him with his sudden arrogance, it had not been by her hand.

Vonvalt snarled and pressed the tip of his blade against Claver's cheek so that it slowly cut into the man's eyeball. Claver's cockiness was briefly forgotten, and he reverted to writhing and screeching.

"I am coming for you, priest," Vonvalt growled. "Everything you are working towards is being unravelled."

"It is not!" Claver shouted as blood and eyeball jelly trickled down his cheek. The man was clearly in agony, but nonetheless madly elated. "It is not! You have achieved nothing! I am ahead of you at every turn! Cut my face if you must, destroy this body. It will not help you. Bring your armies down to Keraq; they will perish."

"I am not frightened of your Templar thugs!" Vonvalt roared. Only Claver seemed to be able to get such a rise out of him so easily.

Claver let off a burst of insane laughter, incredulous. "The Emperor is

blind! Indolent! The Legions are scattered! There is no one to *help* you, Sir Konrad. Leave me be. Go and live out your days somewhere else. Leave the bounds of the Empire and I shall let you and your people live."

"No one will live under the yoke of your insanity," Vonvalt growled, his loose blade scoring all kinds of cuts into Claver's face. "Do you hear me? Mark these words, priest. It will be a cold day in the Halls of Hell before I let you step foot in Sova."

Claver suddenly took on an expression of frightening intensity. "Oh I am… *intimately* familiar with the Halls of Hell," he said. Once again, the chamber seemed to draw in and darken. I became aware of battering on the door where the Templars – those stuck in the Chapel of the Soldier – attempted to smash their way in. But it was strangely muted. Something seemed to be sucking all the sound out of the room. "I have been to a great many places the Magistratum fears to tread."

Vonvalt leant in to say something into the Templar corpse's ear, and it was only then that I noticed the body begin to twitch and move. With a sudden and intense effort, the corpse pulled the knife from its heart. It raised it to strike Vonvalt.

"Sir Konrad!" I shouted, moving forward. Vonvalt drew back immediately, and the knife cut nothing but the air. At the exact same time, the Templars finally succeeded in battering the door open.

"No!" Vonvalt shouted, turning to us. "I need more time!"

The chamber descended into chaos. Bressinger and Sir Radomir immediately moved in to engage the Templars. The interlopers had used a large iron brazier on a pole as a means of ingress, and it was this clumsy battering ram that Vonvalt's taskmen had to contend with. Without thinking, I pulled my own dagger from its sheath and launched it inexpertly at the closest man. By complete chance it sank into the base of his throat, carried by the weight of the hilt, and he collapsed, dropping the brazier which subsequently landed on Sir Radomir's toes, breaking at least one of them. The sheriff shouted in anger and pain, and a chaotic melee ensued.

Several of the Mlyanars and the prognosticator were screaming near constantly. One of the patricians, however, a man who by the look of him was a Reichskrieg veteran, had managed to recover a weapon from somewhere and now sought to engage Vonvalt – ill-advisedly. Only the close confines of the chamber, and the reanimation of the corpse housing Claver,

meant he stayed alive for longer than a few moments. I was sure Vonvalt wanted to take him alive; but he was too overwhelmed to take prisoners, and had no choice but to bloodily and brutally cut the man down with several heavy chops which opened his neck and shoulder.

Claver was staggering impossibly off the altar, his mind bound to the body of the dead Templar. He moved haltingly. I knew not to touch the corpse, and so I reached out and grabbed the prognosticator's staff and used it to club the back of the corpse's head. It turned, its eyes dark circles of rage, and I knew in that moment that I was not simply contending with that mad priest, but something else, some other entity that inhabited the corpse. I fancied I could see its shadow overlapping the space that Claver occupied, like a picture on wet parchment laid over another – some furl-winged black demon from the depths of Hell. It had the effect of locking me in place, enthralled – as surely as if I'd been wrought from marble.

"Helena!" someone – Bressinger – shouted.

I whirled around just in time to see a Templar staggering towards me, but he fell to the ground dead before the sword he carried could do me any harm. Blood and corpses were filling the chamber, as well as a horrible buzzing sound emanating from the animated body. A profound feeling of skin-crawling horror filled me. I wanted nothing more than to be out of the priest's presence.

Finally, Vonvalt moved to cut Claver down. He said nothing as he raised his sword, no pithy parting words. He simply brought it across in a short, powerful arc.

The blade struck something several inches from the corpse's neck, some invisible boundary that might as well have been iron, and the sword travelled upwards, deflected.

Vonvalt grunted in surprise, his eyes wide. Claver laughed, delighted, black goo frothing from his mouth. He rounded on Vonvalt, moving with more confidence now, his hands held out either side of him, fingers splayed like claws.

"How are you doing this?" Vonvalt demanded. Everybody else in the chamber, the remaining Mlyanars, the foreign stranger, Bressinger, and Sir Radomir, backed away, giving Claver – if it was indeed still Claver – as wide a berth as possible.

"I told you," Claver said with a grin, "powerful friends." He seemed to

have grown several feet taller. The chamber was now so dark it was practically black.

“For the love of Nema! Sir Konrad, break the binding!” Bressinger hissed, his eyes wide with fear. I had never seen Bressinger frightened before. Nothing frightened Bressinger. But this did. This frightened all of us.

With horrible inhuman growl, the corpse leapt forward like a beast –

– and fell slackly to the floor at Vonvalt’s feet, a marionette with its strings severed.

Vonvalt stood, his hand outstretched, the words of banishment already fading into memory. In an instant, the buzzing drone and eldritch darkness which had consumed the chamber vanished.

“Blood of gods,” Sir Radomir said, sounding as though he had been holding his breath for several minutes.

We all turned at the sound of a door opening – a secret door, concealed behind a tapestry on the back wall.

The man, the foreigner with the green eyes, was fleeing.

“Shit,” Vonvalt said, thrusting his short sword back into its scabbard. “After him!”

The man was fast – faster even than Bressinger. His clothes and bearing, which had marked him out as a wealthy, indolent man, in fact concealed a hidden strength and agility. He moved like a former solider, but it was his desperation that propelled him to frantic, reckless flight.

Vonvalt tried to bring him to heel with the Emperor’s Voice, but like Claver’s many acolytes, the man had evidently learned to frustrate it. Plenty in the vicinity were suddenly compelled to stop whatever it was they were doing for a few moments, dazed as though they had been knocked about the head. But not the man. The man kept running. He ran free of the shadow of the Temple of Savare and pelted toward the Creus Road like a startled hare.

“Stop him! Stop that man!” Vonvalt bellowed to anybody who would listen, but no one was quick enough to react. The man shouldered his way through gormless bystanders, vaulted over stacked crates and barrels, punched his way past buskers to angry shouts, and even darted through open

doors and through residences and chambers.

Sir Radomir began to fall behind. Even Vonvalt, as fit as any other man in Sova, began to lag. His ailment, a temperamental thing to be sure, seemed once again be reasserting itself. But he did not stop. Our quarry, after all, was only human. There was only so long his own frantic flight could continue

For my own part, the hot, dusty air of Sova choked me, and my breath rasped in my throat. But I would not let this man escape. And I had youth on my side, and a willingness to see the forces of law and order succeed. Besides, he was a quarry worth pursuing. Who knew what treasure trove of information was locked within the confines of his skull?

Bressinger and I began to pull ahead as the man crossed a bridge over the westernmost branch of the Sauber and then through a tangle of buildings next to the Philosophers' Palace. Every so often he would throw a glance behind us, eyes of vivid emerald green wide with the horror of the chase. But he ran on, shedding garments and bits of his skin where he chafed and snagged against innumerable protuberances – beams, nails, stone walls.

He finally staggered onto the Baden High-Way. The Summit of the Prefects rose up on our left, whilst to our right was the city market and unsociable trades district.

"The Wolf Gate!" Bressinger shouted, red-faced and pissing sweat. I followed his gaze to see the gigantic northern gatehouse of Sova rearing up ahead of us, the large black Autun colossus regarding our chase with snarling intensity. It seemed insane, given the thickness of the foot traffic here, next to where the city market lay, that the man would choose this route, but it soon became clear that he intended to try and lose us amongst the thicket of people. He nearly succeeded, too, but every time we lost sight of him, we only had to follow the angry shouts he left in his wake.

Nonetheless, the chase lengthened. Every minute that passed I became more desperate. I was sure that the man was pulling away from us. The trail of clues he left behind – the angry pointing merchant, the crying child, the weaver picking up a scattered pile of baskets – thinned. The man could easily duck into a stall and hide, or cut east through the market towards the Estran Wall. In a place as gigantic and labyrinthine as Sova, he could have cut through just about anywhere and lost us in a matter of minutes.

Instead, we picked up his trail again back on the Baden High-Way, but a few hundred yards from the Wolf Gate.

“Shit!” I wheezed, about to give up; but I quickly realised then that the creaking rumble I heard, the steady grinding of enormous hinges and the rattling of chains and gigantic pulleys, was the sound of the gate closing.

“Sir Konrad! He must have closed the gates!” I shouted.

“How…?” Bressinger panted, his eyes scrunched up in pain and his face as red as the soil on the Frontier, as we both came to a stop and tried to catch our breath.

The answer came very shortly after in the form of a thundering clatter, and we turned to see Vonvalt and several Imperial Guardsmen riding fast horses down the High-Way, shouting at all and sundry to clear the way.

“Of course,” Bressinger gasped. “The signals.” He pointed, and I followed the line of his finger to where several flags raised on the top of the tower at the nexus of the Baden and Dubravkan bridges. Vonvalt had evidently gathered his wits, not to mention a host of Guardsmen, and had done what he did best – turn his mind to the problem.

We resumed our journey to the gate, this time at a fast walk. Already a large crowd was gathered about the foot of the enormous gatehouse, where the constant flow of people quickly swelled like the waters of a dammed river. Vonvalt and his Guardsmen had no trouble in pushing their way to the front of the mass, just in time for the enormous gates to thud closed, the report of it echoing like a single, catastrophic burst of thunder.

But, at the same time, almost lost in that explosive thump, we heard a brief scream, followed by a great groan that went up from the assembled bystanders.

Bressinger and I exchanged a confused look.

“Make way there!” Bressinger shouted as we began to shove our way through the crowd with a fresh urgency. Plenty of people gave us angry looks and shouts as we shouldered past them, only to resile from their displeasure as they saw us to be Imperial agents. We ignored all of it, only interested in seeing what had happened.

Eventually we broke through to the front of the crowd.

“Faith,” Bressinger said, taking in the sight. We both looked to where Vonvalt was crouched.

About his feet was a large pool of fresh blood – and crushed to a fine paste between the shut gates, like a burst sausage, was a body.

A single green eye, hanging from a smear of gore, looked out accusingly

at us from the gap.

XI

An Untimely Distraction

“The father of misfortune sires many children.”

SOVAN PROVERB

We returned to the Temple of Savare, this time mounted on horses and with a group of Imperial Guard and city watchmen with us to make arrests. But there were no Templars guarding the doors this time, nor any Mlyanars to intercept us en route. There was no one in the ambulatory or hallway which led to the Chapel of the Soldier, and no one to be found in that latter place, either.

“Shit,” Sir Radomir muttered next to me. We were at the rear of the group, waiting whilst the Guards- and watchmen smashed the door into the secret chamber, which had been re-barred – from the inside.

“What?” I asked. “It matters not if they are dead. Sir Konrad can use his necromancy.”

“He cannot use it on a corpse that is not there,” Sir Radomir said.

My brow furrowed in confusion, but my attention was drawn by Vonvalt as he walked quickly back through the chapel, his face a mask of displeasure.

“This whole damned city conspires against me,” he muttered. He did not break his stride. “Search every inch of this temple!” he shouted to the watchmen gathered around the chapel entrance. “They cannot have gone far!”

“See?” Sir Radomir murmured grimly. “And if our enemies have any sense, they will burn those bodies.” He spoke with a weary fatalism, as

though he routinely dealt with vast and complex conspiracies. But it was not that – just a veteran lawman's tired expertise in criminal enterprises. He had long ago given up on optimism – and sobriety.

"Those Mlyanars will have families," I said, referring to the various senators we had seen partaking in the ritual. We began to walk back out of the temple, as though being gently pulled into Vonvalt's wake. "Associates. They may disappear, but their disappearance will have to be explained. And the prognosticator—"

"There is no one in the city permitted inside the College of Prognosticators," Sir Radomir said. "Even I know that."

"How do you know that?" I asked, embarrassed that I did not.

"A good lawkeeper is quick to learn the limitations of his power," he said gruffly, and took a draw from his wineskin. I did not realise it then, but the gruesome spectacle of Claver puppeteering a reanimated corpse had affected him more than he let on. How could it not have? Nema knew it had terrified me well enough.

"You do not think our enemies have mis-stepped today?" I asked.

"There are too many fancy men, wealthy men, involved. Nothing will come of this," Sir Radomir said with a sigh. "You mark my words."

Vonvalt summoned a carriage and we were carried back to the Grand Lodge. After slaking our thirst at a public water fountain and bathing our faces and necks, we made our way to the Master's chambers. It was in there that Vonvalt set investigative wheels in motion. Representatives from the city watch and Imperial Guard were tasked with the search. The Temple of Savare was to be turned upside down; Senate chambers of the Mlyanars were to be ransacked. Of the latter he provided a document, an evidently pre-prepared list of patricians whose offices and persons were to be searched.

It did not stop there. Vonvalt gave descriptions of the two Mlyanar women who had stopped us in the temple, with orders for them to be detained for questioning. A guard was to be put on the College of Prognosticators – official interpreters of the Book of Creus, the Creed and the will of Nema, politically and legally untouchable – to look out for an elderly woman with a

visible neck injury.

Templar facilities were to be searched, too, and the familial homes of all the suspects visited and searched. The mansion of Margrave Vladimir von Geier, another ostentatious – and empty – house on the Summit of the Prefects, was to be raked through meticulously. Vonvalt gave a detailed description of the foreign man, too, with orders that records of any foreign dignitaries or merchants were to be brought out and consulted to see if anything could be divined there.

The instructions went on and on. No stone was to be left unturned. Even the Imperial Guardsman taking the orders, a gruff, dark-skinned Southern Plainsman, began to baulk as the list of tasks grew longer and involved more and more politically significant people. This was not a subtle course of action. This was an evisceration of the Empire's chief agitators. As the plans grew in both scope and ambition, I found myself becoming infected by Sir Radomir's pessimism. This was going to ruffle a lot of Sovan feathers. Vonvalt may have been used to moving quickly, but the capital was not.

Once the final orders had been issued, and just Sir Radomir, Bressinger, and I were left, Vonvalt took out his pipe and lit it. The air in the chamber – already leaden and stuffy thanks to the midday heat – now became overbearingly so as it filled with smoke. He idly pushed open several of the windows behind him.

"You are about to make a lot of enemies," Bressinger said, breaking a long silence.

"It seems all of Sova is my enemy," Vonvalt murmured. "Even apparently the Wolf Gate."

"That was bad luck," Sir Radomir offered.

"That was the hand of Fate, I am sure of it. Nema, I wish I had not touched his mind."

Bressinger looked alarmed. "You used your necromancy on him?"

Vonvalt had explained enough of the process for me to know that a violently destroyed body produced little but gibberish when subjected to necromancy. That he had even attempted it, however briefly, was a mark of not a little desperation.

"I should not have," Vonvalt conceded. "I wish I had not. Nothing but a miasma of insanity and darkness. And… something else, too. Some entity – a presence I have not felt before. I shall have to think on that."

I sat up suddenly. “What was the nature of the entity?” I asked.

Vonvalt looked at me, frowning. “I know not. Why do you ask?”

“I myself have dreamed recently of a…” I cast about the room, trying to think of the appropriate words. I could only think of the one Vonvalt himself had just used. “*Presence*. I can barely describe it, now. Just a feeling of being watched by something. Something unpleasant.” I shuddered.

Vonvalt regarded me for a while. “That is odd,” he said. I felt as though he were trying not to frighten me. “These things are unlikely to be unconnected. If it happens again you must try and remember more.”

I nodded, but in all honesty, I was pleased to have forgotten much of it.

The chamber was quiet for a moment, each of us lost in our own reveries.

“If the operation here is anything like that in Galen’s Vale, the conspirators are likely to have been careful with their information,” Bressinger said, bringing us back from the realm of the afterlife.

“I agree,” Vonvalt said. He sighed, long and loud, filling the air with another huge breath of smoke. “And really, what have we learned? That Claver is in league with the Mlyanars and the Templars? Nothing we did not already know. Nema knows why I bother.”

“Claver,” Sir Radomir said. I could tell he was disturbed. “Or… fucking hell, *whatever* it was in that chamber. That is why you bother. If that is but a hint of the horror to come, then I am sure of one thing: he must be stopped.”

“Indeed,” Vonvalt said, and then looked at Sir Radomir. “You have not grappled with the sharp end of my practice, have you?”

“No, and thank the gods I have not,” the old sheriff muttered.

Vonvalt considered this for a moment. “Let’s you and I speak alone on the matter.”

“Now?”

Vonvalt shook his head. “No. *Now* we go to the Emperor. All of this…” he gestured out the window, indicating the long knives he had just put into motion “… will wither and die quickly without his blessing.”

Bressinger winced. “The Emperor will not be pleased to hear you speak on Claver again.”

“The Emperor is acting like a petulant child,” Vonvalt said. “He does not know what is good for him, nor the Empire.” He stood. “I do. Now, come. We’ve much to do, and little time to do it in.”

The journey to the Imperial Palace was a fast one, but nonetheless I could not help noticing sources of unrest on every corner. Neman priests in their performatively threadbare purple habits, Templar recruitment tents outside every temple, patrician toadies rabble-rousing on crates. Watchmen and Guardsmen were everywhere, breaking up crowds and fights in equal measure.

“Fuck me, this place is going to explode like a keg of blackpowder,” Sir Radomir murmured from his place next to me on the litter.

“And the Emperor seems intent on nothing but filling the barrel to the brim,” Vonvalt replied.

We reached the Imperial Palace and began to make our way to the Hall of Solitude – but were stopped almost immediately.

“My Lord Prefect!” a man called out to us. “My Lord Prefect!”

An Imperial Guardsman intercepted us, uncharacteristically breathless and perturbed. “The Emperor requires your immediate presence.”

“I am on my way to see him now,” Vonvalt said.

“Oh, you have been told, then?” the Guardsman said, hurrying us not to the Hall of Solitude, nor to the strategium, but to another private chamber.

“Told what?” Vonvalt asked, nonplussed. “I haven’t been told anything.”

We reached the audience chamber. The Guardsman looked uneasy, and spoke in a low voice. “The Prince Kamil has gone missing. Taken. As of this morning.”

Vonvalt froze. We all froze. I was sure I had misheard.

“*What?*” Vonvalt demanded.

“Just that, milord. I know not the details. Here; he is expecting you.”

“Who is Prince Kamil?” Sir Radomir muttered to me.

“How can you not know this? He is Prince Tasa’s son,” I hissed.

“Nema’s blood,” the sheriff swore. “Kamil is the son of the Emperor’s *firstborn*?”

“Yes!” Vonvalt snapped. “Be quiet, the pair of you.”

My heart sank like a dropped stone. It was happening. I was sure of it. The end of the Empire. This had to be the beginning of it, or if not the very beginning, then one of its catalysts. My blood turned to ice. I felt as though a

trapdoor had been opened beneath me. I exchanged a look with Bressinger, to see my own surprise and fear reflected back at me. Even Vonvalt, as imperturbable as rock, looked shocked. Suddenly Sir Radomir's pessimism in the Temple of Savare was imbued with an uncanny prescience. Already, barely an hour or two after the confrontation with Claver, I could see it being overtaken, the illegal séance and all of its repercussions obfuscated like a handful of thrown sand. Bressinger was right. If the Prince Kamil had been abducted, it was difficult to imagine the Emperor troubling himself about Claver.

We entered the chamber, dazed by the sudden and unwelcome news. What was supposed to have been a council of war, a plan to quit the capital and head south to dislodge Claver and the traitor Templars, was now the beginning of another investigation. After the events of the morning, a sense of unspent energy filled us. I saw Bressinger scratching at his arm stump, worrying at the folds of tissue there beneath the pinned arm of his doublet. Sir Radomir's hands kept searching for a wineskin that was not there. Even Vonvalt could not stop running an index finger and thumb over his moustache, a tic which only afflicted him when he was particularly vexed. It was difficult to stand in silence; I felt as though I wanted to *do* something.

Inside the chamber was the wolf-headed Kasar, Kimathi, and a knot of anxious-looking advisers who may as well have been part of the fresco they stood in front of. At the foot of an ornate chair – evidently some sort of proxy throne – lay three Sovan war shepherds in a pile, so inanimate they might have been dead.

Almost immediately after our arrival a side door opened and the Emperor entered. I suspected he had been monitoring the chamber through a hidden peephole. Silence fell, save for a susurrus of fabric as everyone made their obeisance. The Emperor's face was grim set, but there was no hint of the apoplexy I had expected. He wore simple clothes, not unlike those Vonvalt would wear following a day in court – but in spite of this, the man radiated a tangible, almost eldritch sense of authority.

"There is much work to do, and little enough information available, so I shall be brief," the Emperor said. "My grandson, the Prince Kamil, went missing this morning in the unsociable trades. The tanneries, to be more precise. He had a life guard, whom Sir Gerold has taken to the city watch house. My people are searching for the boy as we speak, but you all know as

well as I do that that is a stopper before the plank." He turned to look at Vonvalt. "Lord Prefect. You have proven most elusive this morning," he said pointedly. "There is to be no more cavorting about the city temples. The Magistratum is well staffed with men and women with special investigative talents. I want you to select as many as can be made use of and liaise with Sir Gerold." The Emperor then turned to one of his advisers, and was about to speak, when Vonvalt interrupted him.

"Majesty, I will of course liaise with Sir Gerold as you ask," Vonvalt said, his voice strained. "I take it that you anticipate the sheriff will lead the investigation?"

The Emperor paused for a moment, briefly confused. "No, Lord Prefect. You will lead the investigation as Master of the Magistratum." The Emperor turned back to his advisers, but Vonvalt interrupted him again. I shared a brief look with Sir Radomir.

"Majesty, I do not wish to suggest that this matter is anything other than extremely serious," Vonvalt said, in a tone of voice that suggested he was about to do precisely that. "And I will of course turn out the most appropriate Justices from the Grand Lodge as soon as this meeting is concluded. But as Your Majesty is aware, there are other…" Vonvalt glanced at the cabal of royal advisers "… *difficulties* facing the Empire at this time which I had hoped to address with you. These matters have taken on a very urgent aspect as of this morning."

The Emperor's expression curdled. The air seemed to vacate the chamber. "Yes. I am aware from my subordinates that you ordered the closure of the Wolf Gate, and have, as of a short while ago, tasked a number of the Imperial Guard with investigative duties regarding Patria Bartholomew Claver. These investigations will cease immediately. I have issued instructions that whatever resources you have turned to the task will be called off. Every woman and man will join the search for the prince."

I saw the muscles of Vonvalt's jaw working. "Majesty, I fear that that is *precisely* the intended effect of the abduction," he said. "The timing alone is __"

"My Lord Prefect," the Emperor said icily. "You misjudge the situation. With *uncharacteristic* imprudence."

I assumed that Vonvalt would concede the point then with a nod, or perhaps a shallow bow, for however reasonable the Emperor seemed, nobody

– not even Vonvalt – could have expected him to prioritise the geographically and temporally distant Bartholomew Claver over the abduction of his own grandson, even with these latest disturbing developments in the Temple of Savare.

But he did not.

"Majesty, there are any number of extremely capable Justices and investigators I can recommend in my stead—"

"My ears deceive me," the Emperor said, his voice granite. "Your ready acquiescence sounds an awful lot like obstinacy."

"I might say the same," Vonvalt muttered, to the audible astonishment of those in the chamber. Bressinger actually thumped Vonvalt on the arm.

"What was that?" the Emperor asked, leaning forward. I was sure he was only pretending not to have heard so that he did not have to flog Vonvalt.

"*Sir Konrad!*" Bressinger mouthed emphatically.

Vonvalt drew in a deep breath. "Majesty, Bartholomew Claver was—"

"*Blood of gods*, Konrad!" the Emperor exploded. "You dare to stand there and argue with me like this is a fucking moot at the Philosophers' Palace? I am the *Emperor*! I have given you a set of instructions! The second-in-line to the Imperial throne has gone missing! Perhaps I ought to have that carved into a block of wood and stamped on your forehead! You stand there and have the temerity to contradict me at a time like this? I have taken your counsel on Bartholomew *fucking* Claver. The man will *keep*. Kasivar, you would set this city afire overnight! Orders to ransack the Senate! Searching patricians' private residences! A *guard* outside the College! Who are you to issue commands such as these? There will be blood in the streets! The capital will be ashes by dawn! Blood of Creus, I know you are frustrated, but have some *circumspection*, man!"

"He was *here*!" Vonvalt shouted, his eyes closed. "Claver was here, in the city, conducting an illegal séance with—"

The Emperor looked sharply about him as though genuinely confused at this defiance, an incredulous, furious expression on his face. "Shut up! Shut up! Nema, man, shut *up*!"

The chamber lapsed to silence. I watched Vonvalt, aghast. In a lifetime of warfare and lawkeeping, he had never come so close to being killed.

"Have you *finished*?" the Emperor asked, nostrils flared, perspiration on his brow.

Now Vonvalt did what I had expected him to do earlier: a shallow bow, with his eyes closed. It was hardly a great prostration, but it was good enough for the Emperor, who apparently had a separate, special rope he was willing to play out only for Vonvalt.

"Find my grandson, Sir Konrad. You must do whatever it takes to *find* him. *Those* are your instructions. And in the meantime, Sova's governing estates are to remain *intact*, understand? These matters are being *worked* on. The difficulties remain. I cannot magick up solutions from the soil. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, Majesty."

"Heinrich," the Emperor snapped, and one of the Sovan war shepherds leapt to its feet. The Emperor turned back to Vonvalt. "Take him. He has the best nose of all my shepherds, and he has the boy's scent committed to memory."

"At once, Majesty."

"'At once, Majesty', indeed. Spare me your sullen theatrics, Konrad. You will get to the bottom of this matter in short order. We are in the heart of the Empire, with all the investigative apparatus you can bring to bear and the most incisive minds in the realm at your beck and call. Once my grandson is safe, you can spend as much of your blood on the Frontier as you see fit."

Vonvalt performed another shallow bow. I could see the muscles of his jaw clench tight with anger.

"Flame of Savare, be about it," the Emperor said, and stalked out of the chamber.

Outside the palace, Sir Radomir was the first to let fly.

"The Emperor's grandson has been plucked off the streets of Sova in the middle of the working day? How the fuck is that even possible? Such things did not happen in Galen's Vale to peasants' children, let alone one of the Autun's cubs!"

Vonvalt swept on, implacable and undoubtedly embarrassed at his loss of control. "I know not. It will be a question for his life guard, first and foremost."

“I wonder what he has to say for himself?”

“We shall find out soon enough – if he is still breathing.”

We walked on. Beside us, Heinrich trotted, his tongue hanging out slackly in the morning heat. The dog came up to my waist, but I found myself stroking his black fur nonetheless. He seemed to have the effect of quieting rebellious sentiments within several dozen yards in every direction.

“How are you feeling?” I heard Bressinger ask Vonvalt quietly.

“How do you think?” Vonvalt muttered. He grimaced. “The timing of this alone should be tolling alarum bells. The *instant* I move against the patricians and…” he gestured to the city about him “… *this* happens. The Emperor is making precisely the same mistake I did: he is underestimating Bartholomew Claver.”

“You cannot seriously have expected this to go any other way,” Bressinger said. “You are his son in everything but name. Any other man would be in a gibbet after speaking to the Emperor in that manner. He was never going to trust the search to another.”

“That is what bothers me, Dubine. Nema knows how long this mess could take to clear up. We may be detained weeks here, or months! It is an unforgivable delay. Every day the Emperor piles new and urgent matters on me, whilst the most urgent of all bubbles away like a witch’s cauldron in the south.” He threw a hand up in the air, as though he might dismiss the whole mess with a gesture. “*Yes*, he is the Emperor’s grandson; and *yes*, he is heir to the throne – after his father. But the boy will not have an empire to inherit unless the Emperor does something about Claver. He does not need me for this. There are two dozen men and women who could look into it.”

We rounded the corner of a vast, pillared corn exchange and moved down the broad and imposing Saint Slavka Valent the Martyr High-Way, the road that would take us to the city watch house. “Claver was right about one thing, damn him to hell. The Emperor is blind, or being blinded.”

“What is it you intend to do?” Sir Radomir asked. “You cannot disobey the Emperor, surely?”

“As frustrated as it makes me,” Vonvalt said, “the way out is through. The sooner we put this matter to bed, the sooner we can focus our time and energy on stopping Claver. We shall just have to be more subtle about our other investigations.”

“But the Emperor is right,” I said, uncertainly. “We have the entire Order

at our disposal, with all the arts and magicks that come with it. And Kamil Kzosic is hardly a random peasant lad. Will we not solve this matter quickly?"

"One would think that the fact that anyone even felt able to undertake such a drastic crime would focus the Emperor's attention a bit on the wider problems facing the Empire," Sir Radomir said.

"Guard your tongue, for Nema's sake," Bressinger said, eyeing an orator's corner where yet another Mlyanar stood, ranting and gesticulating.

"Or what, fancy man? You going to cut it out of my head?" Sir Radomir shot back.

"Prince of Hell, shut up, the pair of you," Vonvalt snapped. Both men fell to silence. But after a while, Vonvalt muttered, "Though Kasivar knows I agree."

I had been in Vonvalt's service when he had investigated the disappearance of children before. Where foul play was involved, there was usually only a brief window of time in which to recover the child alive. It was always an appalling business. Of the many and varied crimes men and women are capable of committing, those involving children are the worst. As a man who had lost two children, I feared for Bressinger's sanity.

We swept along the high-way, keeping the Royal Imperial Courts of Justice to our left. Another mass of gothick buildings faced us, rearing up from the ground like termite mounds, and amongst this pile was a huge and imposing edifice that was all the more striking for its simplicity: the city watch house. It was a plain oblong of stone, its only concession to feature a pillared entranceway and an Autun wrought from black marble above it, with "*The wolf with two heads sees in both directions*" rendered in High Saxan above that.

We entered, to find ourselves standing in a well-lit atrium that bustled with activity. It was akin to the Galen's Vale watch house except every feature was grander and more expensive. Constables and serjeants moved about the place in gleaming armour and embroidered surcoats. Racks of weapons lined the walls. I could make out holding cells near the back of the

atrium, whilst stacked mezzanines above were crowded with desks and cases filled with scrolls and ledgers of records. There was a sense of frenetic activity in the air, and men and women bustled about like – well, termites in a mound.

At that point in time there was only one reason why the Lord Prefect and his entourage would come to the city watch house, and someone whom I took initially to be a senior serjeant, a large, muscled man with skin the colour of dark tanned leather and a greying black beard, broke away from the conversation he was having and approached us quickly. He was clad not in a watchman's uniform, though what he did wear was reminiscent of a more expensive and ostentatious version of it. A medallion, an Autun armed with a short sword, hung about his neck. He struck me in the same way Sir Radomir had struck me the first time I'd met him: professionally tired, sagging under the weight of the city's ills.

"Sir Gerold Bertilo," Vonvalt said, grimly. He clasped the Sheriff of Sova's forearm in the traditional Sovan greeting.

The man nodded to us. "Sir Konrad Vonvalt," he said. He had a stern bearing, and every word he spoke seemed to be uttered at great expenditure of effort. "I heard of your promotion to Lord Prefect. I am glad it is you."

"I am glad that you are glad. My congratulations on your own promotion. It was Keller when I was last here."

"Aye. Dead, now."

He and Bressinger also clasped forearms, evidently familiar with one another, and then Vonvalt quickly introduced me and Sir Radomir, too.

"Did you receive my instructions this morning?" Vonvalt asked. "Regarding searches of the Temple of Savare?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Every resource we have has been consumed by the abduction of the young prince," he said, gesturing wearily for us to follow him – though not before he had roughly scratched Heinrich's ears. "Was it important?"

"Extremely," Vonvalt said dourly, but offered nothing more.

We were taken up several flights of stairs, through a warren of corridors, and into a large and well-appointed private chamber with a dual aspect. The sheriff, likely too overburdened to have thought to forewarn us, ushered us in, and so forced us all to make an immediate and awkward obeisance to Prince Tasa and Lady Iliyana who were standing by one of the windows. The former

had the classic Haugenate dark red hair, but had superficially shrewder features and a more stern comportment than Prince Gordan who we had met on the Baden Road. Iliyana… Iliyana was a force of nature. She filled the room with her presence, standing tall and erect, shoulders back, chin tilted slightly upwards in that disdainful aristocratic way. She had striking green eyes, strong cheekbones, and her hair was tied up in a complex knot of plaits that spoke of an embarrassment of riches in itself. Considering her son had been abducted, she appeared composed, which I put down to her being a prisoner of royal convention.

"The Emperor has tasked me with the recovery of your son," Vonvalt said once we had all taken our seats. He was making a great effort to remain calm and respectful, but after the morning's tangle with Claver, I could tell he was still agitated. "I understand that the Imperial Guard have been… *retasked* to look for him now?"

It was Sir Gerold who spoke. "That's right," he said, discomfited by Vonvalt's tone. "Word has been passed back to the barracks. Captain Galla is personally leading the search. They are out in force, as well as of course my own men."

Ingeburg Galla, as I would come to find out, was the Captain of the Imperial Guard.

"The boy was accompanied by a chaperone?" Vonvalt asked.

Prince Tasa was about to speak, but Iliyana cut across him. "He was. A member of our household guard: Sir Rainard Fulco. He has been detained for questioning." She spoke with an accent that seemed completely untempered by her time in Sova – almost to the point of contrivance. My immediate impression of her was of a proud, haughty, and ultimately unhappy woman who had no love for her husband or her political marriage, and although such first impressions are often unhelpful and misleading, in this instance I would turn out to be correct.

"I will speak with him first," Vonvalt said. "Was he known to be particularly lax in his duties?"

"No," Prince Tasa said. Now that I looked at him, examined him, and listened to his tone, it appeared as though he shouldered the lion's share of anxiety – or at least, that which was detectable. For some reason I found that curious – on account of his being a man, for it seemed natural that the mother would be much more openly concerned than the father – but that was because

I had spent most of my time outside of Sova. Here in the capital and the provinces immediately around it, childrearing was split equally between partners – even noble ones. “He was perfectly competent.”

Prince Tasa struck me as a man ill suited to his position as heir to the Empire; a man with none of the easy charm and charisma of his youngest brother, nor any of the ruthlessness and domineering instincts of his father – indeed, his wife. The impression I immediately formed of him was that of a weakling, the kind of heir who acts as a prelude to times of upheaval.

“All right. Let us start from the beginning. Where was the boy when he was taken? What was he doing in the unsociable trades in the first place?” Vonvalt asked.

“The boy was having some leather tanned, up in the north-east,” Sheriff Bertilo said, when neither Prince Tasa nor Iliyana spoke. “There is a tanner there who acts under royal licence and provides all of the under-armour for members of the Imperial household.”

“Kamil was due to start his swordsmanship tutelage—” Prince Tasa began, but his wife again cut him off.

“That is not important,” she said, gesturing angrily as though her husband was impertinent simply for speaking.

Vonvalt actually waved her silent. The only thing more shocking than this act of reckless rudeness was that she actually complied. “There are few details likely to be irrelevant at this stage.”

He waited for a response, but did not receive one. Sir Gerold resumed, deeply uncomfortable.

“The life guard, Fulco, has said the boy was there one minute and gone the next. The deed was done so quickly he neither noticed it nor had time to effectively react. Of course, once he realised the boy was missing, he raised a great hue and cry, but the Prince might as well have been a thousand miles away at that point.”

“Nema’s blood,” Prince Tasa muttered. He ran a shaky hand over his face. I felt extremely sorry for him, though his visible displays of emotion seemed to be making everyone in the room uncomfortable – not least his wife.

“How did they get from the Palace to the tannery?”

“You shall have to ask the life guard,” Sir Gerold said. “It was unlikely to be a minor road, though. I suspect they will have taken the Baden High-Way.”

“And that was the sole purpose of the excursion? To visit the tannery?”

“Yes. It is a job in itself thinking of things to entertain him,” Prince Tasa said with a hint of defensiveness.

“Now, this is the most important thing,” Vonvalt said, leaning forwards so that his elbows were resting on his knees. “*When* did this happen? The timing of this is extremely important, so I would ask all of you to think carefully.”

There was a long moment of silence. “I would say at the eighth bell. It must have been around then, for they left at the half and it does not take more than thirty minutes to reach the tanneries, even accounting for Kamil’s japery,” Prince Tasa said.

Vonvalt sat back. He looked at me, Sir Radomir, and Bressinger. That at least did not fit with his theory that the interruption of the illegal séance had precipitated this. The abduction had taken place several hours prior to our encounter with Claver. And clearly Claver had not anticipated us interrupting his illegal séance. Could it all have been a bizarre coincidence?

“There is a note? A ransom demand?”

“Aye,” the sheriff said, pulling a crumpled roll of parchment out of his pocket. He handed it to Vonvalt, who read the lines of neat text.

“How long between the boy’s disappearance and the arrival of this note?”

“Less than an hour,” Sir Gerold said. “The ransom demand was brought to the watch house, and addressed to me personally, marked for my urgent attention. I took delivery of it first thing, and read it shortly thereafter. I must say, my lord, that the timing leaves little scope for this being anything other than the genuine article.”

“Did you see who delivered it?” Vonvalt asked.

“It was brought in by a liveried messenger; but he himself took custody of the note from another messenger, who I understand travelled up from the Southmark of Estre, a journey of some days. There is no way to trace the ultimate sender – at least, not in short order. And even then, they are likely to have been careful to obscure their identities.”

Vonvalt thought for a moment, weighing this information against his run-in with Claver, too. It was another piece that did not fit well. “Hm,” he said. Then he read the note out loud: “‘*We have taken the Prince Kamil. You will not find him, be assured of that. He will be kept safe for the time being. To guarantee his return, deposit one thousand crowns in a secured strongbox, and anchor the same one mile out from the shore of Kormondolt Bay on the*

18th day of Sorpen. If there is any sign of the Imperial fleet, before or after, the boy will be slain. Once the money is taken and checked, the Prince will be left for collection in a boat in the bay.'"

The rereading of the note caused Prince Tasa to clench his fists and turn away from us. He looked fixedly out over the city, trying, mostly successfully, to govern himself. Iliyana of Casimir lowered her head and looked at the floor, her first visible concession to despondency.

"A thousand crowns," Sir Radomir said. "They do not want for optimism."

"My son's life is worth ten times that!" Prince Tasa shouted, thumping the window in front of him.

"There is no price we would not pay," Iliyana said quietly.

"The eighteenth of Sorpen," Bressinger said. "That is barely a week from now. A curious date to choose. Kormondolt Bay is a few days' journey, for sure, but a chain of fast riders could have a thousand crowns there in a long afternoon should needs must. They are giving us plenty of time to organise ourselves."

"'Tis hardly a stone's throw," Sir Radomir said. "You exaggerate."

"Aye, but not much."

"It is the new moon," Vonvalt said, not looking up from the note.

"'Tis," Sir Gerold said. "The darkest night of the month."

"It is a good plan," Vonvalt said, quite heedless of the room's occupants. "Insofar as one exists for the abduction of the heir to the throne." Vonvalt folded the ransom note and pocketed it instead of returning it to the sheriff. "Your Highnesses, I have my own theories as to the provenance of this scheme, which are much too ill formed to share right now; do you yourselves have any idea why this might have happened? I am aware of the… *difficulties* the Empire faces at the present moment." Now Vonvalt spoke with circumspection; the "Casimir" of Iliyana's title was that of the House Casimir, the foremost royal household of Kòvosk which the Emperor was busy killing off. Vonvalt continued. "And that, of course, members of the royal family face a great many threats of an unparticularised nature, as is to be expected. But are you aware of anything *specific* that has arisen in the past few days or weeks?"

"Nothing," Iliyana said.

"And you, my Prince?" Vonvalt asked Prince Tasa. There was the barest

hint of irritation in his voice, but I think all of us in that room could have forgiven the Lady Iliyana for her tone. It was clear she was very highly strung, and such stresses could exhibit themselves in curious ways, especially when one was used to the stifling nature of the Sovan court.

Prince Tasa shook his head helplessly. “I’ve had no inkling of any specific threats, though as you say, Justice, these are uncertain times. I know not what schemes my father has involved himself in of late. I daresay Kòvoskan rebels are behind it.”

There was an extremely uncomfortable pause as everybody scrupulously avoided laying eyes on the Lady Iliyana. But the discomfort was not given long to settle.

“I do not think so,” Iliyana said simply and with conviction. “That is the point of my being here, is it not? Of this marriage? To prevent precisely such crimes as these?”

There was another pause. To hear her speak so frankly of such matters was unseemly.

“Indeed,” Vonvalt said after a while. He thought for a few moments. Nema knew he had enough to think about. It was true that Kòvosk was one threat facing the Empire, but there were many others: Claver, of course, building up his Templar army on the Frontier; the Mlyanars and the Neman Church, both seeking to consolidate their power bases in Sova itself; and the usual gamut of rebels and heretics across the provinces which periodically coalesced into knots of rebellion which required unpicking at great expense of blood and coin. Then of course there was the incredible possibility that this was simply a straightforward criminal act, albeit one with preternaturally bad timing, perpetrated by a random organisation hitherto unknown to the Emperor’s spymaster. Nema knew there were plenty of those too, and the ransom demand spoke of an unimaginative – if uncommonly avaricious – greed typical of run-of-the-mill criminals. The short of it was, in spite of the day’s revelations, the pool of potential perpetrators for this particular crime remained vast.

Vonvalt thought for a few moments. “I will speak to the boy’s guard, this Rainard Fulco,” he said. He was speaking directly to Sir Gerold. “That is the first order of business. Then I will return to the Grand Lodge. I should like to speak to some of my colleagues about this note; there will certainly be abilities we can leverage. If the boy is not turned up in the next few hours, I

will have a look at the place he was taken."

"Aye, all right," Sir Gerold said.

"The Emperor has already instructed every available watchman to be committed to the search?"

"He has," Sir Gerold said.

"You have no one spare for other matters?"

"Not at this time, no. A great deal of mischief is about to go unpunished."

Vonvalt grimaced. "I daresay you are right," he muttered darkly. He took a breath, and released it. "Not long ago I ordered the Wolf Gate to be closed."

"I am aware. And made mincemeat of a man attempting to get through."

Vonvalt paused thoughtfully. He turned to the Lady Iliyana. "Have you any countrymen in the city this day?"

"No," she said.

"No one?"

"None that come to mind."

"I am speaking of a man, middle-aged. Tanned, bearded, green-eyed, and dark-haired. Uncommonly fit. He would easily pass for Kòvoskan, perhaps Estran."

Lady Iliyana shook her head. "No. That is not to say there are none. Just none I know of."

Vonvalt rubbed his beard. "Hm." He turned back to Sir Gerold. "What is the status of the gates?"

"They are to be kept open, but none may pass through without being searched. It was the first thing Captain Galla dictated – though I issued the same order myself," he added quickly. "She is in the tanneries now." He nodded to Heinrich. "They have dogs, too."

Vonvalt nodded, then straightened up. "Lead me to this Rainard Fulco, then. We shall hear what he has to say."

"Should we not head out and look?" Prince Tasa said suddenly, looking wretched. He gestured to Vonvalt. "What is all this questioning going to achieve? We should be out there looking for Kamil!"

Vonvalt was unmoved by these desperate entreaties. In spite of everything, I could see he relished in so exercising his mind. "Sheriff Bertilo has hundreds of men out looking for your son, and I daresay there will be ten times that in Imperial Guard within the hour. I am not better at looking for people than any one of them. But I *am* better at investigating crimes than all

of them. I will deploy myself and my resources accordingly." Vonvalt looked around the chamber. "Now; are there any further questions before we press on?"

There was nothing but silence.

"Fine. Let us be about it, then."

XII

Life Guard

“Long life and old age are the rewards for cowardice.”

MARGRAVE FARVALD CAROLUS

We left Prince Tasa and Iliyana of Casimir squirrelled away in that stifling chamber, unable to do anything except look out over the vast indifference of the city and wait. It must have been torture for them.

For the interrogation, Vonvalt kept me and Sir Gerold and sent everybody else away. As we approached the room in which Fulco was being kept, I saw a small knot of men and women outside the door, each clad in expensive-looking clothes which gave them away as physicians. The one closest to us, a woman of middling age with long, prematurely grey hair, broke away from the group when she saw us surmount the final steps.

“What is the matter?” Sir Gerold demanded.

“An attempt at suicide,” the physician said briskly. Behind her, the door to Fulco’s chamber opened, and a number of watchmen exited carrying items of furniture and ornamentation. One cradled broken pieces of vase in his hands, careful not to cut himself. I noticed rich crimson stains against the delicate white porcelain.

“He has achieved nothing except superficial damage,” the physician continued. “We have dressed and cleaned the wounds. I recommend rest.”

Sir Gerold snorted.

“You may all leave now,” Vonvalt said, and gestured back down the

hallway.

There was no argument, no entreaties about the patient's well-being. The physician, though clearly unhappy as physicians often were when overridden, accepted the dismissal with good grace, and led the rest of them away until it was just Vonvalt, Sir Gerold, and me, and a solitary guard occupying the landing space.

"All right," Vonvalt said. "Sir Gerold, please."

The sheriff pushed his way into the room. Beyond was a modestly sized chamber. The floor was boarded and laid with a large, ornate rug, whilst the walls were clad up to shoulder height with wood panels and then undressed stone. All that was left in the way of furniture was a desk and chair, which were set in front of a barred window that overlooked the southern aspect of Sova, and a generously sized four-poster bed.

Rainard Fulco was sitting on the window seat, looking out across the city. He looked over at us briefly, then resumed his silent vigil. He was probably about the same age as Bressinger, and with a similar complexion, though he looked grey-skinned and gaunt after his attempt at suicide. I saw that both of his forearms had been bandaged, and his doublet was stained with large patches of red.

"I will see to it that you are provided with a change of clothes," Vonvalt said as we entered.

Fulco turned back and regarded us. He shot a particularly venomous look at Sir Gerold. "Do as you please," he said. He had a thick Kzosan accent. It was harsh, and had the effect of making him seem hard and disagreeable.

"I am Justice Sir Konrad Vonvalt," he said.

"I know who you are," Fulco said dismissively, not taking his eyes from the view. It was a clear, fresh spring day, with puffs of white cloud sailing across the Ebenen plains, casting irregular shadows underneath them. "You are here to charge me I take it? Have me executed?"

Vonvalt nodded to the man's arms. "I see you have tried to pre-empt me."

Fulco let out a brittle, contemptuous laugh. His hands balled into fists.

There was a silence which Vonvalt made no attempt to fill.

"Tell me you have found the boy," Fulco said quietly.

Vonvalt shook his head. "No. And, to be frank, I do not expect that anybody will turn him up today."

Fulco did not move for a while; then he began to shake. At first I thought

the man was having a seizure, perhaps some side effect of the blood loss; then it became apparent that he was weeping.

"I am afraid I do not have much time," Vonvalt said. I looked at him. His features were stern: there was no hint of sympathy, in spite of the man's obvious distress. Behind him, Sir Gerold looked equally impassive. I wondered then why my heart ached so badly for the wretched man in front of us. Surely his emotional state was evidence enough that he had not intended to lose the boy?

"I already explained what happened," Fulco said.

"Not to me," Vonvalt said. "I am afraid this will be unpleasant."

Fulco looked at him, briefly confused – but it was only briefly. The Emperor's Voice hit him like a club.

"*Tell me where the boy is.*" Fulco flinched back, his eyes wide. As with his innumerable predecessors, his hand immediately clutched at his heart.

"I do not know!"

"*Did you arrange to have him abducted?*"

"No!"

"*Are you in any way responsible for his abduction?*"

"Only by my neglect!" Fulco shrieked, and then the life guard slumped back onto the table and broke into great, violent sobs.

"All right," Vonvalt said, unmoved. "All right, take a moment to compose yourself." He turned to Sir Gerold. When he spoke, it was discreetly. "Tell me again the man's account?"

The sheriff nodded to the life guard. "They journeyed together to the tannery district this morning to inspect the boy's under-armour. They had not been alerted to any specific dangers. The boy was messing about, as young lads do." The sheriff shrugged. "Darting in and out amongst the washing pits no doubt. Fulco complained of a slowness of mind this morning, not unlike being drunk, though the man swears he had taken nothing but marsh ale at breakfast."

Vonvalt turned back to Fulco. "*Were you drunk when the boy was taken?*"

The man jolted back as though he had been kicked by a horse. "No!" he screamed, his throat raw.

Vonvalt turned back to the sheriff. "All right. And then the boy just disappeared?"

"Aye. Have you been up in and amongst the unsociable trades?"

Vonvalt shook his head. “I’ve never had cause to.”

“’Tis a chaotic place, full of noise and stink and commotion. The abductors chose their location well.”

“Even so,” Vonvalt said, “the Prince must have been recognisable. Did he not draw attention?”

Sir Gerold shook his head. “The boy was clad in basic clothes. They both were.”

I looked at Fulco, to see that, although his clothes were of good quality, they were nonetheless plain, and only a keen eye would see them for the expensive garments they in fact were.

“’Tis a common practice for members of the Imperial family,” Sir Gerold continued. “Shorn of their finery, and without a cohort of Imperial Guardsmen shadowing them, they can pass for commoners easily enough. They wear disguises, too, sometimes; false beards, and the like.”

“I daresay the practice will be killed off after this.”

“I daresay you are right.”

Vonvalt thought for a moment. “If both the Prince and his guard were travelling incognito, and we treat the ransom demand as legitimate, then that would suggest that the abductors were exceptionally well informed. This cannot have been a crime of opportunity.”

“That is my thinking,” Sir Gerold said.

Vonvalt turned back to Fulco, and the man flinched in anticipation of another battering from the Emperor’s Voice. Instead, Vonvalt held out a hand for calm. “You complained of dullness of the senses. Describe it to me.”

“J-just that, milord,” Fulco said, utterly cowed. “Not unlike being the worse for drink, but not the same either. I passed it off as the beginnings of a minor ailment, or perhaps the fumes from the tanneries. All the piss and shit in the morning sun can be overwhelming.”

Vonvalt considered this for a moment. “And what is your history? How long have you been in the Prince’s employ? You are Sovan, I take it?”

“I am from the Principality, milord,” he said, referring to Kzosic Principality. “I was a soldier – a Legionary. I fought in Venland, and in Denholtz. I was a member of the Prince Tasa’s life guards. After my part in the Reichskrieg was over, I returned to the capital and the Prince employed me. I escort a number of members of the royal household, including Prince Kamil.”

“I was in Denholtz, briefly,” Vonvalt said. “Were you at Lake Ortrun?”

“Aye, milord, I was. I was a life guard, by that time.”

“You are no shrinking violet, then.”

“No, milord. I do not share Your Lordship’s reputation as a master swordsman, but I can hold my own.”

Vonvalt frowned. “I find it odd that a man such as yourself could be overpowered by a few noxious smells in the unsociable trades,” he said. Next to him, Sir Gerold nodded absently his agreement. “Have you any symptoms of an illness? Loose stools? Are you febrile?”

The man shook his head. “I am… somewhat lightheaded. Now.” He gestured helplessly with his forearms.

“Yes,” Vonvalt said, unmoved. “I should expect so.”

“Could your breakfast have been tampered with?” Sir Gerold asked.

“I should think it extremely unlikely, Sheriff,” Fulco said, affronted. “I cannot even begin to think who within the Imperial Palace would have both the means and gall to undertake such a thing.”

There was a short silence as Vonvalt considered matters. “Tell me what happened the moment you realised you had lost the boy.”

Fulco thought for a moment. When he spoke, it was haltingly. “Prince Kamil is a mischievous lad.” He smiled for a moment, briefly lost in a pleasant memory of the boy, before the reality of the situation crushed it. I realised then that Fulco’s anguish was not simply born of a failure to fulfil his duty; he had genuine affection for the boy. Fulco reminded me in that moment of Prince Tasa himself. “He had been briefed on the dangers of being out and about in Sova – and not only by virtue of his position. But I did not feel unduly concerned as we left the palace this morning. Few people knew of our plans, and as you have already pointed out, without a large cohort of life guards and stripped of all ostentation, we can move about Sova practically unrecognised.”

“What route did you take to get to the tannery?” Vonvalt asked.

“The Baden High-Way.”

Vonvalt nodded. “All right. Continue.”

“We got to the unsociable trades just after the eighth bell. The tanner who is preparing the boy’s under-armour has a workshop at Pike’s Bend, but the Prince was gone from my sight before we got there. He was ducking in and out of all the wells, and the place was a press already. I did my best to keep

an eye on him, but as I say, I was feeling the stirrings of illness, and the boy was deliberately hiding from me – you know, playing a game." He paused, briefly lost in that moment when it all turned, revisiting the sudden and overwhelming horror of it. "There was no scream," he said quietly. "And no one shouted out or said anything." He shrugged helplessly. "It was as though the ground simply opened up and swallowed him."

"I find that incredible," Vonvalt said flatly.

"There is nothing else I can tell you," Fulco said. "If I did not know any better, I would say someone had opened a portal to the holy dimension and plucked the boy from the mortal plane altogether."

Vonvalt opened his mouth and then closed it again. He paused, then he turned to me, and looked at me askance.

I shook my head, immediately realising what he was driving at. "Surely not," I said.

Sir Gerold looked puzzled. "What?" he asked.

Vonvalt rubbed his chin.

"Sir Konrad, he cannot have unlocked so powerful a skill in such a short space of time. He barely had a grip on matters this morning. And there are—" I caught myself, for my voice had raised significantly, and both Sir Gerold and Fulco were looking at me expectantly. I leaned in to Vonvalt, bending his ear. "There are a hundred other things he could use such a power for. Killing you, for one. The Emperor himself, for another."

Vonvalt pursed his lips, considering this. But, eventually, he nodded. "Hm. Yes. All right."

"Are either of you going to explain to me what it is you are talking about?" Sir Gerold asked.

Vonvalt shook his head. "No." He turned back to Fulco. "Finish your account, then."

Fulco did, but did not provide much in the way of enlightenment – merely that he had raised the alarm a few minutes after the boy's disappearance.

"You thought the boy was hiding," Vonvalt said.

Fulco nodded wretchedly.

"Those few minutes would, of course, have been absolutely crucial for the abductors to make good their crime," Vonvalt said, but it was to Sir Gerold he spoke, rather than by way of chastisement to the life guard. Nonetheless, Fulco heard it, and resumed his weeping.

“Aye,” the sheriff said.

“Tell me about the boy,” Vonvalt said to Fulco. He had to wait until the man calmed himself down again. “Was he intelligent? Mature? Did he understand the risks that faced him as a member of the Imperial royal family?”

“He was just a lad. He has had special tutelage given what he stands to inherit, but I think the Prince Tasa has tried to preserve as much of the boy’s innocence as possible. It is a precious thing, and Kamil has a lifetime of severity ahead of him. It might be that the boy was perhaps not as streetwise as he could have been, but I was supposed to fill that gap in his stead.” He rubbed his face with his hands. “Nema forgive me,” he whispered, and began to weep again.

“Prince of Hell, govern yourself!” Vonvalt said sharply. “If the boy has truly been abducted to be ransomed, then he is almost certainly alive. There will be time for these theatrics later. Focus your attention on assisting the investigation. Did it not occur to you that killing yourself might have robbed us of a vital piece of information?”

But Fulco was consumed by wretchedness. He sat motionless, staring at the desk, as vacant as one who is dying. I suspected that there would be no punishment Vonvalt, or the sheriff, or the Prince himself could subject the man to that would be worse than that which he was inflicting on himself.

Vonvalt stood in silence for a few moments, then turned and nodded to the door. “Come on,” he said, and we left.

Vonvalt was a generally stern man, but I knew that, beneath his professional veneer, he was a compassionate one, too. He eschewed capital and corporal punishment where the law – and the circumstances of a given case – permitted. He was businesslike in his dealings, never cruel, and rarely relished in meting out punishment, no matter how well deserved.

I was therefore surprised by his apparently callous treatment of Fulco, a man who was very much wallowing in the deepest depths of despair and who had been, it seemed at least to me, only slightly negligent, and very unfortunate.

In fact, Vonvalt's parting remarks to the life guard were telling. It was not that Vonvalt did not feel sympathy for the man; it was that the man's self-flagellation was standing in the way of finding Prince Kamil, and to indulge it would achieve nothing except further delay. If Vonvalt had to hurt some feelings in order to secure the Prince's return, he would not hesitate to do so, no matter how cold-hearted he appeared to be. Indeed, Vonvalt had once told me that one of the greatest strengths a Justice could possess was an immunity to the compulsion to make friends.

We made our way to Sir Gerold's personal office, a large and ostentatious chamber which, like Sir Radomir's in Galen's Vale, did not suit the sheriff himself. Sir Radomir, Bressinger, and Heinrich were in there, and Vonvalt took a few minutes to set out what had happened.

"Nema," Sir Radomir said. "He is not long for this world then."

"No, though whether by his own hand or the hangman's noose remains to be seen."

"They will execute him?"

Vonvalt all but shrugged. "I expect so."

"That seems unjust—" Sir Radomir began, but Vonvalt waved him quiet.

"Our priority now is to secure the safe return of Prince Kamil. Put Fulco from your mind. He can be dealt with in due course."

"His account does not seem to take us much further, even in the retelling," Sir Gerold said. "Though I suppose you have confirmed he was not involved in the enterprise."

Vonvalt nodded. "That is not a valueless piece of information," he said. "But I agree that we have not advanced matters particularly."

"Is there no one from the Order who can assist?" Sir Gerold asked.

"Yes, almost certainly," Vonvalt said. He checked the time. It was into the early afternoon, and it felt as though the day was slipping away from us. Vonvalt looked weary. The fight in the Temple of Savare had exhausted all of us, mentally, physically, and existentially. But there was no choice but to go on. "Have you any theories at all, Sir Gerold?"

Sir Gerold had no difficulty in admitting that he did not. "Kòvoskan rebels is the one everybody keeps coming back to, and Nema knows they have plenty to be upset about. But the Emperor's spymaster knows of no specific schemes. And such people are quick to prattle on about ideology, but there was no mention of anything except coin in the ransom demand."

Vonvalt rubbed his face. “All right. I will go back to the Grand Lodge. Dubine, you come with me. Helena, Sir Radomir, go with Sir Gerold to the tannery. You may as well take Heinrich, too.” Vonvalt turned to the sheriff. “You will speak to all those present?”

Sir Gerold nodded. “My men and the Imperial Guard are under instructions not to let anyone leave the area. But we cannot keep them there all day.”

“We can keep them there all week if we like,” Vonvalt said, pressing himself to his feet. “But I doubt there is much to be divined. I don’t think we are going to find anything here in Sova, not any more. I expect the answers to our questions lie in Kormondolt Bay.”

XIII

Unsociable Trades

“At the end of a hard day’s study and labour, the exhausted initiate would do well to think on all the innocent lives that have been spared thanks to a lawkeeper’s tenacity.”

FROM CATERHAUSER’S *THE SOVAN CRIMINAL CODE: ADVICE TO PRACTITIONERS*

We made our way back through the watch house. Sir Gerold strapped on a breastplate, collared a handful of men, and together we pushed our way through the streets and made directly for the unsociable trades district in the north-east.

With the wind having died away, it should have been a warm spring afternoon, though the city’s immense walls blocked most of the sunlight from the west, and what little made it through was forced to make its way between the huge gothick structures that reared into the sky like untamed architectural stallions. The Sovan forefathers had been so focused on making the most gigantic, oppressive, intimidating buildings they could, they had neglected to realise that doing so would leave huge swathes of the city in perpetual shadow. Perhaps it had become some self-reinforcing cycle; in order to escape the darkness, they had built higher and higher, but in so doing had simply blocked out more of the sun’s light.

We passed through the now familiar road between the Philosophers’ Palace and the Senate House, crossed one of the three branches of the River Sauber that threaded through the city, and headed in the direction of the Wolf

Gate. The day's market had likely passed its peak, though was still thronging with people. It was difficult not to be intimidated by such a huge mass of people and the great clamour their enthusiastic bartering engendered; but thanks to Sir Gerold's men we were able to cut a route through that was more or less directly east towards the Estran Wall. The bulk of that enormous fortification loomed ahead of us, and I watched the distant and colourful figures of soldiers as they patrolled its peak, framed as they were against the embrasure and deep blue sky, sunlight glinting off their kettle helms. Above them, birds trilled, seeking out columns of hot air rising from the Ebenen Plains.

The marketplace was "like any other, but Sovan", as the phrase went. That meant it was bigger, grander, filled with a much greater variety of goods, open for longer hours, and filled with a huge and diverse mass of people. Unlike many other markets, this one had a number of permanent buildings as well as the usual mass of itinerant ones. We passed stalls selling all manner of trinkets, fish and meats, other animal products, food, jewels, tools, and anything else you could care to name. It would take pages and pages to list out all the things on sale, all of the colours and sights and sounds, the cries of storekeepers, the mixture of people of all colours and creeds – the Southern Plainsman purchasing cinnamon, the Grozodan arguing over the cost of salt brittlecut, the Hassian servant surreptitiously accepting a small bag of powdered ivory for his master. I saw animal pelts of black and green striped fur, an entire aviary of caged exotic birds, foreign mystics selling skin readings – more Templar recruitment tents.

The road that led between the Summit of the Prefects to our left, and the market to our right – what I now knew to be the Baden High-Way – was like an artery, with people and goods flowing up and down it like blood. Except, like a clot, I could see a growing mass of people underneath the Wolf Gate, where city watchmen and Imperial Guard stopped and searched every person attempting to both enter and exit the city. Despite all of the noise around me, I fancied I could hear the indignant cries of merchants as their carts were forcibly searched. If Prince Kamil's disappearance had ever been secret, then it was no longer.

We pressed through the market. The smell of the unsociable trades district hit us before anything else. The Sovans were rightly considered some of the most resourceful and inventive people in the known world, and no matter

how violently they absorbed territories, and no matter how resentful their new subjects, one could see Sovan inventions across the breadth of the Empire. Yet even the ingenious sons and daughters of the Autun had not managed to improve the process of tanning. Even in the heart of the civilised world, it involved as much watery shit and piss as it did anywhere else. As we approached, I could see that the tanning wells were fed by a channel that had been cut from the River Sauber to provide the tanneries' water source, yet it was thick and iridescent with effluents. Rats, wild pigs, dogs, and foxes rootled through the trade waste completely untroubled by the surrounding human population.

It was not just the vile stench that made the district unsociable. Other trades, like smithing, were present here in force, for one did not want important matters such as law, bookkeeping, and banking to be disturbed by the constant pounding of the blacksmith's hammer. The result, however, was a thunderous ringing of metal on metal, as though a battle was taking place a hundred yards away. Actually, the comparison was an apt one, for the dyers worked here too, and a huge stretch of nearby paving and compacted earth was stained a rich, arterial red.

This assault on the senses, the smell, the colours, the sounds, was compounded by the indignant shouts of this hellish place's inhabitants, as several hundred Imperial Guardsmen moved through the district. They had taken it upon themselves to smash through the tanneries like a battering ram through a gate. I saw dozens of tanners who were soaked through with the rancid water where Guardsman had forced them to prove their rinsing wells were empty – as though the Prince might have been killed there and then, with dozens of witnesses, and simply stuffed into a pool. It seemed insane, but these were insane times.

Sir Gerold led us to the Royal Tanner. It was a grandiose title for a very un-grandiose man. Very high quality leather could still be made in a horrible, vermin-infested tannery, and though I was expecting some kind of special building, the fact of the matter was, the process still required large quantities of urine and shit. There was really no way to make it any nicer.

"This is just where we tan it, obviously," the tanner said. He was a stooped man with straggly white hair that came down to his collar, and a gaunt, wrinkled body, his skin stained from decades of working with noxious substances. "I have a workshop." He was singularly unimpressed by Sir

Gerold, and looked out at the watchmen and Imperial Guard ransacking his colleagues' pits with contempt. "The under-armour is there."

Sir Gerold was untroubled by the man's rudeness. "Were you expecting them?"

The tanner spat. "No. They do as they please."

"How frequently does the boy come to inspect your work?"

"Once, maybe twice a month? It's possible they come more often, and I am not around."

"The days that they come, is it the same day each time?"

The tanner wrinkled his nose in thought. He looked up at the sky, as though he might divine the answer from the few scattered clouds above. "No, I do not think so. I think it is random."

"And the boy comes alone? With the single life guard?"

The tanner shook his head. "No. He has been with a whole mob of these pleasant fellows before." He gestured to the Imperial Guard nearby. I turned and watched as one of them cuffed a tanner sharply about the head.

"You there!" Sir Gerold shouted to the Guardsman. The man, a burly Hauner by the look of him, looked over to the sheriff.

"What?"

"I saw that," Sir Gerold said.

"What, this?" Guardsman said, and smacked the man about the head again.

Sir Gerold took a step forward. "What is your name?" he demanded angrily.

"Fuck off," the Guardsman said, and the other next to him laughed. They both walked off. The cuffed tanner turned back to look about his working space with despair.

Sir Gerold did not pursue the matter. "We shall learn nothing from these people if that is how they are treated," he muttered angrily.

"These Guardsmen are a law unto themselves," Sir Radomir said, and he too spat glob of phlegm onto the floor. "Look at this place. You would think there had been a riot. There'll not be a scrap of evidence left to gather."

"Hm," Sir Gerold said. He turned back to the tanner. "You work under royal licence?"

"Aye."

"How long has that been the case?"

“A few years now.”

“The pay is good?”

The tanner nodded. “Aye. Business is good, and I am well reimbursed for my labours, there is no question of that.”

Sir Gerold gave the man an appraising look. “Are you in any man’s debt?”

The tanner laughed bitterly. “You think I wear my best clothes to this place?”

The sheriff pursed his lips. “What do you spend all of that royal coin on, then?”

The tanner nodded in the direction of his workshop. “This piece for the Prince Kamil will cover tuition for my five children.”

“For how long?”

The tanner seemed briefly confused by the question. “For as long as they wish to be educated.”

Sir Gerold clacked his tongue. “You did not see them this morning? The Prince and his guard?”

The tanner shook his head. “Not me. But then I doubt anyone did. If it were just the two of them, the boy will have been in his disguise.”

“He has come in his disguise before?”

“Yes. How else would I know of it?”

“How else indeed?” Sir Gerold asked.

The tanner folded his arms. “You may think me a simple man, Sheriff, but I know my rights. I’m a Sovan citizen, same as you. If I am suspected, then you will have to question me with my lawman. And you know I have the coin to pay for a good one.”

Sir Gerold waved him off angrily. “Do not test me, man!” he snapped. “You know what has come to pass here; how important it is that we get answers.”

Now it was the tanner’s turn to be untroubled. “Aye,” he said. “And I hope the lad is found, safe and well, same as anyone else.” He jabbed a thumb at his chest. “But I had nothing to do with it, and if you seek to deny me my rights as a Sovan, make a clean breast of it now so I know to shut my mouth.”

In the brief silence that followed, a thought struck me, and I took a step forwards. “If you have a workshop, and that is where the under-armour is,

then why were they coming to the tannery?"

The tanner looked at me coolly. "And who might you be?"

"I am Helena Sedanka," I said, leaving off the "Lady" I was apparently entitled to adopt, but did not feel I had earned. "The Lord Prefect's clerk."

The tanner looked to the sheriff, but Sir Gerold nodded at me. "You heard her."

"Perhaps they were coming to look for me. I'm not always at my workshop."

"And that is in Pike's Bend?" I asked, remembering what Fulco had told us.

"Aye," the tanner said, wrong-footed.

"Does anyone else work in your shop?"

"Yes. I have an apprentice. My eldest son helps from time to time, too. What has this got to do with anything? I have warned you I know my rights."

I shrugged. I was affecting nonchalance, but in truth my blood was singing. "It seems to me that they would have made for your workshop first. If you weren't there, they would have sent someone to fetch you from the tannery. Have they ever visited you here, in this place, before?"

The tanner did not say anything for little while. A strange look came across his face. Eventually, he said, "All right. I see." He held his wrists out suddenly and dramatically. "Arrest me, then. Come on. Let us be done with this. If you are going to interrogate me as a suspect, you can follow the proper procedure. Nema knows someone in this shithole ought to."

Sir Gerold's lip curled. "You are going to put us to the trouble of arresting you, taking you back to the watch house, and listening to your lawman prattle on about matters of procedure whilst the Emperor's grandson has been abducted?"

"Aye, that is precisely what I'm going to do."

"You know it does not reflect well on you. This will do nothing except increase suspicion."

"Oh, drink brine! Either arrest me, or leave me be. I'll not say another word without representation."

Sir Gerold spat. "As you wish." He nodded to a couple of his men, and they seized the man roughly and took him away. He did not resist in the slightest. I watched him go with contempt. He was right, of course; as a Sovan citizen he was perfectly entitled to do precisely the thing he was doing.

But I got the sense that it was not because he genuinely wanted to take legal advice; he was simply a prickly character who just relished the opportunity to waste a day of everyone's time. It seemed unforgivable in the circumstances. I could not help but feel slightly guilty, too. It had been my questions which had finally closed that door to us.

After he was out of earshot, Sir Gerold turned to me. "That was fine thinking. 'Tis a shame it did not bear fruit."

"I am not myself today, for I fear I'm slow to grasp it," Sir Radomir said, idly scratching Heinrich's ears. The dog, in spite of his enormous frame and capacity for incredible violence, shivered and grumbled with pleasure.

"Think on it," I said. "If the Prince and his guard normally make for the tannery itself – though I do not see why they would – then that is the end of it. But if they normally make for the workshop, and today they instead came direct to the tannery, that might suggest a last-minute change of plan."

"A contrivance. To divert them," Sir Gerold said.

I nodded. "Precisely."

"Nema, your mind works in subtle ways," Sir Radomir said. He gestured to the retreating guards and tanner, sighing mightily. "If he has information, we need it now; not this evening, nor tomorrow."

"Sir Konrad will have it out of him, and his brains through his nose, in the next hour or two, I should think," I said. "He is forgetting we have an entire building staffed with Justices a stone's throw from here. Let him hide behind his precious procedures then."

I realised, even as I said it, the irony in such sentiment. But a day ago I was complaining about Vonvalt for precisely the same thing in sending Kadlec to be tortured. I did not reflect on it too much, convincing myself at the time that I was approaching the thorny issue from a position of righteousness, whereas Vonvalt was doing so from a position of moral laxity. But it was naked hypocrisy, of course.

Sir Gerold looked around. Already the district was shrouded in shade as the day wore into the mid-afternoon and the sun's light was blocked by the Philosophers' Palace. "Sir Konrad was right," he said, watching as tanners and other tradesmen were rounded up by Imperial Guardsmen to be taken away for questioning. "We are on a fool's errand."

"What about the dog?" I asked, turning back to where Sir Radomir and Heinrich were standing. The latter had a fat black rat between his jaws.

“Nema,” I said, my features creased with revulsion, as he devoured the thing more or less whole.

Sir Radomir crouched down next to Heinrich, once again ruffling the fur on his head and jaw. “I haven’t the faintest idea,” he murmured, looking at the top of the dog’s skull as though he might divine its mind.

“How it is supposed to detect anything here, in and amongst all this stench, is beyond me. ’Tis almost as though the place was selected to frustrate exactly this,” Sir Gerold said. He paused, as the thought took root. “Aye,” he said, to himself. “That may be right.”

“We may as well give it a go,” Sir Radomir said. “The Emperor said the dog had the boy’s scent.”

“I am not stopping you,” Sir Gerold said, slightly impatiently.

Sir Radomir put his mouth close to Heinrich’s ear, and said, somewhat hesitantly, “Prince Kamil? Where is he, boy?”

Heinrich pricked his ears up. He looked around, and began visibly sniffing the air.

“By Nema,” Sir Radomir said, standing up. “Surely that hasn’t worked, has it?”

Heinrich began trotting through the wells back towards the Baden High-Way. We all exchanged glances, and then, without saying another word, followed the huge war shepherd. We moved slowly at first, and then more quickly and excitedly as Heinrich broke into a run. But our hopes quickly faded as we saw that the dog was simply running back to the Imperial Palace. We slowed to a walk.

“Shit,” Sir Gerold said. He laughed humourlessly, slightly out of breath from the weight of his armour. “I actually thought that was it for a moment.”

We stood in silence as people moved past us in both directions. For myself, I felt as though we were standing at the centre of the world, at the very apex of history; but for the citizens of Sova, we were nothing, no one. Most barely glanced at us as they walked by, preoccupied by their own business.

“I know not what the Lord Prefect had in mind for you, but insofar as I am concerned, you may be about your own business,” Sir Gerold said to me and Sir Radomir.

Sir Radomir nodded. “All right,” he said. “I daresay we shall see one another again soon.”

“Aye,” Sir Gerold muttered, and headed back for the watch house. We watched him go.

“The Grand Lodge?” I said, as a sense of gloom and foreboding settled over me.

“Come on then,” Sir Radomir said to the flagstones from where he had bent at the waist to catch his breath. He straightened up. “Nema, but slowly, this time,” he said, and we headed off to find Vonvalt.

“Sir Gerold had him sent back to the watch house?” Vonvalt asked us, after I had explained to him what had come to pass with the tanner.

We had found him in the Master’s chamber in the Grand Lodge. Bressinger was absent, attending to whatever task Vonvalt had set him. Vonvalt was in a strange mood, het up after the day’s events, but with nothing to spend his energy on. Perhaps if he had been with Bressinger, they would have gone to a brothel, or sparred, or even had a tilt at one another, for both were accomplished horsemen and there were jousting yards in the city for those who could afford it.

“That’s right,” I said.

“Fine. Well I shall have the truth out of him today, then.” Vonvalt rubbed his moustache with his index finger and thumb.

We turned as the door opened behind us. Bressinger strode in, ruddy-cheeked from exertion, carrying a thick, dusty tome. He nodded to Sir Radomir and me in greeting. “Sorry, this took some getting,” he said to Vonvalt as he handed him the book. “The librarian said it had not been updated for a little while.”

Vonvalt tutted as he accepted the volume and set it down on the desk with a thump. He began immediately rifling through the pages. Bressinger turned to me.

“Anything from the tannery? Where is the dog?”

I explained to him what had happened. He sucked his teeth. “Foolish of him to assert his rights within spitting distance of the Grand Lodge. He must know that Sir Konrad – or any number of other Justices – will come along and turn his mind inside out.”

“Now now, Dubine,” Vonvalt said, not taking his eyes from the page in front of him. “If the man wants to make a nuisance of himself, he is perfectly entitled to do so as the law permits.”

Bressinger snorted. “That dog probably smelt his lunch,” he said.

“Nema knows how he smelt anything in that place,” Sir Radomir said.

“Be quiet, all of you,” Vonvalt murmured. “I am trying to work.”

Bressinger did a little Grozodan gesture of indifference, a double tap with his index finger on his cheek, and pretended to examine the volumes lining the bookshelves around the chamber. Sir Radomir walked to one of the windows and looked out across the city. I stood in the middle of the chamber, for some reason pretending I was happy and comfortable simply standing and doing nothing.

Eventually, after what must have been at least a quarter of an hour, Vonvalt wrote a name on a scrap of paper and handed it to Bressinger. “Dubine,” he said. “Find out where she is and fetch her to me would you?”

“At once, sire,” Bressinger said, and exited the chamber.

“Have you dealt with missing children before?” Sir Radomir asked Vonvalt. He seemed to have waited deliberately until Bressinger was out of the room.

Vonvalt was in the process of packing his pipe with leaf, and did not look up. “I have had my fair share.” He nodded to me. “Helena has too, haven’t you? Remember the young girl at Hackman’s Copse?”

“I had hoped to forget,” I said.

“You and I both,” Vonvalt murmured darkly. “Though I have had successes elsewhere. I find abduction for its own sake can often be resolved. But where the abduction is for the purposes of murder, I think I have failed more times than I have succeeded. It takes but a handful of minutes to kill, and a handful of hours to track down an abductor – and that is taking the very best case.”

Sir Radomir nodded, his features stern. “Aye. That is my experience. Even in Perry Ford you could commit a thousand men to a search and turn up nothing if you did not know where to look.” He looked in the direction of the unsociable trades district, though it was obscured from his view.

Vonvalt lit his pipe. Soon clouds of smoke filled the chamber. “That is why we shall even the odds as much as possible.” He tapped the book in front of him. “This ledger sets out a list of abilities that members of the

Magistratum possess. Tracking is one of the Order's talents."

"Like the hound?" I asked.

Vonvalt shook his head. "No. I am hoping a damn sight better."

Vonvalt went to the watch house that evening. He sent me and Sir Radomir back to the tannery district, to spend long and fruitless hours questioning everybody else who had been in the vicinity at the time of the Prince's abduction. By the time we returned to the Prefect's Palace, it was well past dark, and I was bone tired.

I ate dinner alone and standing up and then hurried off to find Vonvalt. He was in the library, looking over a number of books and papers. A goblet of wine was next to him, and his pipe was lit and filling the place with whorls of blue-grey smoke. I passed Sir Radomir on my way in. The man looked grim, his features wine-blushed. I assumed Vonvalt had provided some explanation to him as to the nature of the afterlife, given that he had promised he would the day before, though I did not pry – nor did Vonvalt offer me any explanation.

"Did you question the tanner?" I asked.

"Hm," Vonvalt grunted. "Nothing there. A good thought, though. Do not let it blunt your enthusiasm."

"They were heading for the workshop?"

"Indeed. Just going via the tannery itself this time. A coincidence. They do happen."

"Did you corroborate it with the life guard?"

Vonvalt shook his head. He took a long draw on his pipe. "No. The man succeeded in taking his own life in the early evening."

I stood, stunned. "That is—"

"Deeply unfortunate, I agree."

I looked at him, appalled by his cavalier attitude.

Vonvalt sighed, and looked up at me. "You may think me callous, Helena, but I warn you now, a great many more people will die before this is over. You must steel yourself. Nema knows you have seen plenty of corpses before."

“’Tis not that he is dead; it is that he was innocent.”

“He was hardly innocent,” Vonvalt remarked. “He had one job to do, and that was to guard the second-in-line to the Imperial throne. He failed in that task in rather spectacular a fashion.”

“You cannot think that his suicide is a just outcome,” I said, emotion freighting my voice.

Vonvalt went back to his papers. “I did not say it was just. Merely unsurprising.”

“Did you question him? After he passed into the afterlife?”

Vonvalt paused his reading for a moment. “No,” he said eventually. He seemed uncomfortable in saying so, and I did not press the point.

I stood in awkward silence for a few moments. I had to stop myself from toying with my kirtle. I opened my mouth and then closed it. There was so much to say, but the intricacies of mine and Vonvalt’s personal relationship seemed so insignificant in the light of ongoing events.

“What of your ‘tracker’?” I asked eventually with a sigh. “The woman you mentioned earlier, in the Lodge?”

Vonvalt shook his head. “She is not due in Sova until tomorrow night.”

“What will you do tomorrow?”

Vonvalt was about to answer when he was interrupted by the housekeeper. Neither of us had noticed her enter the library.

“Begging your pardon, Milord Justice,” she said to Vonvalt. He looked at me, so I performed a subtle but theatrical shrug to indicate that I had no idea what the housekeeper wanted.

“Yes?” Vonvalt asked the woman, turning back to her.

“I… I have a matter to trouble you with.”

I looked at the housekeeper, who had that matronly quality that all women in her position seem to share. We had traded but a handful of words since we had moved into the Palace, and I got the distinct impression that she did not much care for me. Notwithstanding, in that moment, I felt a strange burst of compassion for her. Something was clearly troubling the woman, and she was obviously intimidated by Vonvalt. She must have plumbed the depths of her courage to approach him so directly.

“I do not have much time.”

“’Tis a strange thing, milord, and I hope you will indulge me—”

“Madam, I have a great many things clamouring for my attention,

including matters of state. I trust that you will indulge *me* by cutting to the heart of whatever it is as quickly as possible."

Even with this stern entreaty, which would have compelled any man in the Empire to speak his mind, the woman hesitated.

Eventually, she said, "The staff… They've been having nightmares."

Vonvalt waited a few moments for more, but when it was clear that no more would be forthcoming, he made an irritated noise. "For heaven's sake, woman, this is hardly—"

"A thousand pardons, Milord Justice," the housekeeper spluttered. Now she spoke quickly, on the verge of babbling. "I know it seems like a trifle, but being a Justice, and dealing with the old Saxan magicks and the arcane, I thought it wise to bring it to your attention. Master Kadlec gave us instructions to bring anything like this to his attention immediately, and obviously although we had the palace re-blessed after he left, sometimes these things—"

Vonvalt held up a hand for silence, achieving it as effectively as though he had slapped her. "The palace was *blessed*?"

"Yes, milord, Master Kadlec would have a patria or matria come round maybe once a month and bless the palace to banish any lingering spells."

Vonvalt shook his head, confused. "Master Kadlec should not have been exercising any magickal powers here, certainly not that would attract any kind of attention from—" He caught himself. "Well, we need not go into the specifics of it."

The housekeeper paused awkwardly. "I know not what to tell you, milord. It was his practice, and we were not in a position to question it."

Vonvalt waved a hand at her rudely. "Never mind any of that. Just tell me about these nightmares, and why you feel it is important that I know about it."

"As I say, a number of members of the palace staff have been having nightmares these past few nights, coinciding precisely with you and –" she nodded at me "– your retainers taking up residence here."

Vonvalt shrugged. "It is a coincidence," he said dismissively, but I could hear the hesitation in his voice. "No doubt many of your staff are feeling the strain of the move, and are apprehensive about serving a new master. You may inform them that I do not intend to make any great demands of them. I seek only that I and my staff are provided with what they need to undertake

their duties."

"It's not just that," the housekeeper said. She looked as though she were about to cry. "The nightmares – they're the same. Everyone is having the *same* nightmare."

Vonvalt paused. I felt my skin break out in gooseflesh.

"Well… what is it about?" Vonvalt asked after a moment's consideration. Gone was any sense of irritation. Now she had his attention.

"A moth," the woman said simply. "I-I know it sounds bizarre, milord, and I would not have troubled you with it at all, especially not after a busy day at the Imperial Palace, but the other servants are quite upset about it. And with the timing of it all…"

Vonvalt nodded absently, his gaze on the floor, squinting in concentration. "A moth…" he said. "I wonder what the significance of that is." He turned to me. "What do you make of it?"

I instinctively shrugged. I had not expected to be asked. "I myself have not been sleeping well these past few nights. Nothing about a moth, but a dark presence, certainly."

Vonvalt tapped his front teeth with the bit of his pipe. "Yes, you said, this morning. I am trying to think of what Claver said in the Temple of Savare." He thought again for a moment. "'Powerful friends'. What did he mean by that? I wonder. I fear we have so come to expect Claver to speak in nothing but cryptic inanities that we are in danger of overlooking something."

"It sounded to me like he knew about your ailment," I said. I didn't want to say it. Simply giving voice to the thoughts gave them weight, credence. I had been thinking about Claver's prophetic words since our encounter, but a large and stubborn part of me did not want to confront the idea that Claver may somehow be involved in Vonvalt's illness.

"Yes. It did," Vonvalt replied, clearly unhappy with the prospect. He turned back to the housekeeper, who had long ago lost the thread of the conversation. "Madam, you have my sympathies. I am sorry that you are experiencing these… nightmares. What I would like you to do is try and remember exactly what it is you see, every night. Write it down first thing in the morning. If you wake in the middle of the night, write it down then. If you cannot write, speak to one of my taskmen, or Helena here, and they shall write it down for you. The same goes for your staff. Is that clear?"

"Thank you, Milord Justice," the housekeeper said. She actually moved

forwards and laid a hand on Vonvalt's forearm. "We are always afraid. The nightmares are frightening. We are used to there being a sense of the old Saxan magicks about the place, as you say, but not like this."

I could tell Vonvalt did not like having the woman's hand on his forearm, but he said nothing.

"Helena, would you arrange to have a priest attend and bless the palace? It sounds as though it is a request they are very used to indulging."

"Yes, of course," I said.

"Is there anything else, madam?" Vonvalt asked gently.

"No, Milord Justice. Just that we have prepared dinner for you in case you are hungry. You look as though you are in need of a hearty fare."

Vonvalt nodded. "Thank you. I will perhaps be down later. Helena, do not wait for me to eat," he added, not knowing that I already had.

And with that, we went our separate ways; I to retire, for I was absolutely exhausted after a very long and stressful day, and Vonvalt to remain, poring over his books, trying to bend his considerable intellect around the matters clamouring for his attention.

The strange thing was, that night I did end up dreaming about a moth.

XIV

The Talents of the Order

"One day you will see that men are wolves; and on that day you will learn that you must either be part of the pack or be consumed."

LAST WORDS OF VISCOUNT RAGINMAR VON OSTERLEN

Vonvalt was absent for much of the following morning. He did not tell me where he was going, but it would shortly transpire to be some sham hearing involving Kadlec, a procedural nicety that gave the whole thing an air of legitimacy. He sent word for us to be brought to him after noon, and we were carried briskly back to the Grand Lodge on litters. It was a hot, windless afternoon, and I realised that if the spring could produce such sultry days, the summers in Sova would be intolerable.

We reached the Grand Lodge and made our way quickly to Vonvalt's chambers.

"She is arrived," Vonvalt said, referring to the Justice he had drafted to assist us. "She is waiting downstairs."

Bressinger nodded. "I'll fetch her," he said, and left.

"How did your hearing go?" Sir Radomir asked. I looked at him sharply, annoyed that he had been told but I had not; but neither man met my gaze. I wondered if there was some significance to that. Vonvalt was certainly avoiding certain matters with me. Was it to preserve my opinion of him?

"Kadlec will die," Vonvalt said tonelessly.

"Aye," Sir Radomir grunted. It was almost a laugh. "No great surprise

there then."

His flippancy put my back up, but Vonvalt was untroubled by it. He packed and lit his pipe, and began smoking it. I wondered how he could tolerate smoking it in such hot weather.

Bressinger arrived a few moments later. This time he was accompanied by a woman. She was older than me, somewhere between half and a full decade, and was by any measure strikingly beautiful. But whereas Iliyana of Casimir had been attractive in a powerful, almost frightening way, possessed of a beauty in the same way a master-crafted scimitar or a Grozodan asp was beautiful, this Justice was beautiful in what was considered to be a classically Sovan way, with good, unmarked olive skin, good teeth, luscious dark hair, and pleasing facial features – and that was to say nothing of her well-proportioned frame.

"You are not Justice Gothaid," Vonvalt remarked to the new arrival.

She performed a shallow curtsey. "No, My Lord Prefect. I am Justice Luitgard Roza," she said, in an affected cut-glass Sovan accent. "I am her 'prentice. I have the same power – the same affinity for it. She sends her most sincere apologies, Master, but she has become embroiled in another matter which she cannot disentangle herself from."

Vonvalt frowned. "My instructions were set out in the most explicit terms. There is no matter within the bounds of the Empire that supersedes this."

Roza shifted, uncomfortable. I could not help but feel sorry for her. "Justice Gothaid says my power is as keen as hers. She was confident I would assist you just as ably."

"You have her seal? Or a letter of warrant?"

"Both, Master." Roza fumbled about her person and produced an envelope. Vonvalt took it from her, and opened it, taking in the letter's contents quickly, which presumably set out the nature of Justice Gothaid's indisposal. From where I stood, I could see the parchment was marked with a number of wax seals and coloured ribbon.

Vonvalt refolded the letter, and placed it in a desk drawer. "Justice Gothaid has a reputation as a formidable investigator. I have not met her personally, but I know of her work on the Maja Petrović case. You say she has been training you in her talent?"

Roza nodded. "I completed my training about a year and a half ago. The Voice, of course, and vitaspatial tracking. Justice Gothaid had already

earmarked me as a suitable ’prentice during the latter part of the Imperial Arts.”

“Who was your tutor?” Vonvalt asked.

“Jurist Kralij,” Roza said. “For the lore. He said I had a gift for it.”

Vonvalt nodded. That at least was good news; Kralij was a fusty old man, but he was no Cyrillian. He had escaped Vonvalt’s purge of the Order, though that in itself was by virtue of his being retired the past year.

“Let me see your seal,” Vonvalt said.

Roza once again searched her pockets, and turned out her seal, a cheap apprentice-Justice’s copper stamp that would be used to imprint wax and authenticate documents. Vonvalt took it and examined it.

Roza cleared her throat. “Is there some problem, Master?” she asked.

Vonvalt did not look up from his inspection. “Do you know me, Luitgard?”

“Only by reputation, Master,” Roza said. “You have been keeping order in the Hauner Vale, have you not?”

“Something approximating it,” Vonvalt grumbled. He handed her back the seal. “You know how I came to be Master of the Magistratum?”

“I have heard many things in the last day or so, Master,” Roza said, clearly unsure of how to broach the subject. That was understandable; whatever Vonvalt’s true nature, in that moment, very few nice things were being said about him in the Grand Lodge.

“I arrested Master Kadlec for treason, along with a number of other Justices who have been working against the Order’s – to say nothing of the Empire’s – interests,” Vonvalt said. “Most of those Justices were adherents of the teachings of Master Cyril.” He looked at her pointedly. “I find such ideology both nonsensical and dangerous.”

Roza smiled nervously. “I have no such sympathies,” she said.

“No, nor would Justice Gothaid have imparted to you such heresies, which is another of the reasons I wanted to work with her directly. But –” he gestured to the drawer where he had just secreted the letter “– I am no stranger to the endgame exigencies of a large case. Sit.”

She sat. “May I just say, Master, what an honour it is to meet you. I am a keen scholar of your work – I have read your treatise on the abolition of corporal punishment for debtors at least twice. I know that you were hoping for Justice Gothaid, but whatever it is I can do to assist, you can be assured

that I will turn every ounce of my ability to it."

I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes, but to my great irritation, Vonvalt's mood seemed to shift almost immediately; he softened, appearing to be genuinely pleased by this naked flattery. It was something to which he normally gave short shrift; I had long ago given up on using it as a means of ingratiation.

I found myself taking an immediate disliking to the girl, though I could tell mine was an unpopular opinion.

Vonvalt took a long draw on his pipe, so that when he exhaled, smoke puffed from his mouth as though he were a firedrake. "You have heard the news about the Prince Kamil?"

Roza nodded. "Yes. All manner of rumours abound in the city."

Vonvalt looked displeased at that. "Well, it is to be expected," he muttered. "The Emperor has tasked me with leading the investigation into his abduction. Sheriff Bertilo is of course making enquiries with the city watch, and is liaising closely with Prince Tasa and the Lady Iliyana. Captain Galla is leading the physical search with the Imperial Guard."

"Aye, physical is the right word for it," Sir Radomir muttered. Vonvalt ignored him.

Roza nodded, her eyes flicking to the old sheriff and back. "I have never seen them out in such numbers before," she remarked. "There is a mile of traffic backed up the Baden High-Way. It took me most of an hour to navigate the bottleneck under the Wolf Gate. I heard of a man crushed there, too, yesterday."

Vonvalt glanced at Bressinger. He cleared his throat. "Personally, I doubt they will find the boy in the city. I expect his abductors will have sought to remove him as quickly as possible."

"Do you think the Prince may have been slain?"

Vonvalt shook his head. "No. Not yet, at any rate. There was a ransom note, for a thousand crowns to be deposited in a floating chest in Kormondolt Bay by the end of the week. Unless the ransom is part of an elaborate misdirection, I think we can assume for the time being that the boy is alive. Having said that, every hour that passes in which he is not turned out is an hour we are closer to failure. So, however unlikely it is that he is still in the city, we must nonetheless rule out Sova before casting the net any wider."

Roza nodded. "'Tis plain, then, why you have called for my – well,

Justice Gothaid's – abilities."

"Indeed," Vonvalt said. He gestured to her. "Explain to me how it works, briefly."

Roza nodded. "I shall do my best, though as with all of these things it is difficult to describe. You know how using the Voice seems to channel something… *within* you, some force which seems to originate from both the chest and brain simultaneously?"

Vonvalt nodded. "Yes, though I have used it so many times I have not thought about the mechanics of it for a great number of years."

"'Tis not unlike that innate sense – and no more difficult than taking a breath, once it's mastered. I have undertaken some research on the power in the Law Library." She held up her hands and placed one behind the other. "Some of the old Masters theorised that as we move through the mortal plane, so we move through an invisible, overlapping astral plane, leaving a trace like one drawing a line on paper."

"Kane?"

"Kane is one, and the most well known, but there are others: Master Ewald; Wolfgang Theodoar—"

I cleared my throat unsubtly. Vonvalt looked over at me, irritated, but at least he took the point. There were few things in this world that could distract him more than a discussion on the old jurists of the Order.

"I see. You can detect these pathways where others cannot."

"Not all the time," Roza said, "but I practise constantly, and the skill is improving."

"What do you need in order to track the Prince?"

"Anything you have managed to glean from the abduction. The ransom note will assist; taking me to where he was last seen will be the most helpful thing."

"You do not need anything of his, any personal effects?" Vonvalt asked.

Roza shook her head. "No, not to divine his pathway. Was he with anybody when he was taken? A guard, or guards?"

Vonvalt glanced at me. "You will not have any luck there. The man is dead."

Roza faltered for a moment. "That is unfortunate," she said.

"It is." Vonvalt stood, and Roza stood a few moments later. "Come then. We'll go to the tanneries now."

We made our way back to the tanneries – a now familiar journey. Imperial Guard were still out in force, striking in their ornate armour and imposing frames. They stood at the junctions of streets and roads, watching like statues. The commonfolk gave them a wide berth, sullen in their presence, rebellious out of it. The air felt charged with foreboding.

Roza and Vonvalt walked at the head of our group. Apart from Justice August, I had not really seen Vonvalt spend much time with other Justices, though I could not say that I was warming to the experience. I found Roza's sudden inclusion in our affairs an imposition. It did nothing but remind me of my place, bringing home to me my lack of seniority in the Magistratum. Whilst I was Vonvalt's protégée, I had not begun my formal training in the Order. My nascent authority was only conveyed by Vonvalt's patronage; Roza was an actual Justice.

This was ludicrous, of course. My feelings were born of petty jealousy, and nothing more. Our mission was to locate the second-in-line to the throne of the Empire. The importance of our task could not have been more absolute. If an entire harem of young and beautiful women had been required to assist in the boy's recovery, Vonvalt would have secured two.

"Is that what you want to do?" Sir Radomir asked me. We walked briskly together at the back, with Bressinger between us and the Justices.

"What do you mean?" I said.

The sheriff nodded to Roza. "Be like her. Track people, their 'life force', or whatever the fuck she was on about."

I looked at him sidelong. "What is the matter with you this afternoon?" I asked

Sir Radomir shook himself as though he had just exited a freezing lake. "I know not. Something is bothering me." He scratched the back of his neck. "Can you not *feel* that? 'Tis like…" He searched the sky, but it was clear and blue as far as the eye could see. "'Tis like there is a storm coming, not that there is any sign of it."

"Hm," I said. In fact, I did know what he meant. It was like the city had been saturated in nervous energy.

“Dark forces are at work here,” Sir Radomir muttered. “I fear we are not going to like where this girl is taking us.”

“Because it smells like shit?” I joked, but Sir Radomir merely looked grim. “I did not take you for a superstitious man,” I said.

Sir Radomir grimaced, and shook his head. “I am not. Just an old lawman’s instinct.”

I looked ahead. We were coming up on the Baden Bridge. “Anyway, I do want to. Join the Magistratum, that is.” It felt like a lie. In more ways than not, it was.

“You have been less sure before.”

“Well, now I have made up my mind.”

“Perhaps one day I shall answer to you,” Sir Radomir said wearily.

“You do answer to me,” I said, without thinking.

Sir Radomir barked out a laugh. “You are a fine one, Helena,” he said, leaving me suddenly hot with embarrassment.

We swept through the market, which was winding down for the day. Whereas before it had been a heady and intoxicating mix of sights and sounds and smells, now it was little more than a source of intense frustration. Everyone and everything was in my way. Those vendors still attempting to sell despite the disinterest of the patrons around them filled me with an irrational anger. Several times I snapped at pushy merchants to shut up, only to be shouted at in return. No one in our little band made any attempt to intercede on my behalf, nor should they have.

We reached the unsociable trades district. The place was still in disarray. Signs of the Imperial Guard’s ferocious search were everywhere. Many of the wells were unattended, and treated hides treated lay scattered about, trampled in the muck. There were no small number of bloodstains where uncooperative tanners had met with the sharp end of the law. The place had a sullen, withdrawn air, and many venomous glances were thrown our way.

Vonvalt was untroubled by the hostile reception.

“I did not attend here myself, yesterday, but Helena did, as did Sir Radomir,” Vonvalt said, gesturing to us.

Roza turned to me. “Where was the Royal Tanner situated?” she asked me directly. There was no hint of the warmth or affection she had shown Vonvalt.

I pointed to the spot. “Over there,” I said.

She looked over, then turned back. “No.”

I wrinkled my nose, jerking my head back as though someone had taken a swing at me. “What?” I said.

Sir Radomir grunted. “That is the place,” he confirmed.

“No, I don’t think that’s right,” Roza insisted. She closed her eyes and played her fingers out in front of her, as though she were tapping the keys of a harpsichord. “The boy’s path is much stronger here.” She opened her eyes and cocked her head to the right, looking over to where a vast and unruly tangle of buildings sprouted from the Estran Wall like a tumour. We followed her gaze.

“Over there?” Vonvalt said. There was the first hint of uncertainty in his voice.

Roza closed her eyes, and walked about the wells for a few minutes. Bressinger turned and spat a large gob of phlegm on the floor. He had been idly rubbing the stump of his left arm since we arrived. He frequently complained that it itched, sometimes abominably, and I wondered whether it was becoming a nervous tic. Certainly this case could not have been good for his mental state. I realised with a pang of profound shame that I had not even attempted to talk to him about it, though Vonvalt’s stern injunction that I leave the subject alone provided a convenient, if cowardly, pretext for that lapse.

A few tanners had stopped what they were doing to watch the spectacle. A couple of Imperial Guard, too, walking a patrol after their ransacking of the place, observed matters from a few dozen paces away.

Eventually, Justice Roza returned to us. There was a bead of sweat running down her cheek, and her face was ruddy with exertion.

“I think we should look in the Fleischregale,” she said.

I saw Vonvalt catch Sir Radomir’s eye. Bressinger spat again, worrying at his stump like a fox with its leg caught in a trap.

“Dubine,” Vonvalt said with false brightness. “Fetch the dog, would you?” He snapped his fingers. “What’s it called, Helena?”

“Heinrich.”

“Go and fetch Heinrich, would you?”

“I doubt it will be able to detect anything amongst these noxious odours,” Roza said, being ignorant of the fact that Bressinger’s twin children had been long ago murdered in the sacking of Annholt.

Vonvalt waved her off. “We’ve nothing to lose in the attempt. Dubine?”

“Aye,” Bressinger said, and left.

Vonvalt eyed that dark mass of architecture, waiting until Dubine was well out of earshot. “You are sure?”

“’Tis not an exact science, but I am certain we should journey there,” Roza said. “And quickly,” she added pointedly.

Vonvalt clacked his tongue. “All right. Lead on, then.”

Roza started off towards the Fleischregale at a pace. Vonvalt followed her, and Sir Radomir followed Vonvalt, though not before giving me a look. The harsh caw of a rook sounded above, and I saw it swoop overhead. The bird’s appearance felt portentous.

“Come on, Helena!” Vonvalt called out behind him, seeing that I had not moved.

I sighed, and followed Vonvalt towards the city’s butchery district.

The Fleischregale – literally “meat shelves” in Low Saxan – was a gloomy, stinking precinct at the easternmost extent of the unsociable trades. Here, timber-framed buildings loomed up from the ground, so old and crooked that they almost touched at the apex of their roofs. The charnel smell of blood and offal was overwhelming, and I could only imagine the power of the stench in summer. Here the shit ditches ran with blood like the drains of a sword, and no amount of kicking and stamping could deter the vermin which had grown fat on what must have been extraordinarily rich pickings. Immediately to the left, the Estran Wall rose fifty feet into the sky, a solid, seemingly unbreakable edifice completely unmarked and unadorned. Such was our position that we could not make out its top where the soldiers wandered endlessly.

We moved through that stinking and uninviting place as though we were walking through a tangle of ancient trees in a cursed forest.

“You say you can sense the boy’s pathway into the Fleischregale,” Vonvalt said. He seemed to be affecting a lack of care in the disgusting state of the ground, whereas I knew that if he had been just in mine and Bressinger’s company, he would have been busy turning his nose up,

smelling his dried Grozodan lavender, and picking his way over the more offensive parts of the street with a daintiness that defied his status as a veteran soldier.

"Yes," she said.

"And his journey continues down the street and out into Pike's Bend?"

It had been a while since I had heard Vonvalt worried.

"I do not think so," Roza said. She sounded tired, as though the use of her talent had exhausted her. "Let me take my bearings and see if I can detect it with greater specificity. It will take but a moment."

Sir Radomir came and stood next to me.

"This is not good," he murmured.

I do not know how long we stood there. I felt as though the walls around me were closing in on us. Every day seemed to bring us a step closer to doom, as though the Sovan Empire had been preordained for destruction and we were approaching the nexus of dozens of pathways through the holy dimensions. Now more than ever Justice August's warning of our Entanglement in great world-changing events seemed like the only explanation for why misfortune chased us at every turn. It was impossible to know whether we were being guided by the hand of Fate, or by our actions, we were guiding it. Even the thought of the latter seemed like risible hubris. Given all that I had learned in the past few months about the afterlife, I had no doubt that Fate was a real entity, doubtless a far cry from the Deti of the Neman Creed. If I had learned anything about the astral plane, it was that the entities within it were unknowable – and that made them more frightening than any of the silly malevolent sprites that the Neman Church warned us about as children. We could no more guide Fate than I could smash the Estran Wall with my bare hands.

"There," Justice Roza said eventually, pointing to a nearby butcher's shop. It was an unremarkable place, perhaps a little more rundown than those surrounding it. There was no sign of habitation.

"You are sure?" Vonvalt asked, eyeing the first and second floors of the building.

Roza nodded. "As sure as I can be," she said.

I looked at the door, paint peeling, the jamb warped. It was not so much a door as a portal, and on the other side lay nothing but devastation. I felt a sudden and visceral urge to simply walk away, to abandon this line of

enquiry entirely and focus on taking the ransom money down to Kormondolt Bay. That long and arduous journey seemed suddenly very attractive when faced with the alternative. For as long as we were on this side of the door, we could pretend that matters were in hand.

Instead, Vonvalt said, “Sir Radomir.”

Sir Radomir drew his sword, and then smashed the door in with one practised kick.

We crossed the threshold.

I was in a daze as we walked through the door. Sir Radomir went first. He checked that there was no one on the ground floor, and then ran up the stairs. His boots thumped loudly against the boards.

Vonvalt went in next, followed by Justice Roza.

“Upstairs,” I heard her say quietly.

I loitered in the doorway for a few moments, and then followed everybody else as though I were being dragged by an invisible rope.

“There is no one up here,” I heard Sir Radomir call out, followed by the sound of a sword being sheathed. Vonvalt sheathed his own weapon, as did Justice Roza. I realised that I had not even drawn my dirk.

At the top of the stairs was a single, grubby chamber. I remember it clearly because it was so sparse; wooden boards on the floor, dirty and undressed plaster on the walls, bare beams overhead

A single large butcher’s block sat in the middle of the room.

There was blood on it.

We all stood in silence for a long while, simply staring at it. Eventually, Vonvalt turned to Roza, but it was clear from her expression that Prince Kamil could not be traced from that room.

Vonvalt turned back to the block. There was another long silence.

“Prince of Hell,” he muttered eventually, rubbing his face with his hands.

XV

Locking Horns

"Never ascribe to malicious contrivance that which can be ascribed to naked stupidity."

OLD MAGISTRATUM PROVERB

Vonvalt spent a good deal of time questioning an increasingly agitated Justice Roza about every conceivable aspect of the tracking power. But there was little enough to explain. Like all Justices' powers, the practice of it was innate, the intricacies of it difficult to put into words.

I was spared much of the worst of what followed. Vonvalt considered that there was "no point" in me witnessing a succession of furious and heartbroken people vent their emotions, and sent me and Sir Radomir back to the Prefect's Palace. There would be other matters to attend to in time; Vonvalt would want me to read up on vitaspatial tracking in the Law Library, for one, to see if the practice had some flaw which perhaps Roza did not fully grasp as an apprentice. But it seemed like wishful thinking.

He and Justice Roza went directly from the Fleischregale to the watch house, to inform Sir Gerold, Prince Tasa, and Lady Iliyana. I do not know how long he was there for, but afterwards he journeyed to the Imperial Palace – from which Bressinger had not been able to tempt Heinrich – to inform the Emperor. Vonvalt's only description of the Emperor's reaction to the news was, "as you would expect", and my mind played out all manner of impressively volcanic reactions; though I would learn much later that in fact

the Emperor had retired directly to the strategium and wept.

The news, which was uncontainable, ripped through Sova like fire through a library. The mood in the city quickly reached fever pitch; the pressure on Vonvalt became unmanageable. Whereas I had been concerned for Vonvalt before his ailment, which seemed to have been on the wane in the past day or so, now I was worried to the point of being frightened for his life. The stress caused his illness to return tenfold, like the flare-up of an unshakeable rash, and in the days that followed, as the Prefect's Palace was turned into a common room for Haugenate senators, Vonvalt seemed to wither before my eyes, as though his life were a wheel and the hand of Fate was turning it ahead of time.

The stresses and strains of the investigation took their toll on us as Vonvalt's retainers, too. Bressinger withdrew into himself, the death of Prince Kamil dredging up old and traumatic memories for him. As for Sir Radomir, his drinking increased, which became a problem. In spite of his apparent ability to weather even the worst of news in the way a cliff might weather the pounding of the tide, I think he had the same head for Sovan politics as Vonvalt – that is to say, he had no head for it at all. Like Bressinger, he did not think much of the Haugenate senators in the Prefect's Palace, and took the opportunity to absent himself as much as possible. I think for the first time I had known the man he seemed the worse for the alcohol, whereas before he had been able to master it. I wondered if he regretted leaving Galen's Vale.

Another unwelcome development at this time was the near constant presence of Justice Roza, who seemed to have inserted herself into our group in the same way one might insert a length of iron between a door and its jamb – though I would learn that Vonvalt had asked her to remain at his disposal. Neither Bressinger nor Sir Radomir seemed bothered by it at all, and simply saw her as an addition to Vonvalt's growing retinue. It was, after all, nothing abnormal; there were plenty of Justices who maintained very large retinues. Kane famously kept a staff of over twenty, including a headsman. Both men must have seen my aggravation as nothing more than jealousy, for by that point they had suspected that mine and Vonvalt's relationship was at a point somewhere beyond the purely professional.

I tried to rationalise much of what I was thinking, but given what had passed between Vonvalt and me over the course of the past few days, his

sudden inclusion of Roza felt like a betrayal, and I cannot say that I was particularly pleasant company during this time either. These problems should have been simple, surmountable personal issues which in normal circumstances Vonvalt would have given short shrift. Instead, crushed as we were under the exigencies of the time, they grew like tumours.

It was against this shabby backdrop that Sir Radomir, Bressinger, and I found ourselves in a public house in a part of Sova known as Cygnus Street, a few evenings after our misadventure in the Fleischregale. I wanted nothing more than marsh ale, but the barkeep turned his nose up at this and suggested a much stronger artisanal beer instead, which I had felt pressured into accepting, and so was now slightly the worse for drink. Sir Radomir was nursing a goblet of wine, whilst Bressinger had insisted the barkeep find him a Grozodan liquor, which smelt flammable and which I was sure the barkeep had had to source from another inn. Taken together it was a toxic combination that would guarantee a row in the next hour or so.

“The last I heard, the plan was to try and lay a trap in Kormondolt Bay,” Sir Radomir said. He was slurring, but only slightly. His eyes had a slightly glassy expression which suggested that, that evening, he had exceeded even his exceptionally high tolerance for alcohol.

Bressinger looked irritated. “Have you been to the bay?”

Sir Radomir shook his head. “You know I have not. If I have not been to the capital before, then I am not like to have been even further south, am I?”

“I have not been, either,” I said hastily, feeling like I was going to have to mediate between the two men like a ruleskeeper in the Sovan arena, wearing a bright yellow surcoat to avoid being de-horsed. I felt exhausted even at the prospect of it.

“The Prince’s abductors have chosen their spot well. The bay is a mile wide, easily, with deep water for ships to come right up to the shore. It is why they have the beacons there; it’s the most obvious and convenient point for an invasion from the south.”

“The Prince’s murderers, you mean,” Sir Radomir grumbled.

“Sir Konrad is not treating it as a murder,” Bressinger said, his irritation deepening.

“Aye, because the Haugenates have told him it would be disastrous to do so. They are colouring his mind, pulling it astray like ropemen leading a carrack into dock. But he knows.”

“Sir Konrad is not treating it as a murder because he does not believe there has been a murder. That is all you need to know.”

“The boy is dead, Dubine,” Sir Radomir said, exasperated. He looked to me with a helpless smile, as though I would bolster what he was saying, but I simply winced. “The sooner you accept that, the sooner you will be of value to the investigation.”

“I don’t understand about the bay,” I said, cutting into the conversation before Dubine drew his sword and cut into Sir Radomir. “Why is it so difficult to spring a trap?”

Actually, it was very obvious why. The abductors would want us to leave a chest full of the coin floating in the bay, presumably anchored in some way to stop it drifting off, for even with a thousand crowns inside, with enough air in the barrel it would lie on the surface of the water. But the bay was wide, and even on a moonless night, there would likely be enough ambient light to see any Imperial vessels ready to intercept the abductors. Bressinger explained as much to me, and though it hurt my ego to be thought of as an idiot, it was better than him breaking Sir Radomir’s nose.

“But Sir Konrad *is* talking about laying a trap?” I asked, prompting Dubine to keep talking. I wished one of them would leave and go home.

“He and Sir Gerold and the Captain of the Imperial Guard – what’s her name?”

“Ingeburg Galla,” I said.

“Galla. They are talking about ensnaring the captors somehow.”

“From what I have heard it sounds like a hare-brained scheme to me,” Sir Radomir muttered. “Locking the gate after the horse has bolted.”

“You have a better one?” Bressinger said. “You think to waltz down to the capital of the Sovan Empire, having spent your entire life in shit-heap Hauner towns, and dictate how the greatest lawkeepers of the age prosecute the investigation?”

“Remind me what part of Grozoda you are from?” Sir Radomir shot back. “I shall be sure to pay it a visit, since it apparently breeds the most intelligent men north of the Grall Sea.”

“That’s a thing to be grappled with though, isn’t it?” I said, feeling as though I were trying to bale water out of a rowboat that was already several feet under the surface. “How the Prince was able to be taken so quickly and easily? He is the Emperor’s grandson, after all. Is it not curious that he was

not accompanied with a large bodyguard of Imperial Guardsmen?"

"You are raking over old coals, Helena," Sir Radomir said. "The Prince and his life guard were hoping to slip through unnoticed. With the confusion in the tannery and the noise from the iron foundries, even if the boy managed to cry out, no one would have heard it – and because he was just a boy dressed in normal clothes, I doubt anyone would have thought to question it anyway. They took him to a pre-agreed place in the Fleischregale, probably planning to change his clothes further and maybe chalk his hair, when the boy tried to escape, or kicked up such a fuss that one of them struck him about the head with too much force and killed him. In a panic, they sent out the ransom note anyway to buy themselves more time to escape. A bungled scheme undertaken by amateurs."

"A bungled scheme undertaken by amateurs to kidnap one of the most important people in the Empire? Why go to the trouble? There must be a thousand noble scions who are worth a hundred crowns apiece. If it was really about money, why not kidnap one of them? Or two? Or ten? Even that seems to have a lower profile of risk than going after the second-in-line to the throne," I asked. "Could not Claver be behind it after all?"

In fact, I thought Sir Radomir's theory – and it was not just his theory, though he was its progenitor – was full of all manner of inconsistencies, and fell apart like wet paper under scrutiny. I was particularly bothered by the idea of a ransom note. A thousand crowns was an obscene amount of money, it was true, and something that only the Imperial Crown could scrape together at short notice outside of all but the largest merchant banks. But someone had to have known the Prince would be in the tannery on that morning, and only lightly guarded. I understood that travelling incognito was probably an extremely effective way for royals and senior nobles to move about the city unmolested, but that suggested that those who kidnapped him were experienced criminals who had a good line of information to the Imperial Palace.

In fairness, Bressinger had done Sir Radomir a disservice. Sir Radomir was actually an extremely effective sheriff and investigator, having wholeheartedly adopted the Magistratum's mandate that all watch houses should keep a dedicated team of men and women specialising in criminal investigation. And he also subscribed to the belief – as did Sir Konrad – that one should never ascribe to malicious contrivance what one could ascribe to

naked stupidity. As lawkeepers and Justices, there was a tendency to see sophisticated conspiracies everywhere, “drawing conclusions where none lie to be drawn” as Vonvalt would say. In reality, it was perfectly possible that Prince Kamil had been accidentally killed in a tussle. Young boys, after all, are not as robust as thickset soldiers. In that respect, Sir Radomir’s theory had an air of verisimilitude about it, and the force with which he put it across made it an attractive explanation for those not well versed in criminal activity.

Nonetheless, I still felt uneasy about chalking the whole thing up to failure. And in the event, we were all wrong, in our own way – but I shall come on to why later.

“You think too highly of criminals, Helena,” Sir Radomir said. “’Tis true that those in Galen’s Vale were able to operate a sophisticated scheme from the kloster, but that is a rarity – and, actually, look at all the mistakes they made. Murdering Lady Bauer did nothing but draw everybody’s attention.”

“Aye, were it not for that, you would never have known about it,” Bressinger said.

Sir Radomir looked across at him. “Are you seeking to rile me?” he asked.

“I am saying that for all you criticise Sir Konrad, were it not for him, the murder of Lady Bauer – and the fraudulent scheme running out of the kloster – would never have been uncovered.”

“Were it not for Sir Konrad, Galen’s Vale would not have been sacked by Margrave Westenholtz and half the town watch slaughtered like cattle!” Sir Radomir shouted.

The other patrons looked over to us. There were mutterings, nods, and subtle points.

The barkeep came over. “Now, gentlemen, we’ll have no quarrels in here,” he said.

“You need not fear a quarrel,” Sir Radomir said, gesturing to Bressinger’s stump. “The man is unarmed.”

“Oi!” I shouted, sick to death of these jokes. But, apparently, so was Bressinger.

“Get outside,” he snapped to Sir Radomir as he launched to his feet, hand on the hilt of his side sword. “We shall have an end to this now.”

“Dubine!” I shrieked, now on my own feet. “Nema’s tits, stop it, the pair of you!”

“No,” Sir Radomir said, standing and pulling his Sovan short sword from its scabbard. “He is right. I am tired of listening to his wittering on.”

I felt powerless as both men strode out of the public house and into the street. Duelling was illegal in Sova, and both men faced prosecution. But in that moment, that was the least of my worries. What if one of them killed the other? Or, to be more specific, what if Bressinger killed Sir Radomir? There was no doubt in my mind that the latter was about to die; Bressinger’s talent for swordplay far exceeded the sheriff’s – and that was the case even though Bressinger had half the number of arms.

No amount of shouting could put an end to it. I shoved and smacked and screamed, drawing even more attention to this ridiculous spectacle than it by itself would have drawn, but this ended up being a good thing. As the two men began to strip off their outer garments, a familiar voice sounded.

“Prince of Hell!” Vonvalt thundered as he shouldered his way roughly into the circle. Despite both Sir Radomir’s and Bressinger’s blood being up, and both being the worse for drink, even they realised that the matter was over.

With a sense of weary anticlimax, they both re-sheathed their swords. The baying of the nascent crowd died away, and suddenly everybody found something to occupy themselves with. Vonvalt closed with them, his face a mask of fury. “You are adult men, lawkeepers, and agents of the bloody *Crown*,” he hissed. “Duelling, or whatever you two dolts were about to perform, is a *crime*. You are *my* retainers. Did you even begin to *think* of the position that would put me in?”

Both Bressinger and Sir Radomir hung their heads like chastised schoolboys.

“Everyone in my employ knows of your value to me. I should not have to waste time massaging egos. By the God Mother, have you no sense of what we are dealing with? How little time we have for these histrionics?”

“I am sorry, Sir Konr—”

“Damn your apologies!” Vonvalt snarled. “We have *work* to do. Now come on!”

XVI

A Light in the Darkness

"Criminal activity is rarely confined to the sum of its constituent parts. The wise Justice would do well to remember that tangled matters have tangled outcomes."

MASTER EMMANUEL KANE

Vonvalt led us neither to the Prefect's Palace nor to the Grand Lodge. Instead he took us out of the city entirely.

Only by virtue of his being the Lord Prefect did we manage to exit the Wolf Gate in anything like decent time, for the tailback caused by the Imperial Guard and city watch, as they continued to search every person for signs of the Prince Kamil, remained vast. It was an operation which now seemed devoid of any purpose, but there were plenty – Vonvalt included – who did not believe that the Prince Kamil had actually met his end. I myself was pessimistic, for all my thoughts on the matter counted; but for as long as such a belief persisted, the search for him would continue.

We exited the Wolf Gate and turned left. Next to us the curtain wall rose gigantically, and beyond that the Summit of the Prefects. Outside the wall itself there was still a vast tangle of buildings. This particular area was given over to huge clusters of warehouses, for the River Sauber entered the city from the north-west, and it was down this gigantic, ocean-deep river that most of the city's goods entered.

We were not unused to Vonvalt leading us to obscure places expecting –

and getting – nothing but blind obedience, but even so, I could not conjure up any explanation as to why we were here. The Sovan docklands were a squalid, dangerous place, filled with things wanting to kill you – unsavoury types, heavy unloading apparatus, the vast and unyielding hull of an ocean-going carrack, tall stacks of cargo… Alleys between the vast storehouses were dark places filled with sailors and prostitutes and pox-carrying vermin, and in our expensive Imperial finery, we were practically inviting a robbery.

Nonetheless, Vonvalt moved about the place heedless of any and all of this. He eventually led us to a building set back from the wharf side, an unremarkable construction of wood and stone. It would have been ill lit at noon, let alone at dusk and in the shadow of just about every other building going.

Vonvalt rapped sharply on the door. It was opened, and we followed him inside.

Beyond the threshold was Sir Gerold, the Sheriff of Sova, as well as a handful of men and women. Each was armed with short swords and clad in plain, dark clothing, and wore shirts of mail. They did not wear the livery of the city watch, though they were clearly a part of it.

“Sir Gerold,” Vonvalt said quietly.

“Sir Konrad,” the sheriff replied. He did not look happy. “I am here, as you asked, though I need not tell you that—”

“You are not pleased to be,” Vonvalt interrupted. “I know.”

Sir Gerold sighed. He held out a hand and one of his men placed a ledger in it. He subsequently passed it to Vonvalt. “There. It is marked on the page.”

Vonvalt moved past the sheriff to where a candle guttered on a table nearby. He opened the ledger to where the tassel had been placed, and ran a finger down the page.

“A barge, down the Kova,” he said. He looked up at the sheriff. “Docked a week ago.”

Sir Gerold nodded. “In light of your instructions, I believe that to be the vessel you are looking for.”

There was a pause, broken by Sir Radomir. “Is anybody here going to tell me what the fuck is going on?” he asked.

Vonvalt wrinkled his nose, his earlier censure of his taskmen forgotten. “As you know, the Emperor has all but forbidden me from spending city resources on the Claver matter. However, if the Claver matter is indeed

linked to the abduction of Prince Kamil, then the investigations are one and the same." No one looked particularly impressed by this contrivance. It was one thing for Vonvalt to flout the orders of the Emperor; it was entirely another for us to do so. Even the fact that we had been directed to do so by Vonvalt would not be a defence. "The man that we chased from the séance, the one who had the look of a Kòvoskan about him: I charged Sir Gerold with reviewing the docking ledgers for ships travelling from the east, flagged to any one of the nations forming the Kova Confederation."

"And you have found one?" Sir Radomir said.

"Sir Gerold has found one," Vonvalt said. "And now we are going to have a look on board."

"If the ship is from the Confederation, how is it allowed to dock at all?" I asked.

"Nothing stops money-making, miss, not even warfare," said Sir Gerold wearily.

There was an uncomfortable pause.

"You mean to… perform an illegal raid, against the Emperor's explicit instructions, on a vessel flagged to the Autun's greatest enemy?" Sir Radomir asked eventually.

"Bartholomew Claver is the Autun's greatest enemy," Vonvalt said. "But yes, you have the skin of it."

There was another lengthy pause.

"Fuck me," Sir Radomir said in one despondent exhalation.

"That man, our mystery Kòvoskan – if that is indeed what he is—"

"Was," Bressinger muttered, his first and only offering of the evening.

"—meant to slip through the Wolf Gate and lose us in the docklands. I think it unlikely he would have simply continued to run down the Baden High-Way."

"And you believe that this man, this Neman patria – what was his name?" Sir Gerold asked.

"Bartholomew Claver," Vonvalt said patiently.

"Set these wheels in motion after you disrupted him performing some sort of secret rite in the Temple of Savare?"

"That is my working theory. The timing of the abduction, and the impact it has had on my disruption of his inner circle here, would otherwise be a remarkable coincidence."

“But what of the ransom note? And the other mismatched timings? The boy was lost a couple of hours before you discovered the séance. Did Claver seem as though he had anticipated the interruption?”

Vonvalt shook his head. “No. He did not.”

Sir Gerold opened his mouth, and then closed it again. He thought for a few moments. “And that does not challenge your case theory?”

“Only the timings.”

Sir Gerold shifted his weight. “Sir Konrad—”

“Who benefits?” Vonvalt asked suddenly. “The most basic principle of criminal lawkeeping. Who has benefited the most from the Prince’s abduction?”

“Well, the ransomers are sure to profit by it,” the sheriff mumbled. Like many – especially those surrounded by the huge, thick walls of Sova – he did not think that a single lunatic existing on the fringes of society could meaningfully challenge the existing world order.

“The effect of the abduction is too advantageous for Claver, for the Mlyanars, and the Templars. We have nothing to lose by exploring a connexion.”

“Except our heads,” Sir Radomir said.

Vonvalt gritted his teeth. “I have told you our purpose this evening and I expect everybody here to turn their minds and efforts to it fully. You need not all agree with every aspect of my theorising; but you *do* need to follow my orders. With *alacrity*. Is that understood?”

There was a chorus of assent.

“Are there any other questions?” Vonvalt asked.

There was silence.

Vonvalt scowled. “Fine then. Let us be about it.”

We moved quickly through the darkening streets. The wharf was no stranger to gangs of people moving about – Imperial customs agents, ships’ crews, and the like – and we did not draw an undue amount of attention. Still, I could not help but feel remarkably exposed, even though I was accompanied by the two most senior lawkeepers in the city.

The ship in question was a long and flat barge, unremarkable in almost every respect. It looked more like a floating warehouse than anything designed to sail the open ocean. It sat nestled in its berth, bobbing gently on the currents of the vast River Sauber, at least a quarter of a mile across here and filled with dozens of carracks – not to mention hundreds of smaller vessels.

Our pace slowed. Sir Gerold had his people move out so that the two gangways, one at either end of the barge, were covered.

Vonvalt pulled out his short sword, and everyone else there followed suit. Then he nodded to Sir Gerold, who in turn indicated to his men to approach.

My heart pounded as the watchmen moved down the two gangways. There was no sign of anyone on the vessel, no guards watching the entrances. The barge had windows but there was no light inside. It was the quietest, stillest ship on the waters; every other vessel had some sort of activity – people keeping watch, even on quiet, dark decks; the raucous laughter of sailors gambling in the hold; clusters of officers poring over maps and manifests by lantern light.

I turned back to the barge, suddenly filled with a sense of unease.

“What did the ledger say was on board?” I asked Vonvalt, who was still standing in front of me, sword in his hand.

“Wine,” he said, not really paying attention to me.

I watched as the watchmen pounded on the doors, demanding entry. There was no response.

“Get on with it,” I heard Vonvalt mutter under his breath.

The watchmen kicked the doors in almost simultaneously.

“City watch!” I heard one of them shout.

To our surprise and horror, we heard a woman within the barge let out a loud, bloodcurdling scream.

Then the barge exploded.

“Nema!” I heard Sir Radomir shout as the centre of the vessel buckled upwards as though it had been punched by an enormous sea giant. All of the planks bulged outwards, forced by a vast, invisible sphere; then, with a blinding flash and a thunderous report, the vessel burst apart.

We were thrown to the ground, propelled by the blast and the sudden intense heat of it. Debris was thrown into the air hundreds of feet, and began to rain down like a hail of arrows – lengths of beam, charred planks, iron

brackets, and other unidentifiable remains. They clattered down onto the wharf, many still flaming, shattering roofs and windows and battering nearby sailors to the ground.

The vessel, smashed into two uneven halves, sank to the bottom of the wharf in seconds, taking with it the mostly liquefied bodies of the unfortunate watchmen who had breached the doors. Cries of “Fire!” were quick to fill the smoke-choked air. Alarum bells began crashing in the night. A strange, acrid stink stung my nostrils.

“Blood of gods,” Vonvalt whispered as he pressed himself to his feet and ran towards the barge. He immediately checked that Sir Gerold was all right – he was – before running to the next city watchman, who had been at the other end of the gangplank.

He immediately collared some nearby sailors. “Physicians! Fetch physicians, immediately! And fresh water!” he shouted, his eyes wide.

Bressinger and Sir Radomir moved to action immediately, as did Sir Gerold and his surviving men. Everyone around me was a Reichskrieg veteran, no stranger to death and devastation – though not the kind of sudden and catastrophic devastation that an explosion of blackpowder could wreak, for that was surely what had happened. I myself was dazed almost to the point of insensibility, but I moved to the nearest body I could see. Quite what I planned to do, I knew not.

“Can you hear me?” I shouted – for I was shouting; the blast had rendered me half-deaf – and I fumbled for their hand. It was the hand of a woman, I realised. I wondered if it was the woman who had screamed before the explosion, and decided that it must have been. I pulled myself closer, grabbed her by the shoulder and rolled onto her back –

– and recoiled in disgust.

“Ugh,” I grunted, my gorge rising. The lump in front of me had once been human, but was now a sack of burnt offal wrapped in clothes charred to flakes. I could make out her neck, and the remains of a lower jaw, white teeth jutting out, incongruously clean, against the black ruin of everything else. Of the rest of her head, there was no sign.

I had seen burnt bodies before. Vonvalt had once investigated a suspected arson which had killed a family. But I had expected that, and Vonvalt had spent time preparing me for it. This gruesome spectacle caught me completely by surprise.

I sat back on the hard, damp cobbles of the wharf side, watching as all around me devolved into chaos. I do not know how long I sat there, staring uselessly into space; but eventually someone crouched down in front of me and put a hand on my shoulder.

It was Bressinger.

"Helena," he said gently, and tilted my soot-stained chin upwards after I did not respond. "We must go."

I blinked a few times, looking at him incoherently.

"We cannot be seen here. Sir Gerold has matters in hand. Come."

"But…" I murmured.

Bressinger shook his head. "There will be time enough to rake over it later. Come, now."

He did not wait for me to respond; he hooked his arm under mine and pulled me up, and I allowed myself to be led away from the carnage, as docile as a lamb.

The explosion was a matter which benefited both Vonvalt and – perversely – his enemies to keep quiet about.

The chaos of it could not be concealed, that much was obvious; but the docklands were a dangerous place, filled with all manner of dangerous substances – pitch, oil, legitimate quantities of blackpowder. Accidents were rare, but not unheard of. The biggest risk was not the explosion itself – though several people had perished, and it was important not to forget that – but that it set off a wider chain of events. Vonvalt's greatest fear in the hours that followed was that it would be seen as some kind of signal to begin a general uprising in the city, a riot the foundations of which had long been stoked by the Mlyanars and the Templars.

"I have known a hold full of spoiled meat to touch off before," Sir Radomir said idly. "In the Vale. That one left us all scratching our heads."

We were sitting in Vonvalt's solar in the Prefect's Palace, the evening after the explosion. With rest, a wash, and some time to recuperate and take stock, I had managed to overcome the shock which had confronted me, but I still found myself being jolted by loud noises – the clatter of carts and the

shouting of people in the streets. As a consequence, and thanks to the presence of both Sir Radomir and Bressinger, two inveterate alcoholics, much of the afternoon had been given over to drinking.

Sir Radomir, Bressinger, and Sir Gerold were in the solar as well as Vonvalt. I could tell that for all Sir Gerold liked and respected Vonvalt both as a man and a lawkeeper, he held Vonvalt at least partly responsible for the explosion. No one, after all, had wanted to investigate the barge in violation of the Emperor's injunctions, and now the sheriff had lost two men, and on an illegal mission. Not only that, but it had fallen on his shoulders to clear up the mess, both literally and figuratively.

If Vonvalt had any measure of the man's discontentment, he showed no sign of it.

"You have no sense of what else was on the barge?" he asked.

"Short of draining the Sauber, no," Sir Gerold replied, not taking his eyes from the view of the city.

Vonvalt pursed his lips. Of course it was possible to investigate the bed of a river, though not without great difficulty. After all, bridges were constructed across rivers, and that required sections of it to be drained at a time. There was no doubt in my mind that, had Vonvalt been operating with the Emperor's blessing, that is precisely what he would have ordered. But matters were slipping away from him, and he could not afford to make more of an enemy of the sheriff than he already had done.

"What of the debris that landed in the docklands?"

"Burnt and broken wood. A few body parts. The corpse that Helena found."

I felt a jolt run through me at the mention of the mutilated body.

"Who was she? Has anybody been reported missing in the city?"

Sir Gerold let out a small, incredulous laugh but said no more.

"Well, have you divined *anything*?"

Sir Gerold opened his mouth to say something, but it was something he was evidently going to regret saying, and managed to comport himself before it escaped his lips. "Not yet. I do not know who the woman was. Judging by her skin, she was of middling age, and probably from some part of native Sova, for it was white. There was nothing that might have distinguished her, no rings or jewellery. My men think she may have worn a heavy necklace due to a curious incision on her neck. Her clothes were burnt to cinders, but

there was some brocade, which suggests a woman of wealth. Other than that, we divined nothing."

Vonvalt mulled this over. "A wealthy, middle-aged Sovan woman, on a Kòvoskan-flagged barge, in and amongst at least one barrel of blackpowder. Nema, that is a mystery in itself."

"And this is connected to your investigation how?" Sir Gerold asked.

Vonvalt told him, this time in detail, about our disruption of the illegal séance and our pursuit of the man through the city.

"You think this man was heading for the barge?"

Vonvalt clacked his tongue. "Or somewhere close to it. Perhaps he had compatriots in the docklands." He thought for a few more moments. "There is a thought. It might be worth searching some of these warehouses."

"The Emperor has decreed you find his grandson." The sheriff threw his hands up in exasperation. "In fact we received a written edict on the matter this morning. We are not to render you any assistance which detracts from the search for the Prince Kamil. What you are talking about is illegal—"

"Oh, piss on that," Vonvalt muttered angrily, waving the sheriff off. "Foolish man." It was not clear if that had been directed at Sir Gerold, the Emperor, or both. "Legal, illegal… we are not concerned with terms such as these. Not at the moment."

I could not conceal my surprise at this. I looked at Bressinger, but he remained impassive.

"We are talking about an explosion of blackpowder in the Sovan docklands," Vonvalt said. "This is not a matter we can ignore. In other circumstances we would be turning the entirety of Sova's investigative apparatus to it."

"But these are *these* circumstances, Sir Konrad. The Prince Kamil has been abducted from the streets!"

"Nema's blood, man! These may *be* his abductors!"

Sir Gerold's hands balled into fists. "My Lord Prefect," he said, staring straight ahead at the door to the solar. "If you are finished with me, I shall resume my duties."

Vonvalt rolled his eyes. "Get you gone," he muttered. "You are dismissed."

We watched in silence as the sheriff left.

Vonvalt sat in quiet contemplation for a few minutes. None of us

disturbed him. It is easy with hindsight to think of Sir Gerold as foolish, or blind to the real risks facing the Empire; but the fact of the matter was, Sir Gerold was not used to exercising the level of power that Vonvalt was. Sir Gerold answered to a great many high lords and senators, and his position was entirely revocable. And besides, Vonvalt had not done himself any favours by seeking to link Claver to the investigation into the disappearance of Prince Kamil. He sounded obsessive, even a little deranged, and it was poisoning his cause.

"You need to be more careful about how you approach this," Sir Radomir said after a while, as though he had been reading my thoughts. "*We* know the threat, but here in the capital the people do not. Claver is a lunatic on the Frontier to them – if they have even heard of him – nothing more. You will not convince them otherwise by raving about it."

"Aye," Bressinger said, which surprised me. "Think on how Resi sounded to you, when she tried to warn you in the Vale."

I saw Vonvalt tense for a moment. I thought he was going to argue, but I could see his ailment returning, draining him. "That will be all for this evening. Begin making preparations to head south, both of you. It is my intention to quit the city as soon as possible."

They left. I made to go with them, but Vonvalt stopped me. "Not you, Helena," he said, tiredly. He took out his pipe and lit it.

I stood opposite him, feeling fuzzy-minded and dry-eyed from an afternoon's drinking. Still, it was the first time that Vonvalt and I had been left alone for a little while, and I resolved to take as much succour from it as I could, spurred on by recent, dramatic events and – ridiculously – the looming presence of the extremely beautiful Luitgard Roza. Vonvalt had not brought her into his confidence in the matter of the illegal séance, but she was still working away in the Grand Lodge and Law Library, performing tasks that only another Justice could.

"Sometimes, Helena, I feel as though you are the only person I can depend on," Vonvalt muttered in the new stillness. He was, as was so often the case in the evenings, clad simply in a loose shirt and breeches. A hot day had given way to a sultry evening, and the air in the palace felt stuffy and leaden despite a number of open windows. Vonvalt chewed on the end of his pipe, which he occasionally drew on, so that a haze of smoke surrounded us, adding to the effect. His hair was lank and his beard was approaching

unkempt. He looked at his best when he was so presented; somewhat rakish, as though he might have been found ascending the rigging of a seagoing carrack rather than in the halls of the Lord Prefect.

"I do not know if it is enough," he said, after what felt like a long pause. "All of my efforts, everything I can bring to bear, personally and professionally. I do not know if it is enough. I do not know if the problems which beset the Emperor and the Empire can be solved. Each is like a stone placed on a man's chest, slowly squeezing the life out of them. A couple can be managed, but there are too many things, too many stones piling up." He shook his head. "I am but one man. The Emperor thinks of me as his talisman, and dare I say my reputation, such as it has grown, has given him fair cause to. I feel like I am playing five games of *schach* at the same time. I cannot hope to win them all." He snorted. "At our rate of misfortune, I think I should be lucky to win one."

"Then the Empire must be predestined to fail," I said, taking a step towards him. "I think if you cannot solve these problems, then there is no one who can."

He looked at me with a curious expression. My heart leapt. I was certain he was about to say something to me in that moment, to give me some inkling of how he felt – about *me*. It is strange how when two people are of one mind, thoughts can be expressed as clearly as if some third party were to appear out of thin air and speak them aloud.

I took another step forwards, so that we were now very close to one another. I read nothing in his manner that dissuaded me, and so I began to reach out my hand so that I might touch him on the arm, a signal as clear and obvious as the beacons in Kormondolt Bay on a dark night—

And then he stood suddenly, and began to walk away. For a second I thought he was going to leave the solar entirely, but in fact he was pacing. "There is something I should like to try this evening. As regards Prince Kamil," he added, as if he meant to twist the dagger which he had just neatly slid between my ribs.

I felt my face blush furiously. My heart was beating so hard that I was trembling. I felt such a keen sense of embarrassment I was worried that I might keel over. Not just that, but a sense of rejection as painful as any sword cut. I had not misjudged, I was sure; I knew that Vonvalt felt… *something* for me. But he had made a conscious effort to repress it. My first thoughts were

of Roza and her flattery of Vonvalt. What honey had she been pouring in his ear these past few days? How persistent had her flattery been? Had it strayed into flirtation?

How melodramatic this seems, reading these words back. What an absurd distraction. With all that was going on, what time did anybody have to explore such an entanglement as mine and Vonvalt's? And yet I think it was precisely because we were standing on the precipice of the Great Decline that these matters took on such urgency. I was beginning to think that at least some of us would not reach the end of this pathway unscathed. If that was really to be the way of it, was it not incumbent on us to seize these opportunities whilst we still could? To take some human comfort in and amongst the work of inhuman forces? We could not dedicate every minute of every hour of every day to matters of state. Some indulgence of the human condition was permissible. If our lives were inherently meaningless, were we not obliged to extract every happiness from it that we could?

Whatever the nature of our relationship, it was clear the nettle was, once again, not going to be grasped that night. Vonvalt avoided meeting my gaze until it was clear that I had comported myself. He spoke about "lines of enquiry" and "not neglecting avenues of investigation simply because they seem far-fetched", and it was clear that he was going to continue in that vein until I said or did something.

"I think I understand the point you are making," I said. My voice was brittle and I sounded irritated, but there was only so much I could do to mask my disappointment. Certainly the afternoon's drinking was not helping.

"I think we might journey to the Temple of Nema. You have heard of the Imperial Soothsayer?"

I considered this for a moment. "I was under the impression she was regarded as… something of a novelty. Like the oracles in the College of Prognosticators. A sort of… ceremonial official." I spoke carefully, like someone reassuring a friend that their objectively absurd new hairstyle did actually look quite attractive. In fact, the Imperial Soothsayer was a ludicrous throwback to a bygone era, where superstition and the Neman Church had been the predominant force in Sovan society, rather than the common law and Magistratum. Vonvalt was not a superstitious man by any stretch of the imagination, and I was extremely surprised to hear him talk of consulting, what was for all intents and purposes, a fortune-teller.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said dourly. “You think I have lost my mind.”

“I think you are desperate,” I agreed.

“I am, Helena,” he said. “Flame of Savare, I am. But it is not entirely lunacy. The Imperial Soothsayer is not without power. I do not believe she can divine the future in the way Kane might have put it, but she has a special connexion with the royal family. She would have been there for Prince Kamil’s First Reading of the Creed, named his patron saint, and confirmed him as a member of the Neman Church. There is a nexus there which is worth exploring.”

“You mean she may be able to sense his pathway through the holy dimensions? In the same way Roza supposedly could?”

“*Justice* Roza,” Vonvalt said with a hint of irritation, and then seemed to catch himself, as though he had betrayed something he hadn’t meant to. “But yes, that is the nub of it.”

I shrugged, though I was deeply unhappy with how this evening was turning out. “Perhaps it is worth exploring, if matters are not progressing otherwise.”

“Matters *are* progressing otherwise,” Vonvalt said. He looked at me askance. “Perhaps I should go alone?”

“You mean to go now?” I asked.

“Yes, there is no point in delaying. Will you come or not? Decide.”

“Yes, all right,” I said, for I was desperate to remain in his company.

It was a decision I would come to bitterly regret.

XVII

In the Temple of Nema

"The common law follows the natural law, and the natural law follows the divine. There is no separate secular corpus of law. It is all the will of Nema, in the end."

MASTER AENOR CYRIL

The Temple of Nema was an old Saxan cathedral that looked as though it had been constructed by three generations of architects and builders, each with a different vision of how the final building should look. Though the immediate effect was one of an imposing structure rendered in Sovan gothick, with all of the statues, flying buttresses, steep, conical roofs and towers dressed in dark grey slate that came with it, there were sections that lacked all ostentation, too, like the Grand Lodge. And at either end of the transept were copper dome sections which looked as though they had been plucked from the architectural traditions of another country entirely.

We entered and briskly walked the length of the interior. The Imperial Soothsayer resided in a special chapel which branched off the ambulatory at the eastern end of the temple. To reach it, we had to walk past the altar. In smaller temples, and especially in small villages and towns in the Imperial hinterlands, the altar would be a simple wooden bench, with the skull of a deer – boiled free of all its organic tissues and blessed by a Neman priest – placed on the centre. Here, Nema herself was rendered in a colossus of marble, a woman with a deer's head, haloed by a ring of what was

undoubtedly pure gold. She held in her hands an elaborately carved altar of rich, dark mahogany. I could not help but feel utterly humbled by the statue, which must have stood twenty feet high.

I looked over to Vonvalt to see if he too was impressed by this colossus, but to my surprise he seemed to be visibly pained. His eyes were screwed shut, and I could see the muscles of his jawline working as he clenched and unclenched his teeth.

"Are you all right?" I asked. Vonvalt had slowed his pace, and now he stopped, gripping the end of a pew to keep his balance.

"No," Vonvalt said. He was visibly sweating. "I feel… *dreadful*. I had hoped my sickness was waning. Instead it feels as though it has been… collecting in a barrel which has suddenly now been unstopped."

I had to suddenly dart forward to catch his arm as he staggered. It was not the intimate contact I had hoped for earlier in the evening. I grasped at him fruitlessly as he stumbled, and then sat down heavily on the pew. He spent a few moments breathing deeply, his eyes closed. I knew that he would be feeling acutely embarrassed.

"Fetch the soothsayer, would you? I am all right, I just need to catch my breath," he said. The words rang false, but I did as he bade. I quickly crossed the apse to the ambulatory where a number of chapels were located, though I did not have to go into any; an old woman, gaunt and grey-haired, intercepted me. She exuded the kind of aura which engendered immediate trust, like a wise grandmother. Given what I had heard, I had expected her to resemble a scrawny, deranged hermit, not this quiet, scholarly woman before me.

"I heard your companion," she said. She nodded over my shoulder, and I turned to where Vonvalt was clearly visible on the end of the pew. She squinted. "That is the new Master of the Magistratum, is it not? Is he all right?"

"He is suffering from some malady. He has been for weeks now, but we do not know what is causing it." I dared not give voice to our fears that the malady was eldritch in nature. "'Tis not communicable," I added hastily.

The soothsayer was quiet for a few moments. At first I thought she was weighing up whether to approach Vonvalt, in case he was the host of some pox. But she seemed to be troubled by something else.

"What is the matter?" I asked.

Again, she was quiet. She frowned, and continued to squint, as though she

could see something in the temple entranceway. I followed the line of her gaze, but the place was empty aside from the three of us.

"I am… not sure," the soothsayer said, absently. She bit her bottom lip and worked it between her teeth. "What did you say the nature of your master's ailment was?"

"We do not know. You can't catch it—" I said again, but she shushed me with a wave of her hand.

"No. No…"

I was now really quite troubled by her reaction. She started to walk slowly towards Vonvalt, but every step seemed to pain her. When she drew level with the altar, she stopped again.

"Why did you come here?" she asked. She would not take her eyes off Vonvalt, who seemed oblivious to the soothsayer's reluctance to approach.

"You have heard of the abduction of Prince Kamil?"

She nodded, but even then I still did not have her full attention.

"Sir Konrad was hoping, given your connexion to the boy, that you might be able to divine where he is."

The soothsayer did not stir for a little while; then she turned to me, as though surprised by my presence. "No, no," she said. She almost sounded confused. "Such a sad and terrible business, but I cannot help you with that. That is much beyond my ability. I sense that he lives, still, if that is of use to you; I know that there are many who consider him to be murdered."

I opened my mouth to answer her, but she resumed her slow approach to Vonvalt, now constantly looking over to the doors at the far end of the aisle, and then back to him.

"My Lord Justice," she called out to Vonvalt. To my surprise and consternation, her voice came out cracked and hoarse.

Vonvalt looked up, and as his eyes met the soothsayer's, she suddenly gasped.

"What is it?" Vonvalt asked. He looked blanched, and his face was sheened with perspiration.

"I… think you should leave," the soothsayer said. Her composure fractured completely. Her face was a mask of naked fright. "I think you should leave this place, and quickly. Something ails you and I think being in the temple is making it worse."

"What are you talking about?" Vonvalt asked, his eyes closed. "I have

come to seek counsel—”

“And I have given it, to your companion here,” the soothsayer said hurriedly. She actually gave me a small push in the small of my back. “You must leave. Now. I am sensing a great… *malevolence* about you, Sir Konrad. Whatever it is, it does not like you being in this place.”

Vonvalt’s expression curdled. “Spare me your riddles, woman, I am here on official business. What is it you supposedly sense?”

The soothsayer was backing away, hand pressed against her heart, heading back to the chapel where she had first come from. “I do not know,” she said. She was verging on frantic. I had never seen someone go from being so calm and serene to so agitated. “I do not *know*.”

Then she stopped. Something seemed to seize her. Her elbows were pinned at her sides and her eyes rolled back into her head. She made a number of choking sounds, and I moved forwards to steady her, but stopped when Vonvalt shouted, “Don’t!”

He was standing now, his illness forgotten for a moment. We watched as the soothsayer shuddered and convulsed, and then uttered a stream of absolute nonsense, though it was clearly a language of some kind. I watched, aghast, as the seizure ran its course, and then the woman seemed to regain herself in a moment of shocking and intense lucidity.

She looked, wide-eyed, to Vonvalt, and whispered, “The Father of Time is a stern patron.”

“What?” Vonvalt asked, features creased in confusion. The phrase jarred with me, too. I felt as though I had heard it somewhere before.

“It is coming for you. I have seen it.” She looked at the doorway, and gasped. Her face was a mask of horror. “I see it now!”

“What in Kasivar’s name are you talking about?”

The soothsayer began to weep openly. “It is coming for you and you must outrun it!”

Then she simply turned around and fled, like a conscripted peasant fleeing a cavalry line, back to her chapel.

Vonvalt and I stood for a long time in silence. I looked constantly at the cathedral entranceway, but there was nothing there, not even a hint of a presence.

A *presence*. I thought of my nightmares, of those of the household staff – of Claver’s words in the Temple of Savare, and I shivered, profoundly

uneasy.

Eventually, Vonvalt pressed himself to his feet.

“Come, Helena,” he said. “I am sorry that you had to see that.”

We made our way back to the Prefect’s Palace. Vonvalt walked slowly, but otherwise seemed to have weathered the relapse which had claimed him so suddenly and viciously in the temple.

“How do you feel?” I asked.

“Fine,” Vonvalt said immediately, though he seemed troubled.

I took a deep breath. “What was the soothsayer talking about?” I asked.

“All kinds of nonsense. It was a foolish idea to approach her. I am sorry if it has upset you.”

“I am not upset,” I said testily, though that was only partly true. “The way she spoke made it sound like some creature had its hooks in you.”

“‘The Father of Time is a stern patron’,” Vonvalt said absently.

“What does that mean? And why does it feel… familiar?”

Vonvalt did not answer me.

“You stopped me from touching her. What did you think was going to happen?”

“Nothing,” Vonvalt said.

“Prince of Hell, will you tell me anything?” I hissed. “The woman was *terrified* of you. She would not stop looking over to the temple doors, as though some spectre loitered there, attached to you. And think, the ailment flared the moment you stepped foot in the temple. Are we just to write all of these things off as a string of coincidences? You taught me to be much more rigorous than that.”

Vonvalt thought for a long time. He was clearly grappling with something. It was not the first time he had tried to shield me. “Helena, I do not know what it is you want me to say,” he said eventually. “In some ways it is a shame that the soothsayer appeared to you lucid in the first instance; she is out of her mind a great deal of the time. That she spoke to you sensibly at all coloured your expectations.”

“You are ruminating on something. What about the nightmares, here, in

the palace? The dreams that the staff complain of?" I gestured to him. "Your illness, which defies all categorisation and explanation. Might it be that these things are all linked? 'Tis as though you are…" I grasped for the right word "*… haunted*."

Vonvalt shook his head. Clearly he did not want to confront this issue, at least not with me, but I could see that I had arrived at the kernel of it. "There is nothing to be gained from this conjecture," he said, frustration edging his voice. "Nema knows we have real, earthly matters to attend to. It is always tempting to seek more information and answers about the holy dimensions, but I tell you, even the most celebrated books of the most learned scholars and jurists are filled with nothing but speculation."

"What do you mean?" I asked. This was a conversation I had wanted to have for some time. "That is a mystery in itself, is it not?" I gestured to him. "We are clearly capable of travelling there. Why can't we learn more about it? From observation, if nothing else?"

It was still baffling to me. An entire world existed, a place where we *knew* that souls of the recently dead travelled to. An afterlife, but a real one, perhaps not in the way that the Nemans preached of heaven and hell, but a place that was certainly akin to those places. To think that every human who might ever have existed was there in some form was a frightening and alluring idea. Why were not more people attempting to travel to this astral plane? Why did the Magistratum hoard and mete out the knowledge in the manner they did? It seemed to me that a huge wealth of secrets about the nature of our world and existence was there to be discovered. Instead it was used purely as an investigative tool for lawkeeping and crime solving – and even then sparingly, the practice considered outmoded and on the wane.

"Think on it for a moment, Helena," Vonvalt said. "Think what is required. The only way we know how to access the holy dimensions is to use the soul of a recently deceased person. You saw how Claver was only able to commune with his lackeys thanks to the sacrifice of one of the Templars. The codexes tell of other means, but the methods are lost to history."

"Like what?"

"Oh, I know little enough about them. Dreadports, for one, stable portals in precise, sacred – and secret – locations. And then there is the City of Sleep."

"What is that?" I asked, a chill running through me.

Vonvalt shrugged. “You may read about it one day. All of it. Go to the Law Library and study as much as you like. Plenty of volumes have been written, but as I say, it is all speculation. I know only the bones of it. Neither has ever formed part of my practice.”

“You have only communed with the slain?”

“Aye.” Vonvalt made a fist with his free hand. “We grip the deceased’s departing soul like the chain of an anchor, and like an anchor, it pulls us down to the astral plane.” He sighed. “So that is the first difficulty: unless you are going to walk about killing people, or spending all day loitering in infirmaries or hospices, there is that to surmount. But even setting that aside, for I grant you that plenty of people die every day, it is not simply the case of reading a few words from the *Grimoire Necromantia*. To create that bridge between the two worlds, and to maintain it in a way that does not immediately kill the necromancer, takes a great deal of patient study. There are a great many things that can go wrong. For every necromancer breathing today – and that is a small number – there are ten more in asylums or graves. Years ago, in Baniskhaven, I watched a Justice killed after she was poss—” He caught himself, as if only just realising what he was saying. Evidently, it was not a memory he wanted to dredge up. He sighed. “Look at *me*, Helena. I am the Master of the Magistratum and necromancy’s most accomplished living practitioner – yet you have seen the toll it takes on me. And even taking that to account, all I do is the equivalent of chasing a man through his front door and collaring him at the threshold for a brief, fleeting moment.”

I did not need reminding of the toll it took on him. I had seen Vonvalt undertake a small number of séances in our few years together, and each time had left him introspective, haunted, and drawn, each journey taking a number of days to fully recover from. Still, I could not help but recall to mind Obenpatria Fischer’s words to me my first night in the Galen’s Vale kloster: that the practice had not always been so disturbing, and that Neman priests had undertaken highly ritualised séances whereby they communed with the souls of the dead in peaceful, even fraternal ceremonies.

I decided in the circumstances that it was a point I would keep to myself.

“But you *know* it is all there. You – we – know of the entities that exist there. It is insane to think that beings that many worship as gods and saints *actually exist*. Why is this information not more widely shared?”

“Yes, they exist, but you have seen for yourself the forms they take. It is

no use praying to them or invoking them or appealing to them. There is an animal that exists on the Southern Plains, in the lands of the Kasar – and beyond, for all I know – called an elephant. It is gigantic, like a bull but perhaps ten times the size. The creatures of the afterlife regard us in the same way that an elephant regards a common housefly. We are nothing to them, Helena. It is true that some of them toy with us, like the Trickster as well you know, but these are as rare as islands in the Grall Sea. Most of them are utterly inscrutable. It is common temptation to ascribe to them human emotions and ways of thinking, but they are unknowable to us.

"And there is a further reason why this is not widely shared information: what *good* would it be for everyone in the Empire to know the truth of it? How bleak existence would suddenly become. If there was no afterlife – no afterlife in the way the Neman Church describes it – then what reason is there to behave morally, ethically? The Church would argue that belief as a reward system, whereby good behaviour admits you to paradise and poor behaviour sends you down the Broken Path and into the Halls of Hell, is the only way to keep the peoples of the Empire in line."

"But is that not the point of the common law?" I asked. "And what of the natural law? You have spoken at length on that."

Vonvalt smiled. He could forget a great many ills when his mind was turned to jurisprudence. "Now you are thinking like a Justice. But you would not make any friends amongst the Nemans. They were permitted to keep their canon law as a salve, though that second head of the Autun should have been lopped off if you ask me. I can see a time in the not-too-distant future when the canon law, which has already been severely curtailed, is extinguished entirely. If this bloody mess with Claver can be brought to heel."

I toyed with the hem of my kirtle for a moment. "Part of the reason I ask is because—"

Vonvalt stopped me by holding a hand up. "I know what you are about to ask," he said. He spoke gently, not condescendingly, and I was grateful that he had the good sense not to treat this as a lesson. "It is one of the first things every practitioner asks. 'Can I meet the souls of my family? The souls of my friends? The souls of my lovers?' If we were to but journey a little further, what would we find? The truth is, no one knows – that is, no one alive today knows. We dabble in its extremities, but as for delving deeper into the holy dimensions, you would have to dig out some very old and restricted codexes

from the Master's Vaults." He grunted, a noise that might have been the beginnings of a bitter laugh. "I would not be surprised if Claver had stolen those as well. Let us hope that he discorporates himself in the attempt."

I was both relieved and disappointed. Part of me had wondered whether I could have conjured up the souls of my parents, or Matas. But another, more sensible part of me suspected that this would be a bad idea. Sometimes it is better to simply cherish our memories of a dead person than try to reach out to them in the afterlife. Who knows how the process of death changes a person? What could be worse than conjuring up the spirit of a deceased relative or friend, only to find a deranged, gibbering lunatic, any semblance of their former self destroyed?

We walked on until we reached the Palace, the conversation moving into less dark, less hopeless territory. Afterwards, and in spite of everything that had come to pass that evening, I retired to bed in relatively good spirits. I had been thinking a while about the afterlife, and whether or not I should have made more of an effort to journey there and apologise to Matas. His death still weighed heavily on my conscience, and I could not shake a feeling of guilt about it, especially in circumstances where my feelings for Vonvalt grew in new, unexpected, and confusing ways.

But we were so embroiled in the downward spiral of the Empire at this point that it was impossible to go for more than a few hours before some new piece of bad news found its way to us. Sure enough, I was awoken in the dead of night by the succession of slamming doors and thumping bootsteps that always heralded grave news. I was already pulling my clothes on in anticipation of being roused when my chamber door was thrown open. Vonvalt was standing there, clad in his Justice's robes.

"Meet me by the main entrance," he said, his features grim set. "Be quick. We are heading for the Imperial Palace."

"What has happened?" I asked. "Has some news arrived about Prince Kamil?"

Vonvalt shook his head. "No. It is Master Kadlec. He is dead."

XVIII

The Muphraab

"I would go willingly to nothing at all, to an unconscious eternity of black nonexistence, than any single one of the alternatives that I have seen both the Neman Church and the Magistratum unearth."

SIR GRIMHILT ALDWIN

Vonvalt and I rushed through the quiet and darkened streets of Sova towards the Imperial Palace. Vonvalt had sent for Sir Radomir and Bressinger. I hoped they had made amends. For all their squabbling, I knew that they had already formed a bond of firm friendship.

"I don't understand," I said as we sped along the flagstones. "I thought Kadlec was supposed to die."

"Not yet," was all Vonvalt said.

We reached the palace and were ushered down into the dungeons by a quartet of Imperial Guardsmen. The place was not only designed to inspire fear – and it did that – but also awe. It had been constructed in such a way as to remind its occupants of their utter insignificance, and of the tremendous, godlike power that the Emperor had over their lives.

The stairs took us deeper and deeper underground until the air took on a hot, stuffy quality. Then, suddenly, we were through into the main space, a huge, vaulted chamber that could have been a temple in its own right. Large, black pillars of obsidian held aloft a high ceiling, and though it was frescoed like most everything else, this one had images of Kasivar's realm, of the

Broken Path and the Halls of Hell and of people being tormented and tortured. It was theatrical and tasteless – but I am saying that decades after the fact.

We moved quickly across the tiled floor, our footwear rapping and echoing. The space was lit partly by braziers, but there were also shafts of moonlight being fed in from windows high above which, through the contrivance of mirrors, managed to penetrate deep underground and suffuse the air with a wan, otherworldly glow. Either side of us, large doors of black iron, intricately carved with gargoyles, led to cells beyond. No one cried out. It was a place of strange, intolerable silence. At the far end, Vonvalt led us through another door into an almost identical vaulted hall, and it was only once we had gone through that one that we came to the chamber which contained the Truth-taker.

"His heart gave out," a man said, the interrogator. He was average in almost every respect. He was of middling height and age, with brown hair, a beard, pale skin, and a robust, powerful build. I had expected some viper of a man, with ratty features and greasy, yellowish skin, clad in a patchwork of leather clothing, but he could have been anyone, from a lawman to a butcher. His clothes were normal, just hose and a black shirt. In a sense he was completely remarkable precisely because he was so unremarkable, like watching a family sitting down to dinner in the middle of a battlefield.

"When?" Vonvalt demanded.

"About half of an hour," the interrogator said impassively.

Vonvalt swept past and into the chamber beyond. This chamber cut a square profile, high-ceilinged, and fashioned from white stone. It was featureless except for an enormous inverted pyramid of polished obsidian attached to the ceiling, the tip of which came to a point several feet above the slab in the middle of the room.

This was the Truth-taker.

The Truth-taker had no markings. Nothing was ever explained about its nature or purpose. There was no mechanism that lay above it; it was fixed securely to the ceiling. Yet the Truth-taker drew all of the air and attention in the room. It thrummed with dark energies. The size of it, its sheer inscrutability, and the vulnerability of the naked unfortunate placed underneath all contrived to drive a person mad with fear. I would know.

In this instance, the unfortunate was a very still, very dead Nathaniel

Kadlec.

Vonvalt walked directly to Kadlec and inspected the body carefully. The former Master of the Order was naked, a stiffening sack of cool innards which seemed to bear almost no resemblance to the man I had seen Vonvalt confront – which was itself remarkable as, aside from his nakedness, there was nothing else of note about the body at all. His fingers were not broken, his genitals had not been poked and prodded with hot irons, he was not covered in welts or burns. He was simply… dead.

He had been placed under the Truth-taker, his eyes but a few inches from its spike. Perhaps he would have been nonplussed to start with, even cocky; then the crushing immensity of the structure above him would start to play tricks on him. A creak or thump would have sounded from somewhere else in the dungeon, and suddenly he would have been sickly and sweating with fear. Had the pyramid moved? Descended? Did it descend by fractions of an inch over the course of hours like some perverse variation of water torture?

The pyramid's dark energies, coruscating invisibly down to the slab, would have wormed their way into his mind, saturating his brain. These ancient Draedist magicks – the same branch which had given the Magistratum the Emperor's Voice – unleashed the subject's fear and paranoia. They prised out truths like expert grave robbers. They softened and degraded all mental defences and allowed the interrogator to pluck the yield as easily as if it had been handed to them. If the Emperor's Voice was a barber surgeon's scalpel, the Truth-taker was a sledgehammer.

But Kadlec was – had been – an old man. His heart had given out. And he would take his secrets with him to the grave. That was how it went; here in the Imperial dungeons, men and women simply confessed, or they died.

Much more cynically, I realised, it also meant that the Sovans could claim that they did not torture people in the absence of a conviction, which only held water if you defined torture as the infliction of purely physical pain.

Vonvalt sighed mightily. He shed his outer layers until, like the interrogator, he was wearing only a shirt and breeches. Then he rolled his sleeves up, and it was only at that point that I realised what was about to happen.

"No one move, no one speak," Vonvalt said sternly. Then he spoke the incantations softly, and the light dimmed, and that same horrible whispering that Sir Radomir and I had been aware of in the Master's Vaults suddenly

started gnawing away at the edge of my mind. I felt a deep, nameless dread in the pit of my stomach. I watched as Vonvalt's eyes turned to white orbs as he made the connexion to the astral plane and his spirit left his body. Sweat trickled down my back as we waited in excruciating silence in that stifling, hot chamber.

And then, after only a minute or so, Vonvalt gasped.

I looked to him, and then to the interrogator, who all but shrugged. I wished Bressinger and Sir Radomir were there. It should not have taken them long to arrive, though quite what I expected either of them to do, I was not sure.

I looked back to Vonvalt. Something was definitely wrong. Given the soothsayer's ominous remarks, I was filled with a paralysing sense of fear.

Sweat dribbled down Vonvalt's face. His eyes were fluttering and his mouth formed into a rictus. I told myself that I had only seen a few séances before. Perhaps this was normal. After all, it was a frightening and violent process.

I looked back to the interrogator. He caught my eye, but I got the sense that it would take an extraordinary disturbance to trouble him.

I turned back to Vonvalt again. His whole body was shaking now. Something was terrifying him.

"Nema, what is happening?" I hissed.

Then Vonvalt let out a bloodcurdling scream. He went completely rigid for a second or two, and then pitched forwards.

I moved without thinking, without hesitation. I was focused only on preventing Vonvalt from cracking his skull on the slab in the centre of the room. He connected bodily with me –

– and I was somewhere else. There was a flash of… not light, exactly, but something completely indescribable, a sensation more than anything else. Then I found myself standing on an endless plane of flat obsidian. Above, through gaps in the low ceiling of grey cloud, brilliant constellations of stars filled the sky. In the distance, a dull red glow told of a perfectly flat and limitless horizon. I was filled with a sense of complete and overwhelming insignificance, as if someone had distilled the essence of the dungeon and suffused my blood with it.

I was not alone in this strange alternate dimension. But the fact that it was not *only* Vonvalt who was there instilled in me a feral, mind-bending terror.

The entity that shared this place with us was not human, but it was human-shaped. A body of dark grey-black with disproportionately long limbs, its skin leathery like a fruit bat's, advanced on us, slowly, haltingly, but inexorably. It had huge, gossamer-fine wings, bone white in colour, which dragged slackly across the ground behind it like the train of a corpse bride. And its head seemed to be that of an insect or a moth, a large, disgusting, chittering thing with bulging, featureless eyes that locked us in place like thralls.

Those eyes haunt me to this day. A perfectly pleasant morning, decades after these events, will be completely ruined by a chance memory of this encounter. At night, at least a couple of times a week, I will wake up in a feverish fear, my old skin clammy with sweat. I imagine it walking through my chamber door, or standing at the foot of my bed, having never given up its slow, decades-long chase.

Vonvalt was on the ground, lying on his back. His eyes were that same white colour, but the shock and fear were easy to read on his face.

I rushed over to him and knelt down. "Sir Konrad!" I said. I had to say it two or three times before the words would actually come out of my throat.

"No," whispered Vonvalt. He did not take his eyes off the distant entity.

"What is it?" I asked. My voice had a strange, dull quality in this place, as though the air was a heavy wet blanket draped over us.

"The Father of Time…" Vonvalt said hoarsely.

I turned back to the thing. It seemed to be both close and yet a thousand miles away. It was impossible to determine any kind of distance in that strange infinity.

I swallowed down a very tangible sense of terror and looked at Vonvalt again. Whatever was going on, there was one thing about the situation I was certain of: only he could get us out of it.

"Sir Konrad," I said, trying to keep my voice level. "We need to go. We need to go right now. How do we do it? How do we leave?"

Vonvalt seemed to calm down for a moment and go still, and I thanked Nema that my levelheadedness, which had taken all of my energy to summon, had had the desired effect.

Then I realised that he had not calmed down at all.

He was so rigid with horror he had stopped breathing.

I turned. The entity was right there, an arm's reach away. Voices,

whispers, the chittering of a thousand alien insects – all of these things filled the air in a tangible haze of sound and decay.

I screamed noiselessly. Strange, luminescent runes of pink light which made me weep and feel sick filled the air around the creature's head. My eyes unfocused as my brain tried to unsee the forbidden lore that was written there. I was desperate for it all to be over. I would happily have died in that moment, to have been properly, truly, and permanently killed if it meant that I didn't have to continue to endure such horror. My chest hurt where my heart pulsed and squirmed painfully, stressed to exhaustion, moments from giving out.

The entity opened its mouth parts, its disjointed maw a huge void filled with teeth like daggers. It made a sound that I simply cannot describe. All of a sudden, black ectoplasmic goo started to slough off Vonvalt and fly into the thing's mouth.

I was completely disassociated from what was happening. The only sensation more powerful than my fear was my utter, helpless confusion. I was cursed to watch this bizarre ritual in which the entity drank away Vonvalt's life force.

What came next happened so quickly that I could only recall it after the fact. The first was that a rook appeared in the sky above and cawed a single time. Unlike mine and Vonvalt's voices, this single caw seemed to echo throughout the infinite plane, and it rattled about my mind like dice in a cup.

The second thing was that there was a flash of white in the sky above the rook, and for the briefest of moments the shape of a white deer in searing flame flashed into existence like the birth and death of a new sun.

Then I was back in the torture chamber, lying on the floor, tears in my eyes and sweat soaking my clothes, my throat raw from screaming. Bressinger was standing next to Vonvalt, the Neman medallion around Vonvalt's neck smoking as though it had been freshly forged. He was clasping one of Vonvalt's hands.

The interrogator was pressed into a far corner, immobile, aghast.

Sir Radomir was peering over me, his own eyes wide.

"What the *fuck* just happened?" he asked.

It was a long time before either of us was ready to speak. I even thought for a while that Vonvalt was dead, but his breathing continued, quietly, laboriously, his face sheened yellow from candlelit sweat.

Bressinger, who knew the state we were in better than anyone, quickly arranged for us to be taken back to the Prefect's Palace. We were wrapped in blankets and bundled into a cart, and under guard, escorted back through the dark, empty streets. There, servants descended on us. I was taken into a separate room were a small coven of matronly women fussed over me, crooning and soothing. They stripped off my clothes and disposed of them to be laundered, then took me, unresisting and meek as a lamb, to be washed, dried, and dressed. Despite the horror of everything that had just happened, the thoughts were fading like a half-remembered nightmare, and the feeling I had was one of overwhelming exhaustion.

My next clearest memory is of being awoken just before dawn. A light patter of rain sounded against the window. Bressinger was standing in the doorway to my chamber, holding a candle. I sat up in bed, convinced that he was about to tell me that Vonvalt had died, or was dying. Instead, he said, "Sir Konrad wishes to speak with you."

I fumbled around in the darkness and made myself vaguely presentable, and then followed Bressinger, who had waited in the hallway, upstairs to Vonvalt's solar. Sir Radomir was in there, a goblet of wine in his hands despite the early hour. Vonvalt had propped himself up on a window seat, his white shirt baggy and largely unbuttoned, his collar-length black hair loose and unkempt. He smoked his pipe, and looked somewhat restored, but even in the dim light of the solar I could see that he was pale and gaunt. I myself wasn't exactly a picture of health. The stress of the experience had given me a pounding headache and I still felt weak and shaky.

He turned to me and smiled sadly. The crow's feet in the corners of his eyes seemed deeper and more pronounced. "Helena. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," I said with such speed and dispassion that I couldn't even convince myself of the truth of it. After Vonvalt had been at pains to brush me off after seeing the soothsayer, I was feeling not a little annoyed with him. "What happened? What was that thing?"

Vonvalt looked away from me, back out of the window. He smoked his pipe for a few long moments of silence. When he spoke, I fancied the room seemed a little darker, the sound a little duller.

“The Muphraab,” Vonvalt said. His voice was low and dark. “Attached to me by an ancient Draedist hex.”

“It looked like a monster,” I said. I struggled to keep the horror from my voice. I could not rid my mind of its horrible moth head, its long, tattered wings, its leathery black body.

Sir Radomir shuddered into his goblet. “Fucking hell,” he muttered quietly to himself.

Vonvalt was quiet for another few moments. “It is a type of monster,” he said eventually. “You remember I told you, Helena, after your first exposure to…” He paused. “Well, we shall continue to call it the afterlife, for the sake of ease. I told you that it was home to all manner of beings?”

I nodded. My mouth was dry and my eyes were having difficulty focusing.

“The Muphraab is an elemental. It is ancient, and it is malevolent. It exists within a certain part of the afterlife known as the *Edaximae*, or the Purgatorial Plane.” He sighed, rubbing his face. “According to the Book of Histories, the Muphraab was one of the chieftains of Kasivar. He and another chieftain, Rama, fought for Kasivar against Malakh the Accuser. Rama cut off the head of Malakh on the sixth day, ending the battle, and the Muphraab quarried the stone from the Broken Path for his fortress at Ambyr.”

“So… it’s bad.”

Vonvalt smiled weakly. “Oh yes. Without the books in the Master’s Vault, ridding myself of the curse will be impossible.”

My heart lurched. “What does it mean? To be cursed? This is what Claver was talking about, isn’t it? Is that why you have been ill? The Muphraab is killing you?”

Vonvalt held up a hand, but it was too late. A paroxysm of dread took me. I nearly fell over, but Bressinger darted forwards and caught me inexpertly with his remaining arm.

“Do not speak its name!” Vonvalt hissed.

Tears streamed down my face. I retched. “Why?” I asked with a horrible acid taste in my mouth. “Nema, what is going on?”

“What is the matter with her?” Sir Radomir asked, alarmed.

Vonvalt sighed. “Please do not speak its name. I am sorry. I should have forewarned you.”

“Why?” I demanded.

“It is… difficult to explain,” Vonvalt said. “I told you once before that there is power in a name. The different planes of existence sit on top of one another, as though they occupy the same space but cannot interact. A bit like… think about the mermen of the Jade Sea. They share our world, but they cannot breathe our air or walk on our lands. It is the same concept. The creatures of the afterlife are all around us, but in a separate dimension, a place that we can only access through certain magicks.” He took a deep breath and let it out in a large sigh. “But naming elementals can have… unintended consequences. It is better to stick to the Imperial names, for they are new. It is better still to say nothing.”

“You’re saying it can *hear* me?”

“In a sense,” Vonvalt said.

“But you said it,” Sir Radomir remarked.

Vonvalt shrugged helplessly. “At this point, it matters not a jot if *I* say it.”

“And what is the nature of this entanglement? Do you mean it in the sense that August said? That you have been caught up in important events as one of your fancy men posited a hundred years ago?”

“*Master* Kane,” Vonvalt said. “And no, not *Entanglement*. I did not mean that. I meant that the curse has bound me to the creature. It is not fast, but it is inexorable. It will follow me forever until it has devoured my life force.”

“Is that what I saw?” I asked hoarsely. “The blackness coming off you?”

“I do not know, Helena,” Vonvalt said. “I was half mad. But yes, if that is what you saw, then that sounds right.”

“That accounts for your weakness, then,” Sir Radomir said. “’Tis as we feared.”

“Aye. The ailment has an explanation. It is just a shame that it is worse than any earthly pox could ever be. At least that would have died with my body.”

“But there is a cure. In your books?” Sir Radomir pressed, verging on desperate. The man needed some succour, but Vonvalt was not about to give it to him.

“The same codex that contained the knowledge to cast the hex will also have contained the means to undo it. But it seems all but certain that the books have been taken south to Keraq. In which case, I am as good as dead, for the Emperor will not release me until this matter concerning the Prince Kamil is ended. And even then, he will not give me the forces I need to storm

the Templar fortresses of the Frontier."

"How long will the process take?" Bressinger asked. It was the first time he had spoken in a while. He tended not to speak whenever the matter of the afterlife was being discussed; he had experienced almost as much of it as Vonvalt had over the years, and was, like his master, well versed in the entities that inhabited it. It was Bressinger, after all, who had acted as the bright white beacon that had allowed us to escape from the clutches of the Muphraab at all.

Vonvalt shrugged. "It is impossible to know, but I am growing weaker by the day. If it continues, I should imagine I will be dead inside a few weeks."

My heart lurched painfully at the thought.

Sir Radomir shared none of his master's weary fatalism. "Who could have done it?" he pressed. "Who could possibly have so much power to set such a demon on a person? Nema, to be able to summon and commune with it in the first place!"

Vonvalt snorted. He looked exhausted. "Who else but Bartholomew Claver? You heard his lunacy in the Temple of Savare. That he is behind this is beyond question." His jaw briefly clenched. "As much as I do not want it to be so, I cannot avoid the truth of it."

"We will have to travel south," I said. Anger and a sense of helplessness filled me. Already it felt as though it was too late, that we were imprisoned in Sova whilst our enemies, and those of the Empire, grew more and more powerful. "He must be stopped."

"Oh, I agree," Vonvalt said. "But we knew that already."

There was a long silence. What could anyone say? Vonvalt's abilities outstripped all of ours immeasurably. It was my second time in the afterlife, and the only thing I had taken from both experiences was how terrifying, disorientating, and confusing it all was. And however stoic Vonvalt was being in that moment, the fact of the matter was, with the Muphraab bearing down on him, he had been insensible with fear. If he, the Lord Prefect and Master of the Order of the Magistratum, foremost lawman in the Empire and a seasoned Reichskrieg veteran to boot, was frightened, then what hope did anyone have?

"You will not die. Not in this way," Bressinger insisted. He was absentmindedly scratching his arm stump.

Vonvalt smiled sadly. "I appreciate the optimism, Dubine," he said. "But

there is no one in this Empire who can help me now except my own mortal enemy."

We returned to our chambers to catch perhaps an hour of rest before dawn. I loitered in the hallways upstairs, my skin rough with gooseflesh, craving company. Every corridor and hall I walked into I expected to see the Muphraab in the corner, walking slowly towards me.

Foolishly, I had hoped that Vonvalt might invite me to his chamber in spite of everything, perhaps spurred to recklessness given his impending death. I still was wounded and confused from his having spurned me that evening. I wanted… *something*, some comfort, some further explanation, some reassurance – anything. I hoped to catch him before he retired; perhaps his just seeing me would be enough. Perhaps there would be more.

In fact, I did see him briefly, at the very end of the corridor. I was about to call out to him, when I saw Justice Roza follow him into his chamber. Neither of them saw me.

Vonvalt's door closed with a soft click, and I was once again alone in the corridor.

I stood there for a long time. Then I turned and entered my own chamber, and went to bed.

Outside, the sun rose, and Sova roused itself for a new day.

XIX

The Second Estate

“The wise man seeks to please his friends; the fool seeks to please his enemies; the lunatic seeks to please everyone.”

SOVAN SENATORIAL PROVERB

Vonvalt decided that the Emperor needed to be told, and left early the following morning. The only instructions he left were for me to seek out Senator Tymoteusz Jansen in the Senate House and arrange a meeting before we departed the capital.

I decided to ask Bressinger to accompany me. I felt as though the nature of our relationship had changed in recent weeks, and that we needed to clear the air. But I did not find him in his chamber; instead, after quarter of an hour of searching, I found him at the back of the Prefect’s Palace, where he was practising his swordplay. There was no peach orchard here, as there had been behind Vonvalt’s house, but the garden walls were high, and the Summit of the Prefects was exactly what its name suggested; a large hill, which meant only the very tallest of the surrounding buildings overlooked it. Taking advantage of the relative privacy, he was stripped to the waist and practising his drills with his Grozodan side sword.

I have mentioned before, I think, that Bressinger was a handsome man – though this handsomeness was not confined to his face. Years of hard living and daily exercise had given him a body that could have been wrought from marble and set atop a plinth in one of the capital’s many public spaces. I

found myself admiring his muscular frame as I approached, which glistened with sweat in the morning sunlight as though he were an oiled gymnast standing in the sand of the Sovan arena.

In spite of this impressive display, it was the arm stump on his left side that naturally drew the eye, a puckered and discoloured shaft no more than a hand's breadth long. Watching him cut apart invisible enemies, I was not sure that it had made any appreciable difference to his swordplay, though Bressinger could and did talk at length about how it had affected his balance. In fact, I think the loss of his left arm gave him a great deal of grief, physical and emotional. Not only did it itch and ache and was prone to inflammation, one must remember that Bressinger had long ago come to measure his worth in his utility to Vonvalt. The loss of his arm, and the near simultaneous recruitment of Sir Radomir to Vonvalt's retinue, had wounded him.

"Helena," he said, not turning to face me. I had not been loud in approaching, and the grass had concealed the sound of my footsteps.

"Dubine," I said.

Bressinger stopped and turned to face me, breathing deeply. He nodded to one of the flowerbeds nearby, and I saw a couple of Sovan short swords and sohle shields piled there.

"Are you expecting someone?" I asked.

"I roped in one of the groundsmen as a sparring partner. He had some experience of soldiering." He shrugged. "He was not bad at all. But then, it does not take much to beat me with a short sword."

He placed his own side sword down in its scabbard and then picked up the blunted training swords from the grass, leaving the shields where they were. Carrying them over in his one hand, he lifted them both up, and I took one out from between his fingers.

"Perhaps I could beat you?" I asked wryly.

"I dare say you will in time," he said gruffly. "You are better than you give yourself credit for. You are lucky to have Sir Radomir as a teacher." He held out the short sword in front of him, his face a rictus of distaste that only a Grozodan could achieve. "He knows this weapon much better than I ever did."

I swung the short sword through the air a few times, as I had seen Bressinger and Vonvalt do. "Testing the balance", they called it, and I simply aped the movement like I knew what I was doing.

“Something ails you,” Bressinger said as he took up his place in front of me. For the longest time, I had been taught that the short sword was most effective in formation fighting, where large ranks of armoured knights with sohle shields would advance together, close with an enemy, and unleash a barrage of stabbing. I held the sword as though I had a shield, my elbow down by my side, forearm pointing forwards, with my body turned slightly to the left. The short sword was a stabbing weapon, designed for deep, penetrative thrusts, and I had seen first hand the appalling damage one could do to a human body.

“I am worried about Sir Konrad,” I said, truthfully. It was not the reason why I wanted to speak to Bressinger, but when all was said and done, Vonvalt was the main thing we had in common.

Bressinger advanced towards me quickly, and offered a stab which was much slower than I knew he was capable of. I did a half-jump back and knocked his sword downwards. I was pleased with this instinctive parry, but my follow-up was so pathetic Bressinger actually disarmed me. My sword thumped dully onto the grass.

Bressinger regarded me for a moment. “That was not very good, was it?” he said, his features downturned like those of a lord who has been presented with an unappetising meal.

I had to laugh at his sincere delivery. I recovered my weapon, and resumed my stance.

“What is it about Sir Konrad that troubles you?” Bressinger asked. He came at me again, this time moving his feet so quickly that I could not guess from which angle he was going to attack. I yelped as he made a swipe for my left side, an area which would normally be entirely protected by my shield, and as a consequence the sword made contact with my ribs. I cried out; though Bressinger had pulled the blade at the last minute so as not to crack the bones, it would still bruise.

He did not apologise.

“You will not always have a shield,” he remarked.

“I know that,” I muttered, rubbing my ribs. “I fear that Sir Konrad is not himself.” I did not lift my sword this time, hoping that it would dissuade Bressinger from another gambit, but to my annoyance he came at me a third time, as though he was trying to prevent me from saying something he privately feared. I managed to parry two – slow – cuts, before Bressinger

simulated an effective evisceration from the base of my breastbone down to my groin.

"Nema, enough!" I snapped. "I am trying to speak with you!"

But Bressinger simply smacked me on the meat of my arm with his sword.

"For fuck's sake!" I shouted, throwing my own training sword down so that it stuck into the earth like a spear. I took a few steps back from Bressinger, and pointed at his face. "Don't tell me that that was for my own good!"

"You think I do this for fun?" Bressinger snapped, his Grozodan accent thickening as his choler rose.

"That's exactly what I think! Save your sport for someone else!"

"I am not sporting with you, Helena. You nearly lost your *life* not a month ago. But for a little luck and the arrogance of your attackers, you would be nothing but bones in the Gale right now. Look at me! I am a thousand times the swordsman you will ever be, and even I lost an arm to a fucking dolt and a lucky stroke." He made an exasperated gesture. "The séance! The abduction! The wharf! It is only going to get worse, not better. Why do you think you are being trained so much in swordplay? The way the world is going, you are more likely to use these skills than any of the things Sir Konrad is teaching you."

"Aye, I can believe it given the things Sir Konrad is teaching me at the moment," I muttered angrily.

"Prince Kasivar of Hell, you are insolent!" Bressinger erupted as we both lost control of the conversation, and threw his own sword into the earth. Now he pointed at me. "By what right do you criticise our master so relentlessly?"

I laughed, incredulous. "By what right do you *defend* him so relentlessly? Sir Konrad is our lord and master, but he is also a human *being*! He is not immune to criticism. It is only because I care so… *deeply* for him that I would see him restored. Do you not see it? Kadlec, sent to the Truth-taker and now dead? Vonvalt's complicity in torture? His purge of the Order? A *child* could see that what is happening here is wrong!"

"Aye, and are you that child?"

"I am not a fucking child!" I roared.

"You might have fooled me with the way you carry on," Bressinger hissed, taking a step towards me. "What do you think is happening here?

Have all the warnings passed you by? With everything you have seen and heard, it is *incredible* to me that you can be so naïve. This is the real world, Helena, real life. Open your eyes! You think we can afford people like Kadlec such niceties as…" he gestured about him, conjuring the words from the air "… months in a comfortable prison suite? A battery of expensive lawmen? A lengthy public trial in which all manner of dangerous ideas can be thrown about? And what of his accessories in the Grand Lodge? Are they to be plied with victuals, pampered like children, abusing the protection of the law to shield themselves from the consequences of their actions?"

"I cannot believe you are saying this," I said, shaking my head. "What you are talking about goes against everything Sova is supposed to stand for. What thousands died in the name of!"

"'Everything Sova is supposed to stand for'," Bressinger sneered. "Sova stands for itself. It always has done. It exists in the name of empire, of expansion – in the name of murder. Do not let these… procedural niceties obstruct your view of the truth. The common law, the Magistratum…" Bressinger waved his hand dismissively. "The Sovans know only one thing, and that is death. The sooner you appreciate that, the sooner you will appreciate the nature of the beast you serve."

"I don't understand," I said, shaking my head. My anger was bleeding away. Now I simply felt upset. "Why are you saying these things? What has changed? Is it what happened in Galen's Vale? Your demeanour is that of an entirely different man. I came here to talk to you because I felt as though we were losing touch with one another. I wanted to go back to the way things were, when we were as close as siblings. I wanted to cut out the heart of whatever it was that stood between us. Why do I feel like you are pushing me away? Folding in on yourself? You should be able to depend on me, Dubine. Talk to me. *Share* things with me. Nema knows there are few enough people we can speak to about such matters."

Bressinger opened his mouth, then closed it again. He softened. He reached down with his hand and pulled up the sword, and swung it about. The sounds of the city took up those moments of silence, the bustle of the streets, the trill of birds above, the gusting of the wind, and the ringing of distant bells.

"I am sorry, Helena," he said quietly. "You are right. I am not myself." He was silent for another few moments. I waited for him to speak, resolving that

I would not prompt him. “You must think it odd, given what I have said, that I work for the Autun at all. ‘Sir Dubine Bressinger, a knight of the Chivalric Order of the Autun’.” He smiled sardonically, then hawked and spat. “Sir Konrad and I have been close friends for a very long time. Our friendship was formed in the Reichskrieg. Battle… well, you have seen it yourself. When your life is in danger, when you are sure – and I mean certain – that you will not live out the day, it changes you, fundamentally. It restructures the mind like a house being torn down and rebuilt.” He looked up into the sky, as though seeing it for the first time, examining its blue brilliance, the golden sun, the scudding clouds. It was like watching a blind man who has had his sight briefly restored and who seeks to savour every colour, every shade, before returning to eternal darkness. “You see everything differently. Everything becomes beautiful. Life suddenly has so much value. Everything is to be savoured, because you know – you *know* – that soon it will all be at an end.”

He fell silent for another few moments. “When you have spent years campaigning, the people around you are the only ones who can understand it.” He barked out a short laugh. “Nema, you have more in common with your enemy than the people you are fighting to protect. Because no one else *understands*, Helena.

“Sir Konrad and I went through all of that together. We were the very best of friends, and we were companymen, and our bond was forged in steel, closer than any brothers.” He sighed heavily, like a man stepping away from the edge of a cliff, and looked me in the eye. “Helena, I love you very deeply. You are like a daughter to me. But I have known Sir Konrad for the better part of my life. He and I have been through so much together. You have known him for a couple of years. I feel as though you have not earned the right to criticise him.” I instinctively opened my mouth to protest, but he held up his hand to silence me. “I know that Sir Konrad is not beyond reproach. You are right when you say that he is just a man, when all is said and done, and has the fallibilities and frailties of a human being. But I have known him for over twenty years. He is the wisest, most intelligent, most brilliant person that I have ever known, and I trust him entirely in everything he does. He has never led me astray. He has rewarded my service a hundred times over with his deeds, his praise – to say nothing of his coin. I know that I am touchy when it comes to matters of his honour. I know that in many ways, he prefers

you to me. Saying it out loud makes me feel like a jealous maid, but it is true. You are comely, Helena, young and full of life, sharp as a blade. You are like him in so many respects. He is drawn to you like a moth to a flame. And your relationship is progressing, we can all see it. That is, I think, a good thing."

I felt my cheeks reddening. He was now giving voice to things I would rather have left unvoiced, but since the subject had been broached, I said, "It looks to me as though he is making his bed with Justice Roza." I could not keep the bitterness from my voice.

"Aye," Bressinger said with distaste. "I know not what is happening there. Sir Konrad keeps his counsel on the matter. But it is not like him." Bressinger looked at me askance. "She is a nice girl, whip smart, and is currently of great use. And she has eyes for him, no mistake."

I felt a hot flush of jealousy fill me. "Well," I said, shrugging. "That is that, then."

Bressinger shook his head, wrinkling his nose. "I do not think it is what you think it is. I think Sir Konrad is using her to fill some gap." He looked at me, realising with a sudden and genuine pleasure that he had made a bawdy pun in Saxan.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," I said, laughing helplessly despite myself, and then we were both laughing together. Eventually, though, the mirth died away, crushed under the sabaton of present matters.

"Let us resolve to be better with one another. Please, Dubine?" I asked, and I sincerely meant it. When all was said and done, Bressinger was a closer friend to me than Vonvalt ever would be.

Both of our attention was stolen by the harsh caw of a rook which had perched itself on the rim below the clerestory windows of Vonvalt's new manse.

"A single rook is—"

"Death," I interrupted. "You said that already."

Bressinger's face split into a grin. He lifted his sword back up into a low guard. "Come on then. Show me your high guard."

"Actually, I was hoping you would come with me to the Senate House. I need to arrange a meeting with Tymoteusz Jansen. Sir Konrad wishes to speak with him before we go."

Bressinger lowered the sword. I could tell he was not pleased with the request. "All right," he sighed. "But let me have a wash, first."

We made our way to the Senate House. It was a working day, and the Senate was in session. We surmounted a vast flight of white marble steps and passed through the gigantic entrance without difficulty – anyone was entitled to enter the Senate House, though most never bothered – and walked on through into the main chamber. The interior of the building was much the same as the exterior – that is to say, a broad circle, nested within a larger one – and we walked up to the edge of a marble balustrade which overlooked the Senate floor. Here, sitting amongst exactly the kind of imperious ostentation one would expect – marble and bronze colossi, intricate plasterwork, pillars a hundred feet tall, massive vaulted spaces – was a ring of perhaps half a thousand senators. All of them were clad in their formal robes, each with a medallion of office about their necks. But whilst the division between men and women was more or less equal, I saw little variation in colour and creed. All looked to be from the original four Sovan provinces – Sova itself of course, and Estre, Guelich, and Kzosic Principality – with perhaps the odd Hauner. Exceedingly few were young; middle age prevailed, with plenty of nodding older heads. The colours grey and white were in great abundance.

The Senate was in theory a collection of appointed representatives from all parts of the Empire, and though the Emperor could and did dictate laws directly, in those days the practice was for all such decrees to be filtered, modified, and tempered through the Senate. As one of the Imperial Estates, it was becoming increasingly powerful – not simply as a check on the Emperor’s power, but as a lawmaking institution in itself. After all, the Empire was massive, with tens of millions of subjects; the minutiae of governing such a vast number of people could no longer be subjected to the whims of one person.

Though of course, the Emperor did not see it that way.

Bressinger and I watched, he with distaste, I with genuine curiosity, as the current debate began to heat up. I recognised a handful of the senators, including Jansen, and I could see that they were arranged in clusters, demarcated by invisible lines. In one grouping were the Haugenates, the Imperial loyalists; in another, the Mlyanar Patricians. Between them sat

political representatives of the Neman Church, the Templars, as well as knots of independents with various and complex allegiances.

"… suggest that it is the Emperor *himself* who would benefit most from some self-governance. He cannot even keep his own house safe!" a shrewd, grey-haired Mlyanar said, to great jeers of agreement from his colleagues.

A Haugenate, affronted, launched to her feet. "By the gods, Radoslav, have some decorum!"

But this "Radoslav" remained unfazed, buoyed by the hooting and jeering of the Mlyanars about him. "The Emperor has well in excess of three hundred *thousand* Legionaries at his beck and call, dying in droves along the Kova. We are supposed to believe that he has their welfare in mind when he has not the welfare of his own grandson in mind?"

I exchanged a look with Bressinger. This was not the measured, intellectual debate I had imagined it would be.

"The abduction of the Prince Kamil is not a ball to be tossed about in the name of recreation," another Haugenate said, now standing. "You would do well to remember that he is just a young lad—"

"A young lad who will one day inherit the Empire. Or probably not, now!"

There was a ripple of dismay from the Haugenate quarter, but the Mlyanars delighted in these ridiculous, obscene arguments, calculated to do nothing but offend, thrown with glee across the Senate floor like handfuls of shit. Radoslav weathered many calls to yield the floor, grinning in the face of the affront he had caused. "The point – to come back to what we are *meant* to be discussing – is this: taxation is necessary, but I speak for a great many people when I say that that money should be more *carefully* applied. Eastward expansion is a fool's errand. The Legionary Prefect should, be, *replaced*." He smacked the palm of his hand with each word. "With Milena Bartoš—"

Now a great jeer went up from the Haugenates. Cries of "Of course!" and "There it is!" and even "Traitor!" filled the chamber and echoed off the distant ceiling.

"Another Mlyanar lackey," Bressinger murmured to me. "Milena Bartoš has long advocated for abandoning the war against the Confederation and a reduction in the size of the Legions."

"It is the Templar Orders who should receive the meat of the treasury's

funds!" Radoslav shouted, for he had to shout now to be heard. "And the destruction of the indigenes on the Frontier should be our primary goal, not some afterthought!"

"And here we thought you were more interested in the destruction of the Magistratum," the first Haugenate woman shouted, gesturing about her.

"Oh, I rather think the Lord Prefect is doing a fine job by himself!" Radoslav said, to great peals of laughter. "Not a week in the city and already debriding the wound! I daresay the Order will be little more than a memory within the year. One can only hope."

Now I saw Senator Jansen himself stand. "I fear the learned gentleman's memory fails him – yet again," he said. Something approaching a hush descended in the chamber. Jansen clearly enjoyed some standing within the Senate. "Was it not your patricians, Radoslav, who sold Nathan Kadlec to the Nemans? Aye, and debridement is the right word for it. Cutting away the necrotic flesh which your tame lawmen have left to fester."

Radoslav looked agitated for the first time. Not even the gibbering and batting of his colleagues could stave off a spasm of naked irritation. "Such allegations are unfit for this chamber," he said, to my astonishment. The hypocrisy hit me as sharply as a slap to the cheek.

Jansen performed an exaggerated shrug, mimicking deep confusion. "Forgive me; I was taking my cue from you. I thought we had reached the point in the session where we simply spoke whatever nonsense entered our brains."

Radoslav gripped the wooden lectern in front of him. "This debate is about taxation and Hauner Vale—"

"I am yet to hear anything of substance on the subject."

"I am happy to talk about how the Lord Prefect has unlawfully killed off the Master of the Magistratum and twenty of his Justices if you would prefer?"

"Are you? But a moment ago you seemed pleased with the reduction in the numbers."

Radoslav paused, and then smirked. "Indeed, a great deal seems to go missing in the Lord Prefect's wake. Respect for the canon law, Justices… members of the Imperial Royal household."

"What?" I gasped in astonishment.

"That fucking…" Bressinger said angrily. Now the whole Senate chamber

was on its feet, and the session descended into circus. The Senate was evidently a self-regulating body, for there was no neutral third party to steer the session. Instead, we had to watch as the hubbub died away, like a fire slowly extinguishing itself. But any appetite for further debate withered on the vine, and Haugenate senators began making for the exits. The Mlyanars, judging by their performative self-congratulation, seemed to treat this as some masterstroke victory. It was as though by standing there and being as obnoxious as possible until the Haugenates tired of it, they considered that they had skilfully outmanoeuvred their opponents. But that was the populist way. They just gleefully spouted mistruths that were so outrageous and stupid there was no way to properly engage with them.

"I wish I had not seen that," I said after a while.

"I'm glad you did. Now you can see the nature of the thing we are grappling with – and why Sir Konrad detests it." Bressinger nodded to a side entrance. "Come. I have only been here a handful of times, but I remember the way to the private chambers."

XX

The Investigation Founders

“Death is the reward for hope.”

SOVAN SENATORIAL PROVERB

Bressinger led me through the passageways of the Senate House and up several very long flights of stairs, until we reached the part of the building given over to private senatorial chambers. It was there that he left me.

“I have nothing to say to a senator,” he said dismissively. The corridor here was broad, and filled with people. “Someone here will be able to point you to the specific office.”

“All right,” I said. Knowing Bressinger as I did, I was not particularly surprised that he did not want to join me. “What will you do?”

“If his meeting with the Emperor goes as planned, then Sir Konrad will want to head south in short order.” He shrugged. “There will be plenty of preparations to make.”

We parted ways, and I was able to find my way to Senator Jansen’s chambers. He sounded irritated when I knocked, but his expression changed when he saw me open the door.

“Helena Sedanka, as I live and breathe,” he said expansively, and gestured for me to close the door behind me. “Come in, please.”

It was midday, and the city was filled with warm, honey-coloured light. The senator’s chambers had a western aspect and were several floors up in the Senate House. He invited me out onto a small balcony which sat in the

crook of a flying buttress, and which was stirred only by a mild breeze.

I liked Jansen; he had a wry manner and was fiercely intelligent, and did not take himself too seriously – one of the most attractive qualities in a person, I found. Like Vonvalt he had a career of soldiering in his distant past, which gave him a legitimacy in his political dealings, and he was Haugenate, which put him on the right side of history as it presently stood.

"I saw the debate, or the end of it," I said, my voice pregnant with dismay.

"Hm," Jansen grunted. "A shabby business. Sometimes the only way to win this game is to not play it at all. But… if you do not rebut, if you do not counter their drivel, it goes to the masses unchallenged. I have never had to deal with such obstreperousness in all my years. Just when you think the bottom of the barrel has been scraped, they come up with some other falsehood, devoid of all reason, calculated only to provoke."

"But they were lying. Actually *lying*."

Jansen actually chuckled, briefly surprised at my naïveté. He caught my expression. "My dear, I do not mean to be rude. Forgive a jaded old man."

"How can you stop them?" I pressed.

"*That* is the question," Jansen said. He mused for a few moments. "Perhaps your master has the measure of it. Perhaps the only way to win is to adopt their methods."

I shook my head. "No. That cannot be the way. We are better than them."

"We are. But it is no use being better than them and dead. Anyway." He drew himself up, took in a deep breath of the warm, fresh air, and smiled. "What is it that I can do for you?"

I sighed. "Sir Konrad would like to meet with you before he heads south."

"You mean to make for Kormondolt Bay?"

"Aye," I said, forgetting that Sir Konrad had already met with Senator Jansen, along with many other Haugenate loyalists, in the previous few days.

Jansen took a few moments to drink in the view. "Having spoken with my colleagues, the consensus seems to be that the boy was murdered somewhere in the Fleischregale."

I shook my head. "I know that Sir Konrad believes he is still alive somewhere, though certainly there has been nothing to give him that impression. Justice Roza could not detect the Prince's… *life essence* outside of the Fleischregale."

"Perhaps Sir Konrad believes the boy is alive because he is professionally

obliged to do so."

"The Imperial Soothsayer told us Prince Kamil was alive," I said, but felt immediately foolish for having revealed it.

Jansen smirked. "Sir Konrad must be desperate if he is consulting that mad old crone."

I did not speak for a short while. I did not want to think about the Muphraab, as impossible as it was to ignore. "Sir Konrad has told me that the Senate is in turmoil. From what I have seen today, I can believe it."

Jansen's expression darkened. "It is odd," he said. "It is having a curious dual effect. Let us assume for the moment that the Prince Kamil is indeed dead. In theory, that has ended the Haugenate line. Of course what will happen in practice is Prince Tasa and Lady Iliyana will have another child, or alternatively the line of succession will simply pass through the Prince Luka, and if *he* dies heirless, then the Prince Gordan." He shrugged. "Unless some cataclysm envelops the entire Royal household, there is at least a decade or two's worth of fraternal contingency even if no other children are born – and you can assume with absolute security that a great deal of Imperial seed is about to be spilled in the name of succession planning."

I snorted at this casual treason.

"But what it *has* done is layered further *uncertainty* on to already uncertain times. Empires need certainty, Helena, to function. I need to wake up in the morning and know three things." He held up a thumb. "That the borders are secure." Now he held up his index finger. "That the value of a mark has not changed beyond what the exchequer can tolerate." And now his middle finger. "And that the Emperor is alive and well, and that if he is not, the person everyone *expected* to take his place has done so. If these three conditions are met, another day of prosperity awaits. But remove one of those legs from the stool and suddenly…" He closed his three fingers back into his fist. "Uncertainty. And uncertainty is bad for all stripes of business. It also has the unwelcome corollary of suggesting that the Emperor is weak. You heard the Mlyanars. How can he protect his millions of subjects if he cannot even protect his own grandson?

"However, the Mlyanars are not able to make as much of it as they would like, and hence the curious duality of the situation. It absolutely assists their position to have the Haugenate line cut off, but it is precisely because of that fact that they cannot celebrate it – at least not openly."

“I thought the Mlyanars were throwing all manner of accusations across the Senate floor,” I said. “The things I heard this morning are unspeakable. It sounds great deal like celebration to me.”

Jansen snorted. “I agree. I *do* agree, Helena. But I am sorry to say that the Patricians have done nothing out of the ordinary recently. That is just how they act. In fact, if anything, they have been unusually muted. I have no doubt that the Mlyanars and their Templars many hundreds of miles away on the Frontier are planning something appalling, but with Sir Konrad here in the capital and the Magistratum restored, and – and the effect of this cannot be overstated – with Margrave Westenholtz’s premature rebellion throttled in the cradle, which has done nothing except put the Emperor and his Legions on guard, the Patricians have taken two steps back as against their one forwards. They must now bide their time. If they were guilty of something as rash as the abduction and murder of Prince Kamil, it would spell their doom. Were it not for the Kova Confederation, which is keeping the Emperor’s foot ensnared, he would purge the capital of the Mlyanars entirely, and probably outlaw the Templars to boot, common law be damned.”

“So why does he not? Sir Konrad has tried to impress upon the Emperor a number of times the importance of neutering Claver and his Templars now, before they are allowed to mobilise north.”

“Because of the uncertainty I have just spoken about. Think about it: Haunersheim is pacified; Baron Naumov is besieged in Roundstone by Prince Gordan and will be killed inside a year – if he is not already; then Prince Gordan will take up the margraveship at Seaguard. Anyone who thought that the Patricians were ready to make their masterstroke in the north had their hopes suffocated as surely as Westenholtz himself was. And besides, Claver has *some* Templars under his banner, but not all.”

“Claver is a threat in and of himself,” I said. “You know of the power he exercised in Galen’s Vale; the way he was able to immobilise Vonvalt with nothing but his mind. He has access to the most dangerous Saxan magicks in the Empire, and the malevolence to utilise them. Is he himself not worth a thousand soldiers? Perhaps ten thousand?” I kept my counsel on the illegal séance. That was a subject for Vonvalt to broach.

Jansen shrugged. “I do not doubt that Claver is a powerful man, and recklessly evil, but if I may put it bluntly, he is not invincible. If he holes up in a castle, the castle can be demolished. Perhaps he can immobilise a single

arrow with his mind, or two; in which case, we shall have an entire company of crossbowmen shoot at him. Claver is a powerful man, but powerful men can still be killed by the most basic of methods. In my experience, that means something small and hard travelling very fast.

"No. To excise the Senate of the Mlyanars would be to remove half the governing class of the Empire. It would create turmoil when precisely the opposite is required. I suspect the Emperor is making moves to consolidate his position east of the Kova as a priority, even if it means abandoning further expansion for the time being. Then he will see what can be done at the Frontier. But you must also remember, Helena, that the Emperor doesn't *want* to purge all the Templars. They are not just religious fanatics who enjoy killing indigenes; they are the garrison force of the southern Empire. If they go, there is nothing to stop an army from the Southern Plains – say, Qaresh – from biting a few chunks out of the Frontier."

"But what of the Kasar?" I asked. "Would they not assist?"

Jansen shook his head dismissively. "I shouldn't think so. They have plenty of their own problems. At least they did when I was there. Look, Helena, I understand your frustration. The Emperor is not dealing with this issue with the alacrity that you would like. But the Autun is, if you will permit perhaps another analogy, knee deep in a rosebush. The Emperor must decide which branches to cut, and in which order, so as not to draw blood."

There is comfort in hearing powerful and experienced men – for it usually is men – confidently dismissing one's fears as ill founded. Ultimately we want to believe that the things we fear the most are not as bad as we think. But I had seen Vonvalt dismiss Claver, to his incredible detriment and regret. Now I saw Jansen doing the same thing. Ultimately the senator was in a much better position than me to know the political ins and outs of the Senate and the health of the Imperial Estates, and I did not doubt that the Kova Confederation was a serious existential threat to the Empire. But that did not mean that Claver and his Templars were less of a threat of themselves. There was not some cosmic rule that said that the Empire could only face one serious threat at a time.

I sat and considered matters for a moment. It did not seem prudent to discuss the Muphraab. Given that apparently simply uttering its name could summon it to the mortal plane, it was not a great leap of the imagination to think that discussing it, even in tangential terms, could achieve similar

results. Besides, I didn't particularly want to think about it.

Instead, I settled on, "There is another aspect to this. Sir Konrad is gravely ill. He has contracted a special kind of pox, like a wasting disease. He may only have a handful of weeks to live."

Jansen's eyes widened. "Flame of Savare! What on earth is the matter with him? Can it not be cured?"

I mulled over how to answer this. I decided that some half-truths would serve. Vonvalt was going to meet with the man; they could discuss it then. "The means to save him lies in the south, on the Frontier. Some of the codexes that Claver has stolen contain special magicks which can cure the pox. It is another reason why Vonvalt is so keen to head south."

I had thought Jansen incapable of a bad mood, but I was immediately disabused of that notion.

"Well, you know what they say: 'Death is hope's reward'," he said gruffly." He fussed about the table for a moment like a man losing a game of schach. "There is some magickal element to his ailment then?" he asked eventually.

"Yes," I said. "It is best not to discuss it too much."

Jansen shook his head. He lifted a fist to pound it on the table, but stopped himself at the last minute.

"Prince of Hell," he muttered. "The Emperor knows of this?"

"Sir Konrad went to tell him this morning. I know not how the conversation has gone. But I do know that he will not release Sir Konrad until the matter as regards the Prince Kamil is resolved. He believes Sir Konrad to be exaggerating the gravity of his situation in order to be excused from the investigation. At least, that is my impression."

Jansen sucked his teeth. "That is *unfortunate*," he said. "Quite aside from personal considerations, the ramifications of Sir Konrad's death at this time would be quite seismic."

"Is there anything you can do to help?" I asked.

"There is little enough. Your plan is to head for the Frontier? After you have sprung your trap in Kormondolt Bay?"

"Yes."

"'Tis a shame the Relay does not take you that far south. Though even if it did, that would only get a handful of you to Südenburg, and I doubt Claver is there."

“Why do you doubt that?”

“Because I know the Margrave of Südenburg very well, and I have not been informed of Claver’s presence.”

“Will he be able to assist us? The margrave?”

“She. Severina von Osterlen. I know she will do what she can, if I ask.”

“And will you ask?”

Jansen inclined his head. “Of course. Though by the sounds of it you will need an army. Is the Emperor willing to supply you with soldiers?”

“I know not. I doubt it. Are there any?”

Jansen snorted. “A fair point. It seems short-sighted to me, especially to give Claver so much lead time to further acquaint himself with the old lore. But it is easy to feel safe in Sova – and as far as I am aware, though my knowledge pales in comparison to that of your master, there has never existed within the Order the power to undo stone. At least, not a magickal one. Perhaps that is why the Emperor is so preoccupied with the Confederation. Rumours abound of their access to blackpowder.” He rippled his fingers and made a “woo” sound, as though impersonating a ghost. I immediately thought of the explosion in the docklands – another secret to keep, another mystery bubbling away. “It is supposed to be the future of warfare, though I think we shall have to wait until someone can turn up more than a thimbleful of it at a time before we concern ourselves too much with that.”

We sat in silence for a moment.

“Helena…” Jansen said. He paused, thinking for a moment. “I try not to be an obstinate old man. There comes a point in time, towards the end of one’s life, when one begins to feel… dissociated from the wider world. Like one’s investment in the future is perhaps not as important any more. There is a danger amongst my colleagues and the other elder statesmen and -women of the ruling classes of the Empire, that we become *comfortable*. Things have been the way they are for so long that one cannot countenance any change. And dangers that loom on the horizon and threaten to upset the current world order – sometimes in profoundly destructive ways – become, perversely, easier to ignore. I am conscious of this failing, and often go to great lengths to ensure that I am not turning a blind eye to threats which perhaps should be dealt with, with more readiness.

“I have a network of – well, let’s call them what they are, spies – in and around Sova, and of course they tell me the usual things; about the prostitute

who is really a Kòvoskan spy, about the Mlyanars and their various schemes to obtain more and more power, about even Master Kadlec and his suspected treachery. But I must say, Helena, news of Claver is thin on the ground. What information there is to be gleaned is from the Neman Church and the College of Prognosticators, and they have become very adept at concealing their own moves and motives. I fear I am like a dog with its face in the nettles. You are as sharp as a blade and a Master of the Magistratum in the making, and I would be extremely foolish to write off your judgement as the fears of a young and insignificant legal clerk. Tell me, therefore, Helena, what *you* think about Claver."

I did not have to mull anything over. I gave my answer immediately.

"I think if he is not stopped in the next few weeks, then it will not be possible to stop him."

I left shortly after, and made my way back to the Prefect's Palace. Jansen would see Vonvalt later that evening.

I found Vonvalt sitting in a haze of pipe smoke in the library, looking fed up. At his feet, ensconced within a slab of sunlight and lightly snoring, was Heinrich.

"How did your meeting with the Emperor go?" I asked tentatively.

Vonvalt did not look at me as he pulled an expression of distaste.

"Once the matter of recovering the Prince Kamil is concluded, then I am released," he said after a long while.

"The news of your… *ailment* did not bestir him?"

Vonvalt shrugged, shaking his head. I don't think I had ever seen him looking so despondent. "The Emperor is as intimately familiar with the Draedist arcana as any Justice. He knows of the severity of the hex."

"But he will still not do anything to help you?"

"He believes I can rescue the Prince and defeat Claver before the elemental has me. His faith in me is as ironclad as it is misplaced."

"Then why will he not *listen* to you?" I demanded. I felt as though I were trapped in a nightmare in which I could only move at a snail's pace. What could one do when faced with such crushing institutional indifference?

Vonvalt blinked slowly, and looked at me. “He will not turn his mind to the Frontier until Sova is becalmed.”

“Will he give you any soldiers?”

Vonvalt gestured to the sleeping Heinrich.

“Be serious!” I snapped.

Vonvalt looked at me sharply. “He has none to spare. But he will give me Captain Galla. I have already spoken with her, and we have dispatched some materiel south in anticipation of our departure. Others will join us tomorrow.”

“Is Justice Roza one of them?” I asked. I could not keep the edge from my voice.

Vonvalt did not visibly react, but nor did he answer straight away. “Yes,” he said, eventually. He cleared his throat. “Dubine is making the preparations to leave. You should assist him. There is much to do, and little enough time to do it in.”

“Fine,” I muttered, and turned to leave.

“You spoke to Senator Jansen?” Vonvalt asked my back.

“Yes. He is coming to meet you this evening,” I said, and left the library before Vonvalt could say anything else.

XXI

To Kormondolt Bay

“In peace send me the kind, the goodly, and the strong of heart. In war give me the cruel, the hardy, those who will act in want of all honour. The latter build nations; the former sustain them.”

COUNT HAMER VON SCHOFF, 2ND MARGRAVE OF SEAGUARD

We marshalled at the Victory Gate the following day at dusk, the southernmost of the four gates into and out of the city of Sova. At the head of our caravan was Vonvalt atop Vincento, whilst Heinrich stood about the horse’s feet. Both were war animals, and neither was perturbed by the proximity of the other.

Sitting atop her own horse next to Vonvalt was Ingeburg Galla, the Captain of the Imperial Guard. Like Sir Gerold – and a good portion of the urban population of Sova – her ancestry lay in the kingdoms of the Southern Plains, for her skin and hair were dark. She spoke softly to Vonvalt, and my initial impression of her – which would turn out to be correct – was of a quiet and serious woman.

Behind Vonvalt and Galla was Justice Roza on a white palfrey, and behind her sat Bressinger and Sir Radomir on their horses. But it was the cluster of men behind them that I was most interested in. It was a collection of eight extremely tall and muscular men of a mixture of races, only one or two identifiably native Sovans. I assumed they accounted for the majority of equipment in the baggage train, a stack of Sovan short swords, hatchets, and

worn cuirasses of leather armour of a style I did not recognise. They did not speak in Saxan, and I found myself quite intimidated by them – although I must say they were very easy on the eye. Each had been furnished with a horse from the Imperial stables.

I myself brought up the rear of this caravan – though that was not taking into account the slower and more sizeable force of Legionaries travelling in our wake, their sole purpose to take custody of the Prince Kamil once we had recovered him.

We had a good few days of riding ahead of us. We would essentially travel the full length of the nation of Estre, almost perfectly south-west to the junction of the Estran and Vennish borders. Given that Estre was an Imperial principality and one of the original Sovan territories, I had imagined a country of great wealth, with numerous merchant towns and cities connected with well-kept roads. In fact, like a tumour, Sova had sucked all of the trade and money for dozens of miles in all directions, and for the first couple of days of our journey, we saw little but the decaying remains of once prosperous settlements.

Estre seemed to be one large continuation of the Ebenen Plains, much like the land that formed the Frontier. To the north lay the Pyotronas mountain range, which formed the border between Estre and Guelich, whilst to the west, as one approached Venland, was a region of karst known as the *Spuvazemja* in Old Saxan. But between these two areas of fractured earth was a large plain formed mostly of wildflower prairie.

We stuck mostly to a single dusty road for the vast majority of the journey, moving as quickly as our horses and equipment would permit. We did pass through a number of small towns, but we did not stop for any length of time. The further south we travelled, the warmer it got, and whereas in the same time of year in Muldau it would have been still bitterly cold with the odd bit of snowfall, here the prairies were caressed by a near constant warm breeze which rustled the flowers and cypress trees that stood sentinel on the roadside. The occasional thunderstorm rumbled on the horizon, though we were fortunate not to be rained on at all.

Of all the members of that caravan, I had more to do with Heinrich, who had taken a liking to me after I fed him some of the salted beef in my saddlebags, than my human companions. I approached Vonvalt one evening after we had made camp on the pretext of comparing our separate

conversations with Senator Jansen; but Vonvalt was preoccupied with the Muphraab and the recovery of Prince Kamil, if such a thing was even possible, and for the first time in a long time, he would not be drawn into a conversation about Claver.

In fact, the more Vonvalt pushed me away and dismissed me, the more I wanted to seek him out and speak to him – though few opportunities presented themselves on that journey. I tried to voice my concerns about everything else that was troubling me, such as the death of Master Kadlec, the Muphraab, and our plans for heading south to the Frontier – which did not seem to have evolved beyond a small handful of us riding to the Templar fortresses and challenging Claver; but Bressinger had retreated into himself and had entered one of his phases of severe melancholy which would last for some time to come, and Sir Radomir had had his fill of all of the Imperial intrigues he had become embroiled in, and sought out the company of the straight-speaking Captain Galla whenever he could. I could not even talk to the eight men who accompanied us, though I was sure they were talking about me, for I caught them looking at me on a number of occasions.

And, of course, I would not speak to Justice Roza, who hung about Vonvalt like a bad smell and whom I had grown to detest.

On the second day, we came across the Imperial wayfort at Kamaria, a large castle which formed the northernmost point of the chain of warning beacons from Kormondolt Bay. Once, this fortress had been home to a garrison of a thousand Legionaries; now a hundred auxiliaries existed in the barracks, and much of the castle's halls and chambers were empty and going to ruin. Still, the master gave us what provisions he could spare and refilled our water skins.

An hour later we came across the first of the beacons. It was a large iron brazier set atop a sturdy stone tower thirty feet high, though the latter was half hidden by lichen and climbing plants. At the base of the tower was a small stable, and two horses idly cropped the grass nearby. The two soldiers who manned the station came out and greeted us in pidgin Saxan, and I watched from the back of our caravan as they exchanged words with Vonvalt

and Captain Galla. In the distance, perhaps ten miles away across the plain, I could see the next beacon, and just make out the beacon beyond that on the horizon. Our journey was now simply a case of following them to the coast.

I felt a strange and haunting sense of isolation, standing there next to the beacon. I turned and looked back to the wayfort, and half expected to see a dim black figure of the Muphraab walking slowly in our wake.

But of course there was nothing.

Our journey had been as quick as it could have been in the circumstances, but still felt like an age. But, on the third day, during a warm but dull afternoon, where thick dark grey clouds sat above us like a ceiling, the first whiff of sea breeze reached us, a cool gust of brackish air which sent a painful jolt of anticipation through my gut. In spite of everything, I had grown used to the monotony of our journey, shot through with trepidation as it was, and the smell of the sea was an unwelcome reminder of the purpose of our mission.

Captain Galla brought our caravan to a stop on the side of the road. We had not seen a soul for almost an entire day and night, but now I could see and smell the beginnings of a fishing settlement, which would turn out to be a small coastal town called Linos.

We arrived at noon, the day before that stipulated for the ransom deposit. We rode into town and found stabling for our horses and lodgings for our party. Beyond those few pieces of administration, there was nothing immediate for me or Sir Radomir and Bressinger to do, since we were only there by virtue of our being Vonvalt's retainers, and so we were released to find some food. We quickly fell to discussing the journey further south. Whatever the outcome of this particular expedition, there was no doubt in our minds that we would not be returning to Sova for some time.

We ate bowls of greasy fish broth at a trestle table on the harbourside and batted away tenacious seagulls. The locals, as hardy and weatherbitten a mob as ever existed, eyed us warily, for in spite of half a week's worth of hard riding, our expensive clothing and arms gave us away as officials of the Crown. But we paid them no heed. We kept to ourselves, talked loudly about the temporary nature of our stay, and paid over the odds for every service. In

such circumstances, trouble was extremely slow to follow – assisted in no small part by the presence of Heinrich, who lay at my feet and tucked greedily into a plate of fish skins. At one point, seeing that the gulls were bothering us, he killed one and brought it to me as though it were an offering.

"Nema!" I swore in disgust as the bloodied bird was laid at my feet.

"That dog thinks it's a cat," Sir Radomir chuckled as I picked up the gull and hurled it away. Heinrich, mistaking me, fetched it back, to my companions' great mirth. Repeating the same trick achieved precisely the same results, until eventually there was nothing to do except kick it under the table whilst Bressinger and Sir Radomir wiped the tears from their eyes.

I took in the view. The Grall Sea was striking, and a far cry from the cold, featureless grey of the North Sea which at that point in time was the only other one I had seen. Its waters were a vibrant blue in spite of the distant and dark curtains of rain lashing the water. Kormondolt Bay itself was bookended by two headlands a mile apart, outcrops of sand-coloured rock tangled with weeds and the occasional cypress tree. On both were stone towers housing beacons, but neither looked occupied; in fact, the one nearest us looked to be in a state of disrepair.

On the beach, walking down the sand, I saw Vonvalt and Justice Roza.

"He's quite taken with her, isn't he?" Sir Radomir said gruffly, nodding down to the pair, for ours was a good vantage point.

"No doubt they are checking to see if she can sense Prince Kamil's…" I shrugged facetiously "… *life essence*, or whatever it is she purports to be able to sense."

"You do not like her," Sir Radomir remarked.

I had hoped that we would skirt around the awkward topic of my jealousy, and my features creased at this confrontation.

"I do not see what purpose she is serving here," I said. "She told us that Prince Kamil could not be traced from the Fleischregale; that his blood was on the chopping block, and that the clear inference was the boy had been killed there. If that is correct, then either Prince Kamil really is dead, or he is not and still a hostage – if the former, then her power is otiose, and if the latter then she will have been demonstrably incorrect about the one thing she was needed for."

"I just have one question," Sir Radomir asked.

"What?"

“The fuck does ‘otiose’ mean?”

I rolled my eyes. “It means it no longer serves any useful purpose. In either case, she has exhausted her reasons for being with us. Sir Konrad has not retained her.”

“Not in that sense,” Sir Radomir smirked, and slurped the last of his broth from his bowl.

I suspected that both men would enjoy teasing me about this, either wilfully or recklessly blind to my obvious distress. Mine and Vonvalt’s courtship, in whatever awkward and painful form it was taking, had still been a valid enough prospect to have been noticed by both of them. Justice Roza’s – successful – interposition represented a clear snub, and whilst it might have been normal for Sovan aristocrats to chop and change potential partners – indeed, expected, with that infamous Sovan pragmatism – Vonvalt and I had a special connexion, both professional and emotional, which made his behaviour confusing and hurtful. I had not spoken much with Justice Roza, but apart from her obvious beauty and generally agreeable temperament, she did not seem to be particularly interesting. Vonvalt barely knew her. It seemed odd that he would cast me aside so unceremoniously in her favour, especially when he had hitherto been so selective in whom he chose to bed – and in circumstances where it was likely that he would die within a few weeks anyway.

Against my better judgement I expressed these sentiments to Sir Radomir and Bressinger, for – Nema help me – they were the only friends I had in the world. I had expected banter in response, but instead, both men looked a mixture of contrite, awkward, and sombre.

“I do not know what to make of it, Helena,” Sir Radomir said with a sigh, shortly after ordering another round of drinks for us. “There’s no denying the woman is a beauty, but you are right. She has insinuated herself into his life rather abruptly.”

There was a pause. I looked over to Bressinger, who had contrived to preoccupy himself with his now empty bowl of broth. But he was as uncomfortable with long, pointed silence as anyone else, and eventually he said, “Sir Konrad has a great many things on his mind, as well you know, Helena. Perhaps it is because he fears he will die soon that he is…” He sighed mightily, and scratched his arm stump. “I fear he is becoming reckless in a number of aspects of his life in which he is normally prudent. But I think

that, in a curious way, this… *relationship*, with the lady Justice, is perhaps a way of protecting you."

I did not take this rather sage piece of advice well at the time, and that is one of many regrets I have. There will be time to discuss Justice Roza in this account later on, and her importance in this tale. Suffice it to say, I dismissed Bressinger's words out of hand. How could Vonvalt possibly be protecting my feelings by being such an arsehole?

Both Sir Radomir and Bressinger prudently avoided raising the subject again, and I could not possibly blame them for that – though I would have happily dissected and discussed it for hours. Instead, we sat and chatted the evening away on matters of lesser import. I was happy to note that Sir Radomir and Bressinger seemed to have made amends after their absurd near duel.

My heart aches to think of that evening, just the three of us talking about nothing in particular, even laughing, as the sun made a very brief appearance as it transited the sky between the low ceiling of cloud and the Grall Sea. The temptation is to set it out in full, to preserve those happier moments in writing.

But some memories I shall keep to myself.

That night, I dreamt of a solitary stone watchtower on an infinite white plain. I could not help but approach it, though it filled me with dread.

I'd had this dream before, though I could not recall when. The first time, however, I had not made it across the threshold of the watchtower.

This time I entered.

Inside was a winding stone staircase. I could hear a voice coming from the top of the tower, and though I did not want to surmount the steps in front of me, I was powerless to resist. Leaden step after leaden step, my legs advanced independently of the rest of me, as though I were under some magickal spell.

I reached the top and the voice resolved itself into that of Sir Otmar Frost. He was standing at the embrasure, looking out over the plain. In the distance, a lone black figure advanced, never travelling faster than a slow but

inexorable walking pace. By Sir Otmar's feet, the blistered, charred corpse of a woman lay.

"The Father of Time is a stern patron," Sir Otmar said. In fact, it was all he said. He repeated the words like a mantra, never taking his eyes off the distant black figure. I knew it was the Muphraab.

I felt sick with fear. I grasped Sir Otmar's arm and turned him towards me. I gasped; his face was as pale as the infinite white plain that surrounded us, his lips blue. I saw that his surcoat was marred with frozen blood – in fact his whole body was as cold as ice.

"The Father of Time is a stern patron," Sir Otmar repeated like a lunatic. His eyes were wide with fear, stoking my own terror, which was already approaching fever pitch.

"What does that mean? What does it *mean*?" I shrieked. I turned back to the plain, but the figure had disappeared.

My blood turned to ice.

Sir Otmar stopped his raving with a jarring suddenness and fixed me in the eye.

"The mark of the Trickster is upon you now, girl," he said.

I turned, to see the Muphraab reaching the top of the stairs of the watchtower.

I was overcome with such a visceral horror that I could not even scream.

The last thing I heard was the shriek of a rook. Then all was blackness.

XXII

Planning the Trap

"Lawkeeping is an oft-maligned tradition, and lawkeepers are frequently held in contempt. Yet, curiously, I hear very few complaints from the residents of the watch house gaol."

JUSTICE ERMENRICH BADURAD

When I was roused, it was the morning.

Not for the first time in my life, I awoke to see Vonvalt sitting in my bedchamber. He was asleep, lightly snoring on account of the angle of his head, his Oleni medallion – the icon of the Draedist deer-headed god – around his neck and the *Grimoire Necromantia* at his feet. I realised that I was not in the room I had gone to sleep in; for one, this chamber was considerably better furnished, and had a dual aspect. Through one of those large, latticed windows I could see the Grall Sea stretching away in the morning sun, whipped to a light chop by a fresh breeze. Heinrich slept at the foot of the bed, his enormous black ribcage rising and falling slowly.

The nightmare felt as though it had happened a thousand years ago. I could remember its events clearly, but they had been robbed of all horror, like a wasp that had had its sting removed.

I felt cautiously about my person. I probed and prodded my flesh and pulled the skin taut, twisting and turning to check every inch of my body, but I could make out no physical marks, no cuts or bruises or other blemishes that I had not taken with me to bed. There was nothing else changed, but it was

clear that some kind of procedure had taken place during my unconsciousness, and judging by Vonvalt's effects, one involving magick. I imagined a frantic scene like the one in which Fenland Graves had died back in Galen's Vale, and shuddered.

In spite of the circumstances, I still had no great desire to speak to Vonvalt – indeed, I had been avoiding him for the entirety of the journey south. Notwithstanding, sneaking out of the room, especially in light of the fact that he may well have saved my life during the course of the night, was a bit too churlish even for me. I therefore made sure I was decent, before clearing my throat, banging the charged ale tankard that had been left next to the bed for me, and otherwise clattering about until he was roused.

"Helena," he said, blinking away sleep. His hand immediately went to the medallion around his neck, and he sat up with a start. "How are you feeling? Are you all right?"

I nodded, nonplussed. "Yes, I think so. I had a terrible nightmare."

"You had a great deal more than that," Vonvalt muttered brusquely, lifting the *Grimoire Necromantia* off the floor and checking the clasp was locked. "What do you remember?"

I thought for a moment. I didn't think it would be difficult to remember the horror of the dream, but already I was struggling to call it to mind. I told him what I could – of the tower, the infinite white plain, the presence of Sir Otmar Frost, and lastly, the Muphraab. I knew this time not to mention the elemental's name, but Vonvalt still pre-empted me, as though I had not learned.

"I am assuming you do not know what happened last night?"

I shook my head. "Of course not. How could I? I was asleep."

Vonvalt pursed his lips. "You raised half the town with your screaming. In fact, on that point, it is best if you stay out of sight today. Fishermen are a superstitious lot, and we do not want to draw any more attention to ourselves than we already have."

"How on earth can they begrudge me having one bad dream?" I demanded of Vonvalt. "I thought these were hardy folk. It does not speak much to their character to be so frightened of a bit of maid's shrieking."

Vonvalt sat back in his chair, index fingers on his lips. He regarded me for a long period of silence. He was obviously weighing up something in his mind. I was no stranger to Vonvalt's periods of quiet thought, and knew

better than to interrupt them; however, his penetrating stare, and his manner generally unsettled me enough to say, “What is it? What is the matter?”

Eventually, he said to me, “Helena, I do not want to upset you.”

“Piss on that,” I said. “What happened last night? What aren’t you telling me?”

Vonvalt sighed mightily. “Last night, Helena, you did not just scream – though Nema knows you did plenty of that. You were *seized* by something. Some entity took you in its grip. You… took up your dirk and entered my chamber.”

“This chamber?” I asked, confused.

“Yes. You…” He cleared his throat. “Well, the long and short of it is that you attempted to kill Justice Roza.”

I clamped a hand over my mouth. “Fucking Nema!” I said through my fingers. I could think of nothing to say for a moment; then I began to gabble. “Sir Konrad, you *must* know that I—”

Vonvalt held up his hands, silencing me immediately. “I know, Helena. You were clearly not yourself. And Justice Roza is fine. That is the important thing.”

All manner of imaginings filled my mind’s eye: me, rabid, possessed, teeth gnashing, eyes rolling, trying to stab Roza again and again. Vonvalt, roused suddenly from his slumber, having to intercede – probably with some violence. The thoughts were both terrifying and mortifying, made worse by the fact that I could remember none of it. He might as well have been describing a mummery he had seen a few weeks before.

I opened my mouth to speak, then paused. “She was in here? With you?” I asked, my voice cracking.

Vonvalt grimaced briefly, looking out the window. But he did not answer my question. “It did not end there. After I had disarmed you –” he held out his hand, palm down, and lifted it slowly up “ – you rose into the air. You hovered perhaps four or five feet above the floor. Do you remember speaking to me?”

I stared at Vonvalt, aghast. “No,” I whispered.

Vonvalt looked back out of the window. He did not seem to be worried; more… *troubled*, as though tackling a difficult legal question. “To be honest with you, Helena, I am not entirely sure what to make of it. The words you spoke were little better than gibberish, and in a voice that was not your own. I

was able to pick out the word '*Edaximae*' – an old word for the Purgatorial Plane – but not much else." Vonvalt shook his head. "It felt like a message was being directed at me, but so fractured and cryptic as to be useless. And the substance of your nightmare sheds little light on the matter. I do not understand the significance of the rook at all."

"What happened after I said those words?" I asked, my skin all broken out in gooseflesh. I suddenly found myself wishing I had never met Vonvalt at all, never become entangled in his life and these great world-shaping events. I wanted nothing more than to be back in Galen's Vale living with Matas, or even back in Muldau. Perhaps if I had remained in the latter I would have got steady employment by now, maybe working in a tavern.

Vonvalt turned back to me, his expression dismissive. "Nothing worth talking about," he muttered, and picked up the *Grimoire Necromantia*. "If you have any more dreams like that you should do your very best to remember them. I will have a quill and paper set out next to your bed so you can write anything down that comes to mind."

"You mean it might happen again?" I asked with cold horror.

Vonvalt shrugged. "I do not know, Helena. And that is the truth." He stood and made to leave.

"Blood of gods, at least *teach* me something," I shouted. "Is there nothing I can do? Nothing to… I don't know, ward myself? Some Draedist charm or trick I can do? Or must I simply get blind drunk every night like Sir Radomir?"

"I will teach you the rudiments of the magickal arts soon, I promise," Vonvalt said. "But now we must focus on the task at hand." He made to leave again, this time achieving the door handle.

"How am I supposed to focus on anything with all this shit going on?" I shouted at his back angrily.

"For Nema's sake, *govern* yourself, Helena!" Vonvalt suddenly snapped. "You are lucky we are not digging Luitgard's grave this morning!"

I sat back as though I had been slapped. This was too much. It was all too much.

I saw Vonvalt clench and unclench his hands, but when he spoke again, it was more calmly. "I do not have the energy for this. We all must bear our own burdens for the time being. We will talk, soon, and properly. But now, Helena, I need you to simply do as you are told. Trust me, and trust my

judgement. I will not let anything happen to you. You know that, and if you do not, then you should."

And with that, he left, and pulled the door firmly closed behind him.

I was not in a good state of mind that morning. I was terrified of losing Vonvalt; losing him emotionally, as already seemed to have happened, and then physically, which at that point in time seemed inevitable. This fear, compounded by the constant undercurrent of horror I felt at having become embroiled with the predatory entities of the afterlife, created a rancid mixture of thoughts in my head which I found difficult to put to one side in the way Vonvalt was able to – and, indeed, expected me to be able to.

In a perverse way, the abduction of Prince Kamil, a straightforward if gruesome affair, provided a welcome focus. It was a tangible, physical crime, one that required tangible, physical solutions. I found my brain unknotting as we gathered together in the mid-morning, in a private chamber upstairs in one of the seafront public houses of Linos.

Here we were all assembled: Captain Galla, looking oddly diminutive in a simple loose blouse and breeches; Vonvalt, Bressinger, and Sir Radomir; the eight men, who I assumed were soldiers of one stripe or another, who did not speak Saxan to one another – but who must have understood it – filling the chamber with their muscled bulk and making it feel very small indeed; and lastly Justice Roza, who pointedly ignored me. I could hardly fault her for that.

"All right," Vonvalt said. He had unfurled a map of Kormondolt Bay on a large square table, and it was around this we clustered. "The ransom note tells us that we must leave the chest floating one mile out to sea – though we will hazard three-quarters of a mile, and hope that they have no means of measuring it." He tapped the appropriate point on the map. It seemed like rather a long way. A mile – even three-quarters thereof – was an easy distance to underestimate. "They will then collect the sum and dispatch Prince Kamil in a rowing boat back to the shore.

"We know that tonight is due to be the new moon and thus the darkest night of the month. This assists our captors in that they may move about the

bay unseen, but it also assists us in that we may do the same." He now turned to one of the eight men. The man must have been in excess of six and a half feet tall, and like Galla, had the dark skin of a Southern Plainsman. Through his clothes I could see – and admire – the ripple of enormous muscles. "This is where Lekan and his crew come in."

Of course. The men were *rowers*; the finest rowing crew in Sova. I knew that sometimes the arena was flooded with water, and given over to regattas – and sometimes huge simulated naval battles, which were a thing to behold – and these men were likely champions of the sport.

"The rowers will set up here and here, in the lee of these two headlands." Vonvalt briefly glanced at me. "I trust that the preparations were made under cover of darkness last night?"

I realised then, with a sour feeling of guilt, that Vonvalt had not been able to attend to the preparations personally on account of his dealing with me.

The head of the crew, this "Lekan", nodded once.

"Everything is in place," Galla said. "Both boats are concealed in the rocks and covered over with branches."

"We shall keep the beach completely clear of any sign of our presence. I will accompany the first crew with Captain Galla. Dubine will remain at our headland, concealed in the undergrowth there." I looked briefly confused at what was, on its face, a slight to Bressinger; then I remembered that the man only had one arm. Leaving aside the risk of swimming with a single arm, which was of course not impossible – although certainly difficult enough without choppy seawater battering him – we were potentially going to be scrabbling our way up the side of the ship. There was simply no way Bressinger would be able to partake in the expedition, and that was a serious blow to our manpower, for Bressinger was still the best swordsmen amongst us.

"Helena, you and Sir Radomir will position yourselves here." Now Vonvalt tapped the headland at the other end of the bay, about a mile away from where Galla would be positioned. "You will signal from a concealed position on the eastern side of the rocks if you spot the ship approaching from the west. As for Luitgard –" now he looked at Justice Roza, briefly and awkwardly " – you will remain out of sight in the tavern. This is a dangerous undertaking and you have no direct combat experience."

Roza endured a spasm of intense irritation at this, which spoke volumes

considering the lengths she had hitherto gone to ignore Vonvalt's more annoying qualities and edicts.

"Truly? There is no place for me in this scheme?" she asked. "I have learned sparring."

"Sparring and combat are two different beasts, and this is not the time to bridge that gulf. And we are mob-handed as it is. I am already risking the Master of the Magistratum, the Captain of the Imperial Guard, the Empire's finest rowers and the lives of my own retainers. There is no sense in risking the life of another Justice; and besides, if we are all killed, there needs to be someone left to pass on the message to the Emperor."

In spite of what I had put Roza through – and I did feel genuinely bad about that, for it must've been horrifying for her – I still watched with a great deal of petty satisfaction as she squirmed to think of a legitimate reason to include her. A number of times she looked over at me, and I knew exactly what she was thinking: that she and I were the same, both superfluous, and yet I had been favoured for no real reason. And if that was what she was thinking, then it filled me with a resentment that burned like molten lead in my stomach. I had *earned* my place at Vonvalt's side. I had the scars to prove it. I was not just a body taking up space; I was a tenacious companion and at least a moderately able swordsman. She was nothing.

"There must be something I can do other than simply sit on my hands in this tavern?" Roza continued. Now she sounded plaintive.

"There is nothing more to discuss; kindly be quiet," Vonvalt said testily. He turned back to the map on the table. "We shall watch the chest closely for any sign of the approaching abductors. It is unlikely they will bring Prince Kamil himself to pick up the chest, but we of course will not let them simply take the chest back to their ship and assume they will deposit the boy into our safekeeping."

"More like the boy's remains," Sir Radomir muttered. Vonvalt glanced at him sharply, but said nothing more.

"As soon as the abductors' rowboat is nearly back to the ship, we will launch our own vessels. We must assume that they mean to cheat us out of the coin and leave immediately with the Prince still in their custody."

"That is an odd thing, is it not?" Sir Radomir said suddenly. The smell of alcohol was tangible as he spoke.

"What is?"

“Well, think on it a moment. If it were me, I’d not have brought the boy to the ransom exchange. I’d have told you to drop the coin and then promised to deliver the lad… Nema, I don’t know, fifty, a hundred miles away. What’s to stop an Imperial fleet intercepting them further along the coast?” He gestured to the map. “This way they give up the only collateral they have. Seems like a hare-brained scheme to me.”

Vonvalt nodded. “I agree. But there is little enough to like about the situation without delving into the logic of it, or absence thereof. We have our plan and we shall stick to it.”

Sir Radomir shrugged, and held his hands up. “Fair enough.”

Vonvalt resumed. He tapped the map where the two headlands were. “We cannot move any sooner for risk of tipping off the main vessel to our presence. They must be left to think that they have succeeded. It will make them careless, but they are unlikely to fully let their guard down. From that point it is really a matter of time. Lekan, how quickly can your men cover three-quarters of a mile?”

The captain of the crew thought for a moment. He spoke in Saxan, but it was heavily accented. “Perhaps five minutes,” the man said. “It will depend on the conditions. If it is calm, even less.”

Vonvalt massaged his chin. Five minutes felt like a long time to be out in the open water.

“That is too much time,” Galla said.

Lekan snorted. “You will not find anyone in the Empire who can do it faster.”

“It is not too much time,” Vonvalt declared, and that was the end of the matter. “In any event, it is when we reach the side of the ship that we will be at our most vulnerable. I will use my Voice to disorient any opposition there. Lekan and his men will lead the ascent. We must hope that the ship is not too large. If it is a carrack, then the hull will be much too high and we will likely perish in the attempt.”

“You mean to say that we will not make the attempt,” Sir Radomir corrected.

“Indeed,” Vonvalt said.

I caught Sir Radomir’s eye. He looked unhappy.

“This seems like venture fraught with risk,” he said.

“If you don’t have the stones for it—” Galla began, but Vonvalt cut across

her.

“Sir Radomir’s courage is beyond question,” he said, before a pointless fight could break out. “There is no perfect plan, Sir Radomir. A large Imperial force would be too difficult to conceal. If they see any hint of naval vessels, they may simply execute the Prince on approach. Hell, they would probably sail straight past the bay altogether. We must draw them *into* the bay as close as possible, and hope to board that ship before they turn tail. With luck, we will be at the side before they see us coming. With even more luck, they will simply release the Prince once they have taken the coin, and that will be the end of the matter.”

“You would not seek to hunt down the perpetrators?” Galla asked, instantly offended.

Vonvalt shook his head wearily. “I will consider us to have succeeded completely if Prince Kamil is recovered tonight, even if we lose the ransom sum and everyone in this room in the effort. That is the most important thing. Do not lose sight of that. Anything above and beyond that is simply another bird in the hand. I will not waste any more time and effort gallivanting across the Empire on a fool’s errand.”

“And if the boy is killed? Or if he truly is dead, as Justice Roza insists?” Sir Radomir pressed. Roza looked uncharacteristically uncomfortable at her sudden inclusion in the discussion. She obviously thought the boy was dead; hacked to pieces in the Fleischregale or otherwise killed there, given the apparent extinguishing of his life line and the blood on the chopping block.

Vonvalt rolled up the map. “Then we have a great deal more to worry about.”

The afternoon was a tense and subdued time. We had each been instructed to bring a few garments of dark material, to camouflage us against the night-time blackness. The material was to be light and loose, easily cast off should one of us end up in the water. There was to be no armour for those of us inexperienced in matters of naval boarding, nothing heavy to drag anybody to the bottom of the bay. Pale skin was to be daubed with a black, tarry substance that would not wash off in the brine of the Grall Sea.

Vonvalt dropped off the chest a mile out to sea with the assistance of two of the rowers. I watched him through the blurry latticed glass of a tavern window. The water was not particularly calm, and the journey seemed to take a very long time. For the first time I was beginning to consider the implications of rowing at speed, in pitch darkness, in the sea. It also occurred to me that our burly rowers would probably be spent by the time we reached the abductors' vessel, leaving me to shoulder a much higher burden of the raid than I had previously anticipated. The thought made my guts churn.

As the hour approached, we took a light meal, once again in the private chamber where Vonvalt had briefed us. It was the last thing we would eat for many hours – indeed, it was the last thing that some of us would ever eat – and we needed to keep our strength up. Of everyone in that room, only the rowers seemed to manage more than a few mouthfuls; they wolfed down enormous quantities of food and ale. I picked at a chicken leg, but only managed in the end to eat its salty, crunchy skin.

A few words were exchanged, but we mostly sat in silence. Eventually, Vonvalt entered, smelling of brine and his face ruddy from the sea breeze. "The going is a little rough," he said, speaking directly to the rowers. "The locals think that it will come down by tonight. They are experienced cloudreaders so I have no reason to doubt their judgement." He gestured to everyone else in the room. "Come, all of you, we might as well prepare ourselves now. There is not much light left in the day."

We donned our dark garments, whilst the rowers, the only ones of us permitted to wear armour, strapped their leather cuirasses on. I would have preferred some private place to do it, but it would not do to be wandering around the town all clad in black boots, black breeches, and black blouses. Our party was drawing enough attention as it was.

Once that was done, those pale-skinned amongst us took turns to rub our faces, necks, and hands with the oily charcoal mixture. We all looked rather foolish at the end of this process, but anything we could do to enhance our concealment was something worth doing.

Eventually the time came. There was little by way of illumination in Linos, and certainly no street lanterns. A few small braziers burned outside the couple of public houses, but the settlement was like any other you would care to name within the Empire. When the sun went down, the working day ended, meals were taken, and for the vast majority, especially in the short

spring nights, bed and sleep beckoned.

We exited the tavern unseen and moved quickly out into the darkness. Sir Radomir and I made for the westernmost headland as directed, along with the second rowing crew. Captain Galla, Vonvalt, and Dubine, as well as the remainder of the rowers, including Lekan, made for the easternmost headland.

Sir Radomir and I ran parallel to the beach, quickly and handily outpaced by the rowers, who were at the very peak of human fitness. Above, a low ceiling of patchy cloud obscured featureless night sky, and the sea stretched out blackly like the open jaws of some gigantic beast. I could hear the waves more than I could see them crashing against the shore, and felt for the first time a visceral fear at this undertaking. Like so many of the things I had done in Vonvalt's service, I had turned to this task unthinkingly, with absolute faith in my master's judgement and ability to keep us safe. But Vonvalt could no more protect me from an errant wave capsizing our rowing boat than he could from the rising sun.

We reached the headland after perhaps ten or fifteen minutes' running, and then picked our way along its rocky, scrubby surface. A few times I nearly turned my ankle, and I heard Sir Radomir swear as he walked directly into a cypress tree. But eventually our eyes acclimatised enough to the darkness to be able to pick our way down the slippery, slimy rocks to where the rowers were manoeuvring our boat into the water. It was narrower than I had anticipated, and I realised that Sir Radomir and I were going to have to get very close indeed to fit inside it. At the back of the boat, I could see grapnels, short swords, and one-handed axes. It was only at that point that I realised these men were probably not just rowers but boarding specialists too, employed by the Imperial Navy.

Nearby, I could see a small stash of dried moss, leaves, and twigs, which would be set alight if we saw the ship approaching from the west.

"You go up and keep a watch out, Helena," Sir Radomir said, directing me to the top of the rocks. "You have younger eyes than me and will see further and better."

I wasn't sure I necessarily agreed with that, but I returned to the top of the headland anyway, concealing myself as best I could by lying flat amongst the undergrowth. My teeth chattered in the cool breeze. Anticipation gnawed at me.

We waited.

It must have been an hour or two after darkness had fallen that I saw a ship approaching, a black silhouette against the blackness of the night sky. It was a small ship for an oceangoing vessel, square-sailed, somewhere between thirty and fifty tonnes. It proceeded slowly, not greatly assisted by the breeze, though I think the wind was more powerful a mile or two out to sea. Fortunately, it was not a large oceangoing carrack, but a smaller cog. That at least worked in our favour. Surmounting its hull would be difficult, but not impossible.

I looked about, raising my head as much as I dared to look across the rest of the bay. There was nothing else out there, no other vessels on the water. It was a relatively calm, cool night, and despite the absence of moonlight, I could still see moderately well. I wondered just how concealed we would be.

I crawled over to the edge of the outcrop and called down to Sir Radomir. In spite of the breeze, the sound of the waves, and the distance of the ship, such was the quiet that I was still convinced that the sound of my voice would reach him.

I had to hiss down to him several times before he heard me.

“What?” he hissed back. “Do you see them?”

“Yes, I think so. I think you’d better signal the others.”

Sir Radomir cursed, and fumbled with a flint until a small fire crackled into life. I saw the faintest flicker of acknowledging flame from the other headland, before it was extinguished. We in turn stamped out our own fire.

I clambered down the rocks and the rowers helped me into the boat. Three of them were already in their seats; the fourth was standing calf deep in water, ready to cast off the line which he had secured to the headland.

Sir Radomir waded into the water, and then clambered in next to me. We were pressed together at the shoulder, all sense of propriety forgotten.

Now there was nothing to do but sit and wait.

XXIII

Springing the Trap

"If the Justice is not acting against the state's interests in all things, then she is not performing her role with sufficient zeal. She must be a bulwark against institutional oppression, not its facilitator."

FROM CHUN PARSIFAL'S TREATISE *PENITENT EMPIRE*

I will never forget that night. We watched as the cog slowly, almost sedately, made its way across the extremity of the bay, and dropped anchor perhaps half a mile from the crate. The crate itself was painted white so that it could be seen against the choppy, ink-black sea, and I was actually quite surprised at how effective this simple trick was.

I fancied I could hear the men's voices on the breeze. It was amazing how, in the relative stillness of the night, sound carried. My heart thumped in my chest so powerfully that I was sure it was going to punch through my breastbone. The tension was unbearable. Despite the incredible danger that awaited us, I found myself willing the whole experience to be over. Anything was better than this waiting.

A few taps, whispers and some subtle pointing amongst the crew drew my attention. I looked over to see a rowboat being lowered into the water from the side of the cog. It made laborious progress towards the chest, and I was concerned at the apparent difficulty it was having in traversing the waters of the bay. Eventually it reached the chest. I could see two figures inside it; they untethered the chest from the ballast which was keeping it anchored to the

seabed, and hauled it aboard. It thumped woodenly into the bottom of the rowboat. There was then a period of perhaps ten minutes during which the figures checked the coin, before they began the journey back.

I was so nervous at this point that I actually quietly vomited over the side of our rowboat. In other circumstances this would have brought a snort of derision from Sir Radomir, but the man simply patted me on the shoulder in sympathy.

Another fifteen or twenty minutes passed whilst we waited for the rowboat to reach the cog.

And then, suddenly, we were away.

The boat's bowman cast off the rope that was keeping us tethered to the headland, and I felt myself thrown back into the stern as the sudden and immense power of four sets of bulging arms propelled us out onto the Grall Sea.

Like my first trip down the Imperial Relay in Haunersheim, that frantic race to the abductors' cog is a knot of scar tissue in my mind. I was sick several more times as tension, coupled with the energetic bucking and rolling of the rowboat, overwhelmed me. Even Sir Radomir could not hold in his own meagre stomach contents. The wind, little more than a light breeze on the shore, now roared in my ears like thunder. Brackish water sprayed me, quickly soaking my clothes.

I looked periodically over to the left. If I carefully squinted, I could see the rowboat carrying Vonvalt and Captain Galla. It was extremely difficult to make them out against the sea and sky, and only the odd puff of white spray gave any indication that there was anything there.

I do not know how long that journey took. It felt longer than the five minutes Lekan had predicted, but it certainly wasn't more than ten. By the time we reached the cog, our enemies had withdrawn their own rowboat from the water, though neither plans to deposit the Prince, nor unfurl their sails and make any kind of getaway, seemed to be afoot. That lack of urgency troubled some deep part of my brain, a thought to be re-examined later.

Now, there was no time.

The first shouts from the deck penetrated the air. I felt my gut lurch as I saw men silhouetted against the night sky, barely visible against the aethereal dark grey cloud above, though their movements were unmistakably violent in intent. A moment later I heard the tell-tale thrum of bow strings being loosed,

and splashes as arrows speared into the water around us. I let out an involuntary shriek as one *thunked* into the wood of our rowboat barely a hand's breadth away from me.

"All right, here we go." Sir Radomir grabbed two of the swords at our feet and thrust one into my trembling hand. "Remember everything we have taught you, and stay behind me," he said grimly. I could smell wine on his breath. I wished I had taken some myself.

Our boat crashed into the side of the cog with a jolt. Now was the most dangerous time of this entire enterprise. A cold fear gripped me as I imagined the rowers, exhausted from such a punishing row, being picked off by pikes and arrows as they attempted and failed to scale the steep hull. Instead, a sudden thrill of optimism suffused me as I watched them snatch up the grapnels, apparently untroubled by the great exertion of the chase, and hurl them expertly over the side of the ship. I marvelled as they pulled themselves up, hand over fist, whilst practically running up the side of the cog. That these were experienced naval armsmen, employed not just for their rowing prowess, but also their ability to clear a deck of enemies, was in great evidence. Suddenly this didn't seem like such a madcap scheme after all.

I looked over sharply, my attention snatched by another heavy wooden thump. It had to have been Vonvalt's boat hitting the other side of the cog. This had the welcome effect of splitting the defenders into two parties. Those directly above us hacked frantically at the tar-hardened ropes of the grapnels, but it was no use. With their forces suddenly divided, our boarders were able to surmount the side practically unmolested and achieve the deck.

The first clashes of steel rang through the dark, brackish air as swords and axes met.

"Come on," Sir Radomir said, pressing himself unsteadily to his feet as the rowboat bumped and rocked, battered by both the cog and the waves in equal measure. The fourth boarder who had not yet surmounted the side of the enemy ship tied the end of a grapnel to a stay before clambering up to join the fight.

Sir Radomir was a far cry from these men. Approaching two decades their senior, not to mention a drunk, his strength was a gritty street-strength, not a sport-strength honed in the gymnasium. Sir Radomir was a sheriff, and fought smart, not hard. He did not have the dexterity required to climb the bucking, swaying rope, and overestimated his ability to do so. In seconds he

was thrashing in the water between the cog and the rowboat, his sword travelling to the bottom of the Grall Sea as effortlessly as a thrown spear. It was all I could do to help haul him aboard without capsizing.

He swore profusely and spat out copious amounts of brine as he rolled unceremoniously back into the rowboat and lay there like a dropped sack of shit. But I did not waste time in tending to him. He was fine, his ego bruised far worse than his body.

In the event, and with timing that would have been comic in any other circumstance, a rope lattice was thrown over the side. Torn between pretending I was caught up in the rowboat assisting Sir Radomir so as to keep out of harm's way, and my abiding sense of duty to Vonvalt – not to mention a curious fear of missing out on this particularly dangerous adventure, which I could imagine us talking about and raking over in taverns years hence – I grabbed hold of the seawater-swelled ropes and ascended the side of the cog.

Someone had lit lanterns on the main deck, which seemed unforgivably bright in circumstances where we had gone to great lengths to conceal ourselves. Already I could see several corpses; one of the rowers had been decapitated, and his head rolled around the deck like a loose cannon ball. Another had suffered a cut between neck and shoulder which ran six inches deep and which he would not survive; he leaned against the base of the aftercastle to keep the wound from gaping open, his face grey and hollow cheeked.

But there were casualties amongst our enemies as well. One man lay amongst a pile of his own intestines where these had spilled out like the contents of an overturned butcher's cart. Another writhed in agony and clutched his groin where an axe had severed his manhood from his body. Blood ran between the planks like the fuller of a sword.

I could not see Vonvalt. It was not clear to me whether he had surmounted the side of the hull, or if he had delved into the ship's hold, for there was certainly shouting and the sound of clashes emanating from underneath my feet. But Captain Galla was on deck, and I watched, enthralled, as she dispatched two men with ruthless Imperial efficiency.

"Watch! To your right!" she snapped at me. I turned to see a man – no, a boy, a lad of no more than fourteen or fifteen – coming at me with a bill hook. Had I given it any thought, I would have tried to spare his life on account of his youth, but in the event he gave me no choice – and my blood

was up far too much for me to indulge such honourable conduct. A swift, inexpert parry and a shallow backhanded chop to the lad's exposed neck dropped him to the floor, and there he writhed, pale faced and gurgling, as his life's blood ebbed away and he died. As with many of the people I killed, I found that the boy would haunt my dreams for years to come. A number of times I would wake up in a cold sweat, inconsolable with tears, the whole experience worsened on account of his youth and what I imagined to be his innocence – the murderous look in his eye, the spittle-flecked, screaming mouth, the bill hook gripped in his hands which he had intended to plug into my flesh, all forgotten.

I whirled around as a scream sounded from behind me. Another sailor was charging me down, this time with a one-handed axe which he had liberated from our dead naval boarder. I did little more than lift my own short sword up in a clumsy guard, for I had never been taught what to do against mismatched weapons; but I needn't have worried. Something whistled past my left ear and buried itself in the man's face with a sick spray of blood. He collapsed soundlessly to the deck. I turned back to see that Galla had thrown her own axe.

"Come," she said dispassionately and bade me follow her into the guts of the ship. I did so unquestioningly.

We clambered down a hatch and into the hold. Here I could hear and smell and feel frantic, chaotic combat: the smack of swords and axes on wet bodies and dry timber; the heady mixture of blood and rank sweat and shit; the thumping vibrations of clumsy, frenetic footwork; and the squeal of steel being pulled from wood.

I took in the scene before me. The ship's hold was much like a vault, low and dark, buttressed by ribs of wood. Ahead of Galla and me, the last of the ship's meagre crew tried to defend a visibly unarmed man dressed in expensive clothes. I saw Vonvalt, glistening with sweat, his shirt torn in a half-dozen places; around him were four of the boarders like an honour guard, one wounded at the hip. There were perhaps six or seven enemy sailors with a variety of weapons, and they had piled up crates and sacks of perishable goods as a makeshift battlement. Vonvalt had evidently used the Emperor's Voice moments before my arrival, for several had discarded their weapons and were standing in a daze, being ignored in favour of their still-armed compatriots.

Immediately it was clear that the engagement was only going to go one way. We might have been outnumbered, but we were not outskilled.

I moved in next to Galla, hugely emboldened by the fact that the fight was essentially over. We moved in tandem, tackling a man attempting a desperate overhand swing. It was an ill-advised manoeuvre, for his sword glanced off the ceiling of the hold and deflected, throwing him off balance. I recalled my lessons from the peach orchard of Vonvalt's old mansion, and, taking a short step forward, I thrust my sword into the man's chest, just under his armpit, driving forwards with my hip and shoulder. I felt ribs protest and cut and part, and the razor-sharp blade slid deep into his chest cavity, spearing his heart like an arrow through an apple.

His eyes bulged briefly – another expression of horrified bafflement forever branded into my memory – before Galla smashed her own sword into his cheekbone and cut most of the top half of his head off. He let out a ghastly snort of blood, which hit me full in the face, before he collapsed to the floor.

The man next to him was so overwhelmed with horror at this gory spectacle that he threw down his sword and tried to surrender, only for Vonvalt to cut a brutal channel running from the base of his left shoulder blade to the top of his left buttock. He spun automatically around and I saw a bloodless incision that might well have been lifted from a physician's anatomical textbook. Then Vonvalt took his throat out, and he collapsed.

My own efforts ground to a stunned halt after that. I had seen many appalling things, but the frantic, hot, sweat-soaked, and chaotic melee in that hold was particularly brutal.

Galla shouldered past me unceremoniously. I think she may have even pushed me back with a firm shove to my chest, the pommel of her sword bruising my breastbone. All I could do was watch as the remaining sailors fought tooth and nail, knowing there was no quarter to be had.

Another one of our boarders took a nasty cut to the forearm; he would survive the wound, but with a large chunk of his forearm excised which ended his rowing career. Another couple of messy gut wounds put two more of the sailors out of action, and spilled enough viscera, urine, and shit to make the one remaining crewman chance his arm with a surrender. The only concession to mercy he received was a horrible sequence of stabs from three separate people, which was astonishingly ruthless but which at least ended

his life more or less immediately.

And then a curious, charged stillness fell.

We stood there, our blood singing. The ripe, charnel-house stink of offal, mixed with the smells of brine and sweat, filled our noses. There was no sound but laboured breathing and the grunts and gasps of the wounded. I was filled with an overwhelming sense of nauseous elation. My whole body trembled and felt weak, but thrummed with the feeling that was akin to the heady buzz of drunkenness.

At the back of the hold, on his arse and facing us with a comportment of horrified stupor, was the unarmed, rich-looking man.

Vonvalt advanced on him.

"*Where is Prince Kamil?*" he thundered in the Emperor's Voice.

The impostor reeled. His head smacked back into the hull, eyes bulging.

"*Where is Prince Kamil?*" Vonvalt roared again.

"*I killed him!*" the man shrieked, and then vomited.

"*Where is Prince Kamil?*" Vonvalt demanded a third and final time, the power of the Voice and his own anger pounding off the curvature of the hold like a deflected cannonball.

"*I killed him! I killed him! I killed him!*" the man wailed, and collapsed into unconsciousness.

There was a deadly silence. Vonvalt raised his sword and threw it so that it speared into the floorboards of the hold, quivering there like a plucked string.

"Shit," he said quietly.

XXIV

In Hot Blood

“A man will go to great and abominable lengths in the name of honour.”

JURIST WILHELM LUTGARDIS

We searched the ship high and low for any sign of the Prince, but there was nothing.

In the aftermath of the chaos, a strange calm settled over the cog. The bodies of the enemy sailors were tossed overboard unceremoniously; the corpses of the Sovan rowers who had not survived the boarding – three in all – were covered over with a waxed cloth. We would take them back to shore and give them a proper burial.

Our wounded rower, the one who had taken the sword cut to the forearm, was tended to by his crewmates, who seemed to be well versed in the binding of wounds. He looked as though he would die, but he did not.

Vonvalt calmed himself on the deck of the forecastle. I went to him a short while later, and offered him a cloak I had taken from amongst the belongings of our enemies. Now that our blood was cooled and the fighting was over, we were beginning to realise that the sea air at night time, even in spring, was bitingly cold.

He accepted it wordlessly and donned it, not taking his eyes off the ink-black Grall Sea.

I stood next to him in silence. The boarding action had been an

unmitigated horror, but I felt as though I had acquitted myself well. It made me feel closer to him, our bond growing stronger. It was a pale imitation of Vonvalt and Bressinger's bond, forged in the many campaigns of the Reichskrieg they had endured together; but it was something, an experience not easily replicated.

"Sir Radomir was right. I should have trusted his instincts," Vonvalt said after a while. He sounded exhausted. "Where was he? I didn't see him." He turned to me suddenly. "Nema, he isn't dead, is he?"

He was not. Sir Radomir had made his way up into the cog after his misadventure, but even those brief moments were enough to see him miss pretty much the entire fight. That was the thing about melees: they were often over in a handful of minutes.

"He lost his footing when our rowboat pulled away from the side of the ship and went into the water. I think he lost his weapon and his wits for a minute or two."

Vonvalt snorted. "He will not be happy about that," he said, returning his gaze to the sea.

I looked down to the deck. Vonvalt must have been distracted, for I could see Sir Radomir plainly, assisting with the general aftermath of the fight. Being a sheriff, as well as a Reichskrieg veteran, he had been in his fair share of scrapes, and was as good at dressing battlefield wounds as any surgeon.

Vonvalt and I stood in silence for a while, watching the waves in the meagre light that was available. Eventually, Vonvalt said, "Helena." He paused. My heart leapt, but I had long since abandoned trying to make sense of the vagaries of my master's mood. Still, I knew him well enough to know when he was about to broach – what he considered to be – a difficult topic. "Helena, I have mistreated you, but not in the way you think." He was about to say more, but in that very moment he was interrupted by Captain Galla. I gritted my teeth as anger washed through me. "My Lord Prefect, when do you intend to interrogate the prisoner? The Emperor will want to have news of this as soon as possible," Galla asked. I actually opened my mouth to speak, to interrupt her in turn, but the words died in my throat. I was frustrated, but not foolhardy.

Vonvalt did not bestir himself for a little while. I could tell that he, too, was annoyed – though Galla remained impassive.

"Fine," he said after a while, throwing some piece of debris into the sea

that he had been fiddling with. “Let us be about it.”

He took me and Galla, collaring Sir Radomir en route, down below deck. Here our prisoner waited, the only survivor of the attack. He had been tied to a beam, and his wrists were marked with blood where he had made several attempts, with great violence, to free himself. He looked wide-eyed with fear and sweaty in the wan lamplight, and when the four of us entered the hold he began to make further, futile attempts to free himself. He grunted and squirmed pathetically, and it was easy to feel a great contempt for him.

I inspected the man. At first blush he looked for all the world like a legitimate, wealthy merchant innocently mixed up in all of this, and wore an expression of baffled terror to match. Around him, after all, lay the sliced and smashed corpses of his colleagues, men who but a few minutes before had been living, breathing people; whilst in front of him, he was faced with a collection of men and women, daubed in oily charcoal, clad in midnight black, sprayed with blood and flecked with viscera, looking for all the world like a vanguard of pagan rebels.

But immediately I could see there was something off about him. His features were gaunt, and the clothes – the fine doublet with cloth-of-gold trim, the expensive hose, fine leather shoes with pointed toes – were a poor cut and hung badly. There were other things too. He looked dirty. It sounds strange to say, for his skin was clean, by and large; but it seemed as though his pores were clogged with ingrained dirt. His teeth were crooked, and he wore no jewellery. This was a man who wore the costume of a wealthy merchant but with none of the airs of one.

“Listen to me,” Vonvalt said. Vonvalt was a stern man generally, and gave little of his time to levity for its own sake. But even so, he was also good and kind, and often his long spells of seriousness could be undone with a wry joke.

Here, now, he was as cold, unfeeling, and unyielding as iron. It actually frightened me a little to see him thus.

“You know what I am capable of. You know I can force you to confess using magicks. Do not make me waste time and energy employing them. I want to know everything, in as comprehensive, granular detail as you can provide. I want to know the nature of your scheme, whose idea it was, who you are working with and for, and most of all, I want to know what happened to Prince Kamil.

“I do not think I need to tell you how utterly devoid of any and all hope your position is. Know now that nothing but death awaits you. This is your only opportunity to mitigate the period between now and your execution, which can be either tolerable or extremely unpleasant. Be sensible, and be straight with me, and it will be the former, and not the latter.”

The merchant, if he could so be called, swallowed hard, and nodded fearfully.

“What is your name?” Vonvalt asked.

“Ivan,” the man replied.

“Ivan what?”

“Ivan Godric.”

“What is it you do?”

“M-merchant.”

“What *sort* of merchant?”

“No one sort, I-I deal with all kinds of shipments.”

“Where are you from?”

“K-Kzosic Principality.”

“What happened to the Prince Kamil?”

“I killed him.”

“How and why?” Vonvalt said, snapping his fingers impatiently.

“I… hit him on the head. I didn’t mean to!” He added to our aghast faces. Then, he started gabbling. “It just happened. He wouldn’t stop screaming. I put my hand over his mouth, but he just kept screaming into my hand. I tried to close his windpipe, but I was worried about throttling the boy, so I stopped. But that just made him scream louder. I was sure someone would hear. I tried to reason with him; I grabbed him by the shoulders and I shook him, and then I slapped him a few times, but each thing just made him scream louder. By the Deti, he was louder than the arena on games day. Even wrapping wet cloth around his mouth just made his eyes bulge like an insect. Eventually he started shaking like he was having some kind of seizure. He jerked and had great, heaving spasms. I could not abide it any longer, the *noise* of it, and the shaking. I picked up a bone breaker and hit him.” He tried to tap the side of his head, but forgot that his wrists were bound. Still, he persisted in trying to mimic the blow, which led to several long moments of him working awkwardly against his bonds. Eventually he tapped the side of his skull. “It killed him. I should have known. I should have known! He was

a small boy. The Haugenates are weak stock; their bones are brittle. He was no wolf. Barely a cub. It was as though his skull was made of eggshell. Yes, like eggshell. Like cracking an egg, as easy as that."

There was a long silence. It was horrifying to listen to. He spoke with a sickening, pleading sincerity, as though we might be drawn to understand if only he could explain it properly. It had the effect of making him sound profoundly insane; but even if that were the case, there was no doubting he knew exactly what he had done, and how.

"Why did you take the boy in the first place?" Vonvalt asked.

Godric pulled a strange expression of ambivalence. When he spoke, he sounded slightly surprised, as though he were explaining to himself for the first time. "I was desperate. I had been left in a precarious position thanks to Prince Tasa's whims. I was tasked with sourcing blackpowder for the Imperial Legions on the eastern front, some months ago now. I don't know if the task was officially sanctioned by the Emperor, for I am aware of all manner of stringent laws around blackpowder and its ilk, on account of its explosive nature. 'Tis a volatile compound, you see, formed of some substance which—"

"The docklands," Sir Radomir murmured.

"Yes," Vonvalt agreed. "You were storing some in a barge, in the Sovan wharf."

Godric paused. "What?"

"Blackpowder."

Godric thought for a moment. "Yes…" he said. "Yes, I must have been."

"What do you mean, 'must have been', were you or weren't you?"

"No, I think I was."

Vonvalt's nose wrinkled. "*Were you storing blackpowder in the Sovan docklands?*"

"Yes?!" Godric shouted as though a hot iron had been put up him.

"Have you ever received an answer that was halfway to being a question before?" Sir Radomir asked.

"Oh, I get all sorts," Vonvalt murmured, his face a picture of distaste. He thought for a moment. "You were working with some Kòvoskans, yes?" he asked Godric. "To source the blackpowder."

"No. Kòvosk is not the only place it can be sourced."

Vonvalt wrinkled his nose. None of this was fitting with his case theory.

“And you are working with Bartholomew Claver?”

Godric looked confused. “Who?”

“*Were you working with Bartholomew Claver?*”

“No!” Godric screamed as though he had been punched.

“Why did you take the Prince Kamil?”

Godric worried at the bonds holding his wrists. Blood trickled down his forearms in rivulets. “If I tell you, will you let me go?”

Vonvalt frowned. He looked at me. I shrugged, baffled by this entire exchange. Godric made my skin crawl.

“Do you understand why you are here?” Vonvalt asked.

Godric nodded vigorously. “Yes, because you tied me to this beam.”

Vonvalt lurched forward and slapped the man sharply across the cheek. We all started. Godric tried to clutch at his face, but of course could not, and squealed instead.

“*Why did you take the Prince Kamil?*”

Godric let out a long exhalation that turned into a scream. “Tasa took everything from me!” he shouted.

Vonvalt opened his mouth, and closed it again. Even I wrinkled my nose at the strange response.

“*Prince* Tasa,” Vonvalt warned.

Godric sagged. Something about his demeanour changed. “I wanted to be a good citizen,” he said quietly into the planks of the hull. “I spent a huge amount of coin trying to source some blackpowder from the men east of the Gvòrod Steppe.” He tugged at his bonds again, suddenly, angrily, and futilely. “All of my efforts were in vain. I lost two ships in the Jade Sea, and another on the Kova. This miserable fucking cog is all I have left.”

“Had,” Sir Radomir muttered.

“The Emperor’s son demanded a great deal of me, and it cost me everything.”

“So you sought to extract your revenge from *his* son?” Vonvalt asked. Even he looked slightly taken aback by the quiet horror of the confession of this man. Or perhaps his surprise was more to do with the fact that Godric did indeed seem to be operating independently of Claver, and this whole thing was truly, genuinely, a coincidence.

Godric shrugged as well as he was able to with his hands bound. “And why not? If my children starve because I lose all of my income, then Prince

Tasa would have killed them as surely as if he had clubbed them with a morningstar."

"*You* have children? A family?" Sir Radomir asked, his voice freighted with disbelief and distaste.

Godric seemed to think for a moment. "No…" he admitted. "No, I don't think so." He looked confused.

"What do you mean, you don't think so?" Vonvalt asked.

Godric shook his head. "I don't have a family," he declared eventually.

I watched Vonvalt and Sir Radomir exchange a glance.

"How did you know where Prince Kamil would be?" Vonvalt asked.

Godric sneered. "They think they are so clever, moving about the commonfolk with their pisspoor disguises. They cannot conceal their radiance." His eyes took on a glassy expression, and he examined the roof of the hold. "It… runs off them like the light from a lamp. They walk amongst us like the Deti from the Book of Creus, as though the angels had hacked away their wings and cut out the runes inscribed in the air above their heads." He chuckled to himself with jarring gaiety. "And they assumed no one would notice the blood running down their backs. Prince Kamil can no more walk amongst the filth of the tannery unnoticed than the Emperor himself. Even if you do not know their features by sight, there is a… *quality* to them, an energy which it is possible to detect. I knew the lad was having under-armour made by the Royal Tanner – 'tis not difficult to get information like that with a bit of coin in the right hands."

Vonvalt wore an expression of complete perplexion. "What are you *talking* about?" he asked.

Godric simply smiled at him like a simpleton.

"What 'radiance'?"

"I have told you," Godric said, earnestly. "They glow."

"Who glows?"

"The Emperor and his children and their children. I have seen it."

"The man has lost his wits," Sir Radomir said.

"*Who did you bribe for the information?*" Vonvalt demanded of Godric in the Emperor's Voice.

The man reeled, physically falling over backwards and yelping as his wrists held fast against the beam. But no answer came. Vonvalt battered him with the Voice again, but it made no difference; might as well have been

asking a lump of rock.

Vonvalt turned to me briefly and caught my eye. Again, I could only shrug. I had never come across anything like this in all of my time with Vonvalt. I'm not sure he had either.

Vonvalt turned back to Godric, and Galla bent her head towards my ear.

"Why does he not answer?" she asked me quietly. Sir Radomir leant in to hear my answer, too.

"I do not know," I said, truthfully. "If the identity of the person he paid is within his mind, then the Emperor's Voice should turn it out. Especially in these circumstances. It is clear he has no defence against it."

Vonvalt gritted his teeth. "So a member of the Imperial household informed you the boy would be travelling to the tannery?" he asked.

Godric nodded. "Knowing that he would be there, I simply hung about the place until I spotted him. With all the noise and confusion and stench, and all the fucking pigs and dogs and foxes and rats rootling about the place, t'was no difficulty at all to extract him from the care of his life guard and into the Fleischregale. In fact, I think he was playing hide and seek with the man anyway." He snorted. "It was as though he wanted to be captured."

There was another long pause. It was difficult to listen to the man, but at the same time unnervingly compelling. He rambled, but at times with a strange coherence of thought. He believed entirely in everything he said but had absolutely no perception how he sounded. In a curious way I wanted to hear more, for he was a fascinating study in madness.

"You did not mean to kill the boy, initially," Vonvalt said. "Tell me about your plan. You sent a ransom note to Prince Tasa."

Godric nodded vigorously. "I told you my attempts to source blackpowder cost me dearly."

"But not a thousand crowns' worth," Vonvalt said. "You could have founded a merchant bank with that level of coin."

"It seemed like appropriate recompense, given the trouble I have been put to." He sniffed.

Vonvalt let out a brief, incredulous laugh. "And your story is Prince Tasa tasked you with sourcing him blackpowder?"

Godric looked venomous. "Aye, that's right."

"You, a random merchant with a single cog to your name—"

"I told you I had four ships!"

“What were their names?”

“What?”

“What were the names of your ships?”

Godric opened his mouth and closed it again. “I… cannot recall.”

“You cannot recall.”

“No.”

“*What were the names of your ships?*”

“I don’t remember!” Godric exploded.

“What the fuck,” Sir Radomir sighed dejectedly to himself, rubbing his temples.

“Why did Prince Tasa select you?” Vonvalt asked Godric.

“I am discreet.”

“How did that come about? His instructions to you? You met with him?”

Godric looked confused. He looked about the hold as though he might draw an explanation from the planks.

“He… he…” Godric looked up at Vonvalt. “He…” He looked to be in physical pain as he tried to remember, wincing and screwing his eyes closed. “He had his people employ me. We met in the Principality.”

“Who were they?”

“I don’t know their names!”

“Describe them to me, then.”

“I mustn’t.”

“What?” Vonvalt asked sharply.

Godric shook his head. “A woman, a man, another man.”

“You are going to have to do a damn sight better than that.”

“A Kòvoskan, the woman. The men were Sovans, I am sure of it.”

“One of them was Claver, yes? A priest? A Neman priest?”

Godric shrugged helplessly. “I know not the man you mean.”

Vonvalt spat out a curse. “So you are saying you acted alone in all of this? What of your men here? The sailors we have dispatched this night? They were not in on it?”

“With a plan such as this, it is a good idea to tell as few people as possible.” I looked to my right, to see Sir Radomir idly nodding his agreement with this criminal truism. “These men knew nothing except my instructions. I have engaged in transactions such as these in the past.”

“Such as what?” Vonvalt asked

“Such as…” Godric thought for a moment. Again, the fog of confusion seemed to descend.

“Come now, it is a simple question,” Vonvalt said sharply, like a tutor reprimanding an unruly student. “I have told you, you are going to be executed; there is no sense in worrying about incriminating yourself or your co-conspirators.”

“I… I cannot think of any at the present moment,” Godric said eventually.

“Why did Prince Tasa not pay you? Given the lengths you have gone to, and the misfortune you have suffered? Why did he not reimburse you your losses?”

Godric looked surprised. “I had not even considered it,” he said.

“Your first thought was to abduct a member of the Royal household rather than beseech the Prince for compensation?”

Godric shrugged, as though he had simply made some clumsy, inconsequential mistake.

I saw Vonvalt’s hands closed into fists. “What did you do with Prince Kamil after you had killed him?” Vonvalt asked.

Godric pulled a sour expression. “What anyone would have done. I cut him up into pieces to better conceal and transport him.”

Galla, Sir Radomir, and I each let out a groan. Even Vonvalt, who had borne witness to two and a half decades of inhumanity, could not help but emit a snort of disgust.

“And then what? Disposed of his remains?”

“Of course,” Godric said, as though Vonvalt were an imbecile.

“Where?”

Godric opened his mouth, then closed it again. He seemed to think for a moment. “I cannot call it to mind…”

“*What did you do with Prince Kamil’s remains?*” Vonvalt roared in the Emperor’s Voice. Galla was immune as a member of the Imperial Guard, but Sir Radomir and I flinched as though we had been smacked about the head.

“Nema’s tits,” the sheriff muttered, rubbing his temples.

Godric looked for all the world like he was choking for a few seconds. Then he shrieked, “I don’t remember!”

The confession seemed to confuse even Godric, who looked about the hold once more as though the explanation were something he could pull out of the boards above. This had the effect of enraging Vonvalt, who was now

well and truly out of patience. He withdrew his short sword from the planks of the hold. Godric screamed, and judging from the sudden reek he emitted, soiled himself.

“Sir Konrad!” I shouted. He ignored me.

Vonvalt levelled his short sword at Godric’s throat, so that the tip was needling his neck. “Where are the boy’s remains?” he asked, his voice iron.

“I don’t know,” Godric said, tears and snot dribbling down his face.

“Where?” Vonvalt roared.

“I don’t know!”

“Where?!”

“I don’t—”

Vonvalt seized a fistful of the man’s doublet and yanked him forwards so that his face was but a few inches from his own.

“So help me, God Mother and Father and all the Deti, if you tell me you ‘do not know’ one more *fucking* time I will have your head here and now!” Vonvalt hissed furiously through clenched teeth.

Godric collapsed helplessly to the floor, the cord binding his wrists frayed to the point of snapping. He sobbed mightily but could not be drawn to say anything further by any means.

Vonvalt could have killed Godric, and done so entirely within the bounds of his authority, but in reality, thanks to the nature and form of the crime, Godric should have faced many further hours of questioning back in Sova. And in any event, to have taken the man’s head off in the hold of that cog would not have been a dispassionate execution per the tenets of Sovan legal procedure, so much as a violent, hot-blooded slaying. And Vonvalt already had a few of those under his belt thanks to the rebellion in Galen’s Vale.

I could tell Vonvalt was on the cusp of doing something rash, so I took a step forwards to pre-empt him.

“Sir Konrad,” I said gently. I looked back to Sir Radomir, and gave him a meaningful look.

“Y-yes,” Sir Radomir agreed, bestirred from whatever dark thoughts were percolating through his mind. “’Tis late, and we’ve much to do before dawn. He will keep until the morrow.”

Vonvalt straightened up. His hand felt for a scabbard that was not there, and it was that bit of idle confusion that seemed to clear his mind of whatever mischief had been filling it. He took a moment to regain himself, then turned

to us.

"Bind him, wrists and ankles," he said to Captain Galla. "Then bring him up on deck. The sheriff is right; we have a lot of work to do."

The cog was anchored in the bay, the corpses were ferried ashore, and the thousand crowns' ransom was recovered. Linos had a small gaol which was part of a disused customs house, and Godric was locked in there and put under guard. Bressinger volunteered to take the first shift, sour from having missed the action and keen to assist. I felt sorry for him, but I kept that to myself; Bressinger would detest the thought that he had my pity.

By the time we had sorted ourselves out, dawn was breaking on the horizon, and I realised with a sinking feeling that, as utterly exhausted as I was, nothing more than a couple of hours' rest beckoned.

We went our separate ways wordlessly. The sense of defeat and failure, hitherto kept at bay by a steady stream of matters to attend to, now sat heavy in our hearts. We turned in, slept, and then reconvened later the following morning in our private chamber in the tavern. Vonvalt had already made arrangements for the deceased rowers to be buried in the local fishermen's graveyard, for there was no point in their corpses being wheeled all the way back to Sova and rotting away to powder in the spring sun. I watched as gravediggers and the surviving rowers turned over three fresh plots, whilst behind me our sombre company broke their fast. In spite of the early hour, wine was in great abundance at the table.

What conversation there was revolved entirely around Sir Radomir giving an account of the night's activities to Justice Roza, which might have been amusing in other circumstances since he was the least well placed to give it. She was desperate for information, and especially irritating in circumstances where all of us were bone-tired. Galla, as usual, might as well have been carved from stone. The rowers were absent. Heinrich ate greedily, impervious to wider matters. In that respect, I envied him.

Vonvalt, still in the grip of his eldritch malady – easy to forget about in light of all our earthly misadventures – as well as old-fashioned human exhaustion, sat in surly silence. He had that morning attempted to interrogate

Godric a second time, this time alone – or rather with just Bressinger present – and so I had no first-hand knowledge of it. But it was clear that whatever mysteries had remained at the end of the night's action, they were extant that morning.

Eventually, Sir Radomir, clearly regretting having taken up the conversational mantle, turned to Galla when an opportunity presented itself, and asked, "You'll take the man back to Sova then?"

"Yes," Galla said. As always, the woman was inscrutable. I wondered whether her sense of duty and loyalty to the Haugenate family made Prince Kamil's murder hard to bear, or, whether like Vonvalt, she was simply inured to death in all its forms. If the former, she gave no hint of it at the table.

"Why not just kill him here?" Roza asked. She really had the bit between her teeth about executing Godric, and had asked Sir Radomir a number of times why the man had not been slain. Her zeal was a difficult thing to deal with so early in the morning.

"Godric will face the Emperor," Vonvalt said. "And I daresay the Truth-taker."

"Why?" Roza pressed. "The man confessed to everything, with and without magicks. Have his head off and be done with the whole business now. I will take the corpse back to Sova with me and explain everything that has come to pass."

Vonvalt shook his head. "No. I have decided that he will be transported back to Sova alive. In fact, I am going to send with him an order that he be detained indefinitely, until I return or I send further instructions."

"I still do not understand. Godric's explanation fits perfectly with what we have already conjectured – indeed, what we know to be true," Roza protested. "What good can there come of presenting him to the Emperor like some prize?"

"'Explanation' is a charitable word for it," Vonvalt muttered. "And it does not fit at all with matters I have conjectured."

"Why?" Roza asked. "Because he professed not to know Claver?"

"Because half of what he said was abject lunacy, and the other half defied all rational explanation."

"The Voice has revealed the truth, though," Roza said, uncertainly.

"There were some truths it did not reveal, and it should have," Vonvalt said. "The whereabouts of the Prince's corpse, for one." He gestured to the

old customs house. “And he was no more lucid this morning. If anything his mind was in even more disarray. He should not be able to keep things from me. The only way he can is if he has no knowledge of the matters in question. And that troubles me greatly.”

“But he did confess to murder? And you used the Voice to draw that from him?”

“I did.”

“Well then.”

Vonvalt let his cutlery clatter to the table. “‘Well then’ what?” he demanded.

Roza said nothing. She returned to her breakfast, chastened.

“If Godric was handling blackpowder without the proper licence, he could be hanged on that count alone,” Galla said from nowhere. “I say kill him. What’s the sense in wasting good victuals on him for the week back to Sova?”

“Thank you for that penetrating insight, Captain; I shall take it under advisement,” Vonvalt sighed.

Galla shrugged, and she too went back to her breakfast.

Vonvalt’s features creased in annoyance. “I have made myself clear that Godric is to be detained. Nema, I see that I shall have to *write* out special instructions. I want him to be kept in the watch house, under the care of Sir Gerold Bertilo. Godric is insane, there is no doubt in my mind about that. It is true that insane people can appear perfectly lucid, and it certainly takes a broken mind to hack the corpse of a young boy to pieces. But—”

“But *what*?” Roza suddenly pressed. “I agree that it is rare that a matter should be solved so comprehensively – leaving aside for a moment the fact that we have ultimately failed in our duty to Prince Kamil. Is the scarcity of such neat outcomes sowing the seeds of doubt in your mind? Do you not think your professional scepticism is colouring your view needlessly? After all, was it not Kane himself who said that the explanation that requires the fewest assumptions is the most likely to be correct?”

“*But*,” Vonvalt said, “there are key pieces of information that he cannot be drawn into giving me. Which means he does not know, or someone has tampered with the man’s mind.”

I looked up. “Is such a thing possible?” I asked.

Vonvalt shrugged. “I do not see why not. It is possible to lose portions of

one's memory after a blow to the head. Clearly the brain is capable of omitting certain things but retaining others. The question here is whether such is the result of Godric's insanity, or whether there is some other explanation. In either case, we cannot simply execute the man as a murderer. At this point I am loath to even rule out the possibility that he is innocent."

"But surely only someone who was intimately involved in the abduction could have known the matters he was lucid on?" Roza said. "After all, he knew about the Fleichsregale, did he not? And he said that he had paid someone for information about the boy travelling to the tannery. And more besides, from hearing your account of it. These are not things he could have cobbled together from hearsay. They are not widely known, and cannot have outpaced you from the capital."

"For what it is worth I agree with you. But there is a process to be followed," Vonvalt said.

"You cannot be serious? Such niceties will not fly in the capital. When the Emperor finds out Godric murdered his grandson, he will be fed to the war shepherds," Justice Roza said. "If you are interested in preserving due process, you would do better to hang the man here and now."

"No," Vonvalt said firmly. "I do not like it at all. There are a great many things to unpick before the man can be put to the sword." He took a long draw of wine. "It is just that I shall not be doing the unpicking."

"Perhaps I shall put some questions to the prisoner myself," Roza said quietly.

"As you will," Vonvalt said. He nodded to Heinrich. "Take the hound. May as well see if the smell of Godric bestirs him."

"Of course," Roza said. She looked for Heinrich, to find him lying next to me. In the course of her brief search she had caught my eye – the first time since I had tried to kill her. But the intervening events had done nothing to lessen the awkwardness of it, and she quickly looked away.

"And make sure Dubine is in the room with you. I shall want an account from him."

I looked up at Vonvalt, but his eyes were on his breakfast. Then I looked over to Roza. She looked irritated, and I thought she was going to argue again, but instead she simply nodded.

"As you wish," she said, and left, taking Heinrich in tow.

XXV

Leaving the Empire

“Many have questioned my methods; none have questioned the results.”

MARGRAVE ALFWIN VON THEUDOBALD, MASTER OF THE ORDER OF THE TEMPLE OF SAVARE

In the event, Roza was not able to achieve anything useful with Godric, and Heinrich showed not the least bit of interest in the man; and an hour after breakfast we prepared to part ways on the outskirts of Linos.

Only Vonvalt, Sir Radomir, Bressinger, and I, as well as Heinrich, whom I had been permitted to keep, would make the journey south to Südenburg. It was with no small measure of regret that I watched Galla and the remaining rowers saddle up, with the catatonic Godric in chains, and depart Kormondolt Bay to the north. Roza, too, accompanied them, sour-faced and silent. I was glad to see the back of her, though our paths would cross again.

Südenburg was not that much further south than Kormondolt Bay. We had travelled a fair few miles west in getting here, and in fact Südenburg was more or less due south from Sova. Our journey would take us a little closer to the Frontier, but most of it would be spent traipsing back east.

We saddled up and set off in the middle of the morning, leaving behind another settlement pleased to see the back of us – though we had paid them handsomely for a great deal of fresh water and a couple of hunting bows and sheaves of arrows. A few hours later, we passed a small stone marker which

was the only indication that we had left Venland and formally assimilated Imperial territory, and had entered the area known as the Frontier. The huge open expanse in front of us, which stretched to the horizon, felt intrinsically dangerous, unknowable, and frightening. I felt a profound sense of unease as we journeyed across the invisible line that separated us from the possessions of the Two-Headed Wolf.

"Is there any danger?" I asked Vonvalt after perhaps an hour of riding. We were drawing up to the first sign of civilisation – or rather, former civilisation. It looked like an early attempt at colonisation, a collection of houses in visibly Sovan styling, though long razed and left to rot. Judging from the overgrowth, it looked as though it had happened many decades ago.

Vonvalt nodded ahead of him, and I followed his gaze, though I could see nothing beyond that sorry ruin except a vast expanse of wildflower grassland.

"I doubt it. Not here in the lee of Südenburg," he said. "We are approaching the pilgrim path, or a branch of it."

I looked about, but there was no sign of anyone, let alone pilgrims.

"Where do they pilgrimage to?" I asked.

"It will be Balodiskirch, this close to Venland," he said, and pointed in the direction of it.

"What's that?"

"It is where Saint Creus is alleged to have spent the Long Insanity," Vonvalt replied. The Long Insanity described a long period of fasting and wandering in which Saint Creus, the earthly conduit between Nema, Savare, and the Deti, wrote much of the Neman Creed. Just how much was a debate in itself. "It was nothing; now it is a small temple, probably a day's ride from here."

"Huh," I said. "You'd have thought that would have happened somewhere in Sova, or near it."

Vonvalt shook his head. "No, Helena. You are in the Holy Land now." He freighted the words with sarcasm.

"If it is important to the Empire, why did they not conquer this first?" I asked.

"They tried, centuries ago. We have spoken on this before," he added with a measure of reproach. "I taught you of the Tijanic Crusades."

"Oh yes, I remember," I said quickly, and Bressinger laughed with great mirth at this patent falsehood.

“Control of the Frontier has shifted over the years,” Vonvalt said with a hint of irritation.

“Who controls it now?” It was Sir Radomir who had asked the question.

“Well, I suspect the Templars would say they do; the reality is more complex. I do not pretend to know the detail of it. The Saekas are the natives. They practise a type of paganism not dissimilar to the Draedists in the north.”

“Superb,” Sir Radomir muttered.

“Who are they?” I asked.

Vonvalt shrugged. “They are a people, like any other. Their only crime was that they were here before the Sovans, and they have paid for it with a great measure of blood.” There was some bitterness to his voice, which wrong-footed me. Vonvalt had always been slow to criticise the Empire, which was strange considering he was better acquainted with its faults than most.

“They would still kill us if they had the chance, though?”

“I should think so. Would you not?”

I fell to silence. At the time I felt very conflicted. At that point in my life I had been nothing except an Imperial subject. Like most in the provinces I had no great love for the Empire, and given that my parents – not to mention a good portion of my countrymen – had been slain by Legionaries, I had a better reason than most to harbour a grudge. Still, my time with Vonvalt had shorn me of some of my resentment. Out here on the Frontier, too, despite all of my lofty ideals of an even-handedness of the mind, of an incisive intelligence, and of a burgeoning legal practice which very much had its roots in liberal urban sensibilities courtesy of Vonvalt – my vulnerability made me yearn for the protection of the Templars.

Yet the thought of Imperials putting the locals to the sword simply for the crime of existing on coveted land breathed fresh life into the embers of my resentment. My thoughts returned to and dwelt on Muldau, and I felt my fragile acceptance of the Empire as a force for good wither on the vine.

“More to the point,” Sir Radomir asked uneasily, eyeing the old ruined settlement as we drew level to it, “*where* are they?”

Heinrich bounded into it, poking his nose through the old bricks and beams, tail wagging. A moment later he reappeared with what looked like a leg bone. He looked very pleased with himself as he brought back to me, and dropped it at my horse’s feet.

I regarded it with distaste. “Are we likely to see any?” I asked.

“If we are unlucky,” was all Vonvalt said, his eyes on the horizon.

We made camp that night, the smell of the sea now a distant memory. Several times during the course of the day we fancied we had seen people on the plains or traipsing down the pilgrim path, though we had not come close enough to know with any certainty who or what they were.

“Probably just merchants,” Vonvalt said as we unpacked our saddlebags.

“What is there to trade out here?” I asked.

“Not here. But if you can make it to the Southern Plains, to Qaresh or the Kasar Kyarai – or beyond – there is a fortune to be had.”

“Why not sail?” Sir Radomir asked. “We are bookended by two seas.”

“Those who can, do.”

We lay out our bedrolls whilst Bressinger made a small fire and Vonvalt divided up parcels of food.

“How far away are we from Südenburg?” I asked. I was feeling jittery after our sightings that afternoon.

“A few days yet,” Vonvalt said.

“You’d think they would have made it closer to the border,” Sir Radomir grunted, accepting a hunk of half-stale bread from Vonvalt.

Vonvalt shook his head. “It is not just Südenburg.” He gestured expansively into the darkness. “There used to be a whole network of wayforts guarding the pilgrim path. Now most of them are left to ruin. It is too expensive to maintain them, and barely anyone makes the pilgrimages any more.”

“Why not?” I asked. “There are plenty of pious Nemans out there,” I added drily.

“Mm – it’s too dangerous,” Vonvalt said, his mouth full. He gestured into the darkness again with his own bread. “The Templars have been out of fashion for a hundred years – until recently. It *used* to be that anyone who might have joined went to the Legions.” He shrugged. “Fewer Templars meant less protection, meant fewer pilgrims. The Emperor would rather conquer the Confederation than the Frontier.”

“Easy to see why,” Sir Radomir said. “There is little enough here.”

“There is no less here than anywhere else. There are rivers filled with fish and lands to till in the north, and stone to quarry and minerals to mine in the south. And there *are* settlements. One does not build fortresses like Südenburg, Keraq, or Zetland for no reason. But the Saekas are tenacious. They are hardy folk and doughty fighters like the Kòvoskans. They are capable of marshalling great hosts, but for the most part they play to their strengths, striking in small numbers, ambushing patrols, slaughtering unguarded settlements, and sowing fear. And the Frontier is a vast place. You could send an army of a million men into it and they would die for want of food before they laid eyes on a native.”

“Is that how the Saekas have been able to evade destruction?” I asked.

“Aye,” Vonvalt said. “And how they are able to destroy in turn.”

We stopped as Heinrich stood suddenly. He sniffed the air a few times, and began to walk away from us, into the darkness.

I exchanged a glance with Vonvalt.

“What is it?” I asked Heinrich.

Heinrich took a few more steps forward, sniffing again; then he let out a small whine, and padded back over to me. He lay down next to me, but moments later lifted his head again. His ears twitched as though he had heard something. I followed the line of his gaze, but I could see nothing in the darkness.

“Dubine,” Vonvalt said quietly. “The fire.”

Bressinger extinguished the fire with a few handfuls of earth. We all sat in silence for a long time, but I could hear nothing over the pounding of my own heart. Eventually, we all relaxed slightly.

“Probably a hare,” Sir Radomir muttered.

“Probably. But there is no harm in being cautious. Here, all of you, finish your food and get you to sleep. I will take the first watch.”

We struck camp at dawn and moved off once more. It was another day of trotting through empty miles of untamed wildflower plains under a hot, hazy sky. In other circumstances, I would have considered our surroundings

beautiful; but the knee-high grasses and flowers concealed all manner of imagined interlopers.

We crossed the River Sauber – here a wide, rocky, and very shallow body a far cry from the deep and fast channels it cut through the heart of Sova – and picked up the pilgrim trail north of Südenburg. There was still no sign of the fortress, and I found myself increasingly anxious to be within its walls. It felt like hypocrisy.

After a couple of hours, we reached Balodiskirch, but it was not the huge cathedral-like temple I had been expecting for such an important holy site. Instead it was a small, dusty, and tumbledown accretion of stones. Crude idols had been cut into the rock of the outcrop, worn smooth by generations of pilgrims' hands, and there was a small, dark alcove where I could see a stone altar. If there had ever been a deer skull, it had long decayed to powder.

We took the opportunity to give the horses a rest, and dismounted to have a look around. Vonvalt was not a religious man, but he could not pass up an opportunity to examine a place of such historical importance to the Empire. But, as with the Temple of Nema, the holy stones seemed to reject him, as though they had thrown up an invisible barrier. His ailment flared, and he had to sit further away and take some water. We had been so consumed by the abduction of Prince Kamil that I had forgotten all about it; now my guts churned with fear. How long did he have left?

"We should go," I said, unable to keep the anxiety from my voice. We needed to move much more quickly. The Frontier was so much bigger than I had expected. We had not even reached Südenburg. Vonvalt was going to perish before we even had a chance to fix him, and I could not bear the thought of it.

"The horses need to rest," Bressinger said dismissively. He was biting a sausage into pieces and using his thumb to flick them towards Heinrich, who snapped them out of the air.

I was about to argue when I saw movement to the east.

"What was that?" I asked.

"What was what?"

I squinted, trying to see through the shimmering air. "I saw something, movement over there." I pointed.

Bressinger and Sir Radomir came over to me to follow the line of my finger. They both looked for a long while.

“Where that stump is?” Sir Radomir said, indicating a couple of feet of splintered grey tree stump.

“Yes,” I said. “In the tall grass just to the left of it.”

The sheriff walked over to his horse and unpacked one of the hunting bows. He strung it, took out an arrow, and walked back to where we were.

“You cannot hope to hit that,” Bressinger snorted. “That’s over a hundred yards away.”

Sir Radomir said nothing. He took a moment to gauge the distance and the breeze, and then in one fluid motion nocked the arrow and loosed it. It sailed through the air and *thunked* into the stump.

“Fuck me!” Bressinger said, unable to conceal his delight. “Where did you learn to do that?”

Sir Radomir sucked his teeth. “I had to as a boy. A few hours every week, after temple.”

We watched the sheriff as he traipsed across the grass to retrieve the arrow.

“Can you not shoot like that?” I asked Bressinger.

“I’m missing a fucking arm,” Bressinger said as though I was stupid.

“*Could* you?” I said, laughing at his mock-serious expression. “When you were a boy?”

“You could count on one hand the number of times I have – *nyiza*!” Bressinger began, but then was running to his horse.

“What?” I asked, baffled, watching as he pulled his side sword out of its scabbard.

I turned back sharply to where Sir Radomir was, to see that he was tussling with someone. Two more people were pressing themselves out of the grass.

“Sir Konrad!” I shouted as Bressinger sprinted past me – and Heinrich sprinted past him.

Vonvalt whirled around from where he was sitting.

“Shit,” he said, and in spite of himself, ran to grab his own weapon.

I grabbed mine, too, and ran towards the fight. Several Saekas had emerged from the grass. One was doing her very best to stab Sir Radomir in the neck; the other had a one-handed battleaxe, not unlike the hatchets that the naval boarders had used on Godric’s cog, and was moving to intercept Bressinger. The third had a compound bow, which had been aimed at

Bressinger but which was now aimed at the rapidly closing Heinrich. The Saeka let out a yell of frustration as Heinrich pelted towards him, shot the bow in haste and missed, and then turned to flee.

“Throw down your weapons!” Vonvalt tried in the Emperor’s Voice, but he was drained of energy and still too far away, and it had no effect.

I drew level with Bressinger after a mad dash across the grassland, splitting the closest Saeka’s attention. He was tall man, with the same features as a Kòvoskan – black hair and beard and coppery brown skin. He wore a leather gambeson stitched with interlocking plates of steel which formed an impressive circular pattern.

The moment of uncertainty caused by my arrival was quickly decisive. The man moved to take one step backwards and so give himself more space, and his heel caught a piece of scrub. His eyes widened as he stumbled and lost his footing, and Bressinger moved in with feline speed. The tip of the sword slotted neatly between two of the steel plates of the man’s gambeson – possible only thanks to the awkward angle – parting his ribs and skewering his heart.

Such was my faith in Bressinger’s abilities that I was already moving on to the other Saeka, a woman with no armour but instead wrapped in strips of dark cloth. Sprigs of grass and wildflowers were tucked into the folds, presumably to mask her scent from Heinrich. She was now on top of Sir Radomir and was very close to cutting his throat. Without thinking, I chopped roughly at her shoulders and neck, and she screamed out, suddenly arching her back. Sir Radomir punched the blade out of her hand and threw her off, and Bressinger moved in smartly and thrust his side sword directly through her windpipe. The three of us stood over her, sweating and panting, watching as she died.

“Nema,” I swore as she finally expired. I turned away. The wounds I had dealt her were dreadful, and already the earth underneath her was turning red.

A few dozen yards away, Heinrich was trotting back towards me. His muzzle was drenched in blood, and strips of human neck flesh hung from his teeth. It was a ghastly sight, but they were not called Sovan war shepherds for nothing.

“Good boy,” Sir Radomir said quietly, roughly scratching the dog’s head and ears and wiping away the worst of the gore.

Vonvalt, seeing that we were out of danger, had already slowed to a walk.

Even that brief dash seemed to have sapped what energy he had left.

"Are you all all right?" he asked.

We all confirmed that we were. Vonvalt reached the bodies of the two closest Saekas and looked at them for a long while. Then he looked up, squinting through the haze, scanning the horizon.

He sighed. "We had better get moving."

We rode for a long while, this time well into the night. By the time we stopped we had reached an old wayfort that had once been Waldeburg Keep.

There had been no further sign of natives, and we eventually agreed that the attack had been an opportunistic one. The Saekas must have watched us for a day or two, trying to gauge our weaknesses, and had Sir Radomir not disturbed them they would probably have struck that very night.

We spoke on this and more as we picked at salted meat and bread around another small fire, too tired to engage in anything other than lacklustre banter. Our spirits were nonetheless quite high; the wayfort was raised up above the plain and provided good views for miles in every direction, and it was a clear, moonlit night. For that night at least, we were alone.

"Another kill under Helena's belt," Sir Radomir remarked. "Thank you, by the way. She had the better of me, that girl."

"I am glad to have helped," I said. I thought of my sword cutting into the woman's back, chopping through her skin and muscle, her gasps and cries of pain. "I take no pleasure in it."

"Nor should you," Vonvalt said from the corner. He had been largely silent since the attack. "It is a grim business."

We all looked up sharply as the harsh caw of a rook penetrated the still night air.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say that fucking bird has been following us since Badenburg," Sir Radomir said, pointing his dagger at it. It stood atop a moss-covered pillar which had once held up a thick wall of stone. Now those stones laid scattered about, smashed and blackened from fire and covered over with weeds.

"There is more than one rook in the world," Bressinger said, turning back

to his meal.

“I dreamt of a rook two nights ago. It appeared just before I woke up from my nightmare,” I said.

“None of us need reminding about your visions,” Bressinger grumbled.

“Aye,” Sir Radomir agreed. “Who knows who you’ll come for next?”

I frowned, briefly confused, until I realised he was mocking me about my trying to kill Justice Roza in Linos.

“You need not worry. You are not a rival,” Bressinger said under his breath, winking at the sheriff.

“Hey!” I snapped half-heartedly, but I did not take my eyes off the rook. I looked at it uncertainly. Now that I thought about it, I had seen a number of them around Sova over the past few weeks. Could it possibly have been the same bird?

“It is as Dubine says,” Vonvalt said, as though reading my thoughts. “It is just another bird. Probably looking for a morsel.”

“Although,” Sir Radomir said, his voice now contemplative, “not seen much in the way of trees in the past two days.”

“So?” Bressinger asked.

“Do you ever grow tired of being contrary?” Sir Radomir asked. “Nema knows it tires me.”

“Oh, don’t fucking start,” I said, my voice freighted with weariness.

Bressinger snorted, and then he and Sir Radomir were laughing. Even Vonvalt cracked a smile.

“Where *do* rooks nest?” Sir Radomir asked after a while.

Now we all looked at the bird. We looked at it for a long while, as if we might discern some intelligence lurking behind the eyes, waiting for it to give us a sign – perhaps by flapping around in a circle or doing some other non-birdlike action.

In the event, it simply cocked its head, and cawed at us again.

Sir Radomir snorted. “Pass me the bow. A little game would not go amiss.”

“Emphasis on a little,” Bressinger said. “It must have less than a pound of meat on it.”

The rook flapped its wings and flew away.

“Perhaps it did understand after all,” Sir Radomir murmured uncertainly.

We sat in silence for a long time after that.

That night I dreamt of a beach. The sea was black, as though it were putrid. Next to it, the beach stretched for miles into the gloam, a flat and bone-pale plain of sand.

The rook was there again. It cawed with a strange timbre that seemed to echo infinitely, and this time I followed it, traipsing through the sand –

No. Not sand. I realised, looking down, that it was made of bones. Uncountable millions of tiny bones.

The rook was leading me to a stone tower. It was the tower at Gabler's Mount, near Rill, the place where Vonvalt had used his necromancy to speak to the spirit of Sir Otmar. Despite the dread in my heart, my dream legs were once more being propelled by some force at odds with my sleeping will.

The rook led me through the open door at the base of the tower and I ascended the steps just beyond the threshold. At the top there was a figure standing looking out over the necrotic sea, wearing a battered brown cloak of waxed cloth. The figure had long dark hair that was fading to grey, and filled me with a strange sense of familiarity. But it was not Sir Otmar Frost, as I had expected.

The rook perched on the figure's shoulder and cawed.

In the distance, many miles away, I saw the Muphraab slowly making its way towards me.

"Please, not again," I moaned.

The figure turned away from the parapet.

It was Justice Resi August.

"Helena," she said sadly. "Please listen carefully; I do not have much time."

XXVI

Lessons on the Afterlife

"Binding nations into empires is like tying together a pack of hounds; first they squirm, then they bite; then they tear each other to bloody ribbons."

COUNT BREN VAN DER LARR

One would think I would grow used to waking up to see concerned and frightened faces hovering over me, but I never did.

I pressed myself up into a sitting position. Sir Radomir was standing close by, hand on the grip of his short sword, the blade half drawn. Next to him, Heinrich stood in a low crouch as though ready to pounce, growling and drooling. Vonvalt had been holding the back of my head; now he stood up and took a few steps back, the Oleni medallion around his neck once again lightly smoking. Bressinger was on the other side of me, the *Grimoire Necromantia* open in his hands. I fancied I saw a faint pink glow emanating from it.

He snapped it shut. It jolted me in the same way a sharp slap might have.

"August," I said. I watched Vonvalt's features transform from concern to shock. "Justice August. I saw her. She spoke to me."

Vonvalt took a step forward and then sank to one knee. His expression was a difficult one to read. "You saw her?"

I nodded, and with a trembling hand wiped perspiration from my forehead. "She spoke to me," I repeated. "She told me – she gave me a

message. The – *entity* – was there—”

I stopped. Something had whispered in my ear. I turned sharply to my left, but there was nothing there.

“Did you hear that?” I asked, whispering myself.

Vonvalt held up a hand for silence. He gripped the Oleni medallion absentmindedly, and looked around the ruins.

“What is it?” Bressinger asked.

Vonvalt ignored him. After a while, he said, “It is close. Much too close. The fabric of reality around me is getting thinner.” He turned back to me. “Where did you see her?”

I described to Vonvalt the watchtower on the sand next to the black sea. I had to fight to remember the details. My brain was desperate to let go of the traumatic memory.

Vonvalt rubbed his chin and nodded.

“The Ossian Sea. It forms another part of the *Edaximae*. I know of it, though only vaguely. The way Gero describes it, in the geography of the afterlife, it is a desolate place – though, I should warn you, I have read that one should never enter the water.”

“I did not have command of my movements,” I said. “It was as though I were a passenger in a horse-drawn cart.”

Vonvalt was silent for another long moment. He pulled out his pipe, lit it, and took a long draw. “How was she? How did she look?” he asked guardedly. I did not care to guess at the conflicted nature of his emotions. The overwhelming temptation must have been to bombard me with questions, but Vonvalt did not know what happened to a person’s spirit once they had passed beyond the initial threshold of the afterlife. Even the Order’s most learned necromancers had only managed speculation over the centuries. For all he knew, August might have taken on some horrific, spectral form.

“She looked exactly the same as the day she died,” I said.

Vonvalt thought some more. “She was the rook,” he said. “Commanding it like a puppet.”

I nodded. “Yes, that is what she said.”

Vonvalt looked as though he were close to tears. “She knows of my predicament.”

“She does. She has been watching matters unfold. She did not tell me how. She did not have time. The *entity* was there. It is always there in my

dreams now."

Vonvalt shook his head. "I do not dream of it at all."

"I see it every time I sleep. Justice August said that because I am Entangled, like you, it is… *attracted* to me. I did not understand her explanation, but she likened it to a scent that we share, like a shark drawn to blood."

"What was her message to you? Did she have anything to say to me?"

"She said that she was working on a way to rid you of the curse, but… I didn't really understand it. It sounded as though she was on the run, like an escaped prisoner. I don't think she was supposed to be where she was."

Vonvalt considered this for a very long time. I think he was keen not to appear too hopeful, too desperate, and so collected himself during one of his lengthy periods of silence. Heinrich returned to me and nuzzled my hand, and I stroked his enormous head. Bressinger and Sir Radomir occupied themselves, though it was clear we were all simply waiting for Vonvalt to speak again.

"What is her plan?" Vonvalt asked very quietly.

"She told me that you need the *Codex Elementa*. The necessary lore is in there, and since the parasite was incanted from the afterlife, the hex can only be broken by travelling there – to the E-Ed—?"

"*Edaximae*."

"Right. But I think she can disrupt it. Not for ever – perhaps not even for long – but she can slow it down. But she needs help."

Vonvalt shook his head. "I cannot journey to the afterlife; I will be destroyed the minute I cross the threshold."

I took a deep, shaky breath. This was one of the few things from my encounter with Justice August that I remembered with absolute clarity.

"She didn't mean help from you. She meant help from me."

Of all the things I have been tutored in, I can say that, without reservation, necromancy is the worst.

With swordplay, the purpose is to teach the student about how to defend oneself against an armed opponent, and to attack, best, and kill that opponent.

Swordplay is rarely taught as an end in itself, except for perhaps members of the Imperial Royal family. Instead, it is taught on the understanding that the student will one day have need of the skill in battle. This focuses the attention; it gives the lessons an undercurrent of severity and makes them a sober experience. Indeed, at the first sign of levity, the reprimand is quick and always the same: “Pay attention: this might one day save your life.”

It is, however, difficult to injure yourself with a sword. Pick one up, swing it around, and you are extremely unlikely to cut off your own arm or head. The same is not true of necromancy.

“Journeying into the afterlife is like diving into the sea. It is large enough that most of the time you can pass through unmolested. But, like the sea, there are also predatory entities. The trick is knowing when to get out.”

It was the day after my dream of Justice August, and we were riding further south-east. Here, at last, the ground was gently undulating, and although it was hardly remarkable scenery, it was better than the monotony of endless wildflower plains. Vonvalt and I rode next to one another, whilst behind us Bressinger and Sir Radomir played a game involving wordplay.

“The first thing you must learn are the wards,” Vonvalt continued. “There are many things that can go wrong with the practice, but insanity is far and away the most common.”

“Aye,” Bressinger said darkly. “You remember Justice Sokol.”

“I try not to,” Vonvalt replied, but did not elaborate.

I shuddered. Vonvalt had never led me to believe that the practice of necromancy was anything other than a recklessly dangerous undertaking, but even so, I had hoped he’d been exaggerating, even slightly. If anything, it appeared he had been underplaying how dangerous it was.

“How long does it take to train an initiate in the ways of necromancy?” I asked.

Vonvalt shrugged. “As with anything, it depends on the initiate. Some have an aptitude for it, whilst others will never grasp it. Everyone is taught its rudiments in the first year, though only a tiny fraction progress. We shall have to take a leaf out of Claver’s book and strip out absolutely everything except the bones of it. In that way, I should think it would be possible to intensively tutor someone over the course of, say, a month.”

“How can I possibly pick it up in – what, a week?” I asked. I was trying to keep my voice level, but despite my best efforts, I was sounding a little

frantic. “It sounds more like diving into the sea but not knowing how to swim.”

Vonvalt shook his head. “You cannot. But the syllabus within the Magistratum is focused on training a fully fledged necromancer. That means someone who can operate completely independently. You will have help on either side of the mortal plane. We can cut out months’ worth of study. I can get you there, Resi can keep you there, and Bressinger can get you back. All I am going to teach you is how the process works, what to do and when, and how to protect yourself if something goes wrong. A week will be more than enough time.”

“All right,” I said, still uncertain. “You were talking about the wards, then.”

Vonvalt nodded. “Think of the wards like a suit of armour. They will protect you from a great many things –”

“But not everything,” I interrupted.

Vonvalt pursed his lips. “Helena, listen. I know that this is daunting. And I am – truly – sorry for the manner in which you have been introduced to these matters. It is indicative of a tremendous strength of spirit that you have weathered these horrors with such fortitude. And I know that ultimately I am being selfish. This is all to save *my* life. It would be the easiest thing in the world to simply let the parasite consume my life force. Then the matter would be over.”

“But it would not be over, Sir Konrad,” Bressinger called out from behind us. We both turned. “Without you, Claver will go from strength to strength. There is no one else in the Order capable of stopping him.”

“Aye,” Sir Radomir agreed, spitting. “’Tis not selfish to save your life; ’tis necessary to preserve the realm, and the rule of law. I am no lover of the Emperor, or the Empire, but the stability of its continuance is better than the chaos of its collapse.”

I could tell that Vonvalt was touched by this, even if he was irritated by the interruption. But he did not say anything, nor did Bressinger and Sir Radomir wait for a response. Instead, they returned to their game.

Vonvalt continued. “What I am saying, Helena, is that you must continue to tap into that courage. I know it is within you. You have a core of hard iron that was forged in Muldau. And, Nema, Helena, you have killed men. I have *watched* you do it. You have grasped that nettle, where many others have not

and would not." He threw up his hands, as if only just remembering the litany of experiences I had had as his retainer. "And you have *been* to the afterlife. You have seen it at its very worst. You have seen the parasite up close. And by the sound of it, you weathered that storm better than I did. You are stronger than you know. Do not do yourself a disservice by letting your fear overcome you now."

I admit I was heartened by this impromptu speech, and the earnest dispassion by which it was delivered. And besides, I had been pestering Vonvalt to tutor me in the art of necromancy for some time, mainly to give me the means of defending myself. "You are right. I am ready."

"Good. Now hearken to me: the first thing to do is learn the wards." He clacked his tongue. "But we can't do that without the *Grimoire Necromantia*. So we will look at those later." He thought for a moment. He was clearly torn between giving me enough information so that I could survive, whilst trying not to frighten me. It was a bit like giving a peasant just enough weaponry and armour that he might charge an enemy line, but not so much that he became a danger to himself and those around him.

"In fact, I will start with an overview of the entire process." He pulled out his pipe, lit it, and drew on it. Then he clenched his teeth around its end and held up an index finger. "The first thing we do is incant the wards. These protect us from the predatory entities of the afterlife. Most of these creatures are opportunistic; more still are curious. A living person who journeys to the afterlife leaves a strange footprint to those which inhabit it, and it attracts them much like – well, blood attracts sharks, to borrow your metaphor. Some wards protect us like armour; others act more like a cloak of invisibility, rendering you imperceptible in the same way prey animals might have camouflage markings."

"Which do you use?"

"It depends entirely on how much time I have to prepare. Sometimes it is better to try and avoid being detected entirely. Always, though, I will try and incant more than one. There is no interaction between them and there is no disbenefit to incanting multiple wards."

"All right, so you have warded yourself. What comes next?"

"The *Nyrsanar Navi*," Vonvalt said. "That is what is known as the *descendant* incantation, or the incantation of descent." He took another long draw on his pipe. "You will hear both names used interchangeably."

“What language is that?” I asked.

“It does not matter,” Vonvalt said. “And you will not be making the incantation, so I will not go into detail. Mastering the *Nyrsanar Navi* is the most dangerous part of becoming a necromancer. It is taught only by the Order’s most experienced practitioners, in very controlled circumstances. You recall I told you about the old Saxan magical runes inscribed in the foundations of many of the Sovan buildings of state?”

“Those that allow the buildings to rise higher than our engineering should allow?”

“Precisely. Well, there are rooms in the sub levels of the Grand Lodge which are inscribed with special runes to nullify the effects of miscantation.”

“They have drainage ditches,” Bressinger called out from behind us. I looked back, to see that he was wearing an expression of dark humour.

“Whatever for?” I asked, but I realised shortly after. “Prince of Hell,” I murmured.

Vonvalt shot Bressinger an irritated look. “I told you, you are not going to be doing it, so do not let it trouble you. That is all you need to know.”

“How will I get *down* there?” I asked, fumbling around the nomenclature.

“You recall how coming into physical contact with me transported you there involuntarily?”

I nodded.

“That is how.”

“But I thought you could not go?” I asked.

“I cannot. But I can send you down.”

“So I ward myself, hold your hand, and you chuck me into the afterlife like a pail of shit out the window?” I asked. I had meant it to sound light-hearted, to mask my trepidation, but instead it sounded caustic. All three men laughed, mistaking my tone for gallows humour, and a flash of anger surged through me. “Yes, laugh, all of you,” I snapped. “Let us all have a big laugh about Helena and her suicidal undertaking.”

“Easy,” Bressinger said. “We are not laughing at you, Helena. We are laughing with you. We will all shoulder our share of the danger.”

I sulked. “Well, I don’t particularly feel like laughing right now,” I muttered. Heinrich looked up at me from about my horse’s feet. I think the dog sensed my frustration, and whined in sympathy.

“I think that’s enough for now,” Vonvalt said, extinguishing his pipe. He

looked tired. “Let us pick it up a little later.”

We travelled for the balance of the day, and made our camp in the lee of a rocky overhang. The ground was becoming progressively more fractured here, and the trees were accreting into something approaching forests. There was even the gurgle of water as underground streams broke the surface and merged into nascent rivers.

“Tell me about the afterlife. Why do some people refer to it as the ‘holy dimensions’? Or the ‘astral plane’? Or the ‘spirit realm’?”

“It is the same as ‘Draedist’ and ‘Saxan’ magicks. They are different terms used by different people to refer to the same thing. The fact is, nobody truly knows what that place is. Even Master Kane and the other learned necromancers of the Order could only speculate – and that is after years of study.”

“During the séance in Galen’s Vale, the Trickster spoke to us through Graves.” I shrugged, though my nonchalance was entirely affected. “It seemed very lucid. Could you not simply ask one of the entities there about the nature of their surroundings? Question them, as though you would a hopeful initiate?”

Vonvalt shook his head. “Would that it were so simple. The Trickster is an anomaly amongst the demons of the afterlife. It makes it its business to meddle with necromancers. And I’m afraid that it would delight in tormenting you, probably to the point that you lost your mind, if you tried to get anything approaching a straight answer out of it. Do not let its silly name fool you; it is a dangerous and malevolent spirit, and I should not have held the connexion with the afterlife open for as long as I did during that séance.”

“*Obzinyit utyus*,” Bressinger muttered, a Grozodan expression that translated literally into Saxan as “no one will argue with you”.

Vonvalt ignored him. “We know that it is a place where one’s spirit, or soul, or ‘life force’, or whatever you want to call it, travels after they die. But whether it is one place with multiple different locations, like the provinces of the Empire, or whether it is many different places, is unknown. The Nemans preach that if one is good and moral in the course of their life, paradise awaits

them in the *after*life. Well, in my experience the afterlife and everything in it is completely indifferent to us and our 'souls'. One should lead a good and moral life because that is the right thing to do as an end in itself."

"Hear hear," Sir Radomir said, scraping dirt from under his fingernails with a dagger.

"To my mind, the afterlife is simply another plane of existence, a stage where humans are not the protagonists. And, just as in the real world a person may be killed by a merman in the Jade Sea, or trampled by an elephant, or poisoned by a snake, so too may a person's soul be attacked by entities in the afterlife."

"What about Justice August?" I asked suddenly.

Vonvalt looked at me askance. "What do you mean?"

"She is not dead. Her body lives on, in Galen's Vale. How is it that she can be there?"

Vonvalt was quiet for a moment. "I have asked myself the same question. I have two theories. The first is that she is truly dead; that the killing of her conscious mind is all that matters in that respect. If that is the case, then she will never recover, and the living, breathing body in the Galen's Vale hospice is simply an empty vessel waiting to expire."

I could tell Vonvalt was upset. He tended to conceal his inner turmoil with cold, dispassionate words.

"And the second?"

"The second is much more speculative – and here I am really at the outer limits of my knowledge. There is another way to enter the holy dimensions. It is called the City of Sleep. It is not part of the purgatorial plane – the *Edaximae*. It is a separate dimension. If Justice August is not dead, she may be stuck in that limbo. This theory would also make sense in light of what you told me – that you felt Resi was trapped somewhere she was not supposed to be."

"Here's a thought," Sir Radomir asked. "What is to say that the afterlife is not the true form of existence? And what we experience now is the 'pre'-life?" As usual, his gruff manner belied an incisive intellect.

Vonvalt smiled. "You are a Rochusian," he said. "You would be interested in the work of Justice Emmerich Rochus."

"I very much doubt that," Sir Radomir murmured, not taking his eyes from his nails. Bressinger snorted.

“There are places detailed in the old lore. You must remember that the Nemans were travelling to the afterlife long before the Magistratum was. Much of the Church canon, whilst shrouded in nonsense, is a rich seam of information. The Ossian Sea, for example, is referred to in the work of a Neman scholar called Clothildis Gero, and the skeleton beach that abuts it. You of course have heard of the Broken Path, and the Halls of Hell. That—”

“Wait, you mean to tell me that *hell* is *real*?”

Vonvalt shook his head impatiently. “You are not listening to me. I am saying that over the years, the Neman Church, and the Magistratum, and their scholars, priests, Justices, and so on, have explored and come up with names for the different parts of the afterlife. Some of these have been named tendentiously, some have been named with appropriate levels of scholarship.” He drew his index fingers together, and then pulled them apart. “But what we *think* of them, as rational human beings, and what these places and their inhabitants *are*, are two extremely different things. I cannot put it any better than I already have: often we are like insects to some of those entities, who view us with complete indifference, and we are prey animals to others. But to try and draw parallels to the mortal realm is folly. We as humans will constantly try to ascribe human attributes and feelings to animals – Nema, even inanimate objects – when it is ridiculous to do so.” He nodded at Heinrich. “Heinrich is a dog; yet we often act as though he is capable of emotion far beyond what his intellectual capacity permits.”

“But you said some of the entities are malevolent,” I said.

“They *appear* to be. Tell me, Helena, what are the elements of the crime of murder?”

I shrugged. “To kill another human being—”

“No, give me Caterhauser.”

I thought for a moment. “The premeditated killing by one human being of another without lawful excuse or justification, under the Emperor’s peace.”

“Right. So, to put my analogy to the rack, an elephant may trample and gore a man and leave his body a broken ruin, and do so without having the least idea of the impact of its actions. The elephant does not ‘murder’ the man, out of some heinous desire to inflict fear and anger on us. It does not premeditate the crime. To the elephant, it *isn’t* a crime. It does so because it is driven by some base instinct.

“When we see creatures of the afterlife feeding off a person’s life force, or

turning them insane, or taking possession of their body, it appears to us that the entity is acting from a place of malevolence because the effect on us is one of horror and revulsion. But the entities are inscrutable to us. Their thought processes exceed and outstrip ours. Perhaps malevolence may form a part of it, in the sense that we understand it – the considered desire to inflict evil upon a person – but we cannot truly understand how their minds work." He shrugged. "Either way, there is no sense in only armouring oneself against the intentional when the accidental is just as likely."

We sat in silence for a little while. It was another pleasant evening, and despite the impending danger, both mortal and supernatural, it was difficult not to be soothed by the cool breeze, the quiet plains, and the starry evening sky.

Eventually, Vonvalt stirred. "Once you are there, I assume that Justice August will contrive to meet you. There is only one place I can deposit you, and you have been there before – that marsh-like area. That is called the *Myočvara*, by the way, the Plain of Burden."

"What happens if she does not find me? Or I come under attack?"

"That is the third limb of the process. Getting out – the *Nyrsanar Nexi*."

"That is what Dubine assists you with sometimes?"

Vonvalt nodded. "Yes, that is right. This medallion that I wear has special magickal properties. It acts like a beacon. It is not a necessary part of the process, but it makes getting out considerably easier."

"How can Dubine do it?" I asked.

"Because I had training, Helena," Dubine said.

"Precisely. It was one of the very first things I taught him. He will be able to help you get out. I will not do it, for obvious reasons. But I shall also teach you the incantations to extricate yourself, in case Dubine is not available for whatever reason."

I thought for a moment. "I don't want to sound facetious, but the process does not sound particularly complex – at least, not on its face. Ward, incant, and incant again. After one has learned the incantations, what more is there to do?"

Bressinger snorted. Vonvalt smiled tolerantly. "Let me put it this way. I could probably teach you to sail a catboat in a day or two, and then you would know the rudiments of sailing. But what if I put you in that catboat at night? What about in choppy waters, or even a storm? What if it were not a

catboat but cog, or a carrack? What if it was dismasted? You would still know the rudiments of sailing, but they would not be much help to you."

I said nothing. Suddenly I was feeling very sour about this whole enterprise.

"We will do everything we can to help you, Helena," Vonvalt said. "This will be like sailing an unfamiliar vessel but with some of the best sailors in the Imperial Navy helping you."

"Nema's tits, you are murdering your words tonight," Bressinger said.

"I thought that was rather good," Vonvalt said.

"You considered a career as a poet?" Sir Radomir said. "You have been talking like one this evening."

"Bah," Vonvalt said, waving them off, and we chatted about less severe matters for the rest of the evening.

XXVII

Rekaburg

"I have never known a road more littered with the corpses of senators, Justices, jurists, and philosophers, than that by which we attempt to convince the common man that his political superiors act in their own interests before those of any other."

SIR RANDALL KORMONDOLT

I cannot repeat the incantations of the *Grimoire Necromantia* here, nor indeed do I think I could fully remember them anyway, but I do recall that they were complex. They were also not in any form of Saxan or Tollish, but rather in a long-dead language which Vonvalt would not name. Like so many other things about the process in this truncated tutelage, I did not need to know.

I learnt the wards, about what entities I might encounter and what to do if I did, what incantations to speak if I wanted to leave – a sort of self-banishment rite, as Vonvalt put it – and how to use Bressinger as a beacon to escape should things go terribly wrong. There were further words to learn if I wanted to stay but found my connexion decaying for whatever reason.

It was no good just speaking the words, however; I had to intuit them. I had to get a *feel* for them, how they affected me, body and mind. The biggest mistake that most initiates made in the Magistratum was rushing, focusing on the form of the words but not the content. That was one of the most difficult parts, though Vonvalt said that, fortunately, I was a natural. He may well

have been lying, but it had the desired effect of focusing my energy.

All the while he urged me to remember that whilst it was possible to suffer physical injury, the true danger was to the mind. Insanity was my greatest enemy. I had to perform all manner of mental exercises to steel myself. Alongside my accelerated swordsmanship training, I found these long days to be particularly exhausting. I felt as though I were being groomed for the position of the Empire's saviour, as though I were Xoel of Valdis from the Autun's well-stocked library of heroes and legends. Nothing could be further from the truth; I was being given a primer in how to stay alive. No fancy tricks, no flourishes or expert turns; just how to block the sword with a shield, how to parry, how to stab and not lose my hand doing it, and how to jump into the murky lake that was the afterlife and how to kick off the bottom again.

Vonvalt himself seemed more well adjusted, too. His tutelage of me, like the investigation into the murder of Prince Kamil, had given him something to focus on, to take his mind off the Muphraab and Claver. But if I had hoped, as we approached a small settlement about twenty miles from Südenburg, that this shift in his demeanour marked a deeper realignment of his governing principles, then it was about to be dashed, and rather spectacularly.

The settlement was called Rekaburg. It was a small, fortified town, surrounded by a curtain wall rendered from blocks of yellow-grey stone. At its centre, sat atop a hill, was an Imperial wayfort in a functional, outmoded pre-Saxan style. A decent-sized river flowed through the centre of the town, and on to Südenburg.

Approaching from a distance, it looked like any number of similar settlements on the Frontier, a quiet merchant town a stone's throw from the pilgrim path; close enough to Südenburg to avail itself of the Templars' protection whilst far enough away to avoid routine scrutiny from Imperial tax collectors. But as we drew closer to the walls – which were unmanned – we saw that the place was largely in ruin; and, as we crossed the threshold of the Western gatehouse, we saw that it was near deserted, too.

“Nema,” Sir Radomir muttered as our horses plodded up the main thoroughfare. Some houses had been smashed to pieces; others were simply disorganised piles of charred beams. The castle itself had burn marks on the walls, large streaks of soot where flaming bales had been hurled at it. Debris littered the streets.

“We did not see a host nearby,” Bressinger said. “Nor evidence of one.”

Vonvalt gestured about. He was hunched again in his saddle. He looked exhausted. “This is a few weeks old.”

Bressinger dismounted and kicked a blackened beam. It snapped in half, and sooty charcoal scattered in the wind.

“Who goes there?” someone called out to us.

We turned, to see a weatherbitten crone. She sagged under the weight of some armour which, judging by the way it sat, did not belong to her. Her skin was gritty and blackened with soot, but she had a hard, tenacious look about her. She wore a Sovan short sword about her waist, and her left hand idly stroked the pommel.

“Who are you?” Vonvalt asked her tiredly.

The old woman nodded at him. “Just because you’re wearing fancy clothes does not mean you can talk to me in that way. *I* asked *you* your name.”

“Flame of Savare! You miserable hag, this is the Lord Prefect!” Bressinger snarled, taking several steps towards the woman.

She was unmoved. “You have the manner of a Grozodan,” she sneered at Bressinger. “My husband was killed in Grozoda. I never could stand that accent.”

“Enough. I am Justice Sir Konrad Vonvalt. What is your name? And what happened here?”

The old woman spat. The kettle helm she wore tipped forward over her eyes as she did, as though she were playing the fool in a mummery. She did not seem to be embarrassed by this clumsy display.

“I am Willidrud Raganhildis,” she said, “and we were attacked by the pagans. What else?”

Vonvalt nodded to the burn marks on the castle, a look of mild incredulity on his face. “They have siege weapons?”

Raganhildis smiled without warmth. “And much more besides.”

“Where is everybody?” Sir Radomir asked.

“Killed, Hauner. The pagans sent most of the bodies down the Reka to Südenburg. They are always trying to poison this river. Nema knows why; it’s got enough shit in it already.”

“I am sorry for your losses. Will the town recover?” Vonvalt asked insincerely. It was plain his ailment was bothering him.

Raganhildis shook her head. “’Tis a miracle it lasted this long. The place exists for the sake of existence. ’Tis little more than a stake in the ground.” She looked around. “No, I daresay this place will be a ruin inside a month. They might regarrison the wayfort from Südenburg, but what is the point?”

“We require lodgings,” Vonvalt said, ignoring her. “Who is the master of this town?” he nodded at the castle. “Are they in residence?”

Raganhildis snorted. “From which direction did you come?” she asked.

“West.”

Raganhildis smiled again.

“Something amuses you?”

“I suggest you approach the wayfort from the south, and then you and your party may reassess your choice of lodgings.”

Vonvalt pursed his lips. “And what position do you take? Militia? A member of some volunteer company? The town watch?”

“I am the sheriff. At least, I was the only one who volunteered to take over the role after the town was sacked. Sheriff of the ashes and bones.”

“Are you the ultimate authority in this town?”

She snorted. “No, Milord *Prefect*. That honour falls to you now.” And with that, she turned on her heel and walked back down the road.

Vonvalt wrinkled his nose. He turned to Bressinger. “Go and see what she is talking about,” he muttered, nodding at the wayfort, and Bressinger remounted Gaerwyn and kicked him to a trot. We waited for a few minutes, though it did not take long for Bressinger to see what the matter was. He returned after a short while give us the inevitable news.

“’Tis gone to ruin. You cannot see it from this angle. The gate has been smashed in, and by the looks of it the roof of the keep.”

Vonvalt rubbed a hand down the length of his face. “All right,” he said, tiredly. “Let us find an inn, then, or something of that ilk.”

We ended up staying in an abandoned but intact house which abutted the river. It had clearly been a wealthy lord's house, though it had been stripped of every stick of furniture by either the Saekas or Rekaburgian looters. I imagined a long caravan of destitute refugees, wheeling carts loaded with pilfered goods to the next Imperial settlement.

I hated our time in that town. Bressinger and Sir Radomir took turns to keep watch all night, though we kept Heinrich tied up outside the door as a deterrent. He barked once, setting us all on edge, but we had no trouble from those few people who remained in the town. It seemed as though the abandonment of Rekaburg was much further along than had first appeared.

I slept extremely badly. Every time I felt myself falling unconscious, I would jerk awake, as though taking a step back from the edge of a cliff. I was terrified of what my dreams might hold, of some aethereal visitation, or worse, another vision of the Muphraab. It was not until dawn's light was breaking on the horizon that I finally found some semblance of sleep, and by the time I was kicked unceremoniously awake by Sir Radomir I could only have been out for an hour. I felt utterly exhausted.

We scavenged what food we could, though there was very little, and what there was to be had Vonvalt paid an extortionate price for, before making for the town gaol. It was not clear why we were going there, or indeed whether there was anybody in residence.

"You mean to attend to official matters?" Sir Radomir asked as we approached the gaol. It was still standing, which was curious, given that, thanks to its pennants and heraldic devices, it was one of the few outwardly obvious buildings of the Sovan state.

Vonvalt did not answer. It was only then that I felt the first stirrings of unease. He had a look, a sense about him, which I had seen before. His features were hard set, eyes slightly squinted, lips pursed, the muscles of his jaw working. He did it when he was about to undertake something he knew he shouldn't. I had seen this look before, when I had accosted him on the road to Ossica, a few days before the murder of Obenpatria Fischer.

"Indeed," he said, and no more.

We entered the gaol. There was no duty serjeant to greet us, nor any other semblance of habitation. I wondered if Sheriff Raganhildis – insofar as she could legitimately be called that – would make an appearance, but there was no sign of her.

“You two,” he said to Bressinger and Sir Radomir, “have a look around, see you can find anybody. Helena, you come with me.”

We broke up. Heinrich elected to go with Sir Radomir, which I felt a stab of betrayal about. Vonvalt led me to a long corridor which housed the gaol cells. Either side, I could see that many of the gates had been forced.

“Why would the Saekas storm the gaol?” I asked, hoping to draw Vonvalt into a conversation.

“Why does anybody do anything?” Vonvalt muttered, preoccupied. That was not a good sign. Vonvalt rarely let a question go unanswered.

We reached the end of the row of cells. All had been empty, but this one had a single occupant, and the gate and bars were intact. A solitary man in rough homespun clothes, with an unkempt beard and long scraggly hair, stared out at us from the far corner. He had clearly heard us coming, for we had not attempted to be quiet, but he had not called out. He looked half stupid with fear, and the other half looked as though it had been pretty dense from the beginning.

“What is your name?” Vonvalt asked.

The man did not answer.

“What is your name?” Vonvalt repeated.

“A-Ansigar Arnulf,” the man stammered. His accent was strange; I could not place it at all. It sounded like Estran, perhaps, but heavily influenced by something else.

“Why are you here?” Vonvalt asked.

“I live here,” Arnulf said, confused by the question.

“Not here in Rekaburg,” Vonvalt said, rolling his eyes. “Here in this cell. What is your crime?”

The man, who had not been particularly forthcoming in the first place, withdrew into himself.

“Do you know what I am?” Vonvalt asked.

Arnulf shook his head. He looked Vonvalt up and down. “Some lord, I would guess.”

“I am a Justice. You have heard of the Magistratum?”

Arnulf nodded, now, vigorously. “Of course.” Now he looked wary. “It is often said that Justices have magickal powers,” he said.

“We do,” Vonvalt said. I looked at him. My unease deepened. It was extremely rare for him to simply admit it; much of the time he would deflect

the question, or play down his powers' significance. Sometimes this was so that he could wrong-foot a suspect later; other times it came from a place of slight discomfort, for he did not like to be feared for what he considered to be the wrong reasons. To Vonvalt, his arcane powers always came second to his powers as a lawkeeper.

"Do you mean to use them on me?" Arnulf asked. His hands shook, and I noticed that his fingernails were all dirty and ragged. I wondered what kind of man he was, and what kind of life he had led. Certainly he fitted the role of prisoner, but not everybody who graced a gaol cell was guilty of a crime.

"I am hoping I won't have to."

"Please, Milord Justice." He gabbled. "I have done nought to deserve to be here. Just carousing, like. I have no home and I beg for money. And then I spend the money on drink – I freely admit it. I know I cut a wretched figure, but there is no great crime in being a drunk." Then he started crying.

"How did you come to be in this cell? Were you were arrested before or after the sacking of the town?"

"Oh, milord, before, just before. In fact, I have not had much in the way of food for a week or more. Willidrud brings me the odd morsel, but she says there are those more deserving than me."

"Oh, I have no doubt of that. *Why are you here?*" Vonvalt thundered suddenly in the Emperor's Voice. For once, I had seen it coming. The pattern of Vonvalt's questioning, his tone, even his stance, all told of an impending psychic bludgeoning.

"I would not be pressed into the volunteer companies!" Arnulf shrieked immediately.

"*Why?*"

"Because I am a drunk and a coward!" Arnulf shouted, again in an anguished voice.

Vonvalt looked at the man with contempt. Afterwards, Vonvalt would frame what he was about to do in legal terms; that the man had vitiated the contract between state and individual. That, as someone whose father had taken the Highmark, and who had accepted his impressment into the Sovan Legions at a young age, it was clear to him, and should have been equally clear to everyone else, that when the Two-Headed Wolf was at the door, you answered.

Of course, Vonvalt's view as both an adult and a Justice had changed over

time. He was contemptuous of many aspects of the Empire, and certainly thought little of the Templars and their nakedly expansionist aims. I think in this case, however, his contempt came from a place of personal disgust. Rekaburg had needed defending, its citizens protecting, and this man had contrived to intoxicate himself so severely that he was useless to all and sundry at the crucial hour. Worse still, he had survived the attack by virtue of that fact, where so many others had not.

"What is the punishment Sheriff Raganhildis decreed for you?" Vonvalt asked.

Arnulf looked at Vonvalt wide-eyed. "She said I was to stay in here and think about what I had done."

"That is all?" Vonvalt asked. It was as though the words were burning his mouth.

Arnulf shrugged. "I do not know what to say to you, Justice. That is what she decreed."

"*What punishment did she decree for you?*" Vonvalt roared again in the Emperor's Voice. Arnulf reeled as though he had been punched in the nose. His eyes rolled back into his head.

"She said I was to stay here and think about what I had done!"

Vonvalt once again eyed the man with contempt. He was about to say more, when we heard the door open at the end of the corridor behind us. Sir Radomir, Bressinger, and Heinrich walked through, their nonchalance entirely at odds with the brewing drama.

"The place is deserted, and not a scrap of armour nor a weapon to be found," Sir Radomir said. He nodded his chin to us. "Is someone in there?"

"A coward," Vonvalt said, and told them what had happened.

"Aye," Sir Radomir said. "A whipping is what he deserves. Naked, too, if I had my way."

"Well, I am going to have *my* way," Vonvalt said. "He will die."

"But, Sir Konrad," I said hastily, "Sheriff Raganhildis has already decreed this man's punishment. He cannot be punished twice, even under the Law of Precedence."

Vonvalt looked at me. I could not discern his mood – was there even a shred of shame there? – but I could tell that my interruption had been an unwelcome one.

"You wish to debate me on this? You will be the man's advocate?" he

asked eventually. His tone was not a pleasant one, and there was a hint of a sneer about it. Still, I felt bound to continue, for his sake and for mine. I did not want him to simply execute Arnulf. What on earth was the point of it? Besides, I had made this a public matter in front of Bressinger and Sir Radomir.

"Well… I have already made my first point," I said, wrong-footed. I glanced at Arnulf sidelong. He was still insensible from the Emperor's Voice, which had smashed his weak mind like a hammer might smash a vase, and had no notion of what was taking place before him.

"Under the Sovan criminal code, a punishment may not be indefinite in nature," Vonvalt said, casually, as though he were pressing a mosquito into the table with his thumb. "It cannot stand as a matter of law."

"It can be indefinite as a temporary measure," I said. Actually, I didn't know if that was true, but people were thrown in gaol cells all the time for a huge variety of petty misbehaviours. I couldn't imagine serjeants across the Empire stating to every drunkard the precise nature of their detention.

"No, it cannot," Vonvalt said, stating incontrovertible fact.

"Convention is—"

"It does not matter what convention is. I'm talking about the law. The letter of it."

I foundered, but then a flash of inspiration struck me. "Desertion is a matter for martial authority," I said suddenly. "This man was detained in wartime, by Raganhildis using executive martial powers. Only a tribunal of knights can sentence him to death."

I might as well have been a small child trying to push over an oak tree. "Helena, this man was not a combatant. That is the reason he is here. Only soldiers can desert. He is not subject to any martial law. And anyway, martial law does not override my authority. It never has done."

I threw up my arms in exasperation. "You cannot kill him just because you feel like it!" I shouted. I felt emotion exploding through me. So many had died; why add Arnulf to the tally? What could it possibly achieve?

"It is the Justice of Kings, Helena," Vonvalt said, looking slightly pale, now, and unsteady on his feet.

"Aye, that would be a good name for your sword at the rate you are going," I snapped. I looked behind me to Sir Radomir and Bressinger, but neither seemed to be particularly moved by Arnulf's cause. "Please, one of

you," I said, though I knew it would not be Bressinger, whose wife and children had been killed during the sacking of Annholt and who would spare few sympathies for those who did not take up arms and defend their town.

Sir Radomir cleared his throat. "Sir Konrad," he said. "I know that ultimate authority rests on your shoulders, but you know I have been a sheriff for many years. Any experienced lawkeeper will tell you that the letter of the law is not always the most appropriate course of—"

Vonvalt gripped a bar of the cell. He looked as though he were steadying himself. I could see that sweat was sheening his brow, and when he spoke, it was through gritted teeth, and to the floor. "I am the Master of the Magistratum," he hissed. "I will not be lectured on the law by anybody, least of all some provincial sheriff."

Sir Radomir took a step back, completely wrong-footed by Vonvalt's reaction. "Sir Konrad—"

"I am trying to save this godforsaken empire, though Kasivar only knows why, and I am stuck here debating the niceties of the criminal code with a pair of simpletons. Dubine? Have you anything to add? Perhaps the fucking dog wants to chip in?"

Heinrich cocked his head, and whined.

"Nothing?"

"No, sire," Bressinger said uncomfortably.

"Then go and fetch the *Grimoire* immediately."

Bressinger left, though he did not have to go far. It was unwise to be parted from such important artefacts in a looted and lawless city.

Now it was my turn to look nonplussed. "The *Grimoire*?" I asked.

Vonvalt said nothing.

"What do you—" I stopped as realisation – and a cold surge of horror – struck me. "Nema," I whispered.

"Helena—"

"You mean to kill him merely to use him as a *tool*? An anchor to drop me into the afterlife?" I asked, my voice freighted with fear, anger, resentment. I felt my skin crawl. I was about to be flung into the holy dimensions without any kind of mental preparation. "I am not ready."

"No one is ever ready."

"Sir Konrad, *please*!" Learning about it had been one thing. Doing it – well, that was another entirely. "I need more time. I… I cannot remember all

you taught me—”

“Helena, we have no time to spare. And this is too good an opportunity.”

“You cannot kill this man simply because we need an empty vessel!”

“I am killing this man because it is what he deserves, ethically and legally. It just happens that doing so is extremely expedient for my current purpose,” Vonvalt said. I watched a bead of sweat cut loose from his forehead and spatter on to the floor. His hands were white where they gripped the bars.

“How can you do this? What is the matter with you?” I breathed.

“I am *dying*, you foolish girl! And if I cannot teach you the ways of necromancy before I am consumed, there is no one else alive who can – certainly not in the time we have left.”

Bressinger returned, and handed Vonvalt the book. Vonvalt snatched it out of his hands and gave Bressinger his Oleni medallion.

“You mean to do this here, now?” Bressinger asked.

“Nema, yes! How is this not clear to you all?” He turned to me. “Ward yourself.” He drew his short sword. Arnulf, who was only now recovering his wits, seemed to finally appreciate the significance of this. He let out a scream, followed by an incoherent stream of desperate entreaties.

I turned to Vonvalt. “No,” I said. “I will not do it. Not like this.”

“If you do not ward yourself, Helena, you will die. Your mind will be turned inside out and we will be scraping your brains off the walls.”

I truly did not think that Vonvalt would risk killing me. I knew he loved me. I certainly didn’t feel the same way about him at that point in time, but I was still willing to gamble that he would not let any harm come to me.

“Killing this man will change you,” I said. “Irrevocably. You know that execution is the wrong thing to do. Even if it is permitted by the law, you have discretion. Don’t do this. You are better than this.”

Vonvalt was implacable. “Ward yourself, Helena. I will not tell you again.”

“You are better than this, Sir Konrad. Please; I know you are better than this.”

Vonvalt, who was now clearly in no small measure of pain, shook his head. “No, Helena. I am not.”

He closed his eyes and spoke words in that strange old language, holding his hand out in front of him, thumb and index and middle fingers out. I realised then that he was warding me. It felt like a violation.

I started forwards. “No!” I shouted, but I felt someone grab me from behind. I whirled around to see Bressinger, his one arm outstretched, his hand gripping me firmly by the upper arm. “Don’t, Helena, please. It is suicide.”

I tried to shake myself free, but Bressinger’s hand was like a vice.

“Helena, stop!” he pleaded.

In the event, it didn’t matter. It did not take Vonvalt, the most accomplished necromancer in the Empire, long to perform a few simple wards. I turned away from Bressinger as the sound of Arnulf’s screaming filled the cell. Vonvalt was moving towards him, sword raised.

“No!” I shrieked, but it was hopeless. The sword struck a vicious blow on Arnulf’s outstretched hand, taking it off. Arnulf had a precious few seconds to gasp in horror, before a second thrust took him in the heart, and he expired.

I thrashed myself free of Bressinger’s grip, but it was no use. By the time I had taken one step towards Vonvalt, I felt myself being enveloped by the incantation he spoke.

And then I was falling down into oblivion.

XXVIII

On the Shores of the Ossian Sea

“I fear for the future of mankind when the destructive power of blackpowder is beheld as an opportunity, instead of a threat to every aspect of the civilised world order.”

JUSTICE LADY ODILA ODA

There was no stone tower this time; just blackness, for a while at least. I heard a screeching noise that I never wanted to hear again, even though I have no notion of what it was or where it had emanated from. Then came the usual whispers and chittering, a demented chorus of nonsense that scratched at the mind.

I came to land in a familiar place that I now knew to be called the *Myočvara*; a marshland of black water and dead white grass, and lightning-shaped black trees that jutted up from the ground like splintered bones. Above me yawned that gigantic funnel mouth, swirling with stars and banks of astral cloud.

I felt a keen sense of disorientation, and a profound unease, the kind of feeling that prey animals must feel at the rustling of grass and the quiet snapping of twigs. I kept seeing movement at the very corners of my eyes, but every time I turned to look, there was nothing there.

“Sir Konrad?” I called out, but my voice was muted, as though I were talking into a pillow. It was as though there was very little air here. Although it was an endless expanse of marsh, the place had a leaden, liminal feel to it,

like an empty dining hall on a summer's afternoon.

Everything I had felt, the crushing resentment, the frantic anger, had gone. It was as though all those earthly matters had lost all meaning and sense of urgency. Here I could not even feel the innate passage of time. It was like everything, the air, the ground, the elements, had all been paused; as if a gigantic hand had reached out and pinched the world to stop it turning. Everything, from Claver, to Prince Kamil, to Nathaniel Kadlec, and the Empire itself, felt meaningless and insignificant. It was like standing at the centre of some macabre dreamscape.

"Hello, Helena," a voice said from behind me.

I turned, to see Justice August standing calf deep in the marsh water. She was not looking at me, but away into the distance. I noticed she was fiddling with a medallion nervously.

"Justice August," I said. I had so many questions, it was difficult to know where to start.

"Did Sir Konrad send you?" she asked. She sounded worried, and a sudden and profound sense of fear took root in my guts.

"Yes," I said. "Against my will. It was all so fast." I was going to say more, but she held up a hand.

"He has drawn it to him, and undone a great many of my efforts in so doing. Foolish man. He might as well have lit a beacon. It will have him in a few days now."

She was still looking into the distance, as though she could see something, though when I followed her gaze I could see nothing except the infinite deadness of the marsh.

"You mean—"

"I do."

"I was not going to speak its name," I said, a little irritated.

August looked at me. "You might have. That is all that matters. You will have to endure a little rudeness, I am afraid, for both our sakes."

"Where are we?" I asked. "The *Myočvara*?"

"He has taught you, then."

"Some things."

"This is the Plain of Burden, yes. But we will not linger. 'Tis little more than a purgatory. Your bond is weak here. I will take you deeper."

"What do you mean?" I asked. I felt my panic rising.

August held up a hand for silence. Now I, too, heard something; a distant pounding, echoing in a way that our voices did not. It was like listening to the heartbeat of the earth.

“Ghessis,” August said. I could hear the slight tremble in her voice.

“What is happening?” I asked.

But August said nothing. She reached out and took one of my hands in hers, then spoke in the same language Vonvalt had when incanting from the *Grimoire Necromantia*. Pink-red runes glowed in the air before us, as though they had been burned there by a blacksmith’s brand, and then we were –

– somewhere else entirely.

The pounding remained, but it was the pounding of waves on the shore. I saw the black Ossian Sea from my dream, lapping at the beach of bones. Both the sea and the beach stretched away for ever, one half white one half black, as though we stood at the nexus of a pair of infinite schach tiles. Above, the sky was…

I paused. It was a roof. A ceiling, rather. I could clearly make out intricate plasterwork and coving, and the classic gothick style of High Saxan architecture. Now that I looked around, the infinite plain had gone, to be replaced with a room of gigantic proportions. But already the image was shifting, to one of a huge cathedral, its buttresses a ribcage.

“Where is this place?” I asked.

“This is where I have made my home, for the time being,” August said.

We were sitting at a table, in a gloomy, candlelit room. Above, strange constellations swirled through the sky.

“Everything keeps moving, changing,” I said.

“Does it?” Justice August said. “I stopped noticing so long ago. You cannot apply any form of logic to this place. Wherever it is.”

“The afterlife?” I asked.

August shrugged. “Or just life,” she said. “My life before this, my mortal life, feels as though it took place a thousand thousand years ago. I know that I am Resi August, and that I was an Imperial Justice, but those things feel… so far removed from me now. I don’t think this is the afterlife so much as just…

life.”

I shuddered. Such a thought was terrifyingly bleak. “How can that be so?”

“What is the measure of reality? If it is simply a matter of longevity, then this place must be the natural state of man.”

“But you have only been here a handful of weeks. You do not think that something is holding you here, artificially?” I asked. “Remember the manner in which you came to be killed? Your body lives on, does it not? Perhaps you are suspended here.”

Then August did something which I did not expect. She looked at me, wide-eyed with horror, and began to scream and scream and scream, with such a visceral and all-encompassing terror that I too began to scream –

– we were walking along the beach again, its tiny bones crunching underneath our feet. The black, necrotic waters foamed and lapped on our right, whilst the sea rippled like maggots squirming beneath decaying flesh.

“Something is holding me here,” August said. “You are right; I am bound to this purgatorial plane. The *Edaximae*.” She paused. Again, I heard the distant pounding. “Ghessis,” she breathed.

“Sir Konrad said that you would help me stop the parasite that is eating his life force.”

August nodded. “Yes,” she said. She looked briefly confused, but shook her head. “Yes, I am sorry. This place, this reality, it does strange things to my mind. It takes a little while to put things in order.”

“Are we safe, here?”

“Neither of us is safe, but for different reasons.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Why are you in danger?”

“Ghessis,” August said again, but she would not elaborate. “There are others here, too. Here in this dimension. Others who are not supposed to be here, that have been killed by Draedist magicks. They seek to help me, but we are like mice trapped in a huge house. We scurry about at night, trying to talk to one another, seeking out morsels of food, avoiding the traps of the housemaster. But it is only a matter of time. Our existence is not permitted. Not in this form.”

“Who does not permit it? Sir Konrad told me that the entities of the afterlife are not interested in our mortal lives.”

August gestured broadly about her. “But we are not living our mortal lives,” she said.

We walked on. “I am frightened,” I said after a short while.

“You would have to be insane not to be,” August said, not particularly reassuringly. “You can see why so many necromancers lose their minds. The truth of this place, its bleakness, is enough to strip the brain of its sensibilities.”

“This cannot be it,” I protested. “There must be more than this. Endless layers of nothingness, just barren, empty, unconstructed space. Marsh. Sand. A dead sea.”

August shook her head sadly. “I do not know what to tell you, Helena. I can only go on what I have experienced. There must be more, but I have not seen it.”

I didn’t want to think about it, didn’t want to admit to myself that such a dismal fate awaited us. “I need your help. To stop the entity that is tracking Vonvalt. He will die soon.”

“The Father of Time is a stern patron,” August incanted.

“Why do people keep saying that? What does it mean–?”

– We were in a vault. It is the only way I can describe it. It was like the barrel vaults under the Galen’s Vale kloster, but the walls were not made of stone. They were made from some kind of black resin, the same kind of material the carapace of a beetle might be constructed from, and ribbed with bone-like structures of glossy chitin. The walls glistened and steamed and the floor was springy, as though formed of muscle or some similar tissue. The smell was appalling. It was like standing inside the body of some horrible entity, with no one part of the structure able to be comprehended. It hurt the mind to look at it.

“I don’t like this place,” I said, a deep but familiar feeling of dread welling up from within me. “I don’t like it here. Lady August?”

I looked around me, but there was no sign of her.

My immediate instinct was to panic, and it was a violent compulsion. My mind felt so overwhelmed with fear that one good kick and I would tumble down the stairs into the cellar of insanity. But I steeled myself. Vonvalt had told me that I had to be strong. And I *was* strong. I was here, wasn't I? I had endured so much, yet I had kept my wits about me thus far. And besides, Vonvalt was counting on me. Thousands of lives would be lost if I did not succeed.

I made my way through those walls, plagued by a haunting sense of familiarity. Each connecting corridor was like a gullet. It was like walking down the length of an enormous snake. Eventually, I turned a corner, and the corridor opened up into a hall. It was like a vast royal banqueting suite, except the pillars were made of black bone, and the walls dripped with venomous ichor.

But my attention was fixed on the ceiling.

"By Nema," I breathed. The ceiling… How to possibly describe it? I was looking up at Rekaburg, but it was as though the ground were made of glass, like a huge void had been carved out beneath the town. I could see the foundations of houses and walls, the silty bottom of the Reka, subterranean grain stores, all laid out above me.

A thought suddenly gripped me. My skin turned out in gooseflesh. Compelled by morbid curiosity, I pressed through that horrible hall, knowing instantly the place I was going to go: the gaol house.

I could hear a horrible whispering sound now, that same insect-like chittering which I had come to associate with only one thing. Tears dripped free from my eyes. My courage was deserting me like a routed army from the battlefield. I could barely breathe.

Eventually, I came across a familiar scene; a pool of blood above me like red glass; my own prostrate form on the cell floor; runes, invisible to all except me, flickering incandescently above me. Sir Radomir and Bressinger standing in the corridor, aghast at the scene; Vonvalt, frozen in time, standing in the centre of the cell.

And there, standing beneath him below that invisible partition, was the Muphraab.

I saw again that horrible moth head, with its impossibly large human mouth filled with fangs, sucking out Vonvalt's life force in a steady stream of black ectoplasm. I could see a spectral version of Vonvalt, a ghostly image

writhing and screaming silently as it was siphoned away into the maw of that disgusting, horrifying beast.

I knew that the Muphraab saw me standing there. I could see nothing in those glistening eyes, but there was no doubt in my mind that its attention was fixed on me.

It slowly began to lift a hand, to reach out to me, and I was transfixed, so utterly terrified that I felt my mind peeling away from the walls of my skull –

– I was standing in a room in a castle. Wide open windows revealed nothing but unending blue sky and banks of bright white cloud. Late-afternoon sunlight slanted into the chamber, which was mostly empty. It had a transitory, liminal feel, and an overwhelming sense of isolation and emptiness, as though it were simply adrift and floating through raw, unconstructed space.

I walked to the window and looked out, but there was nothing, no hint of ground, nor any hint of black, starry emptiness above. Just never-ending blue sky, and no sound but the wind blowing the clouds through the air as though they were enormous carracks.

I turned. In the middle of the room was a table. The top of it was circular, and a small diorama was there.

I recognised the scene. It was Obenpatria Fischer's bedchamber. The diorama was rendered in such perfect detail that I marvelled at its fidelity; then the model chamber door opened, and Fischer and a woman walked in. I gasped. It was no model; it was real, a small piece of the mortal plane rendered into miniature scale on this table.

I watched as the two of them undressed and vigorously copulated on the bed. I squatted down so that my eyes were level with the floor, and I could see my own prostrate form there, pressing myself into the boards, desperate not to be seen or heard.

"It's remarkable, isn't it? How the smallest of occurrences can dictate the movement of all time."

I whirled around. A man stood in front of me, wearing simple yet expensive-looking robes. He had the dark features of a Southern Plainsman,

and held an ornate, black-lacquered sceptre topped with a skull wrought from ruby.

"Who are you?" I asked.

The man gestured back to the table behind me, and I turned reluctantly. The woman had gone, and Obenpatria Fischer was making himself ready for bed. Then he dropped one of his rings, which bounced under the bed, and as he bent down to recover it, I watched myself scream and dart out from my hiding place. I bolted for the door, which was now locked, and watched as Obenpatria Fischer sprang after me. He snatched up a marble bust from a plate near the exit, and before matters could progress much further, he had brought it crashing down onto the back of my head. Aghast, I watched as my body crumpled to the floor, killed outright.

"Nema," I breathed. "That is…"

"Not what happened?"

"Not what happened," I murmured in agreement. I could not tear my eyes away from the scene.

"No," the man agreed. "You are welcome."

Now I did turn. "You are Kultaar," I said. "The demigod of luck. You heard my prayers. I thought you were supposed to look like a mouse."

"Who are you?" the man replied.

"Helena," I said. "Helena Sedanka."

The man shook his head. "You do not recognise me? We have met before," he said.

"You are not Kultaar?"

The man shook his head again.

"I do not remember ever meeting you," I said, truthfully.

"Here, let me jog your memory."

I was standing in a room which took me a few moments to recognise; it was the ward in which I had convalesced in Mr Maquerink's house in Galen's Vale. On the floor was Fenland Graves, very much dead; standing next to him was Vonvalt, with Bressinger a few paces removed.

"I see the girl in the room," Graves was saying – or rather, the Trickster

was saying, talking through the possessed form of Graves's corpse. The memory came back to me, but slowly, as though it were travelling through an ocean of honey.

"Who is she?" Graves asked.

"Silence!" Vonvalt snapped.

"I hear her, too."

"It has been a while since we last spoke," the Trickster said to Vonvalt. "Who have you brought to meet me, Justice?"

"You've lost him," Bressinger said out of the side of his mouth. It was strange to see him with two arms. "Come back."

"No, he is still before me," Vonvalt said, his eyes still glassy and vacant.

"Give this man to me," Graves said.

"He has not answered my questions," Vonvalt said.

"You heard him. Your investigation ends in the kloster. But you already knew that. Release him."

"I want the name."

"You have had close enough. A name for a name; the girl, in the room. I see her."

"You see nothing. Answer my question."

"It matters not. I will meet her soon… The threads of time converge. I see it." Graves chortled and more black goo frothed from his mouth and trickled down his lips. "Your taskman is right. You should leave. Go back."

"Out," Bressinger whispered to me.

I remembered this part; I watched as I got up to leave, but then the Trickster called out: "Girl!"

I shrieked and flinched so that I touched Vonvalt –

– I was back in the castle room. The light had shifted; it was now coming through the opposite window, but still retained that late-afternoon quality. The effect was disorientating.

"You are the Trickster," I said. "Aegraxes."

The man performed a mock bow. "Indeed. I told you we would meet soon. I suppose you did not think anything of it at the time."

“Where is Justice August?” I asked. I had a horrible, vertiginous feeling that I was going to be trapped in this strange limbo for ever, cut off from everything and everyone I had ever known.

“Somewhere she is not supposed to be. I expect Ghessis will bring her to heel.” He seemed displeased at the thought.

“Who is Ghessis?” I asked.

The Trickster shook his head. “I dare say you will meet him soon enough. *Helena*.”

When he said my name, it sent a jolt of energy through me, a curiously unpleasant experience, as though someone had plucked all of my nerve strings at once.

“What was that? How did you do that?”

“You told me your name, freely, I might add. Did your master not warn you against that?”

I felt a sudden, overwhelming stab of panic. The number of times Vonvalt had stopped me from saying the name of something, some sprite or elemental or, more often than not, my own. And now I had given Aegraxes my name freely. I did not know what it meant, for Vonvalt had never told me the implications of doing so; but given his severe injunctions against it, it could only be a bad thing.

“What are you going to do?”

“I am going to use you, like a tool. *Helena*.”

Again I jolted, as though I had been slapped. Aegraxes reached out with his cane and pointed it between my breasts. I looked down, to see that I was naked, and wreathed in aethereal energies. On my breastbone was a mark, a tattoo of a two-headed snake. I recognised it immediately from the etching I had seen in the Book of Creus, in my cell in the Galen’s Vale kloster.

I tried reflexively to cover my nakedness, but I could not move.

“The mark of the Trickster is upon you now, girl.”

“The Father of Time is a name given to the entity devouring Vonvalt’s life force,” August said.

We were sitting in the ruins of a castle. The castle itself sat on a plinth of

rock that jutted up from the Ossian Sea. Above, clouds rolled in a dark purple sky. A cool breeze, carrying the smell of brine and death, sang through the glassless windows.

A table sat between us, one identical to that in the Trickster's strange enclave. But atop it was nothing, just dull, dark wood.

My brief time with Aegraxes was fading from my memory like an old dream.

"That he is a stern patron is simply an old phrase," August said. "It is a perversion of a patron saint, such as those found in the Neman pantheon." She shrugged. "As I say, just an old phrase. Like a mantra."

"How do we break its hold over Vonvalt?" I asked.

"It exists here, in the *Edaximae*. It cannot exist elsewhere; therefore we must break the hex."

"Using the *Codex Elementa*," I said. August had already told me that, at least, in my last meeting with her.

"That's right. There will be an incantation of banishment."

"We are heading to Claver's encampment now," I said. "He has stolen all the texts from the Master's Vaults."

August shook her head sadly. "You cannot simply read the incantation from the mortal plane; I told you, it has to be done here."

"How on earth can we do that?"

"Travel here the same way you travelled here now."

"Sir Konrad murdered a man to get me here!" I snapped.

But August did not really seem to hear me. "There are others here, other entities, echoes, trapped like me. All of us are being hunted, for we are trespassing. But for as long as we can evade capture, we will do what we can to assist. There are preparations we can make here to aid in the ritual of banishment. The Father of Time may be an elemental, but even elementals can be slowed, distracted, interrupted."

"Who is helping you?" I asked.

"Others who have been wronged by Bartholomew Claver. The magicks he wields leave a very particular signature in this place. It is like a scent; it is very distinct, and reeks of malevolence."

"We are on our way to stop him," I said, though what had felt like an important and grandiose mission in the mortal realm now felt inconsequential, like trying to divert a stream trickling into the ocean.

“I am glad to hear it,” August said earnestly. “His power grows. I can feel the roots of it in this place, like the roots of a tree growing into the soil. The longer it is left, the stronger and more entrenched it becomes. I think he is receiving assistance from something here, some entity of great power. His ascendancy cannot be explained by mere aptitude alone.”

“Perhaps it is the Trickster?” I said. The memory of my audience with him in that floating castle returned, but like everything in this strange place, it felt distant, like it had happened many years before. I had no idea how I had come to be transported back to the Ossian Sea, but at the same time, I felt no innate desire to question it. It had simply… happened.

“Perhaps. He has taken a special interest in you. I think it is to do with your Entanglement. The currents of time are pulling you along, but the more you thrash and upset them, the more you dictate the course of future events.”

“Do you think this will be the end of the Empire?” I asked.

“Who knows? Who cares? The Empire of the Wolf is one of dozens of empires that coexist in ignorance of one another on the mortal plane, and one of thousands that will exist and have existed. It is simply one form of civilisation. I think Claver represents something bigger and darker. He grows in strength in both mortal plane and the holy dimensions. And those entities who monitor your realm – and know, Helena, that they are few in number – do not like it. There is a hierarchy in this place, incomprehensible to us, but it exists. Everything across all the planes of existence are linked to one another. Upset the balance in one realm too much, and everything is thrown into disarray.”

“It is too much responsibility to bear,” I said eventually, miserable.

“Oh, this is just one limb of the Tree of Fate,” August said. “Fear not; you have already failed this quest a million million times before.”

August looked over sharply. “Ghessis,” she said, her voice freighted with fear. She looked back at me. “Time to go.”

“She is back with us.”

I blinked, gum-eyed, and surfaced to consciousness slowly, as though waking up from a coma. It was absolutely extraordinary to me to see that, not

only was I in the same cell, with Arnulf's corpse slowly cooling a few feet away, but that apparently very little time had passed. Vonvalt was sitting on the edge of the bed in the corner; Sir Radomir was sitting on the floor, his back leaning against the wall, spinning his sword by the pommel between his legs. Bressinger was standing by the gate, Vonvalt's medallion in his hand.

It was Vonvalt who had spoken. He looked as though he had aged half a century. His face looked gaunt, his posture hunched, his lips dry and cracked.

Any sense of urgency I had experienced in the afterlife faded as quickly as my contempt for Vonvalt returned. The sense of betrayal was strong; I burned suddenly and brightly with resentment.

"You *fucking* bastard," I snapped, pressing myself up to a sitting position. I spat on the cell floor.

"Helena—" Bressinger started.

"Oh, spare me," I shouted.

No one said anything. I pressed myself to my feet, and smacked Bressinger's hand away where he moved to steady me. Then I stalked out of the cell, down the corridor, and kicked the door open at the end of it.

"Blood of Gods!" Sheriff Raganhildis shouted, nearly spilling the bowl of stew she was carrying. "What the hell are you doing here?"

I nodded to the bowl she was carrying. "Is that for Arnulf?"

She looked completely baffled. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

"You needn't bother. He's dead."

And then I walked past her and left the gaol.

I heard her furious shouting even as I walked out of the ruined gate.

XXIX

Südenburg

“The shepherd who hides away from the wolf will only live long enough to starve.”

SOVAN PROVERB

We would make amends – of a sort – some time later, though irreparable damage had been done to my relationship with all three of them. Vonvalt I despised for what I saw as a betrayal of every core tenet of our relationship, though I would soften as time went on and I was able to take a broader view of matters.

Bressinger and I had been on uneasy ground for some months now, and the fact that he had done nothing to stop Vonvalt’s wanton killing of Arnulf, nor about my unceremonious depositing into a hellish realm of insanity and terror, was enough to sour even our rock-solid friendship. That we had arrived at such bad terms pained me deeply, for I knew Bressinger was a good man, and we had shared so much love and mirth over the two and a half years we had spent together. But Bressinger’s loyalty to Vonvalt was dogmatic, and it is not healthy to be that blindly faithful to anyone. No one is above criticism or reproach, for no human being is perfect. I had once thought Vonvalt to be perfect.

Sir Radomir I disliked for much the same reason as Bressinger, for he too had done nothing. It was difficult, because Vonvalt, Bressinger, and Sir Radomir had all fought when the Emperor had demanded, probably against

their will, yet they had been driven by duty, or whatever other force exists that compels a person to act in such barbaric ways. Therefore, their patience for someone who refused such a burden, especially in a situation as black and white as defending one's own townsfolk, would be almost non-existent. And perhaps Vonvalt was right; perhaps Sheriff Raganhildis's punishment was void as a matter of law, and Arnulf's life was legally forfeit. But just because the law decreed that Arnulf *could* die, did not mean that he necessarily *should* have. It seemed like killing for killing's sake. Had Vonvalt not needed the corpse to send me to the afterlife, there is no doubt in my mind that Arnulf would be alive. And to me that was unforgivable.

Perhaps, reader, you see me as dogmatic in my own way. Perhaps I am too idealistic, or I certainly was, expecting the law and morality and ethics to marry perfectly. But I was not so self-righteous to think that the life of one man, ten, or even a hundred were more important than hundred million. After all, people died all the time, for a variety of reasons and injustices. But to me that meant the deaths we *could* control, the killings we *could* prevent, were all the more important.

I think Vonvalt saw in me what he had once been, too, for he was less friendly to me for a while. Whatever form our nascent courtship had taken, strained as it had been by the interposition of Luitgard Roza and Vonvalt's sense of duty, and now by the return of Justice August – Vonvalt's first and truest love – had surely been killed off. Our only interaction was a terse exchange in which I told him everything I had seen and heard in the afterlife – for I was not so surly and intransigent as to keep such vital information to myself. I had expected my account of my meeting with Aegraxes to disconcert him, but Vonvalt had mentioned interactions with the Trickster in past séances, and to my surprise, he accepted it practically without question. "We can grasp that nettle later," was all he said on the matter.

In spite of everything I had experienced, and as I had explained to August in that castle ruin in the middle of the Ossian Sea, our plan had still not changed. We still had to seek out the old lore which Claver had stolen from the Master's Vaults; perhaps we had a fresh focus in that we now knew it was the *Codex Elementa*, and that the banishment rite had to take place in the afterlife itself. But our mission was otherwise unaltered.

I am not suggesting that the four of us hated one another from that point on; nothing could be further from the truth. We were bound by bonds and ties

that were as strong as the roots of a mountain. It is possible to love a friend deeply and still detest their actions. I am in one of my melancholy phases, and I cannot help but reflect on the way matters were left between us in the most pessimistic of terms. These volumes are a form of self-flagellation, I suppose, as much as an account of the end of the Empire of the Wolf.

I shall return to what came next, for there is a great deal of very mortal brutality about to unfold.

We left Rekaburg after another night's stay. Vonvalt's ill health would not permit a faster departure, and it was becoming increasingly clear that we would probably have to leave him in Südenburg.

We picked up a branch of the main pilgrim path about ten miles south-east of the town. Here the grassland became more sparse, the wildflowers thornier and hardier, and compacted sand and rock began to claim the land. The sun, though it was only considered early spring in the main body of the Empire, beat down mercilessly, and our horses plodded along, thirsty, their heads bowed.

Evidence of a well-trodden path was all around us, and it was clear that the same host that had laid waste to Rekaburg had churned its way through what pilgrims there had been here like a scythe through rye. There were some bodies, picked clean by buzzards and wild dogs, whilst worthless possessions – for anything of value had been looted – lay scattered amongst the scrub.

And then, on the morning of the second day after we had left Rekaburg, as we approached the edge of an escarpment which concealed the land ahead of us for some miles, we heard the unmistakable sounds of battle.

"Nema, are we too late? Has Claver moved already?" Sir Radomir asked no one in particular, and no one answered. With fresh urgency, we cantered to the edge of the escarpment, to see Südenburg revealed to us.

It was a vast fortress. From where we stood, walls of dusty red stone reared out of its steep earthen ramparts, themselves thirty feet high. Several large stone towers, square in profile and with classic, steeply sloped roofs of grey slate prevalent in Sovan gothick architecture, jutted up at the south-west corner. One of them was flat, and housed a trebuchet, which was currently

busy at work hurling large stones at a host marshalled below. Through the morning haze, I could also see a huge cathedral-keep in the centre of the fortress, safely ensconced in an inner bailey – though from the very top of the temple, it was not a black flag with a white star that flapped, but a white flag crossed with black and centred with a deer's head. That was the device of the Templar Order of Saxan Knights. Next to it was a red flag with a black griffon rampant, which I would soon learn was the device of the margrave and Senator Jansen's friend, Severina von Osterlen.

"No," Vonvalt said. Every word seemed to pain him. He pointed to a host of Saekas as they wrestled with a number of siege engines, but even as we watched, one was smashed to ruins by an expertly placed missile from the trebuchet tower on the south-west corner.

"How many do you think?" Bressinger asked. "Five hundred?"

"Cannot be much more than that," Sir Radomir said. "There is not the resource to support more. Unless they eat grass."

We were not the only ones observing the battle. A number of people, perhaps two or three dozen, could be seen spectating from the relative safety of the escarpment. We must have been a mile or two away from the castle.

"What could such a small force hope to achieve against that fortress?" Sir Radomir continued. He watched in silence for a few more minutes. "By Nema, 'tis madness. They will be slain to a man."

In fact, this seemingly suicidal attack would have some important ramifications later, but that is not for this volume.

Vonvalt shrugged. "They are clearly not motivated by logic, that much is certain. Here, look: there is a sally."

One of the gates was opening, and a wedge of Templar cavalry was exiting onto the plain. It was an awesome spectacle; every horse was a huge war destrier, armoured and caparisoned, and the thunder of their hooves vibrated the earth even from where we stood. The knights, dressed in white surcoats crossed with black, gathered speed. Banners and pennants fluttered in the morning breeze. Even from our distant vantage point we could hear the clattering of steel plate, and the roar of zealous battle cries.

I could see Saeka commanders desperately gesticulating to their men, and from where we stood one could just make out long sturdy poles of wood which had been fashioned into anti-cavalry spikes. The odd horse stumbled and fell, lamed by caltrops strewn in front of the castle gate. But the

formation at large was untroubled by these inconveniences.

The anti-cavalry poles might have checked the advance if arranged in two ranks by a group of men with souls as unyielding as iron; as it was, the Templars cut an awesome spectacle, and their charge was more or less unchallenged as the Saeka host aborted what had appeared to be an utterly hopeless attack in the first place and broke in panic.

The Templars were merciless in cutting down what fleeing natives they could reach. Had we been closer we would have been treated to a bloody spectacle where men and women were impaled on lances and smashed apart by cavalry sabres. As it was, we watched a curiously tame version of the battle, too far removed to see the visceral displays of gore which accompanied the meeting of travelling metal and flesh.

The screams carried well enough though.

This part of the engagement could not have taken more than a handful of minutes. But then, small groups of Saekas began to cluster together in knots, after the main ranks had been driven apart. Now we watched some Templars fall; the natives' tactic was actually quite effective, for small pockets of relatively well-armed and -armoured men, spaced well apart, could pick at cavalry lines from all angles and frustrate the Imperials' greatest weapon – that of the single, all-devastating charge. We observed as what had started out as an extremely one-sided affair, lasting no more than a few minutes, was dragged out for another hour, as increasingly exhausted Templar knights were forced to dismount and clear out these schiltrons laboriously. In the increasingly punishing heat of the morning, heavy plate armour became a liability, and more reinforcements were brought forth from the castle to bolster the Templars.

"Nema, what a mess," Sir Radomir muttered. "How could–"

He was cut off by a thunderous boom that echoed across the scrubland. It was so powerful and unexpected that the battle ahead of us paused briefly.

"Flame of Savare, what was that?"

We watched as a plume of smoke and dust rose into the air on the far side of the castle.

"That – was blackpowder," Vonvalt said. He pointed briefly to the melee in front of us, which was finally drawing to a close as the last of the Saekas were put to the sword. "And *this* was a distraction. Come, it looks safe enough to approach."

With these dubious words ringing in our ears, we picked our way down the bank of the escarpment and pressed on amongst the low grass, shrubs, and wildflowers of the lands surrounding the fortress.

We drew some attention from the outlying Templars as we approached, but they were mostly too busy dispatching the remaining Saekas to pay us too much attention. I watched, appalled, as men and women begging for mercy were killed out of hand, dispatched with a quick plant of a short sword through the breastbone or neck.

“I am looking for Margrave von Osterlen,” I heard Vonvalt call out. I looked up, to see that he had accosted a pair of dismounted Templars. They looked tired, dusty and bloodied, and in no mood to engage with this random noble and his retinue.

“Who the fuck are you?” one of them asked. He eyed Heinrich warily, for the huge Sovan war shepherd could smell blood.

“This is—!” Bressinger started, leaning forward in Gaerwyn’s saddle, but Vonvalt silenced him with a gesture.

“Justice Sir Konrad Vonvalt. I am not expecting any special treatment. I just need to speak to the margrave.”

The soldier appeared to regret his hostile tone. He spat. “She will be commanding the eastern division.”

“We heard the explosion,” Vonvalt said. “How long have the natives had access to blackpowder?”

The Templar shrugged. “I’ve been here two years and I’d say they use it perhaps once a month.”

Even Vonvalt, whose face rarely betrayed what he was thinking, looked shocked at this development. “I thought it was a rare occurrence. Where on earth do they get it from?”

The Templar spat again, and took a long draw from a skin of ale. “You will be a popular man, Justice, if you can work that out.”

The conversation was over. The Templars, who I would soon learn were a hardy and surly mob, did not stand on ceremony, even for Justices. Out here, the only currency was one’s reputation, be it for piety or skill at arms – or both – and given that one could not be Templar without having first been at the very least knighted, the simple fact of one’s nobility did not carry much in the way of respect.

Vonvalt did not seem to care too much. He became considerably less

prickly about the proper niceties being observed in a military setting. Having spent his formative years as a soldier, he knew all too well the stresses and strains of campaigning, and rarely insisted on receiving the full ceremony and respect his position entitled him to.

"Come on," Vonvalt muttered, and we advanced towards the mighty earthworks which formed the roots of the castle.

"Nema's arse," Sir Radomir said, as we stood looking at the breach in the eastern wall. In front of us, a team of Templar masons and engineers examined the damage, whilst gangs of workmen, stripped to the waist, were moving aside the rubble.

It was several hours after we had first arrived. The fighting on the eastern side of the fortress had been much fiercer, and much closer run than the shambolic display on the western side would have indicated, and we had had to wait in the lee of the fortress for the battle to conclude for some time.

The sky was now obscured by a dirty white haze, and on the distant horizon, a thunderhead formed. The corpses of the indigenes had been piled up ready for burning, stripped of anything valuable, including rings, jewels, necklaces, and, of course, armour, which could be either used by the Templars, or melted down and re-forged. I was surprised to see Neman priests ministering to these piles of corpses, converting them to the Imperial faith post-mortem; and I was even more surprised to see the earnest tenderness with which that task was undertaken. That was not to say I condoned the practice, by any measure; but certainly one could not accuse the Templars of Südenburg of not taking their mission seriously, even if that mission was rotten at its core.

Wounded and dead Templars had been repaired to Südenburg for treatment or burial – and for those most unfortunate wounded, both. More knights were going over the battlefield, gathering up sheaves of weapons and painstakingly removing caltrops and filling in divots which could break a horse's ankle. By the end of the day, save for perhaps the odd broken arrow shaft or leather armour strap, one would not know that Südenburg had played host to battle at all.

Except the hole in the wall.

It was not obviously catastrophic, but it was certainly a dramatic rent, haloed with huge blast marks of soot which marred the curtain wall like a black star – an almost prophetic inversion of the white star the Templars wore as a device.

The hole itself was perhaps ten feet in diameter, and had done considerably more damage to the earthwork that abutted the wall than to the heavy stone blocks of the wall itself. But, as I would come to learn, it was more serious than it first appeared. The Saekas had chosen their place of detonation well, and the engineers' report, which would find its way to the margrave later that evening, warned of serious structural damage to that section of the curtain wall which would require reinforcement at great expenditure of labour and funds.

"What is that?" I asked, pointing to a mark on one of the blocks.

"It's a fucking great hole," Sir Radomir said. Bressinger snorted.

I turned to them, my eyes half lidded. "There. That mark on the stone."

They both peered into the deep crater. At its nadir, a gap in the broken masonry revealed a dark, underground chamber below. Water welled up through the soil, as though the fortress were bleeding. I could see for the first time shattered pipes rendered from clay and lead.

"That is the mark of Imperial engineers. 'Tis to warn other masons of the water lines," Bressinger said.

"Helena, your dog is eating a hand," Sir Radomir said.

I whirled around in horror, to see Heinrich chewing on a severed human hand, toying with it as though it were a dried pig's ear.

"Heinrich!" I shouted, appalled, whilst behind me Bressinger and Sir Radomir laughed.

"'Tis in its nature," a voice called out from the crater. I turned back, watching as one of the knights, who had spent a great deal of time examining the damage to the foundations of the wall, now climbed out and approached us. Her surcoat was filthy from the freshly turned red soil, and her face was sooty and blood flecked. She accepted her sword back from another Templar standing at the side of the crater, and buckled it about her waist. "From the Hall of Solitude to Südenburg. Your hound has come a long way." She nodded to Vonvalt. "Justice."

She had the look of a Saeka about her, as many Estrans did, and but for an

invisible border dividing the southern Empire from the Frontier, she could have been a native herself. It was all the more bizarre that her lordly title, “Severina of Osterlen”, marked her out as being a noble of the Hauner city of Osterlen – though as I would discover later, it was ceremonial.

“Margrave,” Vonvalt said. “Have you been forewarned of my arrival?”

She nodded once. “I received a note from a mutual friend. I can spare you some time now, more this evening—”

And then she stopped abruptly as Vonvalt collapsed to the floor.

XXX

Revelations

"You will be alarmed at how quickly the commonfolk turn on a suspected criminal, and how swift and intense the demands are for violent punishment. Never be cowed by this; you are an officer of the law, not the whims of the people."

FROM CATERHAUSER'S *THE SOVAN CRIMINAL CODE: ADVICE TO PRACTITIONERS*

Südenburg had its own Order of Knights Hospitaller, and Vonvalt was taken to a private chamber reserved for those injured and sick Templars of the highest rank. For the longest time I was convinced that Vonvalt had simply died, but the physicians who tended to him said that it was merely heatstroke, and stripped him of all his heavy formal garments and plied him with marsh ale. Other orderlies bathed him in cold water, and by the late afternoon he was somewhat restored. Only we, his retainers, knew the true root cause of his ailment; but as embarrassing as it was for Vonvalt to be thought to be suffering from too much sun – an ailment of the weak and incautious – it made a convenient pretext. Templars were, after all, an extremely devout and superstitious order, and we did not want to be turned back out on to the Frontier where marauding bands of Saekas were at large.

Margrave von Osterlen visited only once during the afternoon, and briefly, and did not seem to be particularly sympathetic to Vonvalt's plight. In the first instance she merely contented herself that he had not died, quickly and brusquely, her mind clearly occupied on other matters. Nonetheless,

word from Senator Jansen had reached her, which I privately thought was the only reason she was speaking to us at all.

She returned at dusk, however, after vespers in the cathedral-keep, having at some point found the time to strip out of her armour. Now she wore black breeches and a black blouse, with her hair tied back into a simple ponytail. Even shorn of all her martial trappings, she exuded power and authority in much the same way Vonvalt did. Like many powerful women of the Empire – and beyond – I found myself in her thrall, awestruck and jealous of her easy, commanding manner.

"A simple case of heatstroke, or so the physicians tell me," she said. "I did not think the mighty Sir Konrad Vonvalt could be laid low by a bit of sun." I looked at her, to see the faintest of smiles on her lips. It had a disarming effect, given the great burden she had inherited in Südenburg – to say nothing of the lousy day she had had.

Vonvalt smiled thinly. He did not have the energy for repartee. "What I am about to tell you does not leave this room," he croaked. "I need to know you understand."

Von Osterlen did not look particularly pleased at that; like Margrave Westenholtz, she had become accustomed to being her own liege lord, many miles beyond the reach of the Autun's claws. But, unlike Margrave Westenholtz, she was not a traitor to the Crown – nor a total shit – and she acquiesced with a nod.

"I am not suffering from heatstroke." I could tell that Vonvalt had wanted to clarify that point for a long time. "I am in the grip of an eldritch malaise. Patria Bartholomew Claver—"

"Obenpatria, now," von Osterlen corrected.

Vonvalt gritted his teeth. "So. He has been promoted?"

"I expect it is merely a matter of time until the man is made Margrave of Keraq."

"The Emperor would never allow it."

"I do not know for how much longer the Emperor is going to have a say in the matter."

Vonvalt mulled this piece of news, his features creased in distaste. Eventually, he said, "Claver has cursed me. He has stolen codexes from the Master's Vaults in the Law Library. We believe the Margrave of Keraq, Sir Vladimir von Geier, assisted him in this enterprise."

“Oh, of that, I have no doubt,” von Osterlen remarked dourly. “The pair have struck up quite a friendship.”

Vonvalt pressed on. “Contained in a codex called the *Codex Elementa* are instructions on how to incant a hex. The hex summons a powerful demon which I shall not name. This demon is consuming my life force and is – unfortunately for me – very close to completing the process.”

Coming from anyone else, it would have sounded insane. Hearing it from Vonvalt in such simple terms was like being freshly introduced to the horror.

Von Osterlen processed this news for a moment. It was difficult to know where she stood on matters concerning the holy dimensions. Many, if not all of the Templar rank and file, would have been some degree of religious, and a good portion of them would have been fanatically so; but margraves and other commanders were political appointees, and with guaranteed fights to be had, the three main Templar fortresses – as well as many of the smaller wayforts – would be popular postings, jostled over by ambitious knights and lords of both secular and religious persuasions.

“That is very bad news,” she said carefully. Her expression and tone of voice betrayed nothing of her feelings on the matter. “If there is anything my priests can—”

“There is not,” Vonvalt said abruptly. “You must forgive me, Margrave; I do not have a great deal of energy.”

Von Osterlen was untroubled by the interruption. “How can I assist?” she said evenly.

“First,” Vonvalt said, “I would hear your thoughts on the… *political* situation here. Tell me of the Templars, and of the Frontier, before what I have to say influences you further.” He gestured to the window. “There was an action here this morning.”

Von Osterlen’s expression curdled. She folded her arms and leant back against a pillar behind her, cocking one leg so that her heel was pressed against the stone. “How much time do you have? To live?”

“Days. Perhaps a week. No more.”

Von Osterlen considered this. “The situation on the Frontier is perilous. It has been for some time. With the Kova Confederation absorbing the cream of the Legions, we have had few initiates to replenish our ranks – and those we do get are taken by Keraq. And our foe is getting more dangerous.”

“Blackpowder.” It was Bressinger who had spoken.

“Aye,” von Osterlen said. “They are being supplied from Kòvosk, or so Tymoteusz tells me.”

“Who is supplying them from Kòvosk?” Vonvalt asked quickly. The matter of the mysterious Kòvoskan man and the blackpowder explosion in the Sovan docklands still bothered him immensely. There had been little enough to tie it into his theorising.

“The rumours I have heard implicate some minor members of the Casimir household, and their knightly retainers.”

“*Casimir*?” Vonvalt asked. “As in the *royal* household of Casimir?”

“I told you, it was just a rumour.”

“The Emperor’s daughter-in-law is—”

“Iliyana of Casimir, I know that,” von Osterlen said. “As I say, ’tis a rumour.”

Vonvalt contemplated this, his expression sour. “There is a connexion between Claver, Kòvosk, the abduction of the Prince Kamil, and blackpowder. I am certain of this, and yet the answer eludes me.”

“Well, I am afraid you are not going to find it here.”

Vonvalt sighed. “Tell me what you know of Claver.”

“Only rumours. Keraq has cut itself off from the rest of the Knights of the Temple. It is true that the orders of the Frontier have their rivalries, but… this is different. I heard that Claver was involved in some form of treachery in the Hauner Vale. There was even some talk of him being arrested, though those whisperings have fallen by the wayside. I have heard nothing from Zetland for weeks, and all manner of rumours abound.”

“Such as?”

“That Claver will be made the head of the Savaran Order in Keraq, and Vladimir von Geier will take over the running of Zetland from Margrave Gislenus. Then Claver and his collection of lunatics will set out in force. There must be thousands of them now, perhaps five or ten. Even these fastnesses cannot sustain so many men for more than a few months, and you have seen the landscape. A huge programme of works would be required to turn it tillable. A great deal of food we must import – not only for us, but for those people we are obliged to protect and sustain – and that gives the native pagans ample opportunities to make mischief. I have heard that von Geier is taking men out in force, pushing south, taking them beyond the border of the Frontier itself and as far as Qaresh.”

“Why? The Emperor has not decreed war with the nations of the Southern Plains.”

“’Tis an end in itself. No reason greater than to goad the southerners into fighting. He wants to blood his men.”

Qaresh was the northwesternmost nation of the Southern Plains, in the same region as the kingdom of the Kasar – the Kyarai. It was a long way south of the Empire, and not a place that the Empire would lightly make war with. That von Geier was doing so spoke of extraordinary audacity.

“And where will this great host of Claver’s go?” Vonvalt asked.

“I should imagine here would be the first port of call,” von Osterlen said bitterly.

Vonvalt nodded. “Our fears are aligned.” He thought for a moment. “Do you think he would actually do it? Move on Südenburg?”

“What sensible commander would not? If he does not reduce this fortress he cannot safely further his own ends. Not if he means to move against the desires of the Autun.”

“You consider yourself his enemy?”

“Aye.”

“Have you sent word of your concerns to Sova?”

“I have corresponded with Tymoteusz about von Geier and the other Templar Orders a number of times, and I have protested about the fact that Keraq is being given all the new initiates. But Claver has not been here for that long. I do not *know* what his plan is, and can only speculate. There are plenty of other rumours to suggest that he will head south, for what else could such a large force be amassed for? By every account, he is a pious man, to an extent that puts the rest of us to shame. Perhaps he means to crusade.”

“I do not think that Claver has designs on Qaresh or on the Southern Plains. I think he means to take his army to Sova.”

Von Osterlen snorted. “And do what with it? They would be annihilated.”

“Why can you believe he would move on Südenburg but not the capital? He cannot make war on you here without making himself an enemy of the Empire.”

“Because he could comfortably defeat us. My men are dying in droves,” von Osterlen said bitterly. “We are like a whale carcass being picked apart by sharks. ’Tis as though the natives have some special designs on this fastness above all others. And I have already told you we are not getting men to

replace our losses. *And* neither hair nor hide of help from our brothers and sisters in the south. Ten thousand men and a few more barrels of ’powder and there will be nothing stopping a force cutting north.” She paused to take in a deep breath, and let it out again. “But Sova… well, he’d need twenty times the number, for a start.”

I could tell for all von Osterlen had said, Vonvalt was still irritated by her last remark. “Others have made the mistake of underestimating Bartholomew Claver, including myself. I was told you were a sensible woman, one who could be trusted, and one would assist me in the cause of justice. Are you that person, or must I look elsewhere?”

“I don’t think you *can* look elsewhere,” von Osterlen said, nodding to Vonvalt’s laid-up form. She sighed. “But yes, I will help you, though I do not think I can do much. I can hardly launch an attack on Keraq. And besides, my duties keep me here; I have pilgrims to protect.”

“You have books, yes? Codexes in your temple?”

Von Osterlen nodded. “Undoubtedly, though I do not get much chance to read these days.”

“It is worth me having a look. Will you have someone bring them to me? I will not be departing here. I am too weak.”

That caused a great deal of consternation from everyone except me, for I seemed to be the only person who had predicted it.

Vonvalt held up a hand for silence. “I can barely stand, let alone ride a horse for another fifty miles,” he said irritably. “And what would I do when I got there?”

“What would *we* do?” Sir Radomir asked, not unreasonably.

“Infiltrate. They are taking on new initiates all the time. The three of you will go, pose as Templars, find the *Codex Elementa* and break the hex.”

I felt my blood surge at this. I would sooner have returned to the afterlife. Not only was this an extraordinarily dangerous undertaking in itself, but the consequences of our failing could not have been greater.

Curiously, it was my fear of looking afraid in front of von Osterlen that kept me from saying anything.

“What about me?” Bressinger asked. He gestured to his missing arm. “I cannot pose as a Templar.”

“Why not?” Vonvalt turned to von Osterlen. “What would happen to one of your men who had been so injured?”

Von Osterlen eyed Bressinger. “He’d be given a posting within the castle, if he still had his wits. Naturally he would be excused from combat.”

“But he would not be turned out?”

Von Osterlen shook her head. “Not unless he wanted to be.”

“There you are,” Vonvalt said to Bressinger. “We shall think of an appropriate task for you.”

Bressinger didn’t look particularly pleased – he was as brave as they came, but he was not foolhardy – but if he had any further reservations, he did not give them voice.

“I can certainly provide you with appropriate armour, weapons, and clothing,” von Osterlen said. “Perhaps an official letter, too. Nothing beyond an update on, say, our grain stocks. It might get you through the gate, and no one is going to question you on it too thoroughly.”

“We will have to come up with a story for Helena and me, too. I cannot exactly use my existing knighthood,” Sir Radomir said. “We may be expected to fight if we come into trouble.”

“Helena can join the Daughters of Nema. There is no requirement for nobility,” von Osterlen said. “I daresay, Sir Radomir, you can pretend to be one of my men killed this morning.” I could tell she did not particularly like that idea.

“You have my thanks,” Vonvalt said. “In fact, Helena, I have a story you can use already. You will be able to join as a minor noble. Hopefully it will get you better treatment, if nothing else.”

I was confused by this. “What do you mean?” I asked.

Vonvalt signalled for patience with his hand. “Margrave,” he said, turning his attention to von Osterlen. “You have my sincerest gratitude for your assistance. I will try not to be a burden on you at this trying time for you and your Order, though I remind you that you are of course duty bound to assist me at the expense of all. I make a point of not interfering with ongoing military matters, as my retainers here will attest, but, notwithstanding, I do require you to furnish me with all the assistance I require. The matters I am grappling with concern the security of the entire Empire.”

The margrave accepted this gentle warning with more grace than I think she was used to displaying, but the acceptance was all that mattered.

“There is a wayfort between here and Keraq, Kunoburg. I will give you a letter to present to the commander there, to assist you if and when required. It

is the southernmost outpost I still have allies in."

Vonvalt inclined his head. "I'm grateful," he said. Then he closed his eyes.

"I take my leave, then," von Osterlen said awkwardly, offering a shallow bow before leaving. Bressinger, Sir Radomir, and I made to leave too, thinking Vonvalt was going to try and get some sleep; but he said, "Not you, Helena."

I waited patiently as the others left, not knowing what to expect. But my heart was thumping, and I felt sick with anticipation. I was sure that we would fail; Vonvalt looked as if he would die that very night. How on earth was I supposed to infiltrate a huge and secure Templar fortress – not only that, but presumably Bartholomew Claver's private chambers, too, which were hardly likely to be unguarded – recover the *Codex Elementa*, and get it back to Südenburg all in time to save Vonvalt's life? Such an endeavour would take a week at least. It would take us most of two days simply to get to Keraq.

That sense of hopelessness must have been writ large on my face, for Vonvalt said, with a rare, tired tenderness, "Come, Helena. I know it all seems so difficult, and I have asked a huge amount of you. But you must be strong. You are the strongest person I know. I am so lucky to have found you. I am convinced it was fate that our paths crossed in Muldau. There is no one else in the Empire equal to the task I have set."

"'Tis not possible," I said helplessly. "There is just not enough time left. We have been too slow. I have *seen* it, Sir Konrad; I have seen the creature that is consuming your life force. It stands but a few feet away. Would that you could see what I have seen. It is as though you are standing on a trapdoor, and it is waiting beneath. The Emperor has slain you with his fool's errands."

Vonvalt snorted. "On that, we can agree. Listen to me, Helena, I do not have much energy left. If I die—"

"No, please—"

"Hearken to me!" Vonvalt snapped. "I am sorry, Helena, but I have three things to tell you, each more important than the last. It may be the last chance we get to speak."

I nodded. I did not trust myself to speak.

"Some time ago, I set up a false identity for you. Lady Sofie Esser. You

are a minor noble from Jägeland. Every document you will ever need, devices, family line, patents of your nobility, as well as a seal, can be found in a strongbox in Ekkebert and Reinhold Mercantile Bank, in Sova. Lady Esser was a real person, the last surviving member of her household. She took her own life upon the deaths of the rest of her family in a fire. No one knows of her suicide. I kept it a secret to keep her estate intact. I have also deposited a large sum of money in her name. More than enough to buy a house, hire a small staff, and live out the rest of your days in peace and obscurity. Not a mark of it can be traced back to me. To access it, you need only present yourself and a code word, which the bank has in their records. The word is *magnolia*. Tell me the word, Helena."

"Magnolia," I repeated dumbly, too surprised to take any of it in. In fact, such must have been evident, for Vonvalt made me repeat it several times more.

"If you should fail, if we should all fail, and Claver takes the throne – or does whatever it is he's planning to do – promise me, Helena, that you will take yourself far away from Sova. Promise me you will take the money and go a thousand miles away. Promise me you will do whatever makes you happy. There is no ignominy in that. Promise me?"

"I promise." I nodded, feeling myself begin to well up.

Vonvalt sighed and he seemed to deflate almost into nothingness. "I have been such a fool, Helena, for so many reasons. I have tried to protect you, to do right by you, and at every turn I have made things worse. I should have just been open with you, treated you like the adult you are, and let you make your own decisions." He laughed bitterly. "*Dopavla Kasivaran je kobrim namjyema.*" It was an old Saxan proverb: "The pathway to Hell is paved with good intentions."

I said nothing. I had wanted to say so much for so long, and now my words failed me.

Vonvalt resumed, his head resting against the headboard, eyes still closed. When he spoke, his words were fractured, as if the very act of speaking brought him great pain. "I will write a letter for you, Helena. I shall give it to the margrave. If the worst should happen, she will pass it to you. It will go some way to explaining my feelings – I hope that it gives you some succour.

"I have always been at pains to keep you at arm's length, Helena. I am aware of my power, both that invested in me by the Sovan state, and that

much subtler power granted to me simply by virtue of my social position. Our relationship is one of unequals; I am your employer and mentor, and your protector. I fulfil a great many roles in your life that would normally be filled by other men and women. I knew you would be drawn to me.

"As time has gone on, and as matters have become more urgent, I have weakened in this resolve. My professional and ethical obligations…" he winced "… which have thus far prevented me from doing the one thing I truly *want* to do, have been eroded by the pressures and exigencies of my professional life. When you face death, Helena, so many things which have seemed so important, and which have governed the way we have lived and conducted ourselves, seem suddenly so immaterial. Know that it was my intention to court you, Helena, consequences be damned."

He paused. Vonvalt had never spoken to me so intimately before. The most tragic aspect of it was that it felt as though it were too late. I had begun to realise that he and I could never form any kind of romantic attachment. And in fact I was grateful that he had exercised self-control for so long – indeed, that Luitgard Roza's interposition had taken place, though I detested her. Vonvalt was not the man I had long thought him to be. And though he was still at his core a decent person, he had changed, and was still changing. For all I had previously lamented his prior stubbornness, I found that the alternative was in fact much worse.

Vonvalt exhaled, as if some great pain which had been building up suddenly dissipated. "As you probably are aware, Justice Roza and I engaged in an affair. It was she who initiated it, and I convinced myself that if I indulged it, it might… cause you to reconsider your feelings for me. In a strange way I suppose I was trying to force both our hands on the matter, though I knew the result was that you would be somewhat heartsick. Perhaps you would even have been tempted to leave my service." Vonvalt shook his head. "Like I said, I should have just been straight with you. I am sorry, Helena." He paused again. "And then of course there is—"

"Resi," I whispered.

Vonvalt nodded. "Resi," he said quietly.

I did not know what to do or say. Too much; it was all too much. For the longest time I had wanted *something* from him, some answers, some indication of his thoughts and feelings. Vonvalt had always been a closed book; now I was getting a library's worth of revelations, and I could do

nothing with any of it.

“There is one more thing I must tell you.” He spoke quietly now, moments away from unconsciousness. “I know that you think I have betrayed my values. That I have taken an… equivocal approach to the common law. That I have killed extra-judicially. That I have… committed murder.” The last addendum he spoke quietly, and his voice was freighted with regret. “Helena, the law is a perfect tool applied to an imperfect world. There are times when a guilty person must go free. There are other times when the difference between a just killing and murder is procedural formality. You think that I have acted in contravention of my powers as a Justice. That I once was a paragon of virtue, and the murder of Resi saw me come untethered from my personal and professional code of ethics.”

He was right; it was precisely what I thought.

“I am going to tell you a story, now, Helena. A story that I have never shared with anyone.

“I told you that Dubine’s family was butchered in Annholt. Some years later, the Emperor made me a Justice. We took our oaths and dispersed into the provinces.” He paused, briefly lost in reverie. “The very first thing I did was go to Venland with Dubine. And I used the Voice on man after man after man until we found out exactly who was responsible for the deaths of Dubine’s family. Well. We found him. He had been legally pardoned for any and all actions undertaken in the Reichskrieg. It was nothing unique to him. I received the same pardon. Everybody did. The slate was wiped clean, so that the Empire could progress without every noble household living in fear of prosecution. It was an entirely political act, and nothing at all to do with justice.

“Dubine and I killed that man, Helena. We were young and full of nightmares and anger, and we killed him. We killed him slowly. He suffered incredible excruciation. And then we disposed of his corpse and said that we would never speak of it again.”

I stood, trembling, tears rolling down my cheeks.

“Have you never wondered *why* Dubine is so loyal to me?” Vonvalt asked with sudden force. “Such loyalty cannot be purchased with a simple Imperial stipend. I achieved *justice* for him, Helena. And I broke the law in doing so – smashed it to pieces and trampled those pieces into the mud – within weeks of taking some of the most solemn oaths it is possible to take under the

common law.

“Now you see, Helena. I have never been some paragon of virtue, a rigid stickler to every law and by-law of the Empire. I am exactly what my title is: justice, no more and no less.”

I stood in silence for a long time. It is simply not possible to describe what I felt in those moments.

“There. Now you know everything you need to know about me. Whatever you think of me and my methods, you know Claver must be stopped. Go, now, and do what must be done. I only hope I am still alive on your return.”

XXXI

Daughter of Nema

"'No one is above the law', it proclaims on the walls of the Grand Lodge – the great exception that proves the rule."

SIR WILLIAM THE HONEST

For the second time in one evening, I was given another identity.

Because I had spent some time in a Jadran kloster, courtesy of another infiltration mission given to me by Vonvalt, it made sense that I professed to be a member of that Order. I knew enough of its ways to deflect all but the most rigorous of scrutiny, and enough of the Neman Creed to affect the necessary level of religiousness. I would pretend to be from one of the Klosters in Muldau, and my name would be Anjelika Pohl, an orphan – which was, again, true – who had been convicted of affray by a canon court and whose sentence of hard labour for ten years had been commuted to two years of service on the Frontier.

Sir Radomir's story would be that he was a sheriff from Perry Ford (where he had actually formally served as sheriff, albeit over a decade ago) who had joined the Templars as a confrère knight and who had had agreed to transport me, since we were going in the same direction anyway. Bressinger, who had only recently lost his arm, would pretend to be some dogsbody within Südenburg, responsible for various menial tasks whilst a more formal role could be found for him. A talented infiltrator in his own right, he would hold back whilst Sir Radomir and I went ahead, and attempt the fortress

separately.

The story went that we had reached Südenburg via the pilgrim path from Estre, and von Osterlen had taken the opportunity to give us a message about the grain stocks there. She also gave Bressinger a separate letter containing a warning about blackpowder, to deliver to the quartermasters at Keraq or the margrave himself, depending on which course of action seemed most promising at the time. In the end, none of these options would present themselves.

Von Osterlen had one of her most trusted knights, a Grozodan named Luther de Rambert, also brief us on Keraq's escape tunnels, one of which ran underground for a full mile out of the fortress and which had a concealed exit located in a rocky outcrop to the north. He would make sure that there would be a Templar and two fresh horses there for the duration of our mission. He himself would travel as far as Kunoburg, and take the opportunity to assess the garrison there.

There were other preparations made. Von Osterlen took the trouble to arm and armour me, telling us that it would not be considered strange that she had done so. All manner of people joined and were permitted to join the Templars, so finding armour that sat comfortably on my frame was not difficult. Given the volume of money that found its way into the Templar Order's hands – they were one of the largest banking institutions in the Empire, after all – I found it strange that the armour was so simple and rugged, little more than a suit of mail, kettle helm, and black surcoat emblazoned with the white star of the Savarans. I left the short sword that Vonvalt had given me behind, for it was of a quality that my story would not bear out, and its replacement was buckled about my waist. I was also given a sohle shield, which I would wear across my back like a pack.

And so it was that Bressinger, Sir Radomir, Heinrich, and I set out on specially bred messenger palfreys from the Südenburg stables that could travel great distances at speed. As planned, Bressinger and de Rambert accompanied us as far as Kunoburg. The two of them talked in Grozodan for most of the journey, and I was pleased at that. I could not bring myself to speak to Bressinger. I could not even look at him. Fortunately for me he was too preoccupied with the mission and too engaged in his conversations with de Rambert to notice and so provoke a confrontation. He probably considered that I myself was nervous, for he seemed completely untroubled by how

withdrawn I had become. I had not felt so off balance in a long time.

Kunoburg was a pale imitation of the gigantic fortress at Südenburg. It could only have held a garrison of one or two hundred soldiers, and from its battered stone walls I could see that it had suffered much as an opportunistic target for Saeka hosts who did not fancy chancing their arm on Südenburg or Keraq. We fed and watered our horses, rested them for an hour or two, took on some victuals ourselves in the mess hall, and then Sir Radomir and I pressed on our way.

The pilgrim path to Keraq was well marked and easily followed, and we did not need a guide. It was on this journey, as the sun set and the endless wildflower plains that had hitherto smothered the ground like a bejewelled carpet of green finally gave way to dusty, scrubby land, that Sir Radomir and I finally spoke.

"What was it that Sir Konrad wanted to speak to you about?" he asked me. I heard his mail ring as he waved his hand in the darkness. "I'm not interested in your courtship, if that's all it was. I'm not prying."

I sighed. "He told me that he was not some paragon, as I had always taken him to be." I told Sir Radomir what Vonvalt had said. The old sheriff listened quietly. I carried on, all of my thoughts and feelings spurting out of me like wine from an uncorked bottle lying on its side. Sir Radomir was the only one I felt I could speak to, which was ridiculous given I had known him the least amount of time, and he was not a particularly good listener. Perhaps the severity of our mission had driven him to a more introspective mood, however, for that evening he displayed a depth of patience and understanding that I had not known he was capable of.

Once I was finished, he was silent for a long while. "Helena…" He paused again, searching for the right words. "'Tis a good thing that you have seen Sir Konrad's fallibility. It is just a shame you did not see it sooner. Sir Konrad is a Justice, yes, and his power is unlimited. But simply because he is a Justice does not mean he is not a human being. He is not perfect. He is subject to the same desires and motivations as any other man. He thirsts after you, as I'm sure many a boy and man do. Dubine and I thought the two of you were fucking, the way you have carried on these past few weeks, though Nema knows a tumble like that would probably have sent him to his grave."

I had to laugh at that, but bitter sadness still lingered about me, draped across my shoulders like a wet cloak.

“I expect this return of Justice August, in whatever form that takes – and believe me, I haven’t the first fucking clue how that works – has thrown matters to the wayside.”

“Aye. And a number of other things besides.”

We rode on in silence for a little longer.

“In many ways, Sir Konrad has done too good a job of teaching you his trade. And you, like a good student, have soaked it all up like a trencher. But you were an orphan. You lived the best years of your life in poverty. You have seen plenty of bad behaviour in your time. You know full well what people are capable of when driven to desperation. Well, Sir Konrad is capable of desperation too. Think on it; when Justice August was slain – at least, in a manner of speaking – Westenholtz got the better of Sir Konrad. Claver got the better of him, too. And when a man who is accustomed to receiving nothing but obeisance and obedience is challenged so brazenly, it is normal for him to react very badly. I have seen it before. I have no doubt we will see it again. No one can be granted the gift of unlimited power without it affecting their mind. Look at the way he has carried on since we arrived in Sova. Every time he does not get what he wants, he loses his temper. ’Tis no wonder he hates the capital. Were it up to him, I reckon he’d have spent the rest of his life touring the arse end of nowhere, frightening all the peasants.”

I considered this blunt wisdom for a moment. “And the slaying of Dubine’s family’s killer?”

“Fuck me, Helena, if you grieve for that man then you truly are lost.”

“Of *course* I do not grieve for him,” I snapped. “I just…” I sighed mightily. “I do not know. I thought that we had *rules*. The Sovans have always been so preachy about their fucking rules. And not even the great Sir Konrad Vonvalt, the most feared and respected lawkeeper in all the Empire, follows them. If that is the case, then…” I threw my hands up in the air, my anger suddenly spilling over “… what was the *point* of it all? What was the point of the Sovan conquest? What was the point of any of it?!”

“Aye,” Sir Radomir murmured, his eyes on the horizon. “There’s the question.”

We did not speak for a long time after that.

We made camp for a few hours in the dead of night. A band of pilgrims, who had noticed our Templar livery, trailed us for a while and then set up their own camp a stone's throw away. Ironically, it was us who took comfort from that; it meant more eyes on the scrub and rocks around us, looking out for any opportunistic natives. We had been lucky not to come to grief against the Saekas before; now we had two fewer sword arms. I slept close to Heinrich that night.

We set off at dawn to cover the rest of the ground before the punishing heat of the sun made the going too difficult, especially now that we were encumbered with armour. Our worries in that regard were unfounded; as the day wore on, a huge thunderhead gathered, and I found a pain building in my head as sometimes happened in muggy, stormy weather.

The messenger palfreys lived up to their reputation, and we covered the distance between Südenburg and Keraq in less than half the time it would have taken us with our regular horses. Keraq itself was another huge castle, standing in what looked to be an artificial lake which had apparently been filled by a number of irrigation ditches siphoning off water from the distant Reka. The castle had a vast curtain wall, with square mural towers at each corner and halfway along each wall. In the centre, atop steep ramparts, was a cathedral-keep fluttering with pennants and banners. It was a breathtaking edifice. It is incredible to think that it is little more than ruins now, harvested for its stone and otherwise neglected to the elements, rendered obsolete, like so many of those old-fashioned fortifications, by blackpowder. Back then, the fortress of Keraq looked as though it would stand for all time.

"Good gods," Sir Radomir said as we drank in the view. Keraq stood on a plain that I would later learn was a dry lake bed, and was a little greener than the dusty, rocky country we had just ridden through. I could see distant Sovan settlements dotted about it, pilgrim and merchant villages and towns that depended on Keraq for their continued existence.

We both jolted as a voice called out to us. "You two, there! Have you come from Südenburg?"

We turned to see a man wearing Templar garb. Judging by the state of him, he had been riding for some time; his surcoat was so dusty it was almost white, whilst his face was red from too much sun.

"Aye," Sir Radomir said. "We have a message for—"

"Never mind that," the Templar called back to us. "There is a host moving

up from Qaresh. Obenpatria Claver has ordered all able-bodied men and women to marshal on the Leutwin Plain."

Sir Radomir and I exchanged a glance. "We need to speak to the margrave about—" Sir Radomir tried again, but was once more cut off.

"Later, later!" the Templar said. "Make for the plain. Margrave von Geier is indisposed anyway. I am headed for Kunoburg. You have come by there?"

"We have," Sir Radomir confirmed. The Templar was already riding past us, heading north.

"How many in the garrison?"

Sir Radomir shrugged. "We know not," he said, truthfully. "We stopped there only to make common mess."

The Templar touched the rim of his helmet. "I wish you good hunting. *Nema volas!*" he cried in Saxan. "It is the will of Nema", the rallying cry of the Templars – and then he was on his way.

Sir Radomir and I turned to one another. "We have not arrived at a good time," he said, in what would have taken first place in the Philosophers' Palace for understatement.

"I cannot fight a battle. I will be killed," I said. Although I was frightened, I wasn't speaking from a place of fear. Rather, it was a simple, factual observance. I had escaped the sacking of Galen's Vale with my life, more by art than design, and had fared only a little better on Godric's cog. I did not fancy my chances in any kind of organised mass melee. "We should wait for Dubine."

"We cannot head back to Kunoburg, and we've not enough water to make another night's camp." Sir Radomir sucked his teeth. He nodded to Keraq. "Let us at least approach; we can always cry ignorance and claim that we were searching for the margrave."

We rode onwards, unhappily, but we did not have much in the way of choice. Unfortunately, Fate was a cruel mistress that afternoon, and as we approached the castle we were hailed by a party of mounted knights. There must have been thirty or forty in all, each resplendent in their armour and Templar surcoat. Banners fluttered in the afternoon breeze, and there were as many knightly devices as there were white stars on display.

We went through a very similar conversation as we had with the Templar scout. The commander of this host, a severe-looking woman wearing a surcoat that bore both the white star against a black background and a

howling griffon, had little time for our explanation. Our hesitation, however, was never mistaken for a lack of bravery. The Templars were many things, but cowardice was not amongst their faults.

Sir Radomir tried one last throw of the dice. “We have ridden from Südenburg directly,” he said. “Our horses haven’t a battle in them. Let us at least change them. Is there a common stable?”

The commander looked at Sir Radomir, then at his horse, and then at mine. She pulled an expression that was very Grozodan, a downturn in the corners of the mouth as well as a raising of the eyebrows that put me immediately in mind of Bressinger.

“Your horses look fine to me,” the commander said – disingenuously, I thought, for that was one of the only true things Sir Radomir had said. She turned back in her saddle, so that she was facing away from us. “Do not worry; this will not be too taxing.”

It struck me as an odd remark. Even taking into account the Templars’ suicidal bravery, I sensed an uncommon eagerness amongst this relatively small group of knights.

There was nothing more to say. No one thought us to be anything other than precisely what we appeared to be. Further protestations, however mild and logical, would be met with suspicion.

And so we fell into the formation as though being forced along by a gigantic invisible hand. I found in those moments the temptation to simply run away had never been stronger. Curiously, though, I did take quite a bit of comfort from being surrounded by a formation of mounted and armoured knights, as though their courage and confidence was an aura from which I could draw.

There was no chance of speaking to Sir Radomir, now. The knights, a diverse collection of soldiers from all parts of the Empire – and beyond, judging by the dark skin of a few of our new compatriots – were almost all within earshot, even above all the rattling of armour, the clop of hooves, and the snorting and whinnying of horses.

“Where do you hail from, brother, sister?” a man immediately to the left of Sir Radomir asked. He reminded me of one of the rowers who had accompanied us in our failed attempt to rescue Prince Kamil. That entire endeavour felt as though it might have been ten years ago.

“Muldau,” Sir Radomir said, and could not stop himself wincing once he

realised his error.

“He speaks of me,” I said. “He is from Perry Ford.”

The Templar nodded. “I was going to say, I do not hear much of Tolsburg in your accent.”

“No. A Hauner, born and bred,” Sir Radomir said, with a tired enthusiasm that ten years ago might have been genuine.

“And what are your names?”

“I am Sir Randulf. This is my charge, Anjelika.”

“I am pleased to meet siblings in Nema. I am Sir Walhberct,” he said, giving the Saxanised version of his name. “That is a fine hound.” He nodded down at where Heinrich trotted at my horse’s feet.

“Thank you,” I said stupidly.

“What is happening? ’Tis rather late in the day to be giving battle, is it not?” Sir Radomir nodded to the thunderhead above, which showed no sign of abating. “Poor weather for it, too.” I didn’t realise it at the time, but he was doing his very best to remove me from harm’s way.

Sir Walhberct frowned. “’Tis not our choice; there is only the Will of Nema. The host from Qaresh has already moved through Hrolfbruck and Rudsindfurt. They will salt all of the farms from here to Zetland if left unchecked, farms we have prised from this land like rings from a corpse.”

“Trouble yourself not, Sir Randulf,” another Templar said heartily, leaning across me and winking. “It will not be a demanding encounter.”

We rode at a trot for perhaps ten miles. By the time we started mustering with other groups – more clusters of mounted Templars from different wayforts in the large stretch of land between Keraq and Zetland, as well as marching ranks of auxiliary foot soldiers and men-at-arms – the light was beginning to fade from the sky. Having come all the way from the Kunoburg wayfort in a mail hauberk, I was both hot and exhausted, and desperate for something to drink, though I dared not ask anyone. The only thing that was keeping me going at that point in time was an increasingly intense fear of my impending death, which suffused my whole body with a nervous energy, overriding all other bodily concerns.

The thing I remember most about this point in time was the colour. The ground, a mixture of sandy yellow and green wildflower scrub; the sky, a seething mass of intense dark grey; and the Templar host, which, when fully accounted for, must have numbered some three or four thousand. Five

hundred of them were clad in the black surcoat of the Templars, whilst the confrère knights, half the balance, wore their own colours. The remainder, formed of auxiliaries, were clad in a much more ragged mixture of uniforms.

We came to a stop on a plateau – known as Gelbegard – which ended a few hundred yards away in a shallow sloping escarpment. Beyond was a plain which itself sloped away to the west into another dry lake bed. It was there that an old earthen rampart sat, and atop it the ruins of a formerly impressive Imperial fortress known as the Agilmar Gate, which had once been the southernmost boundary of the Frontier. To the east, a tributary of the Reka ran, wide and no more than a foot or two deep, bubbling over a broad pan of rocks. Further south, the banners of what I assumed was the Qareshian host formed up on the plain. It was a force that dwarfed our own, and all trace of courage and comfort which I had taken from the knights around me evaporated like a puddle in the midday sun.

I didn't know it at the time, of course, but what I was about to take part in is now one of the most well-known Templar engagements: the Battle of the Agilmar Gate. As von Osterlen had told us, the Templars of Zetland had been needling away at the Qareshians for months, seeking to provoke them into giving battle. The Emperor would have been furious to learn of it; I have no doubt that the small nation of Qaresh – and then possibly the lands of the Kasar themselves – would have eventually fallen to the Autun, given enough years. But Qaresh was not a disparate collection of nomads such as those that lived on the Frontier; it was a sovereign nation, with all the things that came with it – including an army.

An army that Claver meant to use as target practice.

"What is your name, girl?" the commander asked, twisting about in her saddle.

It took me a minute to realise she was talking to me. "Anjelika," I said. I had to repeat it, my mouth was so dry. Fortunately, Sir Walhberct offered me some water from his skin, and I drank more than was polite.

"What order do you hail from?"

"The Jadran Order," I said, nearly forgetting. I could feel the attention of the Templars around me like a physical weight pressing me into the saddle.

The commander pulled an expression of distaste. It was hardly surprising; of all the monks and nuns, those belonging to the Order of Saint Jadranko were probably amongst the least likely to join the Templars. But it was the

only Order I knew about in any amount of detail, and that was more important.

“What brings you to the Frontier?” the commander asked. I could not help but feel that my next words were about to dictate how the next few hours – and very possibly the rest of my life – were going to go.

“She is my ward,” Sir Radomir interrupted, wrongly suspecting that I was about to make a mistake in our cover story. “She has been convicted of affray. She is here to serve a two-year penance.”

I could have punched him in the face. The commander’s expression hardened into contempt. She gestured to a group of people who I could see were exclusively women, dismounted and forming up in ranks in what even I recognised as a classic Sovan shield wall.

“Female penitents join the Daughters of Nema.”

I didn’t move. The knights jostled around me uncomfortably. This was a tawdry little drama that everybody could do without. We were about to give battle, and here I was, a petty criminal being de-horsed.

“Hurry up about it!” the commander snapped. “I have a formation to join.”

“I had better accompany—” Sir Radomir started, horrified at his mistake, but treading a fine emotional line. Already his apparent reluctance to fight was marking him out amongst this small group of Templars; now his curious desire to accompany me to this woman-only sect was generating more unwelcome attention.

“Can I not just—” I started, sounding plaintive, but once again I was cut off.

“Prince of Hell! Fuck off over there, right now!”

I pulled my horse around and trotted towards the gaggle of lunatic battle nuns, Heinrich dutifully in tow, my skin aflame with shame. I could see many of them had the shaved heads of penitents, and their surcoats were embroidered with prayer parchment and other religious markings. They stood to the rear of the main body of the Templar host, which was forming up on the plain at the foot of the escarpment, and for a precious few minutes, I thought that I would be safe in the rear.

The temptation once again to simply flee was almost overpowering, but I was spotted by the apparent commander of this group, a large, worryingly scarred Southern Plainswoman who put me in mind of an even more

imposing version of Ingeburg Galla.

“Are you to join us, sister?” she asked in heavily accented Saxan.

I looked back to Sir Radomir, but already they had departed to join the cavalry lines further south.

“Yes,” I said, though Nema knows why I didn’t simply lie. I could have said anything.

The woman nodded sympathetically. She was wearing a mail hauberk and black surcoat, but many of her associates were not. One woman was wearing little more than a sackcloth, her shaved head daubed with ash, this battle apparently little more than a creative exercise in suicide.

“I am Mother Genovetha.” She beckoned to Heinrich, who attended her, tail wagging. She scratched his ears. “Here, quickly; dismount and join me in prayer. We are expected in the van.”

This sentence, uttered so casually, had the same effect as the flat of a sword smacking the crest of my kettle helm. I climbed down from my horse, which I never saw again, recovered my sword and shield, and was led, docile as a lamb, to the rest of the women. They all ignored me, but it was not necessarily out of rudeness; most had their eyes closed and were muttering prayers.

“Nema, blessed and beloved God Mother, fill our bodies now not with mortal blood, but with your pure and righteous fire. Gaze upon us, your faithful daughters, as we prepare to give battle in your name. In righteous warfare, we do atone for our sins. We shall fear neither death nor pain. Armour us with your love; put in our hands the tools of your terrible vengeance upon the godless mass before us. Charge our souls with righteousness: and if you see fit to claim us from this mortal plane, then by grace accept us into the green forests of heaven. So be it.”

I stood in a daze, as all around me men and women traipsed to the front. Genovetha mistook this for a moment of solemn reflection, and clapped me on the shoulder.

“What is your name, daughter?”

Her gentleness wrong-footed me, and I said, “Helena.”

She smiled, and it struck me that there was a hint of sadness behind it. “Helena, you are a Daughter of Nema now. Come,” she said, and looked up at the black thunderhead and fading afternoon light. “We had best make haste. They will want to start shortly.”

XXXII

The Battle of the Agilmar Gate

“For those in any doubt about the fallibility of the Sovan noble, I recommend a visit to the battlefield; there you will find their corpses in great numbers – and in a great number of pieces.”

TEMPLAR SERJEANT-AT-ARMS ADALWIN VON SAXANFELDE

I was surprised at how orderly the forming up of both armies was, for it seemed to me that there was a great advantage to be had in smashing into an enemy whilst he was still preparing his lines. Small snatches of conversation I can remember with great detail. An archer complaining about impending rain; a knight with a broken spur; a man-at-arms with a snapped leather strap on the back of his shield.

As for the Qareshians, they hardly seemed like the incoherent savages they were often dismissed as in Sova. I saw two large blocks of foot soldiers, their right flank protected by the wide, shallow river, their left flank by the earthworks leading down into the dry lake bed. In front of these two formations were rows of pikemen, two deep; whilst a slightly more disorganised mass of mounted archers milled about in the rear. From several hundred yards away, it was difficult to distinguish them by physical features, but their battledress was different enough; loose linens, overlaid with hauberks formed of metal discs, rather than chain link, so that they resembled large armoured fish, whilst their helmets tapered to a point, with many of them plumed. Their banners, too, were written in a different tongue, not the

functional, blocky letters of Saxan, but a looping, curling script.

The Templars were pushing their dismounted knights and auxiliaries to the fore, presumably to engage and remove the enemy pikemen, before the Templar cavalry could smash into them from the sides. Unfortunately for me, as a freshly minted Daughter of Nema, we were in that vanguard, shock troops who would crash into the enemy ranks insensible with religious fervour.

I looked about me constantly, trying to gauge where the advantage lay, for it was certainly not in numbers – and then I saw him.

Bartholomew Claver.

Gone was the knock-kneed palfrey I had last seen him riding outside of Galen's Vale. Now he sat upon an enormous white destrier, armoured and caparisoned in purple. The man himself was resplendent in decorative plate mail, though he did not wear a helmet, and I could see that his gaunt features had been fleshed out by the plentiful provender of a castle larder. He was still clean shaven, both his jaw and pate, though both were marked with a dark grey shadow which gave him a severe appearance. Here was a man who had foregone all pretence of humility, and had fully bought into his own myth. He looked more like a margrave – perhaps even a king – than a priest. He could easily have been a different person entirely. But there was no mistaking that superior sneer which he had always worn.

Behind him, a cabal of mounted warrior-priests and Templars held aloft a number of banners and religious icons; I saw consecrated deer skulls, as well as copies of the Neman Creed, opened, nailed to boards, and mounted on poles. Men jostled obsequiously to be near this inner circle. Next to Claver was a man in a sky-blue surcoat which I immediately recognised, thanks to the Imperial herald, as that of Vladimir von Geier. He was an olive-skinned, severe-looking man, precisely the kind of person who I had imagined in my head.

There was a noticeable shift in mood as Claver and his little warband appeared. People glanced over – though many more had no compunction in simply pointing, agape – and the air filled with whispers which put me in mind of the horrible, insanity-inducing chitters that accompanied the Muphraab. There was a reverence there, but it had an edge to it. People were *frightened* of him. It was obvious, even then – and these were his own people. They were on the same side.

And then he looked at me.

I have thought about that moment many times since; whether, my face half hidden under my kettle helm and mail coif, he could possibly have recognised me. We had spent a great deal of time in one another's company, not so long ago. Placed in a room together, it was unthinkable that he would not know precisely who I was; but here, amongst the organised chaos of an army preparing for battle, could he really pick me out, and with such apparently penetrating discernment?

And yet, his gaze lingered. I felt uncomfortable – no, frightened – and looked away, but I felt it remaining on me, an intangible sense like prey sensing the gaze of a predator. I wondered then if my contact with the Muphraab, and my recent and distressing foray into the afterlife, had given me that same eldritch aura that Vonvalt had at times. Given that Claver was the progenitor of the hex, was I like a beacon to him, tainted by the elemental's dark energies?

I risked one last look around to see if I could spot Sir Radomir somewhere amongst the mounted Templars, but I was jolted from this by the blast of a war horn. I turned back, to see the enemy approaching. They had foregone what seemed to me to be the better position, for all they had to do was sit there and let our cavalry break themselves up on their pikes. It is difficult to separate out what I know from reading accounts of the battle many years later, for irrespective of how ghastly the whole affair was, it is impossible to resist reading about it, knowing I was there.

I rubbed Heinrich's head with a trembling hand. The dog's hackles were up, and he was slavering manically. Some of the Daughters of Nema had crowded around him, eager for his protection, our animal talisman.

"Here we go, Heinrich," I whispered.

The Templars sat somewhere between the ruthless efficiency of the Sovan Legions, and the disparate, national forces and lordly retinues of men-at-arms which had formed the armies of the continent before the Sovan conquests. They were not quite the élite fighting force of the Legions, but they were also not as bad as Vonvalt and many others of his snobbish urban worldview liked to pretend. In fact, of everyone in the Empire, the Templars were getting the most combat experience of any. The Legions tied down in the Kova Confederation were being forced to endure an endless wave of traps and ambushes, from which no satisfying combat could be derived. Here on the

Frontier, the natives of these lands, and those of nearby nations like Qaresh, were still able and willing to muster in hosts of hundreds and – as in this case – thousands strong, emboldened by their Imperial-style weaponry, and the counsel of their tactical advisers supplied from Kòvosk. Throwing themselves against the gigantic fortresses of Zetland, Keraq, and Südenburg was a fruitless venture, though less so with the increasing use of blackpowder; but going toe-to-toe with the Templars on the open battlefield was still a worthwhile enough venture to risk the odd defeat. The number of broken wayfort ruins and Templar skeletons littering the landscape was testament to that.

The commander of the Daughters of Nema bellowed a war cry into the air. At the same time the thunderhead broke dramatically and rain began to lash the landscape around us. I watched as archers hastily loosed off a few rounds of arrows before unhooking their bow strings and drawing melee weapons.

The Qareshians advanced in two broad formations of pikemen. We moved forwards to meet them. All my rough upbringing, the death of my parents, the trials I faced on the streets of Muldau, which had hardened my soul so effectively, provided nothing like the mettle required to march into battle. Instead, once again, I felt the invisible hand of Fate propelling me forwards despite every fibre of my being telling me to do nothing but run away. Rain rang off the rim of my kettle helm, but despite the sudden drop in temperature, I felt sweat running freely down my back and forehead. My breath, tinny from the metal surrounding my face, laboured in my ears, but the sick fear I felt and nervous energy propelled me forward, as did the knowledge that, if I were to try to escape, I would be killed without hesitation by the people around me.

It was only as we approached across that field that the realisation of just how outnumbered we were hit me. Groups of forces which I had not really seen now revealed themselves, lines of soldiers with swords, axes, and hammers walking behind the pikemen. It was a passing simulacrum of a Sovan shield wall. I could almost feel their weapons stabbing into me.

The Daughters of Nema were exercising themselves into a pious fury around me, screaming all manner of penitent oaths, some even going so far as to injure themselves with deliberate sword cuts to arms and legs. I tried to draw from it, but my knowledge of the afterlife and its terrifying indifference to us humans quashed such attempts like a sabaton crushing a fly.

The rain was already making the going underfoot difficult. I didn't even realise that missiles were raining down on us until I saw them sticking into the ground, but the Qareshian archers were evidently not dissuaded by the rain. One daughter of Nema collapsed, killed immediately as an arrow passed straight through the top of her skull. Others, the ill-advisedly less armoured, also began to suffer crippling injuries. I saw a couple, including our commander, suffer arrow wounds which, rather than cause them to stop, they lurched forwards, exhorted by their comrades and a number of the warrior priests dotted throughout the Templar ranks. They ran, keening like the banshees, into the front lines of the pikemen, inevitably to be killed and achieving nothing of practical value. I watched, wide-eyed, as their bodies were penetrated by multiple pikes.

At this point less than a few tens of yards separated us, and I was horrified to see religious fervour overwhelming any kind of common and military sense. The nervous anticipation which charged the air as effectively as the thunderstorm above caused the rest of the Daughters of Nema, as well as the other penitent orders that flanked us, to disregard the formation and charge headlong into the wall of pikes.

This sudden break out and desperate disintegration of cohesion was not limited entirely to our vanguard. The other side broke too, so that we met one another in the middle of what was fast becoming a muddy quagmire.

For a moment, all was sound, overwhelming noise: the clatter of steel against steel, armour on armour, and sword on sword. Screams, of rage, of triumph, and of animalistic terror filled the air. It was not just screams, either; all manner of noises, the full spectrum of grunts, cries, whimpers, gurgling, choking, and everything else was suddenly there to be heard, an instant and demented chorus of human suffering and anger and rage.

For my own part, I was able to drop back slightly in the break, feigning a trip in the mud, so that I was not amongst the very first people to meet the row of pikes. It was self-serving, and cowardly, but I was no soldier – was certainly no Daughter of Nema – and if I were to have any hope of surviving this battle, I was going to have to be cunning as well as brave.

For all my new comrades' suicidally religious fervour, they did in fact have some success in breaking apart our enemy's front ranks. Plenty met their deaths on the cruel heads of the pikes, including the woman immediately in front of me, who sank onto the weapon's edge like an orange

sliding down a knitting needle. But this allowed me to move past her and engage the pikemen himself, whilst his pike was engaged with the corpse of the daughter of Nema now behind me. I thrust my short sword at him, met resistance against the metal scales of his chest armour, thrust madly again, and this time caught him in the neck, quite accidentally. He collapsed, and more Daughters of Nema rushed to fill the fleeting breach, screaming incoherently.

For me, in the vanguard, the rest of the battle was simply chaos. There was no way to know what was going on around me. I was so focused on the people within sword and spear's reach of me, that there was no time to take any kind of tactical stock.

I slipped and fell into the mud briefly, and I was trampled by several soldiers behind me, eager to press into the fray. I pressed myself up, exhausted already, the mail hauberk pulling me down like the corpse of a man strapped to my back. I remember being suddenly concerned that my short sword having mud on it would dull the edge, and desperately trying to wipe it off on my surcoat. It was one of those strange things that apparently happens in battle, a completely insignificant thing that the mind fixates on in order to process the horrors all around.

I staggered forwards. The mud was like soft cake underneath my boots. Now I saw the Templars proper moving in. I must admit, it was an awesome spectacle that even my cynical mind was not immune to. Watching as they crunched into the flanks of the Qareshians was an appalling, but in that moment, immensely gratifying sight. I certainly didn't want to get killed, and in order not to be killed, ultimately we had to win the battle.

"Move up! Get up in there and fight!" a serjeant at arms bellowed at me. I ran clumsily forwards once again to rejoin the melee. I hacked clumsily at another soldier who parried my sword so expertly that I almost lost it. An involuntary scream escaped my lips as the man pulled back to stab me, but he himself was stabbed from the side by a dismounted Templar knight, and I watched as his eyes went wide and he fell backwards, clutching at his side as if in so doing he might heal himself. A great many times that evening I would see people doing apparently insane things as their brains simply could not accept the horrible conclusion that they had been killed, and there was nothing they could do about it.

I now found myself in and amongst a group of dismounted Templar

knights. Most of them were men, something I only really noticed because I was no longer with the Daughters of Nema, most of whom had earned their penitence by cracking open the enemy vanguard as one might an egg.

“Here!” one of them shouted, grabbing me roughly by the back of my surcoat and pulling me tightly next to him. “Shield up!” he snarled. His breath smelt strongly of onions and wine. Another man battered in next to me on my right, so hard that the wind was knocked from my lungs. He thrust his shield in behind mine so that they were overlapping, and others were doing the same on either side of them. Before I knew it I was being pulled along to join in with the attack on the meat of the enemy infantry on the right flank.

The Sovan shield wall was a famous formation, or infamous if you were an enemy of the Sovans. I had seen artworks of impenetrable collections of men, shields to the front sides and even overhead, impervious to missiles, breaking only once they reached an enemy formation. Here, the short sword could not be bested. It gave its wielder a huge amount of versatility in close quarters, and phenomenal stabbing power. The overlapping shields were practically impenetrable.

I was about to witness first hand this marvel of Sovan tactical doctrine. I was pulled forwards by the knights either side of me. More still had formed up behind me. History – and a great many artists – have recorded this moment as “Sir Gerulf’s Thrust”, a move which turned what was the enemy’s left flank, though it was our right, and exposed them to the charge of Templar cavalry currently forming up behind us.

We met the enemy not at a run, but at an inexorable walk. The Qareshians ran bodily into our shields, hoping to fracture the line and create a gap into which more men could pour; but if they were ever successful – a vanishingly rare occurrence – there were more Templars behind to plug the gap.

Those men who had the presence of mind to say anything said prayers or even sang hymns, but most were silent, their faces grim-set as we met the enemy and stabbed them. The smell of shit and vomit in this impromptu phalanx, and the rattling and grinding of teeth, was overwhelming.

At one point a Qareshian charged me and landed a ringing blow on the side of my helmet and knocked it clean off, but I was amazed to find that I barely moved, thanks to the press of knights around me. The man was stabbed repeatedly by men either side of me, and then Heinrich ferociously ripped out his throat, and I felt blood and saliva spray me in the face as he

screamed and thrashed his way to the afterlife.

Now we were approaching the earthworks which sloped down and away into an old lake bed. The Agilmar Gate was on my right, an apparently holy site, for many Templars made some sort of obeisance to it as their circumstances permitted. I could see pilgrims sheltering there, watching the battle, which was extremely foolhardy since if we lost they would be slaughtered.

Still we pressed on. It was relentless. I had never been so tired in my life, but some deep reserve of energy was compelling me on, for to do anything else was to be killed.

The manoeuvre of which I was a part was now complete, for we had driven a wedge through the enemy formation of infantry. The pikemen had been killed; those who had survived were finished off by the auxiliaries bringing up the rear, and the archers, who had found themselves practically useless thanks to the deluge of rain. This left the majority of this half of the enemy's host, a collection of amateur and professional soldiers variously armed with melee weapons, extremely vulnerable to cavalry charge.

This was now the decisive movement of the battle. Vladimir von Geier led it, with Claver by his side, as well as the body of the best and most experienced Templar cavalry to be had from Keraq. I mistook the rumbling of their horses for thunder, for the storm still raged overhead, unabated. But as the soldiers in front of us rushed to grab up pikes and spears and form any kind of defensive line that they could manage, it was clear that they were about to be hit from the side, and I turned just in time to see the foremost cavalryman meeting the unfortunate pagans in their way.

Watching what a huge, armoured, and caparisoned Sovan destrier did when it collided with a body is beyond description. The charge was devastating. Those few brave Qareshians who had snatched up pikes and spears and other long weapons to try and dissuade the horses from meeting them had their hopes crushed as surely as their bodies. I watched a man hit so violently with a lance that it split his body in two. More still were simply battered aside in great sprays of blood. Cavalry sabres did not so much chop pieces off people – though they did plenty of that – so much as smashed them off like hammers against plaster.

None of this, though, was the most shocking aspect of what I witnessed that evening. As the charge inevitably lost momentum and the surviving

Qareshians coalesced around this sudden glut of horses and Templars, I watched as Bartholomew Claver dismounted. The knights who shared my shield wall seemed suddenly charged with anticipation. Heinrich, who I had not even been aware of for much of the battle – though his claws and muzzle were clotted with gore – barked and growled suddenly, sensing something that our human eyes and ears could not detect. Priests pressed their way through the mass of people, mud, and corpses to be near their obenpatria. An eldritch energy suffused the rainy air. I saw tattered and bloodied icons being thrust aloft into the black, twisted sky. Something was about to happen, and it was not good.

A circle formed around Claver. Qareshians surged forwards, hungrily sensing an opportunity to decapitate the leadership of this particular Templar host. His warrior priests and life guard of knights kept them at bay. I saw Vladimir von Geier, still mounted on his horse, directing soldiers left and right with his sword.

I turned back to Claver. His eyes had gone completely white. The last time I had seen that happen was in Galen's Vale.

I felt sick with anticipation. Once again, malevolent whispers filled my ears. It was as though the tortured and demented souls of the beyond, sensing a breach forming between worlds, were clamouring to return to the mortal plane. I felt it more keenly than ever before, coated as I was with the invisible ectoplasm of the afterlife.

The hair on my arms, weighted down by the metal chain links of the hauberk, stood up on end. I felt weak, and sick and frightened.

And then all was still and calm. The rain, which had been a torrent, stopped. I noticed everybody around me, Templar and Qareshian alike, looking up at the sky in fear and wonderment. I followed their gaze, to see lightning still forking through those black clouds, but slowly, as if the speed of earthly events had been reduced almost to nothing. I looked back to Claver, to see that his eyes were no longer just white; that white formed the epicentre of a crackling green luminosity, as though he had harnessed the power of the lightning itself. That same radiance fizzled and crackled down his arms. Horses around him whinnied and stamped, wide-eyed with fear.

"Nema volas!" The knights around me suddenly erupted. They roared into the air as Claver turned into some kind of demigod before their eyes. "Nema volas!" they shrieked, and tears ran down their blood- and mud-streaked

faces as ecstasy overtook them.

Whatever power Claver had employed to lift Vonvalt into the air in Galen's Vale, he now employed to devastating effect. The intervening weeks had apparently been spent doing nothing but honing this skill, for I watched as invisible energies sprang forth from his outstretched hands and battered into the ranks of Qareshians around him. Fully grown men and women were thrown backwards as though hit by a battering ram. More still were simply knocked over like saplings in a gale. I watched as one unfortunate Qareshian was impaled on the spear of a man behind him.

But that was not all. In the confusion – which would shortly turn into a panicked rout – other warrior priests, well armoured, moved through the front ranks of Templars and auxiliaries and began to thunder commands at the closest Qareshians. I recognised it immediately for what it was: the Emperor's Voice, but used in a manner Vonvalt had always feared. I had seen Vonvalt use it in this way before, to have men disarm themselves, but… not on this scale. This was something else. Claver had trained an entire cadre of priests to use the Voice as a battlefield weapon.

The Qareshians near the priests began to stab themselves and their brethren frantically, screaming and crying in their mass, wretched murder-suicide. It was a uniquely horrifying thing to witness. The only good thing I could say about it was that it was over quickly, for our enemy began to quit the field immediately, screaming and terrified.

I could see now that Vonvalt's faith in the Legions was misplaced, his confidence in their abilities overstated. Every one of these warrior priests was worth a hundred soldiers. Claver himself? Perhaps a thousand. Vonvalt had been right about one thing: the longer Claver was left to hone these evil talents, the harder it was going to be to stop him. There seemed to be no upper limit to his power. With enough focus, enough obsessive learning, he could become a one-man army.

But already I could see that, as dramatic and terrifying a demonstration of his power as this had been, Claver was once again a spent force. His job done, he sagged, and it was only by the timely intervention of the Templars around him that he did not pitch forward and break his neck in the mud. It is a shame; that would have been an appropriately ignominious end for him.

I knew then that Fate had once more shown me a gap in the cosmic cloud, through which some blue sky could be seen; a way forwards for the powers

of order and justice, and not right by might. I saw Aegraxes in his flying castle, standing over his table, moving pieces, subtly diverting the streams of time. Suddenly it felt like no accident that I was here, bearing witness to this. If we were quick, Claver might yet be stopped.

Their job done, the priests withdrew, and the Templars surged forwards again. Away on my left, a second cavalry charge – of which Sir Radomir was a part, though I did not know it at the time – smashed into the Qareshians as they milled about, stunned and terrified. Then the real killing began, as the pagan host broke and fled, mired down in the claggy mud that the battlefield had become. The slaughter was appalling, though I was to have no part in it. Feigning injury and exhaustion, I dropped back as all around me men and women – and Heinrich, for his blood was up – surged forwards, eager to maximise the victory and remove as many Qareshians from future armies – and the mortal plane altogether – as they could.

I dropped to one knee, leaning on the pommel of my sword. Already, members of the Order of the Knights Hospitaller were moving through the Templar wounded, conspicuously avoiding auxiliaries in favour of Templars themselves.

“Are you injured, sister?” one asked as he approached, a gaunt, diminutive man clad in a Savaran Order habit.

And suddenly, I saw an opportunity. I looked over to where the Templars were crushing our foe, distant now beyond a field of corpses. The reordering of this force, and the return to Keraq, would take days. Better to be taken away now, into the infirmary, than to spend time and effort meeting up with Sir Radomir and gilding our subterfuge.

I cast a glance up to the thunderhead, as though I might see the Trickster looking down on me.

“I can’t…” I said, clutching at my ribs.

The man called over two of his fellows, and I was laid on a stretcher. As I was being carried away, I searched once again in vain for Sir Radomir, and then offered up a silent entreaty that his life be spared.

Then I was loaded onto a cart, and, trembling with exhaustion and lack of water, I slipped into a deep, abiding unconsciousness.

XXXIII

Keraq

“The hallmark of a nation’s civilisation is how well it treats its criminal class. That they are kept well, in spite of their alleged crimes, is doubly incumbent on the state; one can certainly not rely on the people who comprise it.”

SIR RANDALL KORMONDOLT

I awoke to the sound of screaming.

Disorientated, I pressed myself up in bed. I was in a low-ceilinged chamber that looked like a repurposed grain store. It was a barrel vault, running for dozens of yards in a long, broad chamber. The many occupied beds which lay either side of me, the bustle of physicians of the Order of the Knights Hospitaller, as well as orderlies, immediately marked this place out as an infirmary. That, and the many overlapping sounds of people in differing states of agony, and the charnel house smell of blood, vomit, piss, and shit.

A flagon of ale had been left next to my bed, and I gulped it down greedily, slaking my terrible thirst. Then I turned to my right. The man in the next bed, clearly a Templar by his garb and knightly bearing, was looking across at me. His head was bound, including his right eye, though the bandages were already soiled. Traces of salve and bloody pus crusted around the dressings, and it was difficult not to recoil from both the sight and smell.

“Our blessed God Mother has seen fit to remove me from this mortal plane,” he said quietly. I was saddened by that, given what I knew of the vast,

bleak emptiness that awaited him.

“You may yet live,” I murmured, still trying to come to terms with where I was and how long I had been unconscious. Memories of the Battle of the Agilmar Gate surfaced like flotsam after a storm. I realised with a jolt that I had no idea where Heinrich was.

The Templar shook his head, a very small movement which was almost imperceptible. “No. The physician tells me a good portion of my head is gone. I linger here at the whim of the gods. Perhaps they have some purpose for me yet before I go to my eternal rest.” He offered me a thin, trembling smile, as though embarrassed by his softly spoken piety.

“What happened to you?” I asked, for want of anything better to say.

The Templar shrugged. “I have no memory of it. My last is of Obenpatria Claver. Saint Claver, he may as well be; a living saint. You have seen the gifts the God Mother and God Father have seen fit to bestow upon him?”

“Indeed,” I said. I hadn’t meant to sound sceptical, but the Templar must have known about the old Saxan magicks which still inhabited this world. Simply because they were not frequently on display did not mean that the knowledge was not still there, accessible to the Order of the Magistratum. It was true that by this time some people had forgotten about the ultimate nature and extent of those old Draedist sorceries, with the Order having limited itself to those which assisted in the prosecution of legal wrongs. But most knew that these powers were not some divine gift; it was a knowledge to be learned like any other. It was simply that the nature of the powers meant that that particular library was kept under lock, key, and guard.

It was obviously inappropriate to get into a debate with the man, but he had sensed the slight incredulity in my voice anyway. “You do not believe?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I do not know if I would trust any single mortal person to wield that much power,” I said. “No matter their intentions, it must eventually erode the self-control.”

The Templar sniffed. These were not words he wanted to hear in the minutes and hours before his death. “You talk as if he has designs on the Imperial throne. He means only to expand the bounds of the Empire into the Southern Plains. To annex the holy lands of the Kasar. All in the name of the God Mother and God Father. You should be pleased. Kasivar is filling your head with doubts.”

I had fully recovered my wits at this point, and had no time at all to listen to the man's trite words – for all religious platitudes sounded trite to me, no matter who was speaking them. I wanted to tell him that Claver and his lapdog von Geier were little more than petty tyrants, and that they probably did have designs on the Imperial throne. Instead, I said, "I saw more than one man wield the powers. The Obenpatria must be sharing his gifts."

I could see that that didn't sit well with the Templar; didn't quite square with his theory that Claver was the second coming of Saint Creus.

"I see no reason why he should not share his gifts amongst his chosen disciples. We are all warriors of the God Father, are we not? You yourself wear the white star."

"I do. I am here to do my duty, like everyone else."

The Templar rolled slowly onto his back, his one good eye staring up at the ceiling. "Perhaps Claver will one day share his gifts with you. We are not so far from the inner sanctum, here in the bowels of the cathedral-keep."

I opened my mouth and closed it again. "I would love to see it. I can imagine it is an experience shared with only the most devoted."

The Templar emitted a gurgling, choking noise which I realised after a moment was laughter. "I wish you luck, girl. I do not think you have yet lost yourself in the embrace of the God Father. I see doubt in you. You wear it like a shroud. But fear not; the Frontier is unforgiving. It is a crucible in which our old lives are burned away and our true nature is revealed to the gods. They watch us. Their gaze is fixed here, scouring the earth around Keraq, seeking out those to carry the Flame of Savare into the lands of the unbeliever."

"Oh, I know the gods are watching us," I said uneasily, my mind returning to Aegraxes in his flying castle. I wondered… was his hand here at work, now?

"The Flame of Savare…" the Templar croaked, seemingly to himself. "There are dark entities about this place, girl. Dark beings. We must carry the Flame of Savare into that darkness."

"Yes," I said, looking about uncertainly. "The Flame of Savare."

"Remember it, and it will not be too late for you."

I wrinkled my nose. "What do you mean?" I asked.

But there was no answer from Templar.

I waited until there were no physicians nearby. With the strange, prophetic words of the Templar still in my ears, I pressed myself out of the bed and made for what looked like the exit. None of my clothing or armour had yet been removed, and with the lanterns on the walls, I was soon sweating with the heat.

I exited the chamber and found myself looking at a long, ill-lit corridor, with no inkling at all where I was in Keraq save that I was probably underground. I walked down that passageway, wondering how much time had passed since the battle. I had fallen unconscious from exhaustion. Enough time had passed for the journey back to Keraq itself, doubtless a slow journey by donkey-drawn cart, and then for my sleeping body to be manhandled down into the infirmary beneath the keep. I estimated the better part of the night had passed. If Claver and his priests had left the battlefield shortly after I had, then they had likely already arrived – or could be arriving at any moment. The thought spurred me on.

Above, I could hear the thumping of footsteps on wooden floorboards and the muffled raucousness of soldiers trading banter after the battle. I wondered where Bressinger was. Indeed, I wondered where Sir Radomir was. It did not occur to me that he might have been killed. I assumed he was in the castle above, probably making common mess and seeking to blend in. I hoped Heinrich was with him.

I came across a doorway and pressed my ear against it. I heard nothing on the other side, and was fumbling with the heavy iron handle when I heard footsteps in the passageway behind me. I turned sharply, to see a woman approaching, a nun by her wimple. She walked with a regular, unnatural gait.

“What are you doing?” she asked, frowning. She seemed to be confused by her own question.

I floundered for a few moments. “I am looking for the privy,” I said.

“Well… it is not in there,” the woman said. Once again, she spoke slowly, as if each word was a stranger in her mouth she was meeting for the first time. “What is your name?”

I wondered why she was speaking to me so oddly – so *rudely*, since as far as she was concerned I was a Templar. In other circumstances I might have

leant into the role a little more, acted with affront, even given her a dressing-down. But knowing that I was an infiltrator had tempered my guile.

"What business is it of yours?" I asked. "I need only use the privy, then I shall be on my way."

For all my stumbling fear of discovery, I had managed to be rude in turn.

The woman did not react. She stood in complete silence for a few moments, looking directly ahead. Then she suffered a small spasm, and turned to me.

"You must forgive my impertinence," she said tonelessly. "It has been a long night. And many. Of our brothers and sisters in Nema. Will not survive until morning."

My features creased in confusion at this bizarre delivery.

"'Tis no matter," I said uncertainly.

"Who are you?" the nun asked me again. I frowned as I saw another nun the end of the corridor walk directly past, striding with that same strange gait. It was as though they were marching, but in a bizarrely unnatural way.

"Please can you show me the way to the privy?" I repeated.

The woman considered this for a moment. "Yes, by all means," she suddenly said, jarringly loud in the close confines of the underground corridor. "Follow me."

She led me down the passageway, her bizarre walk making me question my own technique. She took me further away from the infirmary, and to a small, low corridor that even I had to stoop to fit into. For a moment I thought I was going to be attacked, but instead she opened a door which looked identical to the one I had been about to open before.

"I do not recognise you," she said out of the blue. There was no accusation in her voice; she might as well have been making a remark on the weather.

"Yes, well…" I said lamely. What was there to say to that?

The woman stood stock still for a moment. Then she gestured awkwardly to the toilet.

"Here. I shall wait for you."

"There is no need," I said immediately, again wishing I had Heinrich with me.

"No," she said, but offered no more.

I paused, and shot her a sidelong look. She did not move. Frowning, I

went inside and closed the door.

The latrine was a simple wooden seat with a long drop underneath. A single candle sat in a bracket above. I heard the sound of running water, and looked down, to see an actual stream, running along a boxed-in channel, probably siphoned off from the Reka in the same way it had been diverted to create the moat around Keraq.

There was a knock at the door, making me start. *Bloody woman*, I mouthed, furious.

"Hello."

"Just go away," I snapped.

"I shall wait," the woman said, implacable; and then, bafflingly, "Who are you? I do not recognise you."

I looked around the inside of the latrine, incredulous. The woman was broken, insane. What the hell was the matter with her?

I felt my choler rise. I clenched my teeth and my hands into fists. I didn't know what to do. I certainly didn't need the toilet, given I hadn't had anywhere near enough to drink, but found myself sitting down nonetheless. The hauberk I wore was heavy, and the bowels of the castle were stiflingly hot, though the air emanating from the latrine was cool, thanks to the flowing river water.

I paused, thinking. I thought about the marks on the walls beneath the ramparts of Südenburg, where the explosion of blackpowder had revealed the roots of the castle. Bressinger had said they were symbols cut there by Imperial engineers to mark the water lines.

I followed the thread of my thoughts. Vonvalt had talked to me once about the new Sovan castles in Kòvosk, about how they were a marvel of engineering. He had mentioned that they circulated hot air under the floorboards and hot water through pipes in winter to keep the place warm, but also that a channel of cold water through a ventilation shaft would have the opposite effect, and keep a chamber cool in summer. Was it possible that the same stream which carried away waste could also be diverted to produce a channel of cold air to an underground location?

I thought of the dying Templar's words, spoken to me mere minutes before. He had mentioned an inner sanctum in the same breath as he had mentioned Claver.

"Shit," I muttered to myself. I stood, and lifted the top of the latrine up. It

creaked loudly on its hinges. There, cut into the stone underneath, just about discernible in the wan candlelight, was the same engineering symbol I had seen at Südenburg. Once again, I felt the hand of Aegraxes on me, as though I were a wooden schach piece being pushed across the board.

The latrine door smashed open.

It was not a large space inside, and the door hit me square in the back, its edge catching me between the shoulder blades. My hauberk took the worst of the blow, but I was still badly startled.

I turned to defend myself, but I came under a hail of blows. The woman was thrashing at me with her hands with a strength that belied her appearance. Her teeth were bared, her lips drawn back, and her eyes had a feral expression.

“Nema, get off me!” was all I could think to say, shoving her roughly backwards. I was half her age, and strong, but the door frustrated me, caught by the woman as she lurched backwards. It slammed closed, trapping us both in that confined space. I was suddenly filled with a profound feeling of dread; I realised with conviction that only one of us was going to be walking back out of it.

The woman came at me again, this time emitting a screech which was entirely inhuman. Once more I froze, baffled and horrified by this display. Someone or thing had vacated the woman’s mind. She clawed and scrabbled at my hauberk, oblivious to every one of my attempts to throw her off or reason with her. Then blood began trickling from her nose, and her lips pulled back even further, baring teeth which somehow seemed larger than before. Her eyes rolled back into her skull, so that she cut a truly terrifying figure.

And then she tried to bite me. Her teeth – fangs, almost – sank into the mail of my hauberk at the shoulder, tearing my surcoat. She achieved nothing except breaking her own teeth.

I punched her in the side of the head. It was a clumsy blow, and I drew my hand back in pain. A jolt ran from my wrist to elbow, temporarily deadening my nerves.

The woman shrieked and grabbed my surcoat, proceeding to shake me violently. She made to bite me at the neck again, and I intercepted it with my left forearm, so that now I was pressing on *her* neck. I drew my right arm back, my elbow connecting with the wall behind me, and landed a solid

punch directly to her nose.

Nothing. More blood, but it was bleeding anyway. Now the blood ran into the gaps between her monster-teeth, making her face an insane rictus of animalistic rage. In fact, I achieved nothing except making her go completely berserk. Not only did she attack me directly, but also thrashed against the door and walls themselves.

I hit her again, punching her bony midriff, kicking at her feet and legs, lashing out in any and every way I could. I might as well have been punching the walls of the latrine. Several times that is precisely what I did do. It was a frantic, desperate struggle.

At some point in this horrifying melee my wrist snagged on something strapped about my waist. I looked down to see that my dirk had not been removed when I had been placed into the infirmary, unlike my short sword, which was probably still propped up next to my bed.

I yanked it out. I still had not at that point any intention of using it; I still hoped I might be able to breach whatever thrall encapsulated the woman's mind. But it was futile. I might as well have tried to talk to a feral wolf. She seemed for all the world to be both struggling against me, and struggling against herself, as though she were being possessed by some malign entity with instructions to attack me. For brief, fleeting seconds, she seemed to return to lucidity, her monstrous features turning from those of a deranged lunatic to those of a horrified old woman. But in the end, my hand was forced. She was losing the battle for control of her own body. Her movements were becoming more focused and direct, landing punch after punch on me despite my attempts to fend them off. One hit me in the side of the jaw, and knocked me senseless for a second. I clattered into the wall to my right, but still had enough sense to duck back as her hand, now a bony claw, raked the wall so hard as to chip the stone. One of the claws, formerly her little fingernail, snagged my cheek. I felt hot blood dribble down my face. The woman exercised herself into a frenzy.

She was transforming before me. With a scream, I raised the dirk and lashed out with it, not one, two or even three times, but a dozen, perhaps two dozen. I was trapped in a latrine underground with a monster set on killing me, and I was being driven to the very brink of insanity myself. I felt her skin swallow the knife easily, her robes providing nothing in the way of protection. Soon the latrine was a mess of blood.

The woman shrieked, her nature still vacillating grossly between semi-lucid human being, and entirely rabid demon-monster. I was certain that half of Keraq would be outside the latrine any minute, for there was simply no way that the noise of our fight was confined to the four tight walls surrounding us. I jammed my forearm into her mouth to try and muffle some of the noise.

I continued to stab. As the woman's mortal life force slipped away, the thing puppeteering her body seemed only to strengthen its grip.

And then a thought occurred to me. Of all the things, it was the words of the Templar who had died next to me.

"Flame of… Savare," I grunted. I looked up to see the candle guttering in its bracket, so many times nearly extinguished by the struggle. Unthinkingly I snatched it down. Something had seemed so off, so propitious about his words; they had struck me in the same way Vonvalt's arcane utterances sometimes struck me, as though they had some cosmic weight.

"Flame of Savare!" I said again, this time with a little conviction, and pressed the flame into the woman's robes.

She was immediately engulfed in a violent conflagration, as though her clothes had been saturated with pitch. I shrieked and hurled myself away, tripping on the base of the latrine so that I fell arse-backwards into it. I scrabbled madly at the sides, for it was no small drop underneath, all the while watching as the woman was consumed by the unnaturally sudden fire.

She screamed in a voice that was not her own as her flesh blackened and crisped. A terrible stench filled the latrine. She writhed violently, flailing and batting against the walls and door, leaving black soot marks where she made contact with them. It seemed to take her an age to finally perish, and no small amount of screaming, which must have raised half the castle in alarm.

When she finally sank to the floor, expired, the fire suddenly extinguished. It was only then that I realised I had felt no heat from the fire at all; that I was completely physically unaffected by it, though I should have been badly burned.

"What in Nema's name…" I whispered, breathless with fear and a curious exhilaration, but I did not have long to dwell on what had been an extraordinary – and extraordinarily terrifying – turn of events. I pulled myself out of the latrine and opened it as wide as it would go. Beneath was a drop of some six or seven feet.

As horrified as I was by the prospect of touching my attacker's body, I did not want to leave it to be discovered so easily. I hauled the woman's papery corpse up to the rim of the latrine and pushed her, unceremoniously, into the black pit below. The body hit the watery channel below with a sick cracking thump. It was as ignominious an end as it was possible to attain.

I climbed to the lip of the latrine, grateful for the running water, since the smell was practically non-existent, and lowered myself as far as I would go before dropping. Of course I landed directly on the corpse, and I felt the ribs crack and give way under my feet.

I steadied myself and peered into the gloom. There was some residual light from above, and I could make out a channel which had been cut directly into the bedrock, perhaps three feet wide and arrow-straight. With nothing else to do but press ahead, I sloshed through that filthy water, which ran deep enough to reach my ankles.

What I had not counted on was further latrine holes overhead, which of course made perfect sense given that was the purpose of the channel. A number of times I had to halt my progress for reasons which do not bear repeating in this account. However, one benefit of this was that more light made its way into the tunnel than would otherwise have done so.

I wondered if the latrine had been discovered by now. I wondered if men would come into the channel and search for me. That constant fear drove me forwards at what was a reckless pace in the circumstances. But I was sure that my logic held. If there was a shaft designed to carry cool air into the core of the fortress – that "inner sanctum" the dying Templar had referred to, I was sure the Sovan engineers would have used running water.

I wondered about the source of that Templar's words, what eldritch forces had inspired him. I was certain that it was no coincidence. "The threads of time were converging", as Aegraxes might have said.

Nema only knows how long I waded through that murk and muck, but eventually I came to a junction in the channel. Set above the water by couple of feet was a square hole, which led to a tunnel barely large enough to crawl through. From the mouth of this hole came a steady current of hot air, like breath. Carried on this exhalation was the unmistakable smell of unwashed flesh. I knew, intrinsically, that what I was seeking lay at the end of that tunnel.

I took a deep breath. I wondered how Vonvalt was, many miles away in

Südenburg. Had the Muphraab finally caught up with him? Had he succumbed to that most horrific of deaths? I gritted my teeth. I knew that, however I felt about Vonvalt, I was currently the only person in the Empire who could assist him – and he, in turn, was the only person who could stop Claver.

The fates of tens of thousands of lives hinged on my next actions.

And so I climbed into the tunnel, and crawled on.

XXXIV

The Inner Sanctum

"Why do the commonfolk expend so much time, effort, and treasure in shielding their political oppressors from criticism? 'Tis a depressing state of affairs which persists like a tenacious wart."

SENATOR FRIDA HADEWIG

I heard voices long before I saw anything.

Eventually, after perhaps ten or fifteen minutes of crawling – I did not go quickly, lest I be heard – I came to the edge of an opening perhaps four feet across. Wan firelight flickered into the tunnel, as well as the warm breath of air that I had by now acclimatised to.

I lay down next to the very lip of the rim and listened.

"… one of the vessels has perished," I heard one voice, that of a man, say.

"They have only ever been unstable constructs," a second voice said in reply. "The binding is imperfect. It may be that the sprite vacated of its own accord, and the vessel perished in the process."

"That's as may be. I do not know the circumstances of it, only that it has happened. The tremor is unmistakable."

"If I am honest," the second voice said, now slightly more quietly. "I am glad. I do not like having them in the fortress. And their use seems somewhat limited. What could they be looking out for?"

I realised with a sudden jolt of horror that they were talking about the possessed nun I had just killed. Had she been an artificial construct, her mind

vacated to house some sort of interrogative sentry, cursed to wander the halls of Keraq to rootle out intruders like a pig searching for truffles? If so, Bressinger would be in more danger than he realised. The thought filled me with a sense of impotent urgency.

There was the slight rustle of fabric that suggested a shrug. “Do not look to question it, brother. The Obenpatria does not do anything without reason.”

Both men fell quiet as a door opened. At least several people entered, such was the sound of boots on flagstones and the ring of mail. Too many people spoke at once to discern anything for a minute or two, such were the acoustics of the chamber below. From the echo, it sounded bigger than I had first considered.

There came now a different sensation, akin to that I had felt on the battlefield. An almost indiscernible humming, on the edge of one’s consciousness. I tasted a coppery taste in my mouth and my teeth seemed to vibrate in their sockets. A coruscating green light accompanied the orange of the torch fires, and I shrank back a few feet, worried that my silhouette would appear on the wall of the duct in front of me.

I set my teeth and gripped the stone. The feeling was an awful one. A strong sense of dread welled up from inside me, a nameless fear that permeated my every fibre. I pulled at my surcoat and stuffed some of the fabric into my mouth and a bit down on that, terrified at both the all-consuming horror I felt, as well as the fear of being caught if I screamed out. Sweat soaked into my clothes, and I clenched every muscle in my body, waiting for the spasm to pass. It was like being in the midst of some kind of seizure.

Eventually, the crackling, corposant light stopped.

“Oh no,” someone said with an almost comic depth of horror and surprise. There was a flash of green light so bright that for an instant I saw the shadow of a skeleton against the wall in front of me; then there was a sound like a melon hitting the floor, an unmistakable spray of crimson, and a general groan of dismay.

It was fortunate that I had already been biting down on the fabric of my blouse, otherwise I might have yelped at that point too. I looked at the spray of red on the tunnel wall where it had entered through the ventilation aperture in front of me. Small pieces of matter were commingled with it, and suggested some sort of explosive disassembly of a human being. But there

had been no bang of igniting blackpowder, nor the acrid stink which unfailingly accompanied it.

"You fucking *fool*!" I heard a familiar voice say. "How many times must I remind you to *complete* the incantation of unbinding before repairing the power to the codex?"

Claver.

Once again I felt a spasm of fear clench my body. Nema, what was I *doing* here? What on earth did I hope to achieve?

"Kasivar's teeth," another man said. "What the fuck happened?"

"I would not expect you to understand," Claver snapped irritably.

"I recognise idiocy when I see it. Tell me, how many more of your priests can I expect to explode like overripe melons in my fortress? I've already had my fill of idiots blowing themselves to bits with blackpowder; I don't need people doing the same thing with magicks."

That could only have been Margrave Vladimir von Geier.

"You should show more respect," Claver said, untroubled by von Geier's tone; then, evidently to someone else: "Don't just stand there! Start cleaning up this mess!"

"I do not understand," von Geier said. "I have seen what your men can accomplish on a battlefield. Why is… *this* happening still?"

Claver let out an almighty sigh. "I do not know." He struggled to contain his anger. "We are not mis-incanting. It is the repairing of the powers to the codexes that is the problem. The magicks can only be commanded temporarily."

"Justices do not discharge their powers routinely," von Geier said. Then, after a long and freighted pause, he said, "There's no use looking at me like that, Bartholomew. I am perfectly entitled to ask questions of you. You are not my superior in any sense save your 'command' of these old Draedist sorceries. If I am to throw my lot in with you – and the lots of my men – then you shall explain yourself to me. I have already shouldered great personal risk in lugging these fucking books down to Keraq."

"You know I could kill you where you stand," Claver said.

To my surprise, and I imagined the sanctum's other occupants' incredible discomfort, von Geier erupted into a throaty, sincere laugh. It was cut short, and I could clearly hear the sounds of a scuffle.

"Fucking touch me again and I will skewer you like a pig," von Geier

snapped.

"You two get out!" Claver shrieked at the other priests in the room.

"I know you might have tricked yourself into thinking you are some fearless leader of men, thanks to the fancy plate which *my* blacksmiths have furnished you with, but you are no commander. You need me a damn sight more than I need you and your parlour tricks. Now, tell me why your men are bursting apart like dropped sacks of shit, or I will not approach within a hundred miles of the walls of Sova," von Geier continued.

There was another freighted pause. "We are still perfecting the reparation of the powers to the codexes," Claver said. As with so many criminal enterprises, it was clear that both men considered himself to be the other's intellectual and martial superior. "It is not something that can be easily quantified. The incantations must be made perfectly. We cannot hold the powers in our grip for more than half a day, perhaps a day or two at a time. It is like overfilling a water skin. The energy needs an escape."

"So, I ask again: why do Justices not need to relinquish these powers?"

"Perhaps because they are tutored in these arts over the course of several years? Perhaps there are many techniques they are taught which we are not. The codexes contain the lore, yes, but the means of interpreting them, of properly and effectively mastering them, is contained within the brains of the instructors in the Grand Lodge. It is the difference between being given a horse, and being taught how to ride one."

"What about Master Kadlec? I thought he had been… *tutoring* you for months?"

"It has suited the Haugenates to blow the rumours about Nathaniel out of proportion. The man was much more useless than they think. He taught me the Emperor's Voice, and no more. By any measure, it is the easiest power to master, and the easiest power to frustrate."

"I have seen you employ a damn sight more than that. The power to control matter with only your mind – not to mention the hex you put on the Lord Prefect. Why can your priests not perform those rites? What makes you so much more adept at these magicks than your brothers?"

"I have a talent for it," Claver said guardedly. I thought back to the illegal séance in the Temple of Savare, and to the malign entity which appeared to have puppeteered the Templar's corpse alongside Claver.

Von Geier snorted. "Or perhaps you are holding back some piece of the

puzzle, some forbidden morsel of lore which would make the discharging of these powers much quicker and safer. It is what I would do. You wish to be foremost amongst equals. If scores of your priests have the powers, what is to stop them from seizing power for themselves?"

The ensuing silence did nothing but prove von Geier to be unnaturally prescient.

"You stand to benefit greatly from my ascendancy," Claver said eventually.

"I know that I do," von Geier said. "I am not a man who is known for being reckless, or stupid. But know this, *Oben*patria: I may have hitched my wagon to your horse – for now – but if I see you leading me down a path I do not like, I can just as quickly un-hitch it."

There was a pause in which I fancied Claver smiled thinly. "I would not have us squabble like schoolchildren," he said. "We stand to gain everything if we work together."

"Then get your house in order," von Geier said. "Stop… *this*, from happening again. I have been amassing provisions as promised. We shall be ready to move north in four weeks. I trust you will have found a workaround in that time."

The margrave did not wait for a response, as far as I could tell. I heard footsteps receding, and then the sound of a door opening and closing.

"Fucking arsehole," I heard Claver announce to the empty chamber. Then, after a few minutes of him shuffling around, I heard him leave as well.

I wasn't going to get another chance.

I pressed myself up and moved quickly to where the ventilation channel opened up into the inner sanctum – and stopped abruptly.

I had expected some dark and dusty room; but the chamber that greeted me was positively palatial in ostentation.

The inner sanctum was formed of a domed chamber, perhaps twenty yards across. Ringing the chamber were ornately carved pillars of jadestone, each wrought into the shape of a mythic beast. Behind the pillars ran an ambulatory, and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lined the walls there. Above, the domed ceiling was ornately wrought with plaster and gold filigree. The floor itself was a black and white schach-board pattern, and in the centre was what looked to be a classic Neman altar. On its surface was a book, opened.

The floor and altar were drenched in an appalling spray of blood and

viscera. It looked for all the world as though someone had been crushed by an invisible boulder. The smell of gore hung heavy in the air, as well as a strange, eldritch sensation that set the hair of my arms on end and tingled at the back of my nose.

I gathered my wits, reached for the edge of the lip, and dropped down into the sanctum proper. The first book I checked was the one on the altar, but it was not that. I knew I was looking for the *Codex Elementa*, but there must have been hundreds of books in the sanctum, perhaps thousands.

With my breath ragged and my nerves overwrought, I began searching amongst the bookcases in the ambulatory. All the while I was terrified someone would walk in, and then a fate worse than simple death surely awaited me. Who knew what manner of experiments Claver and his priests would be desperate to conduct on someone who was not only expendable, but the agent of a sworn enemy?

I searched the shelves increasingly frantically, my nails snagging on spines and the pads of my fingers contracting all manner of paper cuts – until I heard footsteps approaching.

I froze. I cast my eyes around the sanctum, searching desperately for somewhere to hide, but there was nowhere – worse, there was no way I could reach back up into the ventilation shaft.

The door handle rattled. With a squeak, I made for the altar, and ducked under the heavy fabric draped over it. There was just enough space for me to squeeze into the void there between the heavy legs of that wooden table. I heard the door open, and, judging by the conversation that filled the sanctum, two men entered. I guessed it was the two priests who had been in here before, tasked with cleaning up the exploded detritus of their former colleague.

“Gods, look at this mess,” one said. A few moments later, I heard the slosh and slap of wet mops.

“Did you hear what von Geier said to the obenpatria?”

“Of course I heard it. I was in the room, wasn’t I?”

“Calling him a pig. Extraordinary. The margrave’s heresy runs deep.”

“I might be inclined to a little more heresy if detonating like a barrel of blackpowder is what I can expect for my labours.”

There was a pause. “You knew the risk. It is the price we pay for the powers he grants us.”

“Aye,” the other man said uncertainly. “I wonder if you would feel the same way if it was your eyeball I was picking up off the floor right now.” I heard a plop as something was dropped into a bucket of water.

“Nema volas.”

“Nema volas indeed.”

There was a grunt. “You are surly this evening, considering our victory at the Agilmar Gate. I saw you in the fray. You acquitted yourself honourably. What is the matter?”

“What is the matter? Look at what it is we are doing! Scraping a brother patria off the floor. We have to go through this process soon ourselves. What if it goes wrong?”

“He was careless. You will not be.”

“These powers are deadly to us!” the man shouted with such sudden ferocity that I startled.

“Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“I felt something moving here.”

“Perhaps it is one of these books. ’Tis unnatural. The energy in this sanctum frightens me. There is so much contained in these volumes, so much forbidden lore. I know it has given us powers beyond imagining, but at what cost?”

I heard footsteps, and the unmistakable sound of a leather-bound tome being slid from its place on a bookshelf. I heard pages being leafed through.

“The hex continues. Gods help that man. What a fate.” I heard a book being slammed closed and replaced. It was an opportunity I could not pass up. I peered under the altar cloth, and watched as the priest slid the *Codex Elementa* back into place.

“Here, there is something under the altar,” the other priest said.

I froze once again. My heart started so violently I was worried it would stop entirely. Tears squeezed from my eyes and I gritted my teeth in rage and frustration. What a fool I had been! How stupid and careless!

I heard footsteps approaching the altar.

“’Tis probably a rat,” the farthest priest said.

“Then we should kill it. It will get at the books,” the closest priest said – startlingly close.

“The books are more likely to kill it,” the other man chortled.

My hand went to the dirk at my waist. It was still wet and red with the blood of the awful nun that had attacked me in the corridor.

The altar cloth was whipped up with a suddenness I was not expecting. The priest, a balding and unremarkable man approaching middle age, swore instinctively and loudly as he saw me, jumping back and letting the cloth fall down. I lunged forwards and stuck the dirk into his gut, and he folded in the middle and crumpled to the floor, making a strange, moaning, grunting noise.

I had no choice now but to try and kill the other priest. I pressed myself up and ran across the floor, but slipped on the viscera of their exploded colleague. Once he had finished swearing, the other priest took advantage of my misstep, and spoke several words with great hesitation and uncertainty.

Suddenly I found myself bound in mid-run, in exactly the same way Vonvalt had been in Galen's Vale.

The feeling is difficult to describe. It was not unlike being bound fast in irons, but so rigidly that no part of the body could move at all. I had no control over any of my muscles, save my eyes, which I was able to roll around frantically.

The priest looked even less in control of this invisible binding than Claver had done in Galen's Vale. He shook violently, and looked as though every breath he took was a fresh agony. He sucked in each laboured lungful like a man with a sword sticking out of his chest. Blood vessels bulged; his right eye turned the colour of ink. Long after the fact I wondered why he bothered with it at all; yes, I was armed, but he was larger and stronger, and could probably have overpowered me in spite of my dirk.

For all I felt frightened – and it was truly a frightening experience – already I could see the priest would not be able to hold me for long. His other eye bulged and blackened like someone filling a glass with pitch. He grunted, and the grunts turned into a constant growl of pain and frustration. His shaking turned from a shiver to strong convulsions, as though he were having a seizure. I watched as the energies of the afterlife, energies which he had so ill-advisedly tapped into, overfilled his mind and body.

"Brother! Release it!" the other priest grunted. They would be his last words.

If the priest – the man who gripped me – heard it, he did not respond. I watched as his head bent to the side, every blood vessel in his body pressing against his skin. The unmistakable pop of breaking bones began to fill the air.

I felt the grip on me begin to loosen. My muscles regained some of their power, my limbs some of their flexibility.

The smell of burning flesh filled the sanctum. Smoke began to rise from the back of the man's head. His forehead and face began to turn the same shade of purple as a hanged man. Whispers filled the air, urgent, vicious. I imagined dozens of demons clawing at the fabric of reality, desperate to fill the priest with their malevolence.

A soundless snap cracked through the sanctum. The priest bucked suddenly as though stabbed in the back. I fell to the floor and hit the tiles unceremoniously.

The priest bent and vomited out a great stream of black ectoplasm. The whispering turned into a buzzing, which became unbearable. I jammed my hands over my ears, but it made no difference. The noise came from under the skin of reality itself, and no earthly endeavours could block it out.

The priest launched backwards so violently that he fell on his buttocks. Smoke boiled from the back of his head. A moment later his scalp ruptured, and violent, nauseating light emanated from the rent there – and then his eyes, and his mouth, and before I knew it the top of his head, everything from the eyes up, detonated like a barrel of blackpowder. A spray of cooked brains hit me in the face like an open-palmed slap, and I choked and retched and wiped the gore away with frantic, trembling hands.

And then, there was silence.

I pressed myself to my feet. Behind me I saw that the priest I had stabbed was dead. His face was as white as wax, his lips blue, and a large quantity of blood had soaked his robes.

I did not want to be in the sanctum any more. I ran over to the ambulatory and the bookshelves there where I had seen one of the priests place the *Codex Elementa*. My eye caught it immediately; it had not been pressed all the way in. I snatched it out, weathering a brief spell of vertigo as the book's energies seeped into my hands. I looked at the shelves around me. Who knew how many volumes here had been stolen from the Master's Vaults? Who knew what wealth of arcane knowledge was contained between their covers? Claver's priests might not have been able to command the Draedist arcana like Vonvalt could, but given enough time, would they not be able to? Certainly with Claver's dark patronage. And what other manner of powers could they learn?

The kernel of an idea, something which had sat in the pit of my brain for a long time, began to grow and take root. It was likely that this sanctum contained all of the most dangerous magicks in the known Empire. I looked to the bracket where a torch flame flickered. Surely it was better to destroy them? I thought of history lessons Vonvalt had given me, in which he had spoken about armies destroying bridges, burning crops, and salting fields, denying themselves crucial resources – but denying them to the enemy too. Surely it was better that no one had them than the wrong people?

I wondered what Vonvalt's reaction would be. But what was the alternative? The *Codex Elementa* was a relatively slim volume, but some of the books were huge. I could hardly carry all of them out.

No. I knew what I had to do.

I snatched the torch out of its bracket and held it to the books. The paper was so thick and dense that it took a little while for the flame to take, but once it did, it was quick to spread.

I threw the torch down. It hissed and spat where it contacted the blood and brain of the exploded priest. I made for the door, turned the handle, and pulled it open slightly to check that there was no one on the other side; then, once I was satisfied that I was alone, I left.

I tried to pretend that I had not heard the books screaming as I ran.

XXXV

Forbidden Lore

“Keep your counsel, seal your lips,
abide the silence, guard your tongue.
The quiet man has many opportunities;
the garrulous man has none.”

THE “SONG OF THE SOVAN LAWKEEPERS”

The way out of the inner sanctum was by a single damp spiral staircase of stone cut into the bedrock beneath Keraq. Thanks to the dead priests inside, the door was unlocked, and I hurried through a succession of low stone corridors at reckless speed.

I heard the sound of voices and the bustle of movement, and after a few minutes I found myself exiting an empty store chamber and into the inner bailey. It was still dark, but dawn could not have been far away. Here was organised chaos as dozens of Templars milled about, many of them walking wounded. I watched as some were manhandled off carts and onto stretchers; there was a queue in one corner where a man was handing out cups of wine. The smell of roasted meat filled the air, and I could see cooks parcelling out trenchers filled with roasted hog. In spite of everything, my stomach growled fiercely. I had not eaten anything for a long time, and had done little except physically exert myself. I did not know what deep reservoir of strength I was drawing on, but I knew I was heading for a calamitous fall.

But I could worry about that later.

I jumped halfway out my skin as a large black shadow barrelled towards me. Templars swore as they were knocked out of the way, and I realised with a surge of joy that it was Heinrich. He smelt of lavender and rosemary salve, and one of his legs was bandaged, but he otherwise seemed unhurt.

"Heinrich," I said with love, crouching down to rub his face and neck roughly. The Sovan war shepherd licked my face as though he were a pup, and I smelt blood on his breath. I realised he was nuzzling me with a mouth that the day before had been tearing the throats out of Qareshians on the Gelbegard plain.

"By the gods… *Helena*," a familiar voice said. I looked up to see Sir Radomir standing behind Heinrich. He had followed the hound through the press of Templars. He was muddy and battered, and his eyes glistened by the firelight from the braziers around the bailey. I realised that he was struggling to contain his emotion.

With another surge of joy, I stood and grabbed the old sheriff into a tight embrace.

"Gods, Helena, I am so sorry, so so very sorry – Nema, I thought I'd killed you with my stupidity," he gabbled in my ear, overwhelmed.

"It is all right, I am all right," I said quietly in his ear. "I have the codex."

Sir Radomir grabbed me by the shoulders and pushed me away suddenly. "What?" he hissed. "How?"

"Listen, we do not have much time." I looked past him, trying to see how we would find our way out. The inner bailey, which surrounded the cathedral-keep, was a large space, but none could enter or exit without going through one of a small number of gates. "We need to go. I can explain on the way."

"Murder!" I heard someone shout. Sir Radomir looked at me. "Murder!" someone else shouted. Suddenly all of the Templars were taking up the cry, "Murder, murder!"

The Templars, who had before been in as many different states of being as it is possible to be – some elated to have survived, or elated that friends had survived; others weeping and mourning for lost comrades, or grievous injuries – now seemed united in their fresh common purpose. It was as though they had been expecting something.

Perhaps they had.

Sir Radomir and I watched with barely concealed horror as more braziers

were lit to drive back what little darkness remained. A group of Templars who had come from within the cathedral-keep burst into the bailey. “Make way there!” one of them shouted. It was Margrave von Geier.

“Come on,” Sir Radomir hissed to me. We moved to the northernmost gate, away from the commotion, though several Templars serjeants had taken it upon themselves to stand watch by it.

“Ho there!” one of them said to Sir Radomir as we approached. “Wait a minute there, fellow.”

I felt myself instinctively slowing down to comply, but Sir Radomir did not break stride.

“We’ve not the time,” he said with every ounce of his sheriff’s weary irritation he could muster. “The margrave has bid us search the outer bailey.” He gestured to Heinrich as he strode confidently through the gate, and I had to perform a half-run to keep up with him.

“God Mother be with you,” one of the serjeants said, moving aside to let us past.

Sir Radomir continued to walk down the flagstoned ramp and into the outer bailey. Ahead of us, hemmed in by a number of buildings, was a broad square staging area, filled with all manner of post-battle detritus which orderlies were busy clearing. I saw soiled bandages and pools of blood, bent and broken weapons, discarded scraps of armour, and splinters of shield, all in and amongst piles of horse shit, scattered fodder, and puddles of water. The main gate had been open to allow the returning host through, but the cries of “Murder!” had seen it shut.

In the far north-eastern corner of the outer bailey was a small, tumbledown chapel, nestled into the stones of the curtain wall like a growth. Within that chapel was the entrance to the hidden tunnel which Luther de Rambert had told us about, that which would take as a mile out of the castle. Fortunately for us it was also one of the first logical places to search for the murderer, and we would not draw undue attention for doing so.

“What the fuck is going on?” Sir Radomir asked me quietly. I don’t think I had ever seen him so tense.

“They have women, nuns,” I said, unsure how to describe it. “’Tis though their minds have been removed. They are like automatons, filled with evil magic. They patrol the corridors, looking out for people they do not recognise. I think they are like eyes and ears for Claver. One of them

followed me and attacked me in the privy and – well." I gestured behind me to the commotion in the inner bailey.

"They have found her body?" Sir Radomir asked grimly, his voice freighted with unspoken accusations of carelessness.

"I put it down the latrine," I said, defensive. "Though… the fight was hardly a quiet affair."

We reached the door of the chapel. Heinrich whined and pawed at it.

"What's the matter with him?" Sir Radomir asked. I shrugged.

The sheriff pushed the door open and gestured for Heinrich to enter. He pulled his sword out, too, in case we were being observed; all of the walls around us were manned, particularly above the gatehouse, where a cluster of Templars stood vigil. It was inconceivable that nobody was observing our performance.

Inside the chapel it was cool and dark and smelt of damp. It was a simple place, with none of the palatial ostentation of the cathedral-keep. It was formed of a single large chamber of undressed stone, two rows of old wooden pews, and a Neman altar at its head. Behind it was a large deer's skull wrought from marble, and mounted on the wall behind that were a number of old Templar battle honours. Clerestory windows of stained glass lined the tops of the walls, though there was no light to catch. At the very back was a small wooden door which led to a robing chamber. It was a quiet, contemplative place, ill suited for the horrible violence which it was about to bear witness to.

Heinrich immediately went to the door at the back and began to claw at it. Sir Radomir and I exchanged a glance, and then advanced on it.

"Here, stay behind me," Sir Radomir said.

We reached the door. The sheriff opened it with a well-placed kick. Beyond was a small robing chamber. Heinrich bounded in, barking.

"Faith!" Sir Radomir swore, starting. I jumped, too, for we were both surprised to see that there was a man inside the room, standing at the far end. He was clad in Templar armour and a surcoat, and the hood was up, obscuring his face in shadow. But Heinrich was untroubled by the statue-like intruder, and there was no mistaking his Grozodan side sword.

"Dubine!" I said, running forwards and pulling him into embrace. He had to awkwardly move so as not to cut me with the sword, and I felt his one arm press into my back.

“Nema, I am glad to see you all alive,” he said.

“We have it,” I said to him, pulling my surcoat aside to reveal the *Codex Elementa*. I could not conceal my excitement. Never in my wildest dreams did I think we would succeed, yet here we were, on the threshold of victory. “We *have* it, Dubine!”

But Bressinger’s expression remained serious.

“What is the matter? There is a great commotion in the keep,” Sir Radomir said. “We should leave, immediately. We will not get another opportunity like this.”

Bressinger grimaced. “I knew you would be heading here, so I have been waiting.” He indicated to a trapdoor, which had hitherto been concealed beneath a rug. “You cannot go down there. The tunnel is collapsed where the water from the Reka has seeped into its foundations.”

The news hit me like a punch to the nose. “No,” I breathed, feeling my stomach drop. Resentment, anger, and frustration burned within me so hotly I wanted to scream.

Sir Radomir pressed the pommel of his sword into his forehead. “Fuck,” he declared to the floor.

“There is another way, but it is to the east,” Bressinger continued. “There is a small drainage outflow, an engineers’ tunnel for the water lines. It is how I came in. But the only way to get there is to go back through the outer bailey – and it will only get us beyond the wall, not the moat.”

We stood in silence for a few moments, festering in the sheer injustice of our misfortune.

“How did you get it?” Bressinger asked as he gestured to the codex, clearly impressed.

“In the inner sanctum,” I said. “I made my way there through the latrines, but I had to kill someone in order to do it. I killed two more in the sanctum itself – or caused their deaths, at any rate. They are looking for the murderer now. That’s me,” I added, as though it had not been obvious.

Bressinger nodded. “That was well done. We may just save Sir Konrad yet.”

My heart lurched. Retrieving the codex had become an end in itself; in all of the fear and excitement, I had actually forgotten our main purpose for being in Keraq at all. I was immediately reminded of the manner in which Vonvalt and I had parted ways, and the revelations regarding him and

Bressinger. I shook my head; I did not need such thoughts clouding my judgement at this crucial time.

"All right," Bressinger continued, oblivious to my silent turmoil, "let us leave. You are pretending to be part of the search, yes?" We nodded. "We shall continue with that ruse."

"There is another thing," I said hastily as both men turned to leave, my nerves quickly unravelling.

"What?" Sir Radomir and Bressinger asked me at the same time.

"Fire!" someone shouted in the distance. And then another took up the call, "Fire!", and soon it was not "Murder!" but "Fire!" that filled the chilly dawn air around Keraq.

Bressinger and Sir Radomir slowly turned to me. Heinrich looked at them, and then looked at me.

"Helena," Bressinger said with false brightness, "what have you done?"

"I set the magickal tomes ablaze," I said quietly.

There was another silence.

"Nema's fucking tits," Sir Radomir muttered, rubbing his face.

Bressinger let out an explosive sigh. "Right," he said. "We'd better get on with it, then."

The four of us moved back through the chapel, and reached the door. Bressinger was about to grasp the handle to open it, but he stopped suddenly. A loud voice, just beyond the threshold, cut through the air. Heinrich growled, his hackles raised.

"… probably for the tunnels, my lord, and not five minutes ago," we heard someone say, followed by the singing of steel as it was withdrawn from a scabbard. "'Tis worth checking, at any rate."

"Oh come *on*," Sir Radomir muttered angrily.

Both he and Bressinger took a step back and brandished their weapons. I had only my dirk, and feeling severely under-armed, loitered behind them. I was gripped by a sudden certainty that we were all about to be killed, but the fear was not given long enough to take root.

"You two stand there," a familiar voice said from just beyond the door. My guts clenched.

The chapel door was flung open. A priest stood at the threshold, glowering.

It was Bartholomew Claver.

"*You*," he growled at us. Behind him were several Templars, short swords in hand.

There was a brief, excruciating pause.

"Get him, boy!" Sir Radomir shouted.

Heinrich leapt into the priest from the side, knocking him further into the chapel. Claver, who had not seen the dog in the shadows, swore as he fell over and hit the flagstones hard. I hoped with all my heart that Heinrich would tear his throat out, but before the hound could busy himself with the messy work of killing, Claver snapped out a single word that stopped all of us in our tracks. The sound of it seemed to echo both in the mortal and immortal planes. In seconds Heinrich had been transformed from slavering war hound to frightened puppy, and he bolted from the chapel, ears folded and tail between his legs.

Claver pressed himself up, his face a mask of fury.

"Don't let him speak!" I yelled.

Sir Radomir leapt forward. He tackled Claver at the waist. The priest was crushed under the weight of the sheriff and his mail, and whatever fresh incantation he had been about to utter was forced out of him in a grunt.

The Templars beyond the threshold had already started forwards, and Bressinger lunged for the door and slammed it closed. He jammed his shoulder into it, but was battered back as both Templars smashed into it from the other side, staggering in awkwardly, both bent almost double.

"Helena!" Bressinger shouted as he staggered back past me, off balance. I darted forwards with my dirk before either Templar could right themselves, but my clumsy stab achieved nothing except a tear in the closest's surcoat. The Templar behind him hastily swung his sword, hoping to strike a lucky blow, but it glanced off the kettle helm of his own brother Templar and sank into the wood of the door.

Bressinger was back again. He battered into the door and threw it closed, which had the effect of wrenching the short sword out of the rearmost Templar's hand, and it clattered to the floor. I quickly snatched it up, but howled in pain as the first Templar kicked me in the side of the knee, twisting the joint painfully. Bressinger attempted to run the man through, but his side sword was easily stopped by his mail. A second stab at the man's face was deflected by his arm.

Sir Radomir continued tussle with Claver. The priest was thrashing

rabidly, but the sheriff was much too strong.

“Kill him!” I shouted, filled with a desperate sense of urgency. “For Nema’s sake, kill him!”

Sir Radomir grabbed his sword and angled himself back in order to thrust it into Claver’s flesh, but Claver bit down hard on the sheriff’s fingers. Sir Radomir shouted and yanked his hand back, and Claver suddenly uttered some more arcane words which reverberated around the inside of my skull and which hurled Sir Radomir back. The sheriff smashed into Bressinger, and the two of them hit the pews on the far side of the room in a welter of splintered wood.

The Templar who had kicked me stood, and moved forwards to dispatch them. I stabbed him in the meat of his leg, and then, as he staggered, thrust upwards with all my strength. The blade went up between his legs, stabbing deep between his buttocks and up into his guts. The Templar shrieked and collapsed to the side, his pelvis twisting and disarming me.

Claver drew himself up, taking in the scene with great displeasure. Outside, cries of “Fire!” continued unabated, and I heard bootsteps on flagstones as men ran to the moat with buckets.

“This was your doing,” he hissed, pointing at me, his face contorted with rage. He looked tired and gaunt following the battle with the Qareshians, but he seemed to draw on a deep reserve of malign energies that sustained him.

I shook my head dumbly, instinctively denying the charge as I backed away from him. Without a sword in my hand or Heinrich by my side, I felt very vulnerable.

“Get away from her!” Sir Radomir snapped.

Claver turned sharply as both the sheriff and Bressinger righted themselves, swords in hands. On the floor next to them, the Templar whom I had stabbed screamed and scrabbled feebly at the dirk lodged in him, a strong smell of shit and blood filling the chapel.

Claver held out a hand as though it were a crossbow.

“What have you done?” he demanded of the two men. “Why are you here?” He took a moment to examine them, taking in their Templar surcoats. “Infiltrators. Scum. The Justice sent you to kill me, didn’t he? You –” he indicated Bressinger “– you’re his man. I recognise you. You’re that insolent cunt who tried to stop me burning the villagers of Rill. I see someone’s made a good go of ending you.”

Bressinger let out a snarl and darted forwards, leading with his side sword. Claver spoke a single word, and a strange transformation happened. The air became quieter and denser, the chapel darker. As had happened in the Temple of Savare, the blade was stopped, deflected by an invisible shield that seemed to envelop the priest. Bressinger was once again thrown off balance and staggered past his target. Claver put both hands onto his back and pushed him bodily from behind.

"The hex cannot be stopped," Claver said, speaking with great condescension. He almost seemed to be enjoying himself. "Your master knows this. It is over. Let him perish. Submit to me. Embrace the light of—"

"Oh, shut the fuck up," Sir Radomir growled, and he too lunged at the priest. Once again, Claver spoke that single word, and the sheriff's sword tip was halted an inch from Claver's heart, as though stuck in a beam.

Claver laughed, as if surprised and delighted by the strength of his own powers. It was cut short, however, by the chapel door being flung open once more. Several Templars stood there, stripped down to their underclothes and marked with soot.

"Milord!" one of them said breathlessly.

"What is it?" Claver demanded angrily.

"The fire, 'tis in the sanctum! The books—"

Claver's face fell. The air once again drew in, as though his anger was absorbing it. It became difficult to breathe, to see. Claver trembled as he shouted, "Well put it *out*!"

The Templar did not move. He was only just now taking in the scene within the chapel, the smashed pews, the blood on the floor, the whimpering, dying man in the aisle. "Milord… do you need some hel—"

"*Put it out!*" Claver screamed so forcefully that it seemed his voice might rupture. "*Put it out! Put it out! Put it out!*"

The Templars fled, buckets in hands.

"You *bitch*!" Claver rounded on me. "I shall smite you on the Broken Path—"

He was cut short as Bressinger launched into him from behind, knocking him over. Once again, both he and Sir Radomir tussled with him, stabbing at first with swords that could not penetrate the air about him, before grasping at his throat and mouth, desperately trying to suffocate and silence him.

It was no use; Claver's arrogance was not misplaced. Both men were

bodily hurled away to once more crash awkwardly amongst the pews, and Claver stood and advanced on them, corposant light crackling around his hands.

An idea struck me. I pulled the *Codex Elementa* from my surcoat. I opened the book and frantically flipped through the pages. The codex fell open at a point which must have been well thumbed. I had expected it to be the page for summoning the Muphraab, but judging by the runes and pictograms on it, it appeared to be that for creating the automata patrolling Keraq.

The words were in High Saxan – though some of it was that arcane, dead language that Vonvalt had taught me parts of so that I could read the *Grimoire Necromantia*. Overcome with desperation, I traced the incantation with a trembling index finger, speaking the words aloud as I did so and doing my best to intuit and *feel* them and their meaning.

The moment the last word of the incantation left my lips, I felt as though I had eaten fire and been punched in the face. Blood filled my mouth. My guts churned in sudden, intense excruciation. My eyes watered, my vision blurring. My whole body suddenly blossomed in painful gooseflesh, as though I had been set alight. I looked up in a daze, to see if anything had happened—

"By the gods," I breathed.

Something was happening to the air in the chapel. The transparent aether of reality was being… *pulled* and torn at.

Claver whirled around, his face a mixture of anger and horror. He looked at the book in my hands, and then at me.

"No…" he breathed, eyes wide.

I myself looked down at the book and then up again at the rippling, shimmering air. Something was ripping at it, something with *claws*. Desperate, long-fingered hands scrabbled at the rents in reality where my undisciplined, unfocused summoning had thinned the fabric of the mortal plane to the breaking point. Beyond, glimpses of a hellish dimension beckoned, a swirling mass of chaotic darkness which injured the mind to lay eyes on.

Both Sir Radomir and Bressinger were backing away. Even Claver seemed frozen to the spot.

"Helena… what have you done?" Sir Radomir asked.

“The Broken Path,” I found myself murmuring. I did not know where the words had come from, nor what they meant. More blood trickled from my mouth – no, it was not blood. It was glossy black ectoplasm. I wiped it away with a sudden, furious motion, accidentally slapping myself as I did so.

The *Codex Elementa* felt hot in my hands. Thread-thin lightning bolts of pink energy crackled around the rents in reality. All of us let out a gasp as arms tore through, like those of some demonic baby from an unholy birth canal. The whole chapel felt as though it were vibrating. Outside, thunder rumbled through the sky. Forces beyond comprehension began to stir.

I began to scrabble backwards to the door. Then I let out a shriek as a head broke through.

Blood of *gods,* that head. An eyeless, skull-like thing, more rabid mouth than anything else, and I realised with a sickening horror that this was the thing, this demon, which had inhabited the body of the nun I had fought in the latrine. This time, however, it had not been carefully bound into a human vessel. In mis-incanting so grievously, the demon had not been contained and constrained with all of the correct incantations and bindings.

It was free. And it was going to run amok.

The thing let out horrible brain-rattling screech. I felt my bowels and bladder loosen in terror.

“Pass me the book,” Claver said, now on the far side of the room. He spoke with a quiet intensity, trying not to draw the thing’s attention. “Blood of Creus, girl, hand me the book before we are all killed,” he hissed.

I watched, terror-stricken, as I saw *more* demons scrabbling at the aethereal portal. They moved like coiling shadows given form, somewhere between beast and man, as if every one of the obsidian-black gargoyles festooning the Imperial Palace had come to life. In their frantic, rabid eagerness to smash through into the mortal plane, they became jammed up in the tears in reality.

“Fuck this,” Sir Radomir said with profound dismay, and, giving the demons as wide a berth as possible, moved around so that he was next to me by the door. Bressinger did the same, but Claver, who was trapped on the other side of the chapel, did not move.

“Give me the book!” Claver said, now shouting. He looked for all the world like a man who has tamed one wolf only to be faced with the rest of the pack.

“You *stupid* bastard!” Sir Radomir snarled. “You wanted this hell; now you have it.”

I turned; behind us, Templars were still running across the square with pails of water. The air was redolent of smoke, and I could see flickering orange light emanating from the windows of the cathedral-keep. It looked as though the fire in the sanctum had burned beyond control.

Claver took another step towards us. Behind him, the demons began to pull their legs onto the mortal plane.

“Think on it, girl,” Claver said imploringly. “I have not the energy to compel you to hand me the codex and banish the demon.” I could see that he was frightened, and that did nothing but frighten me even more. “You have no idea what you have meddled with. If I do not contain the beast now, it will never be contained. Now, give me the *fucking* book! Or we will all die, here and now!”

I looked down at the book, then back up at the priest.

“No!” Claver shouted, as realisation dawned on him.

I turned and ran.

“*No!*”

XXXVI

The Death of Hope

“Humankind is not so self-terminating that we would allow our greatest quality – that of our capacity for hope – to be fully extinguished. But I shall readily admit that there are times when we are reduced to fanning the embers.”

MISTRESS OF THE MAGISTRATUM NEVENKA ZORIĆ

Bressinger, Sir Radomir, and I fled across the flagstones. In the chaos, no one sought to challenge us. We had an embarrassment of diversions.

“This way,” Bressinger said, leading us not back into the inner bailey, but around the side of the walls which guarded the cathedral-keep and to the eastern face of the castle. Above, thunder boomed through the air, and lightning crackled in a thickly clouded sky which but an hour before had been clear. I stole a glance backwards to the chapel, but there was no sign of the disaster which I had unleashed on the world.

“Down here,” Bressinger said, pointing to a small alley sandwiched between a pair of low outhouses and a mason’s workshop nestled into the lee of the inner wall. There was no one around; everyone who could was helping to extinguish the fire, and that meant the majority of the Templars were shuttling between the keep and the moat where it abutted the northernmost gatehouse of the curtain wall.

“Helena, come on!” Bressinger snapped.

I paused in that dark alley. Horrible indecision gnawed at me. I looked

back to the chapel, which was just visible around the corner of the wall.

"Helena!" Sir Radomir snapped. "Now! We shan't get a better chance than this!"

I continued to hesitate, as though my feet were anchored to the ground. I felt my brain boiling with frustration. Here we were, moments from escaping, and yet…

"We cannot go," I said with a sense of profound disappointment.

"*What?*" both Bressinger and Sir Radomir hissed.

"Claver is right. If we do not stop those… *things* now, they may never be stopped."

"So what if Keraq is destroyed? We would be doing the world a favour," Sir Radomir grunted.

I shook my head. "It is not just Keraq; what happens when they escape? They will kill everyone in their path, and I shall have been responsible for it."

"Sir Konrad could expel them," Bressinger said, and made to move off again. "Come *on*!"

But I did not move. "You are not *listening* to me. There might be thousands of them by then. You saw what happened in there; it was like a portal, a… a *breach* between planes of existence. Unless we close that door again, who knows what manner of things could come through?"

As if to illustrate my point, the chapel door blasted open as though a barrel of blackpowder had been detonated within. In that same instant, a huge peal of tympanic thunder roared through the sky.

"Blood of gods," I whispered. Not one, not two, but a dozen demons smashed their way out of the chapel and began tearing into the nearest Templars with bloody gusto. There was no sign of Claver. Horrible screams penetrated the night air as men clothed only in fabric and armed only with buckets were ripped to bloody rags. One demon took a swipe at the nearest Templar and smashed him into three large parts. I gasped; it was as though the man had been hit by a ball of rock hurled from a trebuchet. Gore lashed the ground like offal tipped out a butcher's barrel. One exceptionally brave soul pulled out a silver Neman medallion and advanced on the demon, only to be immediately decapitated.

The rest of the Templars fled, screaming – and I could not blame them.

"Flame of Savare, *run*!" Bressinger shouted.

Jolted from my horrified reverie, I did.

We sprinted down the alley to where a small staircase ran down into a tiny alcove, itself home to a stout wooden door. Bressinger smashed the door open, and beyond was a low, dark room that smelt strongly of damp.

"This way," Bressinger said, and led us across the chamber to the far end where a rusted gate had been opened. Beyond was another staircase, but this one was half submerged in the scummy waters of the Keraq moat.

"We shall have to go under the water. It is dark, but it is not far. Quick, strip off your surcoats and armour; we'll have to swim the moat as well."

We hastily began to pull off our surcoats and mail. It was a fiddly task with many small catches and buttons to undo with trembling fingers. I lost a few more fingernails as I frantically pulled everything off until I was wearing just my breeches and undershirt.

"Wait! The book!" I said suddenly. "It will be ruined."

"For Nema's sake!" Bressinger shouted, his own frustration boiling over. "*Find* something!" He gestured about the place. "There must be some oilcloth nearby."

The three of us searched frantically about the old chamber. It was filled with crates and barrels and other accoutrements. I prised open lids and threw over stacks of paraphernalia, trying to ignore the sounds of chaotic horror outside. More screams penetrated the air like thrown spears, but there was the tell-tale ring of steel, too.

"Here!" Sir Radomir said, pulling a square of dirty oilcloth from within a barrel. Masons' tools, which had been wrapped in it, clattered noisily to the floor. The sheriff passed it to me and I hastily wrapped the codex within it—

And then I looked up sharply as a shadow appeared in the far doorway.

I felt so sick with fear I could do nothing but grunt and point. Sir Radomir followed the line of my finger.

"Ah, fuck," he said wretchedly.

The demon regarded us with an eyeless face, and screeched. It was easily seven feet tall, its skin a dark leathery grey, its limbs bony and back-jointed. Runes of sick pink light floated about its head like a cloud of flies. Its hands up to the mid-forearm were bathed in glossy crimson.

"You two, go!" Bressinger shouted as he ran for the rusted gate. He kicked it closed at the same time the demon smashed into it, bending the old bars outward and throwing Bressinger off. It ripped at the metal dementedly, but it held firm – for now. Still, the gaps between the bars were wide enough

for the creature’s limbs to scythe through.

“Nema! You’ll be killed, you fool!” Sir Radomir shouted. With a sudden roar and burst of courage, he moved forwards and chopped at the demon with his short sword – and was as surprised as anyone to see the steel move cleanly through the creature’s arm and take its hand off at the wrist. A great gout of stinking black ichor spewed out of the stump, and I retched. The thing smelt like a cesspit full of corpses.

If the demon had been enraged before, it was apoplectic now. It let out a rabid roar which threatened to burst my ears and boil my mind away into nothingness. For all their reckless courage, neither Bressinger nor Sir Radomir could face down this fresh horror.

“Go!” Bressinger shouted breathlessly, frantically ramming as many of the gate bolts home as he could before the demon’s other hand could grab him.

I did not need to be told again. Gripping the book tightly, I ran and then waded down the stairs into the frigid water of the moat. I quickly came face-to-face with the slimy wall, and trusting Bressinger, I held my breath and ducked under the surface of the water and into its scummy, inky blackness.

Even through the water I could hear the demon’s screeching and smashing against the metal gate. It took all my courage not to scream and inhale a lungful of water. Fortunately, I was able to get good purchase on the stone floor of the submerged chamber and propel myself along.

The tunnel was longer than I thought it would be, and in my fear and haste I had not taken in a deep enough breath. But I felt something hit me from behind, and, terrified it was the demon, I dragged myself frantically through that murk until I could see a faint glimmer of light, and stood up in the waist-deep water on the other side.

“Fuck!” I screamed loudly as I pulled myself out of the water and into another small engineer’s alcove. In front of me was a thin, shallow tunnel, a dark, circular pipe that led into the moat itself. I could see the wildflower plains surrounding Keraq, and beyond, the very first hint of dawn on the horizon. Without its wan light, the small chamber would have been as black as pitch.

I turned; above the submerged tunnel I had just exited was a stout iron gate like a portcullis, clearly designed to prevent an enterprising infiltrator from achieving the castle, though currently it was wedged open by a length of

iron. I realised that Bressinger must have spent a great deal of his time preparing this alternate escape route for us.

I started as Sir Radomir launched explosively out of the water behind me, heaving in a huge breath – though his arm looked as though it was snagged on something, for he did not exit the water beyond shoulder height.

"Where is Dubine?" I shouted at him.

The sheriff remained in the waist-deep water, and bent over, reaching for something beneath the surface.

"Where is Dubine?" I shouted again.

Sir Radomir did not answer me. He grunted and strained, planting his feet either side of the tunnel exit and using both arms to wrestle with something beneath the surface. "*Help me!*" he shouted, blood vessels bulging on his neck and face. "It has Dubine!"

My stomach dropped. With my skin crawling, I leapt back into the water and, feeling about the sheriff's waist, yanked his short sword from out of its scabbard.

"Oh… *fuck*!" I shouted, taking a few deep breaths before I ducked back under. I could see nothing except black water, thrashing shadows, and an unending froth of churned white foam. Summoning every ounce of my courage, I thrust the sword through the channel, aiming at where I thought I could see a hand wrapped around Bressinger's ankle. I stabbed once, twice, three times, and on the third stroke the blade bit into something.

Once again that demented shriek filled my ears and threatened to strip my brain of its sensibilities.

Next to me Bressinger shot forwards through the water where Sir Radomir had been straining to pull him free. I scrabbled backwards against the slippery wet stones until I was back out of the channel as well. The short sword smoked and fizzled where the demon's black blood contacted the blade and I threw it to one side with a clatter.

The water in the tunnel still foamed and thrashed, and with a grunt, I lurched forwards and kicked the length of iron away that was holding the gate up. It thumped down into the water, trapping the demon beyond.

I turned back to see Sir Radomir holding Bressinger under the armpits, cradling him. Bressinger looked pale, and I saw great bloody rents in his legs, so deep and vicious that they were stripped almost to the bone.

"Dubine!" I shrieked, moving forwards. I looked up at Sir Radomir. "We

have to get him out of here," I said frantically. "Between us we can—"

"I'm finished, Helena," Bressinger said tiredly.

"Here, you can fuck off with that," Sir Radomir said. "Helena, bind his legs."

Ignoring the thrashing in the water behind us, and the metallic thumps that echoed through the small chamber where our pursuer attempted the gate again and again with all of the tenacity of a murderous lunatic, I ripped strips of cloth from Bressinger's breeches and tied them around the worst of his injuries. The wounds already smelt foul and pustulent, and I wondered what dark energies had infected him.

"Go," Dubine moaned. "You are wasting your time. The gate will not hold it for ever, and more of them are coming."

Both Sir Radomir and I ignored him.

"Quickly," Sir Radomir snapped.

"I'm going as quickly as I fucking can," I snapped back. With cold, shaking hands I wrapped the grievously deep incisions in Bressinger's legs, trying to ignore the flash of white bone and the fact that the rags were already soaking through with blood.

"Tighter, tighter!" Sir Radomir shouted. "Fuck's sake, here," he said, pushing me away. He took one rag off and tied it above the wounds on one leg, pulling both ends of it as tight as he could, grunting with the effort. Bressinger screamed with the pain, but Sir Radomir did not stop pulling.

"What are you doing?" I asked, but the sheriff ignored me, doing the same on Bressinger's other leg.

Bressinger led out a stream of unintelligible Grozodan, and at some point, in Saxan, "Leave it please!"

"Shut up," Sir Radomir snapped. He tied both Bressinger's legs off just below the knee, so tightly that I could see the blood trickle to a stop, like a dammed stream. I watched these gristly proceedings with breathless incredulity. Even then I did not think Bressinger was going to die; the thought simply hadn't crossed my mind. It seemed like Bressinger couldn't die.

Sir Radomir finished tying off Bressinger's wounds. He slapped him roughly on the shoulder. "One arm, no legs," he said with gruff levity. "The best chance I'll ever get to beat you in a duel, eh?"

Bressinger smiled weakly. Even with sheriff's frantic ministrations, he

was fading away.

“We’ll call it a draw,” he said quietly.

A crash and screech at the submerged gates behind us stole our attention. I saw the bolts holding the gate in place were loosening with the violent efforts of the demon.

“Come on!” Sir Radomir shouted.

I pressed myself up and grabbed Bressinger under the armpits, whilst Sir Radomir grabbed him by the waist. Together we manhandled him to the mouth of the tunnel, and then I climbed in and began to force my way down it, pulling Bressinger after me. For a short while Dubine grunted and moaned in agony, and then he went still and quiet.

“Is he dead?” I asked, but Sir Radomir shook his head. “He is just passed out from the pain, come on, quickly!”

I reached the bottom of the outflow and slid feet-first into the moat. I was glad I could swim; I could not reach the bottom.

Sir Radomir pushed Bressinger into the water and followed him in, and together we struggled to keep the latter afloat. Sir Radomir held him roughly under the chin and swam backwards, and I did my best to prop Bressinger up around his midriff, though I don’t think I helped particularly. Between us we grunted and thrashed across the moat.

I turned to see if anyone was watching us from the walls of Keraq, but judging by the sounds of chaos still emanating from the castle, the Templars were preoccupied.

We reached the far end of the moat and finally our feet found purchase. We scrabbled up onto the bank and lay there panting, utterly spent.

“Where are the horses?” Sir Radomir asked, winded, scanning the ground in front of us. Here to the west of the castle was a good quarter of a mile of open plain, before the ground began to fracture and break up.

“Concealed,” Bressinger said quietly. Sir Radomir and I both looked down at him sharply. He looked like a corpse already. His skin was grey and lacking in all vitality. “Over there.” He gestured weakly to a rocky outcrop that itself buttressed an escarpment. “Luther de Rambert is waiting.”

“I shall go and fetch him,” Sir Radomir said. He looked up at the walls, but there was no one watching. “Wait here, Helena.”

Sir Radomir ran off, and I was left alone with my best friend in all the world.

“Helena,” Bressinger said. His voice was barely a whisper. He lifted his hand and stroked my cheek with a rough, calloused thumb. “Sir Konrad told you what we did. To my wife’s killer. To my babes’ killer.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said through tears.

“Do not think less of me. We were young and angry and full of hate.”

I shook my head desperately. I did not want Bressinger to be dwelling on these things now. I hated that he thought he had to explain himself to me. “You don’t owe me anything. Please, Dubine, you know I love you no matter what.”

Bressinger smiled. “Aye. I know that.” He took in a great, shuddering breath. He looked up at the sky. “There is so much bleakness in this world. I wish I had not seen what comes next. A man might face his end with courage otherwise.”

He reached my hand, and I gripped tightly. “You speak as though you are about to perish,” I said, wiping my eyes furiously with my free hand. “You said you would never let anything happen to me. You promised me that. You *promised* me, Dubine.”

“Aye, well. I draw the line at demons.”

I laughed wretchedly, but the tears were quick to return. “I need you. Please don’t leave me. Please? I don’t know how I shall carry on.”

“You will,” Bressinger said quietly. “You must. The world needs Helena Sedanka for a little while longer.”

I held his hand tightly. He took another shallow breath. I could feel him slipping away quickly now.

“Here I go,” he said. He looked at me. “I am frightened, Helena.”

“Don’t be,” I said, smiling and weeping and stroking his cheek. “Now you can see them again.”

“You think so?”

I nodded. “I am sure of it.”

He smiled. “I think you are right.”

And then, with one last mortal breath, he was gone.

I sat in stunned silence for a very long time. Death was such an odd thing. To be there one moment, lucid, talking, a living and breathing person with thoughts and feelings as complex and tangled as a spider’s web; and the next, to be nothing at all. To be extinguished, like a candle flame. To have your laughter, your words, your very essence, simply… gone. It was just so

surreal. There was a sense of *finality* to it, a permanence which my mind railed against. I was still expecting Bressinger to wake up in a moment, having simply fallen to sleep.

But he was gone, and when the realisation finally hit me, I released his hand and let out a long, anguished scream into the fading dark. What was one more scream amongst the chaos of the evisceration of the Savaran Order? I felt suffocated by the futility of it all – all of it, the Empire in whose name Bressinger had died, the misery that Claver would wreak in the name of achieving his stupid, demented aims, the fact that the lives of many more still hung in the balance for the only reason that a senseless conflict could be played out.

I shifted and felt the *Codex Elementa* dig into me. And then, a vile, insidious thought took root in me.

It was me who had summoned the demons. It was the demons who had killed Bressinger. Which meant that I was responsible for his death. Never mind what *might* have happened, never mind all of the other branches of the temporal pathway. In this one, in *this* reality, I stood at one end of the chain of causation, and Bressinger's corpse at the other.

The thought, though still nascent, threatened to snap the last threads of my sanity, but I was distracted by the arrival of Sir Radomir and Luther de Rambert. They rode two galloping horses and led two more by lengths of rope.

"Quick," Sir Radomir said. Both he and de Rambert smartly dismounted and ran over to where I sat next to Bressinger.

"He is gone," I sobbed wretchedly.

Sir Radomir looked confused. "No he isn't," he said.

I looked down sharply at Bressinger. His eyes were open, and he was stirring.

"He just—" I said, confused, and then I started as Bressinger jerked.

"What do we do?" I asked, frantically.

"He's having a seizure!" de Rambert said, starting forward, but Sir Radomir grabbed him back.

"What are you d—" I began, then Bressinger's eyes turned black, and he lunged and grabbed me by the arm.

It was as though everything around me had suddenly died. The wildflower plains around Keraq vanished, to be replaced by the dismal – and dismally

familiar – Plain of Burden.

Bressinger lay, vacant and gasping, in the black, necrotic marsh water.

Standing next to him, eyes glowing, radiating fury, was Claver.

I took a step forwards in the water. “Let him go!” I screamed at Claver. “You hateful, spiteful pig, let him go!”

“Give me the book!” Claver demanded. “Give me the book and I let him pass. Let Kasivar judge him, I care not. You *must* give me the book.”

I felt so full of rage my head seemed to physically swell with it. “Don’t you touch him! Don’t you—”

“Shut up and listen to me!” Claver snapped, and the force of it hit me like a punch to the throat. I could not speak, I could not move. “You have undone the fabric of reality. I do not care what you think of me, or my men, or my mission on this earth. But you must understand two things: you have unleashed the destruction of this world, for that portal will only enlarge, and the creatures beyond it are beyond counting; and the only way it can be stopped is if *I* stop it.” He shook Bressinger violently where he held him. Bressinger briefly cried out. “I can only stop it with the codex.”

In spite of everything, in spite of my rage and grief, in spite of my hate for Claver and everything he stood for, I knew in my heart of hearts that what he said was true.

“I need it,” I said. It sounded pathetic.

“You don’t!” Claver snapped, smelling victory. “You cannot undo the hex. Your master is beyond saving – but this world is not.”

“I do not think this world should be saved if all you mean to do is claim it for your own.”

Claver roared in frustration. “In the name of all that is holy! You are not paying attention. If you do not give me what I need, I shall ensure that your man here suffers unending excruciation. No soul in the Halls of Hell will know any comparable torment. That is all you shall achieve. That and the deaths of all. Is that what you want?”

A tear rolled down my cheek. I looked at Bressinger. My soul ached. “No.”

When Claver spoke again, it was with none of his insane anger. He spoke with a gentle reasonableness that belied our status as mortal enemies. So help me, he reminded me of Vonvalt. “Bring the book back to me, girl.”

“You’ll kill me if I do!”

Claver spasmed as sudden, urgent rage washed through him. He regained himself. “Then leave the book. Leave it next to the body. I shall take it. I will not even pursue you. But I need it, and I need it now.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but his grip on me disappeared, and I was hurled back up the funnel and into the realm of the living.

I grunted as I was physically hurled away from Bressinger’s corpse. Once again his eyes were closed, and he was still.

I looked up, to see that Sir Radomir had very sensibly prevented de Rambert from touching either of us.

“What happened?” the sheriff asked.

I pulled the *Codex Elementa* out and unwrapped it from its oilcloth bundle.

“What are you doing?”

“Claver has Dubine’s soul. He will torture him for eternity unless we give him the book.”

Sir Radomir’s hands balled into fists. “If we give him that book we have undone everything! Sir Konrad will die, Claver will win, and Dubine will have died for nothing!”

I shook my head. “The demons cannot be stopped by anyone else. Not in time.”

Sir Radomir grimaced – then he suddenly looked at me, realisation dawning on him. “Then just give him the pages! The pages he needs! He doesn’t need the whole book. Rip out the bits he wants and be done with it! We can keep the rest!”

It was so obvious a solution that I did not say anything for a few moments.

“Nema’s tits, of course,” I muttered, pulling open the codex and thumbing through the pages quickly. I was not familiar with it, but I could see that it was split into many sections, each section concerning a discrete aspect of the Draedist arcana – most of it, of course, concerned with the elemental beings of the afterlife. I found the page that I had incanted from, found the beginning and end pages of the same section, and ripped them cleanly out of the book’s spine.

“What was that?” de Rambert asked, very visibly unnerved. “Sounded like a scream.”

“It was the book,” I said without thinking. For a moment I did not want to

touch Bressinger, and I hesitated; but I would not let Claver spoil that. He had already desecrated my best friend's body. Whatever happened to Sir Konrad, to the Empire, I knew that I would avenge Dubine. If it took the rest of my life, I would do it.

I placed my hand on his chest – and thankfully remained on the mortal plane – and bent in to kiss him on the cheek. "I shall not let anything happen to you," I whispered in his ear. "I will never forget you, nor what you have done for me."

Then I rolled him to the side and stuffed the pages under his back.

"What are you doing?" Sir Radomir asked.

"They will come for his body." I did not want to leave Bressinger behind, but I knew we had no choice. It was just an empty vessel now, and he would have hated the thought of encumbering us during our escape.

I stood up, and looked at Sir Radomir and de Rambert.

"We need to go. Now."

XXXVII

A Commingling of Misfortunes

“There is not a problem on this earth that cannot be solved with bloodshed.”

MISTRESS OF KERAQ AMALIA ADELAIS

We cantered away from Keraq, the wind singing in our ears, taking advantage of a natural defilade that would conceal us from all but the most determined of searchers. Still, we urged the horses on as fast as they could go. As soon as Claver had retrieved the pages, closed the portal, and banished the remaining demons, I did not doubt that he would go to obscene lengths to recover the codex – especially in circumstances where the remainder of his ill-gotten lore was about to go up in flames. In that one small way, at least, we had scored a victory against him.

“I do not pretend to know what it is I just witnessed,” de Rambert called over his shoulder. “But you have got what you came for, I hope?”

“Aye,” Sir Radomir said, his voice thick with despair.

Eventually we had to slow down to spare the horses – as horribly counterintuitive it felt – for they had a long ride before them. Ahead of us stretched the scrubby wildflower grassland that was so typical of this part of the Frontier. With dawn finally broken in the east, it should have been a beautiful scene. Instead, the Frontier would always be for me a wretched place, a mausoleum for everything I had once held dear. I do not think I have ever been in as black a mood as I was in those moments. My mind was a

rancid mixture of grief and despair.

“Prince of Hell,” Sir Radomir muttered after a long while. “This is a sore day. I do not know what to make of half of the things I have seen.”

“Aye,” de Rambert said uncertainly, mistaking Sir Radomir to be referring solely to the death of Bressinger and his brief possession by Claver. “I am sorry for the loss of Sir Dubine; if it is worth anything, he was well respected in Südenburg, though we of course did not have the pleasure of his company for long.”

With some distance now between us and any pursuers, I found fresh tears blurring my vision and my breath catching in my throat. De Rambert looked over at me to check I was all right, then nodded to himself quietly when he realised I was simply grieving.

“What of Sir Konrad? Is he still in the infirmary?” Sir Radomir pressed.

The old Templar shook his head. “I know not. Margrave von Osterlen keeps her counsel on the matter.”

In spite of myself and my grief, I could not help but feel de Rambert was avoiding the question. “We had word that there was a battle with a Qareshian host, on Gelbegard, near the ruins of the old Agilmar Gate.”

Sir Radomir grunted. “Oh, aye. Got to see all of Claver’s priests and their fancy new powers. It will not be long before they move north.” He snorted bitterly, looking back in the direction of the castle. “If there are any of them left.” De Rambert looked confused by the addendum, but Sir Radomir did not elaborate. “Two, three, perhaps four weeks maximum. Südenburg will be the first place they hit,” he added.

De Rambert said nothing for a while. “The obenpatria has certainly led the Knights of the Temple there astray. And von Geier has not helped matters. Still, we pray for their salvation.”

“You will need a lot more than prayer to stop them.”

“I have been making war on the Frontier for over a decade, Sir Radomir. I know what it is we need.”

“That’s just the thing,” Sir Radomir murmured. “I’m not sure that you do. I’m not sure anybody does.”

We pushed our horses hard and reached Südenburg by evenfall of the following day. Immediately Sir Radomir and I made for the infirmary in the cathedral-keep, but on our arrival, we found it devoid of our master.

“You there!” Sir Radomir called out to a nearby orderly. “Where is the Justice? Where is Sir Konrad?”

The orderly shook his head. “I believe the Justice passed some time during the night. He fought until the very end, but his ailment ’whelmed him. I am sorry.”

We stood in silence for a few moments.

“What?” I asked.

The orderly gave me a sympathetic wince, and left.

I looked at Sir Radomir.

“So, that’s it, then?” He shrugged helplessly. “We failed.”

I hurled the *Codex Elementa* into the wall next to me and screamed until my throat was raw. And then, after this sorry spectacle, I collapsed to my knees and sobbed.

At some point during this explosion I became aware of a draught at my back, followed by rapid footsteps. I turned to see Margrave von Osterlen striding towards me. “You have the book?” she asked without preamble. “Is that it?” she asked, pointing to the codex on the floor.

I looked at her mutely, my face red and wet with tears.

“Yes, it is,” Sir Radomir said, his own voice freighted with weary, hopeless anger. “Where is the Justice?” he demanded.

“Bring that, and come with me. Be quick about it!” von Osterlen snapped.

Bewildered, I grabbed the book, a desperate hope entering my heart. Sir Radomir and I followed her down into the depths of the castle, and I wondered if she was leading me to another inner sanctum; but instead, she took us to what was evidently a morgue. My hope ebbed away like blood from a fatal wound.

Von Osterlen looked at me, taking in my expression with a single, distasteful glance.

“Get a grip on yourself, girl, we don’t have time for that.” She led us over to where Vonvalt was lying on a slab. His skin looked grey, his features slack, and I could see that the great disassembly of death was already overtaking him. Von Osterlen gestured to him roughly. “He only died last night. More like this morning, if I was feeling like fooling myself. He has

spent his last days painstakingly instructing me in your godless magicks, and I must say at great personal and professional cost."

"'Tis hopeless," I said.

"Hey!" von Osterlen snapped, clapping her hands together once. I jolted like a startled hare. "Enough! I told you, we don't have time for that." She pulled out a sheet of paper which was covered in scribblings. She looked at it with an expression of disgust. "He told me he has 'bound' himself. He told me to tell you that he has done what Claver did to 'Justice August', and that that would mean something to you."

"The Rune of Entrapment?" I asked.

"Yes," von Osterlen said. "He said it was misused before, and it has inspired him to try something which…" She looked at his corpse. "Well, it does not look to me as though it has worked, but I promised him I would attempt this Nema-forsaken ritual. Where is Sir Dubine? He is supposed to be a part of this process, is he not?"

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Ah," von Osterlen said quietly, and not without sympathy.

I turned back to Vonvalt. "He has bound himself to the purgatorial plane?" I asked.

"So I am given to understand," von Osterlen said. "Gripped in its bed like an anchor. But it will not last long. You must be quick. Sir Konrad said that the… 'incantation of banishment' was in the *Codex Elementa*. Here, he gave this reference to assist you in finding it."

I looked at the paper. It was a page reference in High Saxan, as well as further instructions in the language of the afterlife, choice parts of which he had taught me. There were annotations, too, pronunciation guides, for those parts which he had not.

With shaking hands, I flicked through the heavy tome, until I found the part he had referred me to. Even just trying to focus on the words made my eyes swim and gave me a biting headache. I did not realise that my nose was bleeding until a small trickle pattered onto the page in front of me. The book seemed to be energised by the taste of it, and an unpleasant aura filled the air that both Sir Radomir and the margrave registered with discomfited grunts.

I realised, with a strange sense of dismay, that I knew the words there and was able to speak them. Contriving to avoid the picture of the Muphraab, a crude woodcut print that was nonetheless quite horrifying, I spoke the

preparatory words – those that, according to the instructions in the codex, needed uttering from the mortal plane. They caused my throat and teeth and gums to sing with pain, and by the time I had finished, blood was filling my mouth once more and all but one of the candles in the morgue had been extinguished.

For a while nothing seemed to happen at all. I had spoken the initial incantation which would break the Muphraab's hold over Vonvalt's life force, but that seemed to count for little if the man was already dead. Indeed, as I looked at his corpse in the wan light, it seemed no more vivacious than before, and he wore the waxen countenance of the very much dead.

Still, I knew from Justice August that I needed to travel to the *Edaximae* – to perform the final rite of banishment and turn the Muphraab away from Vonvalt forever.

I looked to von Osterlen. "Was that it? Was there anything else?" I asked.

She handed me her page of notes. "This was everything he said. He made sure I wrote it down in precisely this way."

I took in the words on the page. I couldn't help but snort; though it was von Osterlen's hand, I could hear Vonvalt's dictation through the simple, functional script as clear as day.

I heaved in a great lungful of air and looked to the margrave and Sir Radomir. Without Bressinger to act as a beacon for the *Nyrsanar Nexi,* this could well be a one-way trip.

I summoned all of my courage and placed one of my hands on Vonvalt's chest.

"Stand back," I said, entirely for the margrave's benefit. "Neither of you must touch us."

"What are you going to do?" Von Osterlen asked. It was strange; she was taller and visibly stronger than me, her face hardened by years of crusading and commanding Templars, and yet when she spoke, it was as if I were the wise master, and she the mere student.

"I'm going in after him," I said.

I took a moment to check the words on the page. I knew what misincantation would do to me – I had only to cast my mind back a day to think on the horrors that awaited me – and an extra few minutes were not going to make a difference. Once I was sure I had it, I cleared my throat. The words caught as I started. What I was reading was Vonvalt's memory of the

wording from the *Grimoire Necromantia*, transcribed by someone unfamiliar with the text, at a time when Vonvalt was at death's door. I shuddered to think what entities were lurking around me now, invisible to me yet present in their overlapping dimension, waiting for me to get one word wrong and rip through the fabric of reality and consume my soul.

I girded myself. If I died, so what? It seemed that there was very little to go on living for; a world of death and conflict, and few friends to endure it with.

I warded myself and then spoke the words. Once I had finished, I felt a gut-wrenching sensation of falling, as though the ground had disappeared. Around me were swirls of stars and huge whorls of coloured cloud, and a buzzing, chittering noise filled my ears. I became aware of entities around me, in spite of the wards. Perhaps they sensed something, like sharks sensing the ripples left in the wake of swimming prey.

I came to a stop in a hazy, dank place. Immediately I knew something was wrong. This was not the Plain of Burden – the *Myočvara*. Gone was the familiar wasteland of black trees, pale grass, and murky grey water that stretched all the way to the horizon. I was in a place thick with a bone-white haze.

"Sir Konrad?" I called out. The air was leaden and still. Things, entities, rustled in that necrotic fog.

I began to walk forwards. The ground squelched, and I looked down to see a strange mixture of grey, ectoplasmic sludge underfoot. Creatures, little insects, skittered over and around desiccated organic detritus.

I walked on. I became aware of shapes in the haze, stone way markers that seemed to be leading me upwards. No, not stone – they were *bones*, their ossified bulbs sticking out of the ground like mushroom caps.

I did not want to be in this place. I knew it intrinsically. This was a place of creeping horror, some bleak part of the immortal plane that was even worse than the parts I had already seen.

Still, I could not stop. I walked on, driven by a reckless desperation. I needed Vonvalt. I had to save him.

The haze cleared slightly. I saw the murk and muck and bones rise up like a pyre into a scab-brown sky riven with black clouds. At the zenith of this mound was a temple rendered in obsidian-dark chitin, a haphazard, oozing ziggurat of death.

I knew intuitively that this place was the home of the Muphraab. I had been snatched away from the *Myočvara* by the currents of the afterlife. Vonvalt was here, and in using him as my anchor for the *Nyrsanar Navi*, I had been pulled here too.

It is difficult to convey the profound horror of it, that *Edaximaen* palace. It was a ghastly sight that defied mortal comprehension. For much of my approach I physically closed my eyes, unwilling to behold the hellish construction before me. This caused me to trip and stagger a number of times, but even then I still would not look at it.

Until I did.

And I saw Vonvalt.

He was walking slowly up the vast flight of steps that led into the mouth of that unholy temple. There was no one else around that I could see. He was clad in a beaten black waxed cloak and his Imperial finest – though it was in a sorry state. About twelve inches above his head glowed a pink rune, but it could not have been the Rune of Entrapment, since that would have bound him to the *Myočvara*.

"Sir Konrad?" I called out to him. My voice once again took on that strange, muted quality.

He turned. His eyes were white, like balls of marble. I noted for the first time he seemed… *discorporate*, as though if were I to reach out, my hand would pass through him unresistingly.

"Helena," he said sadly. "You came."

I looked about him, and then at the rune, which hurt my eyes and mind to behold. "I must speak the incantation of banishment," I said, but I was riven with uncertainty. I was supposed to banish the Muphraab and so break the hex – but how could I banish it from its own home?

I waited for Vonvalt to say more, to guide me; but instead he simply turned from me and resumed his slow walk up the steps.

Tears ran freely from my eyes. "Stop!" I dared not reach out to him. I did not want my worst fears to be realised – that Vonvalt was beyond saving, and this was just some apparition, some spectral shadow of my former master. "Come back, *please.* You have to come back. I cannot lose you as well. Not now."

Vonvalt said nothing. Step after step after slow, weary step, he ascended the stairs into the Muphraab's palace.

I took a breath, and began to speak the words that would break the hex –

And the Muphraab was there.

Alerted, summoned, the ghastly creature appeared at the top of the steps. I had neither seen nor heard its approach. It had simply… *become*.

The banishment caught and died in my throat.

Vonvalt turned to me, his expression ashen and mournful.

I looked back up to the mouth of the ziggurat. The Muphraab stood, motionless. I felt its gaze upon me. It locked me in place, paralysed me as though I had been injected with venom. The rune above Vonvalt's head glowed brighter.

He faded. The Muphraab opened its arms wide, as if to welcome Vonvalt into some deathly embrace.

"No!" I cried out. I thought frantically of the words of banishment. I began to speak them again –

And the Muphraab was in front of me. On me. I could smell its deathly stink. Black ectoplasm began to flake off me as I disintegrated. I felt thin and light-headed as the Muphraab's disgusting, fang-filled mouth opened and ingested my soul. Its featureless moth-face exuded an intangible sense of rage that terrified me to my core.

I cannot know for sure what came to pass in those excruciating moments; only that I heard the screech of a rook, a fleeting sound that distracted the Muphraab and bought me precious seconds.

It was now, or never.

With one last desperate burst of energy and courage, I shouted the words of banishment.

I was back in the *Myočvara*.

It was strange that that barren and bleak purgatorial plane could feel like something approaching a comfort, and yet it did. If nothing else, it was familiar, and that was enough.

I was lying on my back in the marsh water, looking up at that infernal funnel of cloud which bent above the plane like the eye of some monstrous storm. I pressed myself up, to find that I was alone.

No – not alone. I could see Vonvalt.

He was walking away from me, as he had been before. I stood clumsily out of the marsh water and flailed after him.

“Sir Konrad!” I called out, but I did not feel any sense of success or elation. Something was still wrong. This was not the happy, tearful reunion I had hoped for; his journey into the depths of the afterlife seemed to continue unabated.

“Sir Konrad!” I shouted again.

“Helena,” Vonvalt said. He did not turn around.

“You have to come back,” I said with the most deep-seated desperation imaginable. “Gods, *please*! I need you.”

Vonvalt continued his infuriating walk away from me. His boots sank into the marshy murk, but it did not seem to impede him in anyway.

“Where are you *going*?” I called after him.

“The same place everybody goes, eventually,” Vonvalt said.

“Please, come back with me. The hex has gone. I undid it, I followed your instructions. It is over. Please, *please* come back with me.”

Vonvalt did not turn around. His journey deeper into the afterlife, beyond this purgatorial realm, seemed utterly inexorable.

“Do not mourn me,” Vonvalt said. “I go to see Resi.”

I shook my head. “But she is not *there*. She is trapped, hunted. She is doing everything she can to keep you from this place. You will bypass her. Please, come back! Nema!” I screamed, “We have to go *back*!”

Vonvalt continued his slow march into oblivion. The rune above his head had gone. I could not bear to watch him go, but the afterlife addled the senses. I had to believe that he was simply confused about the desire to live, to return to the mortal plane, for he would not willingly accept his own death on such humiliating terms. If he died, Claver would win, and there was no one else strong enough to stand in his way. I could see the temporal pathways shifting, the stream of time diverting, branching down new and dark routes.

I was about to shout this to Vonvalt’s back, to try and goad him into returning – let alone the fact that I had no idea whether he even *could* return, for his body seemed to be quite dead – when something began to happen. Something triggered my most primal instincts. Something began to coalesce around me. I became aware of a distant thumping on the horizon, and the name *Ghessis* filtered through my mind like lake water through silt. Hadn’t

Ghessis been hunting Justice August? I tried to think back to my dreams, my nightmares.

There was something even closer. Some other presence. It was not the Muphraab – gods forbid – but it had that same malign hallmark.

I saw Vonvalt pause. Slowly, he turned. He cocked his head to the side as the distant pounding registered. “Ghessis,” he said.

Then he and I locked eyes briefly.

Suddenly, all around me, creatures materialised. I struggled to recall their appearance mere hours after this unpleasant experience, let alone decades, but the horror and fear remains. Hints of limbs, of long spindly arms, of reverse-jointed legs, the suggestion of eyes or at least an awareness of my presence overwhelmed me, and I did little more than freeze in place. I managed to cry out “Sir Konrad!” before it felt as though a tsunami of blackness engulfed me.

I can certainly recall that crushing sense of pressure, as though I had suddenly been buried underneath tonnes of fresh soil. My eyes felt as though they would burst from their sockets, my ears sang with pain, and it felt as though my body would come apart at the seams, suddenly overfilled with blood. Not only these sensations, but horrible buzzing in my ears, as though a gigantic, monolithic bee had taken up residence three feet from my head. That buzzing bore down on me, shaking my brain and turning my mind inside out like a psychic thunderclap. It felt for all the world like large invisible talons were gripped around the insides of my head and mind, pulling, tearing.

I screamed, or I felt as though I was screaming. I made no sound – I could hear nothing over that horrible buzzing noise. My mouth, nose, eyes, and ears felt gummed up with soil and marsh water. Fire laced my muscles, and my bones bent and warped like a bridge swinging in a gale. I was sure that in but a few agonising moments, my whole body would simply disintegrate under the assault.

Then, suddenly, light. A soundless explosion of light and pressure the way a deaf man would experience a thunderstorm.

My mind was battered with a succession of images. It was impossible to know what was real and what was simply a bizarre visual manifestation. I saw Lady Karol Frost again, strangling the two-headed wolf pup; Justice August sitting in a castle ruin in the middle of a desolate ocean; a gigantic

creature, a vast, alabaster-pale human man clad in nothing more than a loincloth, his head encased in a crude iron mask; of wolf-headed Kasar and shadowy demons grappling with one another in a large, foreign temple.

Then, after a raging eternity, silence.

When I opened my eyes, I was lying in a bed of fresh linen, wearing a nightdress that was not mine. A fresh breeze cut through the open window, carrying the smell of dust and wildflowers. I saw the beginnings of a cloudless dawn. It was going to be another hot day on the Frontier.

I did nothing but lie still in that bed for a long time. I tried not to think about what had happened. If I did not think, any number of good outcomes were possible. Knowing could only bring bad news.

I heard now sounds of a busy castle preparing for the day; of serjeants bellowing orders in the bailey, of the perennial hammering of masons as they tended to Südenburg's repairs, of dogs barking. The latter put me in mind of Heinrich. I had no idea what had happened to him. I hoped I would see him again, but I did not think I would.

I propped myself up in bed, and saw a letter had been left on the table which abutted it. Frowning, I took the letter up and opened it. It read:

My dearest Helena,

As I write this letter, you are journeying south to Keraq. Whilst I have faith in my abilities, and in yours, I fear that these next days will be my last.

I am not sorry that we parted on such poor terms. I know that sounds strange to hear, but it is true. It means not only that I have taught you well, but that you have not compromised your beliefs. What I am sorry for is that I am not the man you thought me to be. I hope that in time, as your thoughts and memories of me fade, only the good remains; that one day you can understand me and my motivations, if not accept them.

I have always loved you, Helena, in different ways. I would have loved to court you; to have enjoyed the things that courtship entails.

We might have travelled together, or eaten good food and fine wine, or perhaps visited the Philosophers' Palace, or the chariot races. They would have been ends in themselves, simple pleasures enjoyed in good company. How I would have loved to have been familiar and intimate with you, in public and in private. To have been able to admire the beauty of your body and mind openly and without fear. It crushes me to think of what might have been if circumstances had been different.

I have a great many regrets, Helena, but meeting you is not one of them. I hope that in time, you feel the same way.

Konrad

XXXVIII

Reunion

"The struggles of mortal men, the rise and fall of empires, the decimation of entire peoples; all of it pales into the most fleeting insignificance when confronted with the vast and profound indifference of the holy dimensions and the creatures which inhabit it."

OBENMATRIA HAILWIC JUDDA

The next time I awoke, I found myself lying in a moving cart, the clatter and squeal of wooden wheels filling my ears. Above me was a hot blue sky. The air smelt dry and dusty.

I wept again, but tearlessly. I cared nothing for where I was, nor where I was being taken. It is difficult to overstate the depth of pain and loss that I felt.

After a while, I heard the clopping of hooves. Margrave von Osterlen pulled up next to me, wearing her Templar garb. She eyed me with a curious mixture of sympathy at my situation and contempt at my weeping – she was very Sovan in that regard – and handed me a water skin over the lip of the cart.

"You are awake, then," she said. She glanced to where the open letter was clutched in my hand, and nodded her chin at it. "You have read it?"

I nodded, tears still streaming down my face. "Do you know what it says?"

“I wrote it,” von Osterlen said. When she caught the look on my face, she added, “That is to say, I transcribed it.” She paused. Eventually, she said, “You will be pleased to learn that Sir Konrad is in fact alive.”

“What?” I asked, wiping my eyes furiously. My guts surged with disbelief and excitement. “He is alive?”

I pressed myself up to sitting, though regretted it immediately. Waves of sickness overcame me, and I collapsed back down again, exhausted and in pain. But I had seen enough to know that we had left Südenburg far behind.

“Oh yes,” von Osterlen said, though she did not seem pleased by the news. “I have seen many things in my life, Miss Sedanka, not least during my time as Margrave of Südenburg. But I have never seen a dead man restored to life by pagan magicks before.”

“Where is he?” I croaked.

She ignored the question. “To be honest with you, Helena, the only reason I permitted the séance at all is because I did not think it would work. As far as I am concerned, Sir Konrad *should* be dead, and I should hang you for a witch. But your lord and master has impressed upon me the perilous nature of the situation confronting the Empire, which apparently warrants his personal attention. And besides, I am in no position to countermand a Justice – let alone the Master of the Magistratum.”

“I would see him,” I repeated quietly.

“I shall fetch him for you, when he is available,” von Osterlen said dourly. “He is indisposed. Sir Radomir has informed us of the latest developments. Matters progress quickly.”

She was about to spur her horse on, but stopped when I said, “Wait. Margrave, please.”

She turned back to me. “Yes?”

“Why did you give me the letter, if you knew Sir Konrad was alive?”

She sighed. “Your relationship with your master is no business of mine. But there are things in that letter that I think you should know. I suspect he will ask for it back now that he is… restored.”

I did not know how to feel about that, but she did not wait for me to say more on the subject.

“I will send Sir Konrad to you when he returns,” she said again, and once more made to press ahead. But she hesitated. She turned slightly to me, but did not take her eyes off the road ahead. “What is it like?” she asked, angry

and embarrassed by her own supplication, her sudden moment of weakness. “What is there, after life?”

I thought for a moment. “I would not know how to put it into words,” I said eventually.

Von Osterlen snorted bitterly, and left.

Time passed. I lay in that cart, only vaguely aware of what was happening around me. Sometimes someone would hover over me, encouraging me to drink. I tasted water and marsh ale, and less frequently the astringent tang of wine. I remember one cold night being fed strips of dry, stringy chicken. Sometimes I ate; more often I did not. The sun rose and set, and I knew nothing but solitude and grief on that long road.

I had not spent any great stretch out of Vonvalt’s company over the past few years, and it felt as though I had not seen him for a long time. It was not just the passage of time itself; so much had *happened*.

Bressinger had died.

Vonvalt had died.

Claver’s power grew, and every day brought us closer to the end of the Empire of the Wolf. I had long guessed that we were returning to Sova, but what happened when we got there was anyone’s guess.

And now I had one fewer person to share the burden of my fears with.

On the morning before we reached Sova, I awoke to find myself in a bed in the upstairs chamber of an Estran tavern. I realised that the door was open – likely the thing that had roused me – and my heart leapt.

“Sir Konrad,” I breathed.

He stood in the doorway. He was wearing his usual casual attire of a loose-fitting shirt and breeches, whilst his beard was trimmed and his hair was wetted and brushed. With the hex broken, he looked restored, though this latest misadventure would leave its mark on him. I was surprised, actually, how quickly he seemed to have returned to life; gone was the waxen pallor,

the sheen of perspiration, the gauntness of his cheeks. He looked to be in rude health, as though he had been feasting, drinking, and exercising for days.

His eyes glistened with tears as he crossed the room, and pulled me into a rough and tight embrace.

“My Helena,” he said. I returned the embrace fiercely, and I do not know how long we held one another for, but no length of time would have been too long. We both wept openly, for our shared horror and our shared loss in Dubine.

“How do you feel?” Vonvalt eventually asked me, taking me by the shoulders. “For the longest time we feared you would not recover.”

I shook my head. “Where am I? Where are we going?”

Vonvalt stopped me. “In time. Here, take some ale. You are parched.”

I drank, but still not enough. “Dubine,” I started, but stopped. I did not trust myself to speak, and much time had already been given over to weeping.

Vonvalt looked downcast. “I have spoken to Sir Radomir about Dubine’s fate.” He paused. “I hope you will forgive me if we do not speak more on it for a while.”

I nodded. We sat in silence for a few long moments.

“I have a great many questions,” I said after a while.

Vonvalt nodded once. “I will answer them, but, Helena, we do not have much time. The only reason we are here is so that I can send more correspondence ahead of us with a liveried company.”

I nodded my understanding. “What happened? Down there?” I pointed to the flagstones, as though the afterlife were simply underneath us.

Vonvalt reached for his pipe, only to find that it was not on him. He sighed. “That place is called the Ziggurat of Ambyr. It is the home of – well, you know its name.”

“I saw it,” I said, my skin gooseflesh.

“I know. And, Helena –” he looked at me with an expression of intense sincerity “– thank you.”

I smiled awkwardly. “’Tis no matter,” I said.

Vonvalt snorted. “What you achieved was extraordinary. Helena, I owe you everything.”

I was very uncomfortable with this. Fortunately, for his own awkwardness, I think Vonvalt sensed this. “Sir Radomir told me you burned the books in the Keraq sanctum.”

I looked up at Vonvalt sharply, but there was no anger or chastisement there. “I did,” I said. “I thought it was better that they be burned than continue to provide Claver with a source of power.”

To my surprise, Vonvalt nodded. “I agree. In fact, when this matter is concluded, it is my intention to burn a number of other volumes in the Master’s Vaults. I expect it shall be my last act as Lord Prefect, but we can ill afford another madman like Claver availing himself of the old Draedist magicks.” He paused. “Sir Radomir also told me of your… misadventures with incantation.”

“Yes,” I said. I thought back to the demons I had summoned, clawing their way ferociously into the world, and shuddered. “Unless it is something you want to discuss, I would rather not speak on it – for now.”

“No,” Vonvalt said. “That is to be expected.”

A thought suddenly struck me. A memory, buried for what felt like a thousand years, unearthed by an archaeologist’s spade. “What is Ghessis?”

The question took Vonvalt by surprise. “How do you know about Ghessis?” he asked.

“Justice August told me in my dream. She said she was being hunted by it. You said it too, in the *Myočvara*.”

“Ghessis is the Hunter. The Gatekeeper of Purgatory. Ghessis seeks out those who loiter in the *Edaximae* and moves them on. Violently. I pray that you never encounter him.”

I shuddered. I wished I had not asked. “How did we get out? How are you alive?”

Vonvalt massaged his chin. He grimaced. “After you broke the hex, Resi came to assist with the *Nyrsanar Nexi*. She took an insane gamble in so doing. I do not know what has happened to her. That is… another burden I must bear.”

He looked away, out the window. I followed his gaze. Through its warped glass panes, I saw a huge and visibly wealthy metropolis stretch away. I would discover later it was Waldershut, a walled city guarding the southern approaches to Saxanfelde – itself the home of Prince Luka, the Emperor’s second son.

We were a long way from Südenburg and the Frontier.

“What is our plan?” I asked. “I see Margrave von Osterlen is accompanying us.”

“If you feel up to telling me, I would hear what happened in Keraq, first.”

I told him about everything I had seen and heard, including the battle at Gelbegard, the attack I had suffered from the possessed nun in Keraq, and everything I had witnessed in the inner sanctum until I had met up with Sir Radomir in the inner bailey.

Vonvalt listened patiently. When I had finished, he massaged his chin in thought. His other hand once again reached for his pipe, and once again he was frustrated by its absence.

“If Claver and von Geier are at odds, we may be able to drive a wedge between them yet. Von Geier is right; Claver will be nothing without the Templars – at least for now.”

“If there are any left,” I muttered. “Even the priests could not keep the powers in check.”

Vonvalt nodded. When he spoke, it was more to himself than to me, as though he were working through a problem out loud. “They do not have the means of discharging the powers. They have not the knowledge nor the skill to wield them properly. It is like giving the Saekas blackpowder; they can make a tremendous mess by blowing up a barrel of it, but beyond that they haven’t the necessary martial doctrine to capitalise on their gains. Claver’s priests can wield the Emperor’s Voice – or a bastardised version of it – but the energy saturates them, overfills them. It is like – think of it like opening a channel to the afterlife, the source of all these sorceries. Using the Emperor’s Voice opens a channel for a brief moment; but what if I was unable to close that channel off again? The eldritch energies would flood my body until I could no longer contain them. And you have seen what happens then.”

I listened in silence. I already knew this, or had at least guessed it. In fact, now that our more urgent news had been exchanged, I found my thoughts dwelling on the letter Vonvalt had written to me. I was still – still – grappling with my feelings, but his death, or rather near death, had certainly crystallised them.

I was about to tell him that I had seen the letter and read its contents, but I stopped when I saw that he was once again looking out the window. Now he was squinting, his features creased.

“What?” I asked. “What is it?”

Vonvalt pointed. He might as well have been pointing at anything.

“What?” I pressed.

“Look at the city hall,” Vonvalt said.

“I don’t know what—”

“There!”

I looked for what Vonvalt was talking about. I decided that he was pointing to an impressive building of Sovan gothick design.

“I don’t—”

“The flags,” Vonvalt said, standing. “They are at half-mast.”

“Sir Konrad!” I said, but he was already sweeping out of the chamber.

The fullness of my convalescence would have to wait. Vonvalt collected up what was apparently now his retinue – Sir Radomir, Severina von Osterlen, and the Templar, Luther de Rambert, and together we moved across the city towards the Imperial city hall. As we approached, I could see that Vonvalt was right; the flags of the Autun were indeed flying at half-mast, and the bell of the foremost Neman temple tolled a solitary heartbeat of grief.

“Surely it is just for the death of Prince Kamil,” I said as we approached.

“It is not,” Vonvalt said. “They were fully run up yesterday.”

We reached the hall and dismounted. Vonvalt swept inside, and I did the same, following him instinctively, though no one else did. Beyond the threshold was a large, open hallway, with a schach-board-patterned floor and the usual stone vaulting and wood panelling that typified Sovan ornament.

Vonvalt approached the desk clerk, who looked not a little startled, and demanded, “Why are the flags at half-mast?”

The desk clerk had to catch her words before she could get them out.

“Prince G-Gordan,” she stammered.

After a few moments, in which it became clear that she was going to offer nothing further, Vonvalt asked, “What do you mean? What has happened to him?”

The clerk looked confused. “He is missing, Milord Justice, presumed killed.”

Now it was Vonvalt’s turn to look confused. “What in Nema’s name are you talking about?”

The clerk looked about the hall uncomfortably. “The news came in late

last night. I know not the detail, only that the 16th Legion is gone. They disappeared in the Northmark of Haunersheim. Apparently there has been no word from them for some time."

I thought of Prince Gordan, the affable, red-headed Haugenate who we had seen briefly on the Baden Road in what felt like a lifetime ago. How could the Emperor's third son, and five thousand of the Empire's finest warriors, simply disappear? The forests of Haunersheim were wild and desolate places, but it took a great deal to make an entire army vanish from the face of the earth.

And yet, that is precisely what had happened.

"They are supposed to be besieging Roundstone," Vonvalt said, as though he might be able to argue the clerk into remembering a preferable version of events.

She could do nothing except offer a nervous shrug.

Vonvalt rapped the desk once with his knuckle in frustration, then turned and exited the hall.

Once back outside, it was von Osterlen who asked the question. "Well? Is it the lad?"

Vonvalt shook his head. He told them what the clerk told him. Amongst the cries of disbelief and the predictable slew of questions that followed, he held up his hands in frustration. "I don't know anything further, so there is no point in asking. Come; we shall gather our things and be on our way, right now." He glanced back at the imposing façade of the city hall. "Matters are overtaking us. We must be quick if we are to bring them back in hand."

We gathered together our belongings and made all speed for Sova. Here in the northern parts of Estre the roads were wide and paved and kept in a state of good repair, and we made excellent progress over the course of the balance of the day and through the night. By dawn of the final day of our journey, our horses were cropping the fecund greenery of the Ebenen Plains, and the distant, monolithic towers of Sova could be seen catching the morning sunlight.

It was a few hours into the morning, as we travelled up an empty towpath

adjacent to the River Sauber, that we came upon a pair of Imperial Guardsmen. They had been sitting, but now they stood as we approached.

“My Lord Prefect,” one of them called out to Vonvalt, a serjeant by his helmet plumage.

Vonvalt frowned. “Yes?” he asked.

A few more Guardsmen appeared from what I now saw was a small encampment on the other side of a copse of cypress trees, where a number of horses idly cropped the grass.

I felt uneasy.

“What do you want? I have urgent business to attend with the Emperor,” Vonvalt said.

“We have orders to bring you in, my lord,” the serjeant continued.

“Well, be about it, then,” Vonvalt said, gesturing impatiently to the itinerant camp which he, too, had seen. “I daresay the road is clear enough, though our horses haven’t much left in the way of hard riding.”

There was an uncomfortable pause.

“What is the matter?” Vonvalt asked.

“Sir Konrad,” von Osterlen said from the back of our group.

“Wait a minute,” Vonvalt said, not turning.

“Sir *Konrad*,” von Osterlen said, loudly and impatiently.

“*What?*”

“He means as a prisoner,” she said, sighing.

Vonvalt whirled back to the Guardsmen. All four of them were armed and armoured – and impervious to the Emperor’s Voice.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“I’m afraid I must ask you to dismount, sire. And your companions.”

“I’m afraid I must ask you to fuck yourself if you think you’re arresting me,” Sir Radomir said, spitting on to the towpath.

“Sires—”

“I shall do nothing at all until you explain to me what in the name of Kasivar is going on,” Vonvalt demanded.

The serjeant winced. Another pair of Guardsmen joined the existing group of four, this time from the right, where they had been washing themselves on the bank of the Sauber. It was likely they had been waiting for us to appear for some days. I imagined other roads were similarly monitored.

“Please, my lord. There is no need for bloodshed. If there is an

explanation then I’m sure it will all come to naught.”

Vonvalt spasmed with rage. “*Bloodshed?*”

“Have you dolts any idea what is happening on the Frontier?” Sir Radomir shouted. “But a few days ago I saw a demon manifest its way on to the mortal plane and cut a host of men to bloody rags!”

The Guardsmen shifted uncomfortably, not knowing how to process this lunatic outburst.

“Are you listening to me?!” Sir Radomir thundered.

“I am, sire,” the Guardsmen said uncertainly, for he had no idea who Sir Radomir was. “Nonetheless, I cannot disobey a direct order.”

Vonvalt cut across him. “Tell me your name, Serjeant, this instant. The Emperor himself will hear of this insanity.”

The serjeant continued to wear a pained, apologetic expression. “My lord – t’was the Emperor who ordered your arrest.”

XXXIX

More Questions than Answers

“Tyranny loves apathy.”

INSCRIBED ABOVE THE PRELATE’S GATE, PHILOSOPHERS’ PALACE, SOVA

An armoured wagon, formed of thick planks of wood and strapped with iron, was lying off to the side of the road. We were herded into it, disarmed, and bound. Against almost any other foe, I was sure Vonvalt would have fought them. But six Imperial Guardsmen against our sorry and exhausted party was no match at all, and in spite of everything, Vonvalt was not so recklessly angry that he was about to see us all killed.

The Guardsmen who had been instructed to arrest us had obviously been given further instructions to not engage with us, for we learned nothing from this surprise detainment. Vonvalt, who had endured so much in his efforts to preserve the Empire – or if not the Autun, then certainly its people – was insufferable. He raged in that confined space for a long time, comprehensively affronted. Von Osterlen looked bored and annoyed; Sir Radomir muttered angrily to himself, but was soon dozing, lulled asleep by the rocking of the wagon in spite of the circumstances. Luther de Rambert, inscrutable, quietly prayed.

For my own part, I was sure that once we were given an opportunity to explain our actions – whatever it was we had done to invoke the Emperor’s ire – the matter would be resolved, something to be laughed off later as an embarrassing mistake, forgivable amongst the exigencies of an empire at war.

This optimism would prove to be catastrophically misplaced, but at least it sustained me for the long and agonising journey into the city.

More Imperial Guardsmen joined our caravan, no doubt recalled from other paths and roads into the capital where they had laid in wait for our return. Each was armed and armoured as if for battle, and sent up a great clattering that drew all of the proximate attention. And so it was we entered the Victory Gate flanked by what could have been, in other circumstances, an honour guard – what *should* have been an honour guard, given that we had brought Prince Kamil's murderer to justice – and were taken to the Imperial Palace.

Now, for the first time, I was truly afraid. Matters had been different when the five of us had been confined together in the wagon; now we were separated, placed into different imprisonment suites that sat above the dungeons. These were not horrible, dank places; much like the room Rainard Fulco had been detained in the watch house, our chambers were like pared-back state rooms.

But we were prisoners nonetheless.

My chamber, I would later learn, was the only one that had an external window, latticed as it was with bars, at the south-western extremity of the Imperial Palace. This was where the Palace directly abutted the River Sauber, and I had direct views of the Temple of Creus, the Law Library, and the Grand Lodge itself.

The walls were thick stone, and try as I might, I could find no weakness which might permit the passage of my voice. I had no idea where the other members of Vonvalt's retinue had been detained, nor did shouting out of the window assist.

There was nothing in the chamber to occupy my thoughts, and I found myself pacing it, walking around the bed, searching through the drawers of the chests that lined the walls, inspecting the only piece of ornamentation, a large patterned rug. Much of the rest of the time I simply looked out of the window, waiting for a guard to unbolt the door, apologise profusely, explain that there had been some mistake, and release me.

Instead, I was left alone with my thoughts for the balance of the day. I could not think of what had happened at all. Vonvalt had been guilty of rudeness and insolence, that was beyond question; but he had only ever acted in the Emperor's interests, or at the very least what he honestly believed the

Emperor's interests to be. We had had no news from Sova, nothing to indicate that anything was amiss – save of course the disappearance of Prince Gordan, but that could hardly be laid at Vonvalt's feet. Perhaps the Emperor was displeased that Vonvalt had sent Ivan Godric back to Sova to languish, whilst he had proceeded south? Perhaps Vonvalt should have simply executed Prince Kamil's murderer, as Justice Roza had suggested?

I was certain that some misunderstanding had taken place, for the very worst Vonvalt could be accused of was *interpreting* the Emperor's command in his own favour, rather than following it to the letter.

These thoughts and many more whirled around my head as day turned to dusk. A platter of food was thrust unceremoniously through the door, but nothing could be gleaned from the thruster. I ate meagrely, and drank the ale, and sat looking out the window, wondering what was to come. By the main bell of the Temple of Creus, the still-loaded plate was retrieved an hour later.

Dusk faded to night, and I was told nothing. Burning with fear and resentment, I stripped off and climbed into the bed.

Eventually, sleep found me.

I was awoken in the dead of night. I opened my eyes, confused and unsure of my surroundings. Something clattered against the wooden floorboards, and I sat upright, suddenly convinced I was about to be assassinated; but the chamber was empty.

Another small stone clattered against the boards, and I realised someone was throwing them through the open window. I quickly donned my kirtle and ran up to the iron bars. There, in a small rowboat about twenty feet beneath the sill, was Sir Gerold Bertilo. He was accompanied by another man I did not recognise. Both were hooded and cloaked despite the mild evening.

"My lady," Sir Gerold called up. "I do not have much time."

"What the *fuck* is going on," I hissed down at the sheriff.

When Sir Gerold spoke, it was quickly and to the point. "The Magistratum is in disorder. Justice Roza returned and had Ivan Godric executed per Sir Konrad's instructions—"

"No!" I shouted immediately. And then, sudden, cold horror overwhelmed

me. A dozen things, like the tumblers of a lock, clicked into place.

"Prince of *Hell*, keep your voice down!" Sir Gerold whispered angrily.

My guts churned. Misgivings, which I had long written off as the petty jealousies of a scorned maid, returned in force. I gripped the bars, my breath ragged, my heart pounding.

"Sir Konrad gave explicit instructions that the man was to be kept *alive*," I called down.

Sir Gerold shook his head, confused. "Nay, 'tis not so. Not to hear Justice Roza tell it."

I gritted my teeth and thumped the iron bars in front of me in rage and frustration. "I *swear* it, I swear it on Nema and Savare! He meant for Godric to be imprisoned until his return to the capital!"

"Helena, you must be *quieter*, *please*," the sheriff pleaded. "Nema, I believe you. But… gods, I don't know what to tell you. Godric was executed, publicly and with great violence. There could be no other way. The whole city has been in a frenzy. And then, but a day or two later, the Prince Kamil was turned up. *Alive*."

My breath caught in my throat. My vision swam. I had to hold on to the bars as the news washed through me, engulfing me like a wave.

"*What?*" I asked.

"The boy was turned up. I do not yet know how. And the way Justice Roza has been pillorying Sir Konrad to all that will hear it, in the Senate, in the—"

I shook my head, reeling, as though I had taken several punches to the face. "What are you *talking* about? What has she been *saying*?"

But Sir Gerold did not answer me. He looked about sharply, then exchanged a few hasty words with his companion.

"I must go. We have run too great a risk as it is."

"No – blood of gods, wait!"

"Hold fast, Helena. I came to pass on a message from Senator Jansen. He said to tell you and Sir Konrad that you still have friends. They are working on a plan. Bide your time and give nothing away." He looked around again. "There, I have delivered it. Now, we must leave."

"*Wait!*" I pleaded again, but they did not – could not.

I watched as they rowed away down the wide, ink-black Sauber, for as long as there was something to see.

Then I turned back into the chamber, my mind in turmoil, to spend a long and restless night grappling with my thoughts.

Nothing further came through for me the next day save three meals.

And the following day.

And the day after that.

It was not long until a crowd had gathered outside the Imperial Palace. I heard them shouting, though I could not make out the words. The numbers waxed and waned, but I was sure they were there because of Vonvalt. Occasionally there would be a great outcry, as presumably someone was beaten – or even killed. Sir Gerold had said the city was in a frenzy, and he was right.

I speculated wildly. I vacillated between exercising myself into a fury, and sobbing at the sheer, crushing despair of it all. I imagined myself being pulled from my cell and killed in some public square in front of a mob of baying commonfolk. Another time I imagined myself trapped in gaol as thousands of demons descended on Sova, Keraq a ruin and Claver long dead, his mission to close the portal a failure. I spent night after sleepless night sitting next to the window, looking out for any sign of Sir Gerold, but there was nothing.

And then, eventually, I received a visitor.

But it was not who I was expecting.

“I never did like Sova,” Severina von Osterlen said with distaste, as she sat at the table opposite me. She was clad in a white blouse and kirtle, the latter emblazoned with the black cross and deer’s head of the Templar Order of Saxan Knights, whilst her raven-black hair was hidden under a white headscarf. She looked a far cry from the mailed and bloodied knight I had first met on the Frontier, more nun now than warrior.

By this time I was so exhausted and highly strung that I simply stared at her, unable to form a coherent thought.

“We do not have much time, and I do not want to arouse suspicion, so I

shall be brief. You should know that I have not betrayed you or Sir Konrad; I tell you this because that would be my first thought too. In fact, myself and Sir Luther have both been released. We explained that we were simply accompanying Sir Konrad for expediency, as part of a pre-planned trip to the capital."

"They released you? Just like that?" I asked, my voice freighted with doubt.

"No, not 'just like that'," von Osterlen replied, slightly irritably. "A Justice questioned us. He used his Voice, as I expected him to. I was able to partly guard my answers, not that there was much need to. You forget, we have been absent for much of your misadventures."

"Why did they let you speak to me?"

Von Osterlen gestured to the clothes she was wearing. "I am here to minister to you. Briefly," she added pointedly. "I told the guards I was your matria, so please make sure you maintain that fiction if you are questioned about it, which I'm certain you will be."

I blinked a few times, and then nodded. "Yes, of course."

"I have spent some time in the Lodge of Saint Saxanhilde." She caught my expression. "That is the headquarters of my order, here in Sova. I have been trying to find out what has happened." She sighed. "Prince Kamil is—"

"Alive," I said. She frowned, and I explained to her what had happened with Sir Gerold's visit.

"I expect I am another part of that same plan," von Osterlen said. "You know, then, that the Magistratum is in disgrace. The very public execution of a man for the murder of the Prince Kamil, ostensibly by the order of the Lord Prefect, and who has transpired to be completely innocent—"

"What in Nema's name do you mean, 'completely innocent'? Fucking Creus, he *confessed*!"

Von Osterlen shrugged. "I do not know what to tell you, Helena. That's as may be, but he confessed to a crime that has not taken place."

I cast about the room, as though an explanation might present itself there and then.

"Listen. It is clear that we are at the tail end of a long and complex plot," von Osterlen said. "The execution of an innocent –" she held up a hand impatiently as I opened my mouth to protest once more "– man has led everyone in the city to question the nature of the Magistratum's powers – and

I mean both legal and magickal. From what I have been able to glean, the Mlyanars, who funnel great seams of money to the Savarans in Keraq and Zetland, have been vigorously fanning the flames in the Senate for the Magistratum's disbandment." She snorted bitterly. "And the Nemans, who have never been able to conceal their lust for the Magistratum's arcana, have joined them." She tilted her head backwards, indicating the next gaol suite. "I believe that the Emperor believes that by imprisoning Sir Konrad, he may take some of the heat out of the situation. I think it is hopeless. The Haugenates are too weak. And now there is the death of Prince Gordan to throw into the mix too."

I thought back to Senator Jansen's words in the Sovan arena about stability, uttered, as usual, with unnerving prescience.

"What will they do to him?" I asked quietly. "Sir Konrad, I mean."

"I think the very best you can hope for is to be exiled. I know that the Emperor has long favoured Sir Konrad, but even their friendship – such as it is – may not be enough to spare your master from death."

I shook my head. "Roza. It was her all along."

Von Osterlen shrugged. "I expect she has played no small part in it, aye. She has spoken before the Senate a number of times. Sir Konrad told me on the journey from Südenburg that he expected to readdress the matter of the abduction of Prince Kamil on his return, and though he did not broach the subject of this 'Ivan Godric' character expressly, the way he spoke of the matter suggests to me that he did not do many – if any – of the things Luitgard Roza has been accusing him of."

"Sir Konrad gave *explicit* instructions that Godric was to be kept alive," I snapped. "He—"

But von Osterlen once more held up a hand for peace. "Helena, I believe you. But we cannot discuss this now. There will be time enough to rake over this whole shabby business later, for there are a great many questions still to be answered – not least of which is where Prince Kamil has been all this time, for he is certainly alive."

"Where is he now?"

"His mother is taking him back to Kòvosk," von Osterlen said, waving a hand as if to dismiss the entire line of enquiry. "I must go, and soon. They will suspect me if I dwell for much longer. Listen to me carefully. It is likely that you will be taken to the dungeon soon, to the Truth-taker. You may be

put to some excruciation – I honestly do not know. You must do everything you can to endure it, do you understand? There is a plan to extract you from the dungeon, and it is not without danger or unpleasantness, but it will take time, and must be executed carefully. Many of those put to excruciation give up; they will their hearts to give out because they cannot take the pain. What I'm telling you is, if you can *endure* it, you will be rescued. So, have hope and have courage."

She stood, though I continued to sit in a daze. "Sir Konrad told me you are strong, Helena; he said you are the strongest person he knows. It is time to dig deep into that reserve of strength. Never mind the Emperor, or the Haugenates, or the Two-Headed Wolf. Some will mourn their loss, but there are plenty who will not. If the Empire collapses, it will be the commonfolk who pay for it. Think on them, and endure. I suspect the world of the living has some need of Helena Sedanka yet."

And with that, she left.

I would like to say that I faced the end with stoicism, living up to the great faith that Vonvalt had placed in the iron of my character. But the truth was, as I was eventually taken from my suite and down into the dungeons, my nerve failed me.

The prospect of torture is a uniquely frightening experience. The afterlife is an ultimately mysterious and unknowable place, filled with eldritch horrors which bludgeon the mind and threaten the most profound insanity. But retreat from that holy plane, and it is quick to fade from the memory, like a dream dimension.

Torture, the threat of physical pain, is in some ways the more terrifying prospect. Pain is immediate, visceral, and in most cases unendurable. The sense of helplessness that accompanies torture enhances that fear, too. Being entirely at the mercy of someone as they violate you is an experience which scars the mind. It is for that same reason that the rapist is put to death under Sovan law; the victim may physically survive, but a life sentence of trauma awaits.

I was taken to the same place that Nathaniel Kadlec was taken to. Once

more I was in that huge, vaulted dungeon, suffused as it was with that aethereal, moon-like light. I saw no one else from Vonvalt's retinue, no sign of Sir Radomir, or Vonvalt himself. The dungeon was silent as I was led by a pair of guards to the interrogator.

I was taken into a chamber. I recognised it immediately; if it was not the exact same place that Kadlec died in, then there were multiple chambers that cut the same profile. It was a box of white stone, featuring nothing except a slab which I would be told to lie on and strapped to, and the Truth-taker.

The interrogator instructed me to remove my clothes. I would not – could not – and I was forcibly undressed by the guards who had brought me to this place. I thrashed about with great violence, suddenly drawing on some hidden reserve. I had survived years as an orphan on the streets of Muldau without enduring this violation; now I was about to endure it as a member of the Imperial élite? I wept bitterly at the irony of it.

I might as well have been trying to wrestle an oak tree out of the earth. In moments I was as naked as Kadlec had been, covering myself with my arms and hands, trembling with anger.

The interrogator regarded me impassively, and then indicated the slab. I resisted once more, almost as a matter of course, for the two guards simply manhandled me there and strapped me down.

The Truth-taker stretched vertiginously above me. In spite of what I knew about it – for Vonvalt had spoken to me about its magickal nature and purpose – I found the knowledge did nothing to prepare me, and the effect was extremely distressing. My immediate instinct was to try and turn away from its point, which sat about twelve inches above my face; but the straps held me completely fast. I realised that I was having precisely the reaction the pyramid was designed to invoke: panic, which in those appalling circumstances engendered further panic. Thus compounded, a person could lose their mind in mere minutes if they were of a weak constitution.

I was asked nothing by the interrogator. He simply stood in the corner of the room, as inscrutable as the Truth-taker, letting the dark energies begin to saturate the matter of my mind. Of course, he had nothing *to* ask; we had committed no crime, no treason. This was simply excruciation for its own sake, part of the experience of being a prisoner of the state.

The true absurdity of the situation was that it made me hate the Emperor. I might have disliked him before, in a conceptual sense, and feared him in a

personal one; but I had not *hated* him. Like many others of my age and ilk, I had grown up under the watchful eyes of the Two-Headed Wolf, and though Muldau had been a volatile city, and Tolsburg a volatile province, ultimately I had known nothing other than Imperial rule. And, under Vonvalt's careful tutelage, I had come to see it as ultimately a good thing, the – involuntary, yes – imposition of "civilisation", whatever that term might mean, on a great number of peoples. Tolls, Hauners, Grozodans, Venlanders, Denners, and many others, ethnically and culturally similar, had been united under the banner of the common law. Blood had been spilt, but more had been saved – in the long run at least.

Vonvalt was what his detractors called a "Good Imperial", and so in many ways was I – a faithful servant of the Crown, a zealous adherent to the true tenets of the common law, and in many ways, as a non-native Sovan, closer to an archetype of what it meant to be Sovan than many born in Sova itself.

And now, in a few short days, I had gone from all of those things to none of them. I detested the Emperor and the Empire. I would gladly see it burned to the ground. The sense of betrayal and anger I felt at the Autun was total and irreversible. For a nation supposedly built on the principles of justice and equality, I found it remarkable – not to mention unforgivable – that it could subject me to such a disgraceful course of action on the basis of no evidence at all.

But, of course, it could.

And so I shrieked and squirmed and begged for this unbearable torture to be brought to an end. The words that Severina von Osterlen had spoken to me before the excruciation had been rendered immediately meaningless. I could not think of the peoples of the Empire, the commonfolk, the farmers and masons and merchants and tradespeople who stood to be killed in bloody droves by marauding Imperial Legionaries and bands of conscripted peasants. I would have let them all die in a heartbeat if it meant my release. I could only think of that fucking pyramid, looking at its immense weight and presence as it crushed the sanity from my mind without doing anything at all.

"That is enough," a voice said.

I was unstrapped and removed from the slab without question. The guards gripped me by the upper arms and shoulders. I was so disorientated that I said and did nothing.

A new man had walked in, so plain and unremarkable that he could have

been a twin of the first interrogator.

“What is the matter?” my initial torturer asked.

“I am taking over this girl’s excruciation,” the second man said. “You may leave.”

The first man accepted this again without question, and left.

The new interrogator regarded me, as one might regard a painting in a gallery.

“Hm,” he said. He glanced at the door. The next thing I knew, another girl was brought into the room.

“Hold her, there,” the interrogator said, pointing to the wall next to me.

I turned my head to look at her. She and I were of an age, with the same features and the same frame, more or less. But where my skin was pale, hers was grey – for she was very much a corpse, albeit a recent one. Beyond that, I could divine nothing about her, for I knew not who she was, nor where she had come from.

“Good,” the interrogator said. “Lay her on the slab.” He nodded to me dispassionately. “Put your clothes on.”

I did so hastily. “What is happening?” I asked, and was ignored.

The other girl was laid on the slab. She was strapped down. Then I watched as the interrogator snapped his fingers at one of the guards, and a length of iron was placed in his outstretched hand.

I watched with horror as he began to smash the iron into the girl’s face, four, five, six times. Her nose and cheekbones must have been shattered; her body bucked, and dead brown blood frothed from her nose and mouth.

“What are you doing?!” I screamed.

“Shut up,” the interrogator said, irritated, but not angry. He took a step back and assessed his brutal handiwork. I saw him look at the girl and then at me several times.

“Yes, that will do,” he said.

“What have you done? What is happening?” I asked, breathless with fear, anger, and revulsion.

“I have saved your life,” the interrogator said to me. “Now, begone.”

“What?” I asked, my face a rictus of confusion.

But I was gagged, and a bag was put over my head, and I was dragged out of the cell.

XL

Unfinished Business

“The exigencies of life should be dealt with as they arise; who knows what evils will fester if left unattended?”

PROGNOSTICATOR ANKA ANTIĆ

The plan appeared in the first instance to have been successful. I was led by an anonymous woman through a succession of increasingly empty rooms and eventually into a tunnel little more than bare soil held up with rickety support beams of wood. For the longest time, an hour at least, I had to crawl on my belly, propelling myself with my elbows and knees – though I did so with gusto. I would have swum through a river of human shit to escape that place.

Eventually we emerged from a tiny and skilfully concealed exit on the banks of the Sauber. It was dark here, a place greasy with effluent and treacherous with rocks. The walls of the embankment rose behind us, though there was no sign of the Imperial Palace from where I stood. I realised that we had journeyed all the way under the Creus Road, and had exited just west of the Philosophers’ Palace, opposite the Temple of Nema.

Vonvalt was there as well, his face dirty and his clothes ragged, and though I wanted to embrace him with mad relief, he warned me to be still and silent. Sir Radomir emerged a little while later, and I realised that we had left in our wake three fresh doppelgänger corpses, unfortunates who would pass for us and be burned in our stead.

I had many questions, but there was no time. More men and women clad

in dark clothing led us north along the banks of the Sauber. Always we kept to the rocks and shadow, dozens of feet below street level. The going was treacherous in the dead of night, the bank slimy with mud and effluent, and several times we stumbled, chafing our hands and legs on the rocky protuberances. But our progress was constant, and in the circumstances, fast.

A succession of people, some hooded and cloaked, others simply wearing regular clothes, moved us on. Occasionally we would duck into doorways or alleys and wait, sweating, our hearts pounding and nerves fraying, as a watchman or Imperial Guardsman would amble past. The city was lousy with them. At one point we even entered a public house, posing as punters, whilst a group of Imperial Guard moved through the street. We drank marsh ale with forced calmness, the common room empty, the publican unsuspecting and simply grateful for the late-night business.

We moved on. We were constantly torn between moving slowly, nonchalantly, so as not to attract attention – for the entire city was crawling with watchmen and Imperial Guardsmen – and dashing madly. Eventually, though, in spite of the best efforts of this mysterious army of Senator Jansen's people, it was clear we were not going to exit the city before dawn.

We were taken into the basement of what looked to me to be a random residence a few streets away from the base of the Summit of the Prefects. We were ushered in with the promise of water and victuals to come, and we heard the door bolted from the outside. The only light came from a small latticed window at street level. The streets were still dark, and I estimated it would be an hour before the sun rose.

It was in that miserable basement, amongst old chests caked in years' worth of dust, that we spoke for the first time. I told Vonvalt and Sir Radomir of my conversations with Sir Gerold and with von Osterlen. As I spoke, I watched Vonvalt transform from something approaching a broken and exhausted man to one whose veins had been suffused with molten iron. As my account came to its close, so too did the basement feel as though it were closing in on us, as though Vonvalt's wrath had taken on physical form and was filling up the remaining space.

He paced impotently, fists at his side. "She disobeyed me," he said. It was that, more than anything else, which had angered him. "She *betrayed* me – she betrayed the Order! Working with that… *fucking* priest." He turned to me. His expression had changed. He had gone from rage to confusion in an

instant. “What *is* it about him?” he asked. “How is he able to rally people to him? How does he *do* it? What do people *see* in him?”

“I do not know,” I said automatically.

“No, Helena,” Vonvalt said, his voice freighted with such genuine inquisition that it frightened me. “What is it? *Tell* me. There is something I am missing. Something I do not understand.” He cast about the cellar helplessly. “I have never been so baffled by anything in all my life.”

I said nothing. What on earth could I say?

He was silent for a very long time after that. Sir Radomir, too, said nothing. He had given up trying to make sense of our enemies and their motives. I could hardly blame him; there were now so many aspects to the conspiracy that it was easier simply to ignore it all.

“The boy was alive. He was alive the entire time. And she led us on a merry chase,” Vonvalt said eventually.

“That is what I understand, yes,” I said.

Vonvalt resumed his pacing. “She has been slandering me in the Senate?”

“Vigorously,” I said.

Vonvalt, compelled to be quiet on account of the circumstances, produced the most spectacular sequence of movements as he vented his rage. I thought the man was going to give himself a heart attack, when there was a gentle tap at the door – then the sound of the bolt being drawn back.

Vonvalt’s hand went to the hilt of a sword that was not there, but he need not have worried. The door opened, and Senator Jansen entered.

“Thank Nema you are alive,” he said to the three of us.

A few minutes later we were arranged in a rough circle, sitting atop various dusty chests in the basement. One of the men who had accompanied the senator had brought a flagon of wine with him, as well as several rudimentary pewter cups, and we drank greedily what was an expensive vintage designed for sipping over the course of a comfortable evening.

“I hope you have come here to tell me what has happened,” Vonvalt said.

“Well, you have heard about Ivan Godric, I take it?”

Vonvalt nodded. His anger had crusted over, for the time being, like coal-

black skin on lava. “We took him in Kormondolt Bay. The Voice revealed the man to believe himself guilty of the murder of Prince Kamil – but…”

“He was insane?” Jansen offered.

“… he was insane,” Vonvalt agreed. He looked at Jansen sharply. “Why do you say that?”

Jansen shrugged. “He seemed pretty off to me. ’Tis true, men lose their heads on the scaffold—”

“A pun, Tymoteusz? Truly?”

But Jansen waved him off. “I mean I have seen people driven mad with fear ahead of the noose, certainly, but this was different. His whole manner was off.”

“And you did not think to question it?” Vonvalt demanded.

Jansen’s features wrinkled. “What precisely is it you think I should have done?”

Vonvalt calmed himself with a breath. “I sent him back with Captain Galla and Justice Roza with explicit instructions that he was to be detained to await my pleasure.”

“And you know that that is not what happened.”

“I have just heard now that Justice *Roza* –” he spoke her name with venom “– has been spreading all manner of falsehoods about the case, yes.”

Jansen nodded, wearing a pained countenance. “Indeed. I am afraid that we were all under the impression that you had captured the Prince’s murderer, and sent him back to Sova for a spectacular – and spectacularly public – execution, for that is precisely what we were told, and what happened.”

“She led the investigation astray. ‘Sensing’ the Prince had been killed in the Fleichsregale. Dulling my wits with a sexual affair.” He glanced at me. “She played me like a lute.”

“That certainly seems to be the case.”

“And what of Galla? She did not have the courage to speak up on my behalf? She was there when I decreed Godric be detained. Did she say nothing?”

A sudden dismay overcame the senator – that, and the unmistakable expression of an unwelcome revelation. “Of course, you would not know. Why would you?”

“Know what?”

Jansen cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Captain Galla recently took ill. Severely so. She contracted a pox on the Frontier, and is… not expected to survive.”

Vonvalt gritted his teeth. “Of course,” he said quietly. “What did they do to him? Godric?”

“They erected a scaffold in the arena and cut his limbs away inch by inch, sealing the flesh with hot irons as they went. Then they hanged his torso. He was still alive when they did it. They spent half a day on him. It was one of the most appalling things I have ever witnessed – and I fought in the Reichskrieg.”

We digested that for a moment.

Vonvalt grimaced. “What happened after he was killed?”

There was an uncomfortable pause. “I am afraid the news gets worse.”

“I have been told the Prince Kamil is in fact alive,” Vonvalt said, hoping to pre-empt him.

“There is more to be told before we grasp that nettle.”

There was a pause. “All right,” Vonvalt said.

“Justice Roza made several appearances before the Senate, denouncing you in rather… ardent terms. She claimed that you had led a violent and illegal purge of a number of other Justices on your arrival into Sova.”

“A number of Justices were arrested for treason,” Vonvalt said, suddenly on the back foot.

Jansen winced. “I’m afraid the official narrative is – well, it is what I have just said. That you had about two dozen Justices sent to be tortured and killed illegally underneath the Imperial Palace – amongst whom was Master Kadlec, of course.”

“The trial of Master Kadlec was no secret,” Vonvalt said.

“But it *was*, Sir Konrad,” Jansen said. “Do you not remember?”

Vonvalt had been caught off guard. It was extremely uncomfortable to witness. “The matter was dealt with in line with the procedure decreed by the Emperor,” Vonvalt said eventually.

“Sir Konrad, with respect, you are not thinking about this *politically*. You have been outmanoeuvred. It is no longer within your gift to say that you acted in line with the common law, or procedure; the Patricians and the Neman Church have united in the Senate. It seems that Justice Roza has spent some time getting to know the ins and outs of your practice, and has wielded

her knowledge to great and devastating effect." Now, he gestured to me and Sir Radomir. "She claims, for example, that your retainers sabotaged the fortress of Keraq; that you sought to assassinate Obenpatria Claver and destroy a great many volumes of lore that were being kept there."

"How can that news have reached Sova already?" Sir Radomir suddenly demanded.

"Because she is *working* with *Claver*!" Vonvalt snapped. "Blood of gods, how can you not see it?! Think of the séance! He has been communicating directly with people here the entire time, orchestrating matters!"

"Please, Sir Konrad, you must be quiet," Senator Jansen pleaded.

Vonvalt lapsed to silence.

"The point of it all is, you are being accused of attempting to cede the Frontier to the natives, disband the Templars, kill one of the Neman Church's most well-known – and I am sad to say, revered – *oben*patrias, and on top of all that, you have brought the entire Magistratum and its monopoly on the Draedist arcana into disrepute with the botched enquiry into the 'death' of the Prince Kamil. For yes, the Prince Kamil has been turned up, alive and – though it seems strange to lament this – completely unharmed. The man who you supposedly ordered to be killed had nothing to do with it. Your credibility, and by extension the Magistratum's, has been smashed to pieces. Whatever you intended, or ordered, and whatever the *truth* of these matters is, is no longer relevant. The Emperor's hand has been forced. You have been disavowed. The Magistratum was already on the wane as a lawkeeping entity; now it is but days away from disbandment. Mobs gather there daily. There is serious talk of repatriating the arcana back to the Neman Church. Gods know how long Claver has been planning this, but as a piece of orchestration, it is magnificent."

Vonvalt shook his head helplessly. "Where has the Prince Kamil been?" he asked.

Jansen leant forward. "Ah. Now *that* is the strange part. No official explanation has been provided by the royal family. As I'm sure I do not need to tell you, that is very strange, particularly in circumstances where people have died for a crime that was not committed.

"The story goes, as you will of course be very well aware, that the Prince was abducted in the unsociable trades, by this Ivan Godric, no less. But Godric was in fact innocent – at least, of murder. So where did his story come

from, and how was it able to survive the rigours of the Emperor's Voice? And where did the boy go? Did somebody else take him? If so, who?"

"I am to suppose that no one else has come forward to claim responsibility for the crime?" Vonvalt said.

"Quite so. My theory is that in fact no crime was committed. The question to be asked, now that hands have been revealed, is—"

"Who benefits," Vonvalt said.

"Indeed. It seems that a direct corollary of the unlawful – and brutal – execution of Ivan Godric is the destruction of your Order. Who benefits from this? Certainly, Claver, and I expect that your Luitgard Roza is indeed in league with the man. I have my people looking into her past and ties with the Neman Church. Certainly there is some Kovan blood in her."

Vonvalt suddenly fixed Jansen in the eye. "Where is she now?" he asked.

"Who? Justice Roza?"

"Aye."

"Abed, I expect."

"Be serious!"

Jansen sighed. "Sir Konrad, what could you possibly do?"

"Where is she, Senator? I'll not ask again."

"She lives on the Summit of the Prefects. She is currently in Justice Gothaid's residence."

"Where is Justice Gothaid?" Vonvalt asked. "She is still not returned? It was for her assistance that I originally asked."

Jansen shrugged. "I have no idea. I do not keep tabs on the location of all the members of the Order. Such would constantly fall out of date."

Vonvalt was silent again for a long while. "I want to see her," he said. "Tonight. Today. As soon as humanly possible."

Senator Jansen shook his head. "Absolutely not. I have put myself at enough risk in springing you from the Imperial Palace, and a great many other senators besides. I will not have it rendered for nought in some hare-brained confrontation that will surely end in bloodshed – not to mention alert your enemies."

But Vonvalt's mind was made up – and when Vonvalt's mind was made up, there was no force on earth that could shift it.

"Our enemies *are* alerted. Make it happen, Senator, I may not get another chance. Remember what is at stake here."

Jansen gritted his teeth. “I knew I was embarking on a dangerous course when I embroiled myself in this, but Nema’s tits, Sir Konrad. You are a pain in my arse, do you know that?”

“I know, and I am grateful. Now, please, be quick about it. Your ruse in the dungeons will not last long.”

“Kasivar, don’t I know it,” Jansen muttered, and left the basement.

So it was that an hour and another half later, we were marching up the Summit of the Prefects, hiding in plain sight. Each of us, as well as a handful of other men and women around us, was clad in the armour and colours of the city watch. At the head of the group was Sir Gerold, possibly the only member of the city watch who could lead an incursion such as ours into this conclave of the city’s ultra-wealthy. I sensed an eagerness in the Sheriff of Sova to make amends for his lack of faith in Vonvalt, for they had parted on poor terms some weeks before, and the intervening time had done nothing but prove Vonvalt to be – as usual – keenly prescient.

Dawn had only just broken, and here in this leafy precinct, few were stirring except servants. So it was that we were able to reach the manor house of Justice Gothaid quickly.

“You three, round the back,” Sir Gerold said to three of his watchmen, and they peeled off and moved round the rear of the manse. I was conscious that the last time we had undertaken something like this with the sheriff, a large explosion of blackpowder had killed several of his men. Here, though, Sir Gerold did not hesitate.

“If she is in here, she is unlikely to be alone,” Vonvalt said quietly as we approached the front door. “The more people we can question, the better; but do not risk your lives for the sake of it. I need only to speak to Roza.”

The door was kicked open and we moved into the entrance hall. The manor was similar to Vonvalt’s old house, before he had moved into the Lord Prefect’s Palace, and was decorated in almost precisely the same way. Sir Gerold and his men did not shout out or announce themselves in any way; instead they began to move methodically through the rooms downstairs.

But, of a household staff, there was no sign.

“What is the meaning of this?!” I heard somebody demand in thickly accented Saxan.

Those of us remaining in the entrance hall looked up, to see at the top of the staircase a naked Kovan man. In his hand he held a sword by its scabbard.

“*Throw down your weapon!*” Vonvalt thundered in the Emperor’s Voice, and the man immediately threw the weapon down the stairs, staring at his own arms as they obeyed the command over those of his own brain.

He recovered himself and ran back the way he had come. “Luitgard!” he shouted.

Vonvalt charged up the stairs, mail jostling. Sir Radomir and I followed, as well as a pair of watchmen. We turned left at the top, to see the man disappearing into a chamber. Another man, also Kòvoskan, charged into Vonvalt from the side, tackling him bodily to the floor; but, like his compatriot, he was naked, for they had all been sleeping. Our swords cut into him, his back, his buttocks, his legs, parting flesh so neatly and bloodlessly it was as though we were barber surgeons dissecting a corpse.

He screamed out, reaching desperately for his back and the wounds there. Vonvalt righted himself and silenced the man by stamping on his neck, crushing his windpipe. He was left to suffocate.

We moved down the hallway. We heard the sound of a door being locked and barricaded at the end of it, doubtless Luitgard Roza and her companion. Unless they meant to leap from the window and break their legs, they would not be able to escape.

Another man made an appearance. Unlike his companions, he attempted a surrender, but in spite of what Vonvalt had told us about taking prisoners, he could not stop himself from slaying him immediately, driving his short sword through the man’s heart up to its hilt.

“Cunt,” I heard Vonvalt breathe raggedly, and I realised I was seeing an aspect of him I had never seen before. This was not Vonvalt the Justice – even Vonvalt the avenger. This was Vonvalt the soldier. I was seeing Vonvalt as he had been on the battlefields of the Reichskrieg. Watching him stalk that corridor in the armour of a watchman, punching and stamping and stabbing his way through men, uttering words I had never heard him use before, I realised I was frightened of him. He was as close as he had ever been to losing control of himself. And this was not a traumatic but temporary grief, like the slaying of Resi August; this was a large section of the fortress of his

character crumbling away to dust.

He reached the door at the end of the hallway and began to kick at it relentlessly. “Open this door!” he roared. “Open it! Luitgard! Open this fucking door!”

He smashed at it, over and over again. Sir Radomir helped. It was a simple internal wooden door, in no way strong enough to withstand such treatment. In moments it was being ripped from its hinges.

“Get back!” the Kòvoskan man inside shouted, brandishing another sword. He stood behind a hastily relocated chest of drawers; behind him, wedged into the corner, was Justice Luitgard Roza, clad in a nightgown. She clutched a dagger uselessly in front of her.

“*Drop your weapon!*” Vonvalt commanded, and though the man had clearly expected it a second time, it did him no good. He literally opened his grip and the sword clattered to the floorboards.

Immediately Sir Radomir charged in, vaulting the chest of drawers and kicking the man to the floor with a heavy leather boot. He smashed the man in the face one, two, three times with his short sword, so that brains and blood were sloshing out like wine from an upturned goblet.

Roza screamed in abject terror. It was then I noticed that she too had divested herself of her weapon. The dagger had been thrown away, to clatter across the boards. Initially I wondered whether it was some attempt at obtaining clemency.

Vonvalt stepped into the chamber. He, too, noticed the thrown dagger.

He looked at Roza. “You are not immune to the Emperor’s Voice?” he asked.

“Please,” Roza moaned, sobbing. “Please, just wait.”

“*Who are you?*”

“*Gnnn!*” Roza stammered as she tried her hardest to keep her jaw closed.

“*Who are you?*” Vonvalt thundered again.

“Basia Jask!” Roza shrieked, the words exiting her like a stream of vomit. In fact, she did retch shortly after that.

“*Are you Kòvoskan?*”

“My mother was!”

Vonvalt opened his mouth to unleash another question, paused, and then closed it again. He seemed to deflate, as though a great weight of realisation had suddenly crushed him. “You are not a Justice,” he said.

Both Sir Radomir and I looked sharply at Vonvalt.

Roza shook her head miserably.

I turned; behind us, Sir Gerold and his men were moving up the stairs. “We have caused too much commotion,” the sheriff said, breathless with exertion. “The Guard will be here soon.”

If Vonvalt had heard, he showed no sign of having done so.

“You were never a Justice. You were never Justice Gothaid’s ’prentice. You have no special power. The whole thing was a performance.” He ran a hand down his blood-flecked face. “Prince of Hell,” he whispered.

Roza sobbed.

Vonvalt’s features wrinkled in confusion. “But how did you know? About Kane? Kralij? Theodoar? And the letter of warrant? You had a *seal*.”

Realisation dawned on me like a punch to the gut. “The body on the barge,” I breathed. “The burnt corpse. *That* was Justice Gothaid.”

Vonvalt turned back to Roza. His face was a mask of disbelief. “You tortured her, for information. Bloody faith…”

“And set the barge to explode in the instance of trespass,” Sir Radomir said grimly.

Vonvalt sighed and sat on the end of the bed. He looked, once again, profoundly melancholic. “Tell me what happened,” he said quietly. “I will have it out of you, one way or the other.”

Roza looked up, snot and tears streaking her face. She cut a pathetic, wretched figure. It was easy to hate her.

“Bartholomew Claver means to inherit the Empire, and I have been helping him do it.”

“Well, that is in evidence,” Vonvalt muttered. “You took the Prince Kamil,” he said. “From the tanneries.”

“Not I,” Roza said, shaking her head.

“The Lady Iliyana,” I said, the words exiting my lips the moment I realised it.

Vonvalt looked to me, then back at Roza.

“’Tis true,” she said.

Vonvalt’s expression curdled as he considered this. “Of course. She would have been able to coax the boy away from his life guard with ease. No screaming, no commotion. Just a mother calling her son away.”

“Fuck me,” Sir Radomir muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Heinrich wanted nothing more than to go back to the Palace,” I said, now looking at Roza directly. I laughed bitterly. “He had the boy’s scent the entire time, despite your efforts to frustrate it with the noxious humours of the tannery. The Prince has never left the capital. He has been in the Imperial Palace from the beginning.”

“And Godric?” Vonvalt asked. “Some simpleton you overstuffed with false memories?”

“Aye,” Roza said. “Claver taught us how to do it, for when you used your Voice on him.”

“Not well enough,” Vonvalt remarked. “The man was confused enough by his own tale, spewing out foreign thoughts and ideas that meant nothing to him. You drove him halfway to insanity.”

“You still suspected him!” Roza hissed, suddenly defiant.

Vonvalt opened his mouth, then paused a moment. “You tried to get me to kill him in Linos. That surely would have scuppered your plans for a public execution in Sova.”

Roza snorted. “There is nothing to that. A moment of self-doubt.”

“What do you mean?”

“The plan was already tangled enough. I did not expect you to be so suspicious of Godric. I was concerned it would fail. A wrongful execution in Linos wouldn’t have been as… *impactful*, but it would have been a wrongful execution nonetheless.”

Vonvalt regarded her callously. “Were it not for your treachery, the man would still be alive – and this great injustice would have been smothered in its cradle.”

“Injustice,” Roza muttered bitterly.

“Aye!” Vonvalt suddenly thundered. “Injustice! For what else is it? You bloody *fool*! All of you! You, Claver, Iliyana, and a dozen others! Thousands stand to be killed! Tens of thousands! And for what? The pleasure of being able to tell other people what to do?”

Roza shrank back, cowed. I do not think Vonvalt would ever admit to himself just how much other nations despised the Empire of the Wolf; would ever contemplate the depth of their hatred and the sense of injustice at having been conquered. To do so would have meant confronting some uncomfortable truths about his native Jägeland and his role in subjugating it. He looked at Roza and saw an enemy in its purest form; but perhaps there

was something there, in the kernel of his worldview, which wished that he had resisted the Autun with such ferocious cunning. It was much easier for him to bury such feelings under a righteous avalanche of hatred.

Vonvalt took a moment to compose himself. He rubbed his face with a gloved hand. He glanced back to Sir Gerold, who was loitering in the doorway.

"All of it to discredit the Order," he said. "A final nail in the coffin of the Second Estate."

"Yes," Roza said simply. "It was Claver's idea. He knew the Emperor would turn everything to the task – including you. We saw to it that all of Sova became invested in it, the people whipped to a frenzy."

"Now I see why you were so quick to try and have me slay Godric."

Roza shrugged.

Vonvalt's lip curled. "How was it that Claver was able to arrange for the abduction of the Prince Kamil so quickly?"

Roza shook her head. "The matter was already afoot. That Prince Kamil be taken was a plan weeks in the making. Claver arranged to speak to a number of people, including a representative of the Lady Iliyana, from Keraq, on the same morning of the abduction – to make sure it had all gone to plan. You interrupted that séance." Her expression darkened. "The man you caused to be ground to a paste in the Wolf Gate was Iliyana's lover."

Everybody started as Vonvalt suddenly leapt up, sword in hand. He smashed the blade into one of the bedposts, a great cry of frustration and rage exiting his mouth.

"I knew it!" he roared, pointing a finger at Roza's face. "I *knew* it! Gods, but I *knew* there was a connexion there. Blackpowder, is that it? Claver is after explosives. He has seen what a few barrels of it in the hands of the Saekas on the Frontier can do to a Templar army, and he wants some for himself. Is that it? Tell me!"

For the first time, Roza was silent.

"Is that it! *Does Claver want blackpowder?*"

Roza lurched as the words struggled to exit her throat. She moaned and spasmed as Vonvalt repeated the question over and over again.

"Yes!" she screamed. "Yes! Iliyana has been supplying him with it!"

"*Why?*"

"In exchange for his… guarantee!" She fought against every single

syllable as it wormed its way between her teeth.

"*What guarantee?*"

"That Kòvosk be left untouched after he has claimed the Sovan Empire for his own!"

Vonvalt yanked his sword from the bedpost so that it squealed against the wood. He pointed it at her.

"No, please!" she shouted.

Vonvalt turned to Sir Gerold. "You have heard everything she said?"

"Aye," the sheriff said, nodding.

"You will tell Senator Jansen. Today."

"I will, I swear it."

Vonvalt turned back to Roza. "I hope it was worth it," he said.

"The freedom of Kòvosk is worth it," she replied, quietly, in a daze.

Vonvalt shook his head. "If you think Claver will satisfy himself with the Empire of the Wolf, you are sorely mistaken." He raised his blade. "Take solace in the fact that you will never see it come to pass."

"*Autunska!*" Roza shrieked as Vonvalt thrust his sword through her heart.

"What does that mean?" Sir Radomir asked in the silence that followed, as Basia Jask slumped to the floor.

"Wolf shit," Vonvalt muttered, cleaning his blade. He looked out the window. "Nema. It is happening."

I followed his gaze – we all did. There, in the distance, just visible behind the Temple of Creus, was the Grand Lodge.

It was aflame.

"No," I breathed. Behind me, Sir Gerold and his men swore.

Vonvalt rammed his blade back into its scabbard.

"Come on. We need to get out of this city."

Epilogue

The Decline Before the Fall

"No nation will survive where there is inequality of means. Where there is inequality, there is resentment; and for as long as there is resentment, there will be no shortage of men and women willing to act with violence."

FROM CHUN PARSIFAL'S TREATISE *PENITENT EMPIRE*

It was cold, and it would be a while before the sun's first light kissed the grey waters of the river.

Here the banks were wide apart and quiet. We passed slowly through a green country, and after weeks in the sparse southern reaches of the Empire, the place seemed teeming with feature – lush pine forests, striking outcrops of rock festooned with vegetation, bubbling streams, abundant wildlife. The air smelt heavy, and the sky was filled with thick piles of dark cloud.

Ahead, the ground fractured and rose; in the distance, vast grey mountains, still capped with snow in spite of the spring that the Imperial calendar decreed, loomed.

I peered out from the waxed blanket which covered me. Hooded figures sat in the front of our boat; I felt the rhythmic tug of oars against the water, the susurrus of muttered conversation.

I did not move or speak.

We continued our laborious progress upstream. After what must have been several hours, we put in at a small jetty. The blanket above me was

removed and a lid was placed on my crate. I felt the box being picked up and placed, somewhat roughly, in the back of a cart. Another one thumped down next to me, and then a third.

The muffled voices continued. I heard the tinkling of metal against metal, the creak of leather straps, and the squeak and clatter of wheels.

We were on the move once again.

The journey lasted the balance of the day. I watched as forest and farmland gave way to houses of increasingly robust construction, until, by the evening, we had passed through the gates of the Hauner town of Osterlen. We had been fortunate; they closed for the night-time curfew mere moments later, and the guards, eager to end their watch before the dark and cold of springtime in the northern Empire could bite, had checked our cart only cursorily.

The cobbled streets seemed to lead constantly upwards, and the horses laboured, already tired from a day's riding. Osterlen was built into the foothills of the mountains which divided the Empire from Hasse, a place famous for its precipitous terrain and inclement weather. It was a small but important place, a fortress masquerading as a town, that kept watch over one of the few passable roads between the Empire and the Kova Confederation. In other circumstances, sneaking into an Imperial fortress like this one would have been suicidally dangerous; but Osterlen fell under the purview of Baron Hangmar, the master of Weisbaum, if not a friend to Vonvalt, then an ally.

The cart came to a stop once more. The boxes, including the one I was in, were unloaded and carried inside a building. I heard gates being closed and barred, and then someone said, "Watch yourself, miss," and I ducked low in the crate. A moment later, a length of iron was inserted between the walls of the box and the lid, the latter was prised off, and I was free.

We had been brought into a small, vaulted chamber which looked and smelt as though it had once been used to store wine barrels. I climbed out of the crate, and Vonvalt and Sir Radomir climbed out of theirs. In front of us, Severina von Osterlen removed her hood. Around her were several men; I did not recognise them, but we had been told they were loyal.

“How do you feel?” von Osterlen asked us.

“Like I need a fucking drink,” Sir Radomir said.

“There will be sacramental wine,” von Osterlen said without any apparent compunction. “And you, Sir Konrad?”

Vonvalt snorted. “I am fine. Let us be about it.”

“As you wish. This way.”

She led us through a side door and into another anteroom, this one furnished, albeit lightly. Wooden desks piled with papers abutted walls of undressed stone; flickering candleflame provided pools of honey-coloured light. Stacks of ledgers and wooden chests overflowing with old scrolls suggested an attempt at record-keeping.

Von Osterlen approached another door, and stopped. “Wait here a moment,” she said, and disappeared through it, pulling it closed behind her.

We waited in silence. My stomach growled, for I had eaten and drunk extremely little over the past few days of flight from Sova. I met Sir Radomir’s eye, and in normal circumstances, a wry, unspoken exchange would pass between us. But now, the man simply looked tired and fed up.

The door opened again. Von Osterlen appeared. “All right; follow me, quickly.”

We followed her. Beyond the threshold was the vaulted interior space of a small temple, and it was amazing to me how even small and tucked-away places like this could still be filled with so much ostentatious wealth and beauty. The only thing that marked it out as something other than a run-of-the-mill Neman church were the Templar battle honours hanging from the walls, soiled and often bloodstained pennants and battle flags of the Templar Order of Saxan Knights.

We walked quickly across the transept and into a small chapel. Von Osterlen snatched a rug away from the floor, to reveal a trapdoor, and one of the men who accompanied her pulled it open. Wordlessly, we descended into that dimly lit space.

“Blessed Nema, you are still alive,” Senator Tymoteusz Jansen said. I descended the steps, the last in, to see a small chamber, once again lit with guttering candles, home to some largely empty bookshelves and a low table. The senator was sitting at the far end of it, clad not in his senatorial robes, but simple, plain clothes.

“For now, at least,” Vonvalt said, sitting without ceremony.

One of von Osterlen's men closed the trapdoor above us and replaced the rug, and the small, underground chamber quickly became stuffy. The other of her men handed out silver goblets and filled them with wine as we sat. Sir Radomir drained his immediately and asked for another, and was obliged.

"Sir Gerold told me everything," Jansen said. "And I passed on the information."

"And?"

"The Lady Iliyana had already returned to Kòvosk with the Prince Kamil. There they remain, in the seat of House Casimir. The Confederation is already lousy with Legionaries, but even so, Prince Tasa marshals more men to take across the Kova. He means to kill Iliyana and bring the Prince back to Sova, with the blessing of just about everybody in the city."

"That is the last thing the capital needs, to be drained of soldiers!"

"Indeed," Jansen remarked. "The Mlyanars, of course, cry ignorance about what they term the 'evil contrivances of Kòvoskan spies'. I have made the connexion between Iliyana and Claver well known, but there is no evidence for it." He shrugged. "Claver remains in Keraq, and I am afraid that talk of him issuing commands via Draedist sorceries is dismissed very effectively by the patricians and bandied around with contempt."

"What of the Order?"

Jansen sucked his teeth. "Gone. In theory it still exists, since the Emperor has not disbanded it, but…" He took in a deep breath, and released it. "The Lodge is burned. The Justices are lying low. Your name is poison in the capital."

Vonvalt shook his head, close to despair. He was silent for a very long time.

"There is nothing we can do, is there?" he said. "Nothing. We might as well be seeking to drain the ocean one bucketful at a time."

Even Jansen, who seemed to have limitless reserves of dogged optimism, shook his head. "Not yet. The Mlyanars and the Nemans control the narrative. They have deflected the ire of the commonfolk to Kòvosk, playing on their prejudices. It was not difficult. The people already hate Kòvoskans."

"And the Emperor?"

Jansen waved his hand dismissively. "The Emperor is a spent force – and we his Haugenates with him. He has lost the Magistratum, his biggest and most important ally. His daughter-in-law is a traitor to the Crown. He will

soon lose Prince Tasa on some Kòvoskan battlefield. He has already lost the Prince Gordan, annihilated along with the rest of the 16th Legion."

Vonvalt held out a hand. "I have heard of this, and I do not understand. Are these matters connected?"

Jansen shook his head. "I do not think so, but who knows? Our enemies are sophisticated, and they have been planning this masterstroke for months – perhaps years. We have had but a few weeks to react to it. It is no wonder we chase defeat at every turn."

"I had expected Prince Gordan to be besieging Roundstone for the balance of the year," Vonvalt said. "How was he so far north so quickly?"

"Naumov apparently had some shred of honour left in him and surrendered the fortress. Prince Gordan moved almost directly on to Seaguard. They were last seen encamped near Josko. And then…" Jansen shrugged "… nothing."

"His death has been confirmed?" Vonvalt asked.

"No. But it is impossible for an entire Legion of men to simply disappear. They can only have been slain."

"Who is to say they have been killed? Northern Haunersheim is a vast place filled with—"

"Sir Konrad," Jansen interrupted. "They have gone, one way or another. You are simply going to have to trust me. Your questioning me here now is not going to change that fact, nor elicit some fresh information on the matter."

Vonvalt gritted his teeth. "Which élite force has claimed the honour of such an impressive victory, then? One capable of slaying an army of five thousand to a man, and—"

"I do not know," Jansen said, once more cutting across him. It was clear the senator was in no mood to indulge Vonvalt's tired acerbity. "The only rumour that persists is the emergence of some…" he circled his hand, as though he might conjure an explanation from the air "… pagan… warrior priestess."

Vonvalt snorted, indignant. "*What?*"

"Would that I had more information for you, Sir Konrad," Jansen bit off. "I'm afraid I am not going to be able to give you the answers to everything here and now."

"What is the Emperor doing about this? Has he dispatched more Legions

in the 16th's wake?"

"How can he? Prince Tasa has taken the last decent fighting force east with him. The Emperor sits in the Hall of Solitude saying nothing. We need strength, not introspection. He is waiting to die."

Vonvalt sat quietly from moment, then smashed a fist into the table. "Fuck!" he thundered, making everybody start. He rubbed his temples with two trembling hands. "So that's it, then, is it?"

"Sir Konrad—"

"Claver will lead the Templars north and install himself on the throne. And some… *spectral* pagan army which apparently exists in Haunersheim – and more likely in the Emperor's imagination – will grease the wheels of this coup by killing off all of the remaining Imperial Legions actually *within* the Empire standing in the way?"

"Sir *Konrad—*"

"*What?*"

It was von Osterlen who had spoken. She looked unmoved and unimpressed by his rage. She spoke as Vonvalt himself might have spoken had their roles been reversed. "We do not have much time. Rather than exercise ourselves into a fury, perhaps we should consider what it is we can do to right the situation?"

Vonvalt opened his mouth, reconsidered, and closed it. He sat heavily. When he spoke, it was quietly. "There is nothing we can do. Hell, I'm half minded to flee. There are other places that exist, other nations we may live in in obscurity."

"For as long as Claver controls the Draedist arcana, you will never be safe," I said to him.

"You burned it. All the books. All the old lore. He has nothing," Vonvalt muttered disingenuously. "And we have the *Codex Elementa*."

"He has plenty of power already. He has an army. And he has help. He is being *helped*, is he not? Some entity that we do not yet know of, some creature in the afterlife, plying him with magickal gifts. You remember what he said in Sova? 'Powerful friends'. Even if you left the Empire of the Wolf to him, what about the afterlife? What if he means to make an empire for himself there, too?"

It was a sobering thought, and I could tell that my words caused a great deal of discomfort in that secret chamber.

“And think of Resi,” I added quietly. “She is trapped on the Plain of Burden. She needs your help, too.”

“There are two things you can do. At least, to my mind,” Jansen said, filling the silence that followed.

“Go on,” von Osterlen said, when Vonvalt did not respond.

“With the disappearance of the 16th Legion, Seaguard remains ungarrisoned. We are approaching summer. This means the North Sea will be at its calmest, and the summer raiding season is in danger of proceeding unopposed. The Emperor is sure to send a force north, but it will take time to muster. I believe this gives you a window of opportunity to discover the truth of the matter as regards Prince Gordan. If there is a ‘spectral pagan army’ loitering in the north of the Empire, then that army is something that may assist you.”

“What is the second thing?” von Osterlen pressed.

“I told you I squired in the lands of the Kasar. The Kasar are a reclusive nation, but they are well acquainted with the Draedist arcana. I believe you may find some allies there, too. If you so wish, I can give you the name of my contact there – though I warn you now, I know not if they are still alive.”

Vonvalt shook his head, his eyes screwed closed. “What are you *talking* about? Pagan insurgents in the north? Wolfmen from the Southern Plains? What am I supposed to do with these people?”

“You said so yourself: Claver and his Templars are planning to march on Sova. It seems that the Legions have already met their match in some other mysterious force within Haunersheim. If it is your intention to prevent Claver from attaining the throne, then you are going to need an army with which to do it. I am telling you where you may find one. Two, in fact.”

Vonvalt snorted with derision. “Why would any of these people help me save the Empire?”

Jansen smiled sadly. “Oh, I do not think the Empire can be saved. But each may have an interest in maintaining a broader peace in the wake of its collapse. And it is incumbent on us to do what we can to preserve the lives of its people. Claver will not concern himself with such niceties.”

Vonvalt sighed. Another long silence claimed the chamber.

“You are right, of course,” he said quietly. “And I appreciate the risks you have taken in being here. I know that I am a difficult man to deal with, these days, so thank you for your patience.”

“’Tis no wonder, given the nettles we have been given to grasp,” Jansen said. “It will all be over soon, either way. A few weeks, perhaps a month, and I daresay we shall see the tail end of it.”

“There’s a sobering thought,” Sir Radomir muttered.

There was another pause. We sat and drank, and ruminated on matters. Eventually, Jansen clapped his hands together. “Well, we have done all the talking we are going to do.”

“Aye,” Vonvalt said, standing. He clasped forearms with the senator. “I will see you again, before this is over.”

“Indeed,” Jansen replied. “And, Nema willing, at the head of an army.”

And so it was that we left the Vale of Osterlen, our hearts heavy with the weight of the mission that lay before us. We were disavowed, agents of a body that no longer existed, cutting a diminutive silhouette against the vast grey mountains of Hasse as we plodded north and into the unknown.

I shall finish this part of my tale here, for the end of Vonvalt’s tenure as the Lord Prefect – short and calamitous as it was – marks a convenient point to conclude. But there is some way to go yet, before I have aired the full account. Pagan warrior queens, a nation of wolf-headed Kasar, a war on earth and in the heavens – these things must wait for my third volume. For although it was dusk for the Empire of the Wolf, the sun had not yet set; and there are many deeds yet to record, both evil and valorous, before the tale of Sir Konrad Vonvalt is ended.

Acknowledgements

This isn't the first time I have written the second book in a trilogy, but it is the first time I have done so with any sort of readership. Fortunately for me, the final draft of *The Tyranny of Faith* was turned in before *The Justice of Kings* was even published; any sort of pressure that I might have felt in meeting reader expectations was entirely tempered by the fact that there were none. That will certainly not be the case for book three, but we will cross that bridge when we come to it.

The story that you are holding in your hands is a far cry from the first draft of it, and (believe me when I say) much improved. As before, and as with all good books, this is thanks to a number of people.

In the vanguard are my beta readers, Will Smith, Tim Johnson, and George Lockett. It is a difficult (and I continue to stress, unpaid) task to take a messy, annotated and "[sort this bit out]"-strewn zero draft and provide such helpful and incisive commentary. I will always be grateful for your time and effort.

Behind them, in a sort of disorganised mass, stand the professionals. Thanks always to my agent, Harry Illingworth, and to my editorial team – for this one, James Long and Hillary Sames – as well as the rest of the Orbit mob. That this book looks and reads so good is because of you guys.

Lastly, but always most importantly, thanks go to my wife, Sophie. Were it not for her corporate breadwinning, I would not be able to while away my days writing. I love what I do, and I love her for the gift of the time to do it in.

This one's for you, Soph.

Richard
Sydney, June 2022

Discover Your Next Great Read

Get sneak peeks, book recommendations, and news about your favorite authors.

Tap here to learn more.

By Richard Swan

Empire of the Wolf

The Justice of Kings
The Tyranny of Faith