

# **The Knight and the Crown**

Book one of Visions of Nightfall

## Prologue:

# **-•The Black Dome•-**

IT WAS A LONG day, and a long march to reach to Black Dome. Pirran arrived with his men just past sunset. The light from the setting sun gave the Dome an awesome halo, magnifying the terror that was already burning in his heart.

Pirran shouted the order to dismount, and his men were fast to comply. They were a rough looking lot, but Pirran knew that none of them was at ease. Not in a place like this.

He still didn't know if he had to camp here for the night. He didn't know if the other Blue Rings have made it yet or not. He didn't plan to be the first arrival, but there is only so much biding your sweet time before it started to look suspicious.

Khev came forward, his eyes watching the hill-sized Dome from the corner of his eye, as if it would suddenly leap and crush them all... would it?

"What should we do now, master?" He mouthed, his voice hesitant.

Pirran opened his mouth to reply, but he really didn't know what to say. He was ordered to be here as soon as he could abandoning all else he was doing. And it was just when he came to see that he knew where *here* was. The Black Dome was only getting blacker with the dying light of the day, which did nothing to help his blackening mood.

He realised that his mouth was hanging stupidly, so he cleared his throat and said "scout around, not too far. I only want to know if anyone else have made it. Set the men to work on meals. And be alert all of you."

Khev nodded, and moved back to the men to relay the orders, and Pirran watched his men set to work. Or at least begin to...

A horse appeared from east, galloping toward Pirran. A distinct blue cloak flying from the rider's back like a flag in the wind. He closed on him at a dead run. And soon he recognised the blue-clad rider.

“Attend!” He shouted to his men as he dismounted, still watching the newcomer, and the noise of men set to work quickly faded into nothing.

The blue-clad rider dismounted, and approached Pirran with a wide smile. He extended his hand and as Pirran extended his, he caught hold of his forearm and pulled him into a friendly hug.

“I worried you’d lose your way getting’ here, ol’ friend.” Tandon said merrily with his rough voice, and Pirran smiled back. “nah, you’re in time. Almost everyone’s here.” Tandon finished.

Pirran allowed Tandon to pull him to walk by his side, still dealing with his own anxiety. How could someone laugh and joke near the Devil’s stronghold? That was beyond him.

“who’s still not here?” He managed to say.

“well, let’s see,” Tandon countered, “the Lord Nazar is here of course, Hicks is wherever the Lord is. I arrived shortly after, just yesterday actually. And since you’re here that leaves only Louiy.” He finished with a dismissing wave of his hand.

“Sure to Twelve Gods! *he* would arrive last, and probably make a dramatic entrance» Pirran noted half-amused. “I will give command to my men to move, where should I meet?”.

“Don’t worry about that, I’ll ride with you.”

The remounting was done in a minuet. As the men didn’t have the chance to scatter. They rode circling around the Dome. Pirran’s ride was spent catching up with Tandon, and exchanging whatever story judged interesting enough to waste chatting time, and most were. The forest cleared about a mile or so around the Dome, earth was bear underneath the hooves of the horses, and no rock larger than can be held in one hand lay anywhere near. So no one -stupid enough to be here in the first place- could hide his own shadow behind himself.

They rode for a few minuets before he glimpsed the campfires of less than two hundred men.

Tandon trailed off both his story and his laughter, and reined his gelding to a stop. “I assume you’d want to meet the Lord Nazar first thing. It’s best to report straight off.” He suggested.

Pirran nodded, he motioned Khev to the camp and booted Vantec to a fast stride toward the pavilion near the edge of the Dome. As he closed in, the Dome started to look more like an impossibly tall wall. It covered most of the sky. It covered this entire part of the world.

At the entrance to the pavilion that shrunk to nothing in comparison, stood Hicks. The huge behemoth of a man looked as he always did, empty. His face and probably soul if he had one had no warmth. No life. He glanced intensely at Pirran, and Pirran held his eyes while dismounting Vantec, and while approaching the pavilion. Hicks stared into his eyes for a long second, but Pirran didn't give in. Then Hicks moved aside, gesturing him to go in.

Inside the massive tent, Nazar sat cross-legged on the canvas floor. Pirran let the tent flap close behind him. The pavilion was lit by a half-dozen simple mirrored stand lamps. the leader's eyes were closed, his hands settled in his lap, and his head cocked downward letting his long dark hair fall on his shoulders.

Pirran cleared his throat audibly to alert Nazar, and he looked up, he for once looked taken aback.

"Good evening, Number Four." Nazar said, smiling warmly. "You're just in time. We are supposed to go in tonight. You certainly wouldn't want to anger my father by not attending."

*My father.* What would you take from that really? It's not like Pirran had any fancy that Nazar had any sanity left in him, But certainly even the mad would think carefully before calling Azurim, the Devil, father.

"Evening, my Lord Number One. I would surely die before I disobey your summons," Pirran didn't question that fact. Nazar however dismissed the notion with a lazy wave of his hand. "But I just learned that Number Five didn't come yet. Surely we would wait for Louiy my Lord." He was careful to make the last sound like a question.

"You obviously don't know Louiy, Number Four." Nazar mused. "He Leaped here with his men two nights ago. He is waiting for everyone to be here and see his arrival. Quite the showman he is."

Pirran nodded. Louiy *Leaped* his entire force of five dozen men. Impressive, or arrogant? dangerous at best, catastrophic at worst. But still advantageous.

"Do you have any orders for me, my Lord?" Pirran asked.

“No. Rest with your men, and be prepared for the night. It’s rather important.” Nazar said absentmindedly. “Also, don’t drink.” He added “You will want to have your senses on you tonight. That goes for the men as well.”

Pirran bowed his head at Nazar’s dismissal, and retreated toward the tent flap.

Outside he took a last look at the fearsome Black Dome, duelled Hicks stare for cold stare, and started toward camp.

He soon found Tandon standing alone, his blank eyes watching the dark wall of the Dome. He neared his friend and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Quite the view,” he pronounced. “Jals should envy us really.”

“Nah,” Tandon replied, shaking himself awake. “They’ve got the better one. I’ve actually seen it.”

“More the reason to be envied.” Pirran insisted. “You might be one of the few who’ve seen both.” Tandon yawned, then smiled at his friend. Pirran continued, “the only one I know of is Jikal, may he be blessed...”

Pirran’s ass was pinched, and he jumped. He looked behind him to see Eilese, one of Tandon’s. certainly the best looking one of Tandon’s. She stood there smiling wickedly.

“Hey there, sweet thing.” she called at him, causing Tandon to chuckle softly.

“Hey,” he replied. “I didn’t here you come.” He explained.

“Oh you never have, little Pirran.” she answered playfully.

Pirran felt his face heating. “It’s like that with you, isn’t it?” He said, taking her into a hug.

“Well, I don’t mind you prove me wrong.” She elbowed him in the ribs.

It was Tandon who replied, “not tonight Eilese. We all have a hotter rendezvous, with Devil himself.”

“Too bad.” She said. “Master...” she hesitated, her smile fading into a disturbed frown.

“Spit it out.” Tandon ordered.

“Is it true?” she asked shuffling uneasily.

“Is *what* true?” Tandon said sighing, Pirran moved his eyes back and forth between the two of them during the exchange.

“That *he’s* his father. That *he’s* Azurim. The Devil. Godslayer.” She murmured.

“Get back to your post, Eilese.” Tandon ordered resignedly. “Don’t busy your beautiful head thinking about *him*, it’s not your place.” He finished.

Eilese nodded acceptance, her face unchanged, and she left the two of them as briskly as she came. Pirran picked her unanswered question and mouthed it out again, conversationally.

“I don’t know, ol’ friend,” Tandon responded. “And frankly, I don’t give a shit. We’re here because we were ordered to be here, and we’ll leave *when* we’re ordered. No point speculating before we meet him now, is there?”

“No; no point.”

The remnant of the daylight died off soon after, Pirran and Tandon stood there chatting about small things; dreams unaccomplished, hopes lost, and different ones arising, it was healthy to talk about things you don’t talk about, every now and again; most so with someone you trust.

As theorised by Nazar, Louiy arrived with the night. He and his lot at a dead gallop, carrying torches above their heads, the fire from each an arch four feet in the air, with tongues of crimson or blue. It was a grand show worth an audience in Hanceburg with the High King applauding as they bowed.

Louiy threw himself from his saddle as he reached Lord Number One’s pavilion, hitting the ground hard with his booted feet, almost ruining the effect of his entrance by toppling. Pirran wished he fell and broke something.

Tandon touched Pirran’s arm and said, “come on, let’s be close. I think it’s time he told us to move in.”

They walked to the pavilion, and he heard Nazar addressing Louiy.

“...No reason at all. Regardless, we’ll have enough time for everything later. My father has been patient enough. Too patient actually.”

“as you say, Nazar.” Louiy said, sounding amused, as always. “let’s just be done with this. I have business elsewhere.”

Nazar sighed. “let me give you a little piece of advice, Number Five.” He said tiredly. “The lines I allow to cross, my father will burn you to oblivion if you come near.”

“So I shouldn’t call the Devil by name. Easy enough for me to catch on my own, *my Lord*.”

“It would be best if you keep your mouth shut, answer him if he asks you a question, and keep your answers short and sufficient. Understood?”

“Don’t mind...” Louiy started, but was interrupted by Hicks.

“Look at me boy,” the grim man snapped, his voice hoarse but loud enough to get the attention of a mountain. “I swear to whatever’s worth swearing to, if you give me the slightest reason I will enjoy killing you. You’ll find Azurim’s treat a lovely picnic when I’m half done.”

“Enough,” Nazar said as calm as a breeze. “be kind to each other. What will my father think of you all? We go in now,” he announced, and gestured to the four of them to follow him across toward the Dome.

“I didn’t know you knew the word ‘lovely.’” Louiy mused, gaining himself another deadly stare from Hicks. The two Louiy’s men who still accompanied him -Geg and was it Vhenecro?- rested hands on sword hilts in a fast reflex.

“Careful now, lad.” Tandon addressed Louiy. Pirran disapproved of interfering, but kept silent.

“Number Three. If it isn’t a fine night to see you. And Number four. aren’t I thankful to this gathering for bringing us all together for once!”

Pirran followed Nazar instead of having to answer. He paced on the futile dirt causing unmentionable dust, and eventually picked up with the leader as they reached the immense stone artefact. It had no door that he saw from this angle, in fact, as he suspected; it was all one entity, it wasn’t built from stone, it was *a* stone. Not plastered, the stone was bare, but it simply was all one piece.

The others followed shortly. And Nazar closed in and walked through the stone wall and vanished inside. It was unlike anything Pirran had seen. Not like Arts or even Conjury.

Pirran was the first to follow in, the stone of the Dome didn't resist as he pushed through, he squinted and waited for his eyes to adjust to the sudden brightness. He recognised Nazar's posture crossing the broad hall.

Hicks came in next followed by Louiy who was still talking gently to Tandon who entered last.

Pirran studied the space around him. It was a hall. Luxurious enough to be in the Grand Palace. It had eight massive tables with two dozen fancy chairs of dark wood and stuffed red velvet each. It had tall gold mirrored stand-lamps lining the length of the two long walls in two rows. And it had tapestries worked with goldthread, forming writing in a language that must be a thousand years old, scenes from cities Pirran doubted still existed, or bizarre beasts that he doubted still walked the land -or flew the air.

He noticed four crystal chandeliers filling the ceiling of the hall, each one which was worth a price would feed a town for weeks. The rug that crossed the entire length of the hall was the finest wool he'd ever seen. Burgundy with patterns of deep blue and golden on both sides. That alone was worth...

"follow me," said Nazar, crossed the hollow hall empty from any living soul except for them. They followed him of course.

Nazar led the Blue Rings through hallways, and up stairs, and through walkways, the simplest of them had a rug and a set of lamps facing one another. Eventually he pushed through a double-door ten feet tall, leading into a small meeting room. Small compared to others he'd seen, the room was actually quite large, and compared to the grand hall he'd seen, the room looked like an inn's taproom.

It had a big rectangular table near the middle of it, with five wooden chairs around it. It had a simple rug of no particular colour. The room was lit by torchlight, leaving a hint of the acrid smell of smoke in the air.

Nazar took a seat on one side of the table, beside him sat Hicks, and across from him sat Louiy. Pirran chose the farthest chair from him, judging that that would be the direction from which would come Azurim, may he... something. Tandon sat beside him, across from Hicks.

Pirran looked down at his hands resting on the smooth board, and he saw a silver cup of wine that wasn't there a moment earlier. Again, it



had nothing to do with Arts, and probably not Conjury. It was something far more disturbing.

He met eyes with Nazar, who smiled at him. He looked at Tandon looking for something to comfort him, he didn't find any. Dozen damns! Even Hicks didn't look at rest.

A shuffling sounded from behind him, but before he turned to see, he saw Hicks turn his head behind *him*, and so did Louiy check his left side. Pirran turned to find nothing. And when turned back...

There was a sixth chair at the long end of the table then. And on it sat a man. *Much for grand entrances, but what did you expect.*

Louiy started. He muffled a curse at seeing the man appearing just next to him. It obviously was not Leaping. You didn't Leap to a sitting position, in a chair half tucked under a table, in a closed room.

The man was fair of skin, dark of hair and eyes, with a big beak of a nose, and a thin line for a mouth. Pirran saw an unnerving resemblance between him and Nazar -discounting Nazar's dark-blue eyes. He wasn't broad of shoulders, and hard as it was judging while he sat; Pirran thought the man were of average height at best. Not an impressive specimen, but he *was* Azurim.

Nazar stood in a heartbeat, and so did everyone else, bowing deeply. "Father," he proclaimed calmly, and sat down. The rest of them didn't, for obvious reasons, not until Azurim lifted a palm, gesturing them to.

"Nazar," Azurim said, his voice musical, like a too-loose string of a guitar. His eyes were studying the men sitting around his table, nonchalantly. He wasn't impressed. "You took your time now, didn't you?"

"Forgive me father," Nazar replied in an almost mechanical way. "Though we had difficulties, but we're here now."

Azurim just kept peering. He didn't seem to hear Nazar. "Introduce your men, will you." He muttered lazily, and sipped wine from a golden cup set with red and green stones.

Nazar went silent for a short moment, then he curved his mouth grimacing. "Allow me to introduce the Blue Rings, father." He said, and started pointing. "Number Two, Hicks. Number Five, Louiy. Number Three, Tandon. And Number Four, Pirran." He counted. "Blue Rings. This is my father. Lord Azurim, who needn't be introduced."

Pirran performed his best sitting bow.

“You have served Nazar for a time now,” Azurim picked up. “but I want you to forget all that, for now you serve me.

“The true reason of the Blue Rings’ existence begins now, and now you dedicate yourselves for that purpose.”

The Blue Rings exchanged glances, not sure what to make of that. Pirran felt his stomach churning, service to the Devil. What sort of service would he require of them? Pirran didn’t want to be the one to ask though.

“Father,” Nazar started, after the silence extended beyond comfort. “If you would elaborate. I haven’t explained a thing to them. You haven’t told *me* everything yet.”

“Don’t be hasty, Nazar.” The Devil spoke with his hypnotising voice. “No good comes from haste.” He drew a deep breath, then continued. “Do they know about my first Vision?” Nazar shook his head. “Good,” he exhaled. “They don’t need to. The reason I summoned you and your men is because I had another. I have seen a certain Vision. It heralds the beginning of the end. It heralds the return of my glory, and it heralds a great turn of events, here and on the other side of the world. And most importantly.

“It tells me that the one who shall serve me walks the land, he will come to great power in a matter of few years. And when he does. I want you to be there, to control him and to bring him to me.”

Pirran felt his throat very dry, like a dead branch in late summer, and looked at the cup in front of him longingly. ‘*The return of my glory*’ he’d said. There was one way that could come to be, and Pirran didn’t like the thought of it.

“Orders, Father?” Nazar asked gently. Even Nazar looked slightly shocked.

Azurim must have noticed, he disregarded Nazar’s question, and instead said, “I want you to think of the rewards I may grant you when this is all over. When you’ve all served. And I want you all to Know that what you’re do, you do for the best of yourselves and everyone.”

“Orders?” Nazar repeated.

“Take off your rings,” Azurim demanded lightly. “All of you”.

Everyone complied. Pirran took of the ring he was given by Nazar when he was made Commander of the Fourth Division. The ring was of no metal Pirran could recognise, it was blue, of course, the edges dull gold, and engraved with either ugly ornamental designs, or something in a dead alphabet. He slid it across to the middle of the table, and Tandon passed it along with his own.

Soon enough Azurim held four rings in his hand. He looked askance at Nazar. "Aren't you going to give me yours?" He inquired heatedly.

"I would like to keep my things for myself," Nazar replied, with no hint of being intimidated in his voice. Pirran noted that in his mind.

Azurim closed grip on the ring in his fist. His eyes could bore holes in Nazar's skull just then. Then he brought his closed hand under his mouth and muttered something too quiet too hear, and threw the rings back to the table.

Nazar collected and redistributed them. Pirran carried his between his thumb and forefinger, and studied it thoroughly. Nothing seemed to have changed, but Pirran knew better than to trust that.

"wear it." Azurim commanded. Pirran realised that he was the one addressed, as all others already wore theirs. "It will not bite."

Pirran slid the ring back on his middle finger.

"Never take these off. If you do, you will die." Azurim declared.

"What's the meaning of this?" Hicks demanded. Pirran held his breath, still working out Azurim's announcement.

Azurim raised an eyebrow at him. "I am not used to being questioned, mortal." He said haughtily, causing Hicks to burst into laughter.

"Enough!" Nazar shouted. "You will behave yourself, Hicks."

Azurim upraised a palm toward Nazar, his eyes locked on Hicks. Soon he smiled, "it's alright." He said.

Louiy emptied his stomach on the side of the table. Pirran felt like he also would, Tandon was staring into nothing, and trying tot to look like he was. Only Nazar and Hicks kept their composure, other than a disgusted look at Louiy from the first.

“Are you done, kid?” Azurim asked Louiy. And he nodded softly, flushing with embarrassment, or fear. “Well, let’s return to our subject, shall we.” Azurim finished.

“If I may ask, father,” Nazar said, “how clear was your vision, concerning the task you gave us?”

“A very good, question.” Azurim answered. “Let me word your mission like this, you must find the man of my vision, and submit him to my will, whatever it takes, and as soon as possible.” He explained.

“Find?” Nazar inquired. “Do you expect him to be hiding, father?”

Azurim crossed his arms on the table and went silent for a moment, staring at Nazar. Then said “I don’t know who he is. I’ve seen many details about him, but I don’t know what his name is, I don’t know where he is. it will be one of your missions to find him.”

Nazar nodded. He *nodded*, as if he’d understood. Half of Pirran’s mind was occupied with his cursed ring. But the other half knew that Azurim is about to set them to search for a needle in a hay bale.

“what *can* you tell us about him?” Nazar asked. “Is he nobly born?”

“Yes.” Azurim confirmed.

“Is he old or young?”

“Around his twenties,” Devil answered.

“Is he tall or short? Fair or dark? He *is* male right?”

“He is a man, that’s all I can answer.” Azurim said, tiredly.

“One last question, father.” Nazar carefully added. Azurim motioned him to ask. “Are you sure?”

Azurim’s eyes widened and blazed with fury, and he slapped the table, Pirran wondered how it didn’t shatter. “You dare question me. Do you call me a liar?” he spat.

“forgive me, my lord.” Nazar said hurriedly, bowing his head deeply. “I didn’t mean to. I beg forgiveness.”

Pirran wormed back in his chair. He wished earth would swallow him just then. The edge of his vision has gone dark, and there was a bitter taste in his mouth.

“I just wanted to be sure it’s not like last time.” Nazar continued. “He certainly was not the one back then.”

“There was no Vision last time.” Azurim said, anger still burning in his eyes. “I tell you that he walks the land as we speak.” Nazar nodded.

Pirran cleared his throat, “Beg pardon, my lord.” He said hesitating, Azurim looked him in the eyes. Pirran was unconscious of the world outside that stare, he was convinced then that Devil knew his deepest secrets. Azurim gestured him to speak. “How would we know that we found him if we did?”

“I’ll leave you to answer this question on your own, Number Four of the Blue Rings.” Azurim said in a final way.

There was a long silence, Azurim looked to have lost interest in the world, Pirran found it hard to sit properly without fidgeting, he needed something to make him feel in control, and sufficed with picking his thumbnail with his forefinger’s. Tandon was staring into his cup.

“Do we have your leave to withdraw, father.” Nazar said.

“Ah, yes.” Azurim replied absentmindedly. “Join your men in the main hall. Quite a feast I offer. Rest and be on your business in the morrow.” And with that he stood and retreated to the door in the back of the room.

Tandon exhaled loudly, and Pirran closed his eyes, shivering. He only heard Louiy going sick a second time.

“Very well.” Nazar said. “We might as well feast, for our troubles to come.”

Only when Pirran reached the main hall, did he remember that his men were supposed to be camping outside the Dome where he left them. He spotted Khev; his lieutenant immediately. And walked toward him.

The hall was more than half full with the full number of the Blue Rings’ divisions. On each table was food enough to feed a village on Salvation’s Day. Chickens and turkeys, piglets and loaves of beef or lamb, soups of all possible colours, puddings and pies and tarts, chilled wine and warm honeyed milk, exotic fruits for curious eaters, and warm fresh bread for hungry ones. The hall was all more than well served, but there was not one servant in sight.

“Master?” Khev whispered to a gaping Pirran. “Everything alright?  
'd You meet him?”

“We did, for that” Pirran answered.

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## **Chapter one:**

# **-•The Legend Carrier•-**

“HUNDREDS OF YEARS AGO, there lived a man. A man whose faith changed the world. A man whose bravery was unparalleled, who accomplished what was considered impossible, and bore witness what was considered no more than myth.

This man was the knight who formed the crown. And he was Danyalle Borgeah the Second.

“His story started when he was a young man when he heard the legend of the Parts of Truth, or the Tears of Jikal. People called them many things at the time, but one thing they agreed upon, is that they are no more than a legend. A melodramatic story. A poetic song that speaks of the sacrifice Prophet Jikal.

“Danyalle Borgeah the Second though, he knew that there is more to it than a bedtime story. He had an intuition let’s say for the sake of the story. What he didn’t have though was evidence. It was hard. Collecting pieces of a story that was lost for hundreds of years at his time, it was like tracking yesterday’s wind. He met all sorts of Legend Carriers, he followed trails so thin that a summer breeze would scatter. But eventually, he found the first one.

“Danyalle Borgeah brought back the first Part of Truth when he was a boy of eighteen. It was one of thirteen Parts, according to his research. So his job was far from done. But one thing that accomplished that was more valuable than the Part itself; it proved to him that he was not chasing fancies, and confirmed to him that his mission is hard, but possible.

“and sure enough, he started finding them, the second Part followed by the third. That was when his father died, and so he became the King of Weihtford. He kept going of course. With the resources of the kingdom at his disposal.

“He found some Parts of Truth, in places no mere mortal would dare approach and hope to leave alive. He found some with men who would rather die than show them let alone give them away. None stopped him.

“But as all stories, this one has an ending. And not so happy a one at that. Unfortunately; in his journey to retrieve the eighth Part, Danyalle the Second died. The circumstances of his death foggy as they were, they matter not. For one thing remains true: After he died; the search for the Tears of Jikal came to a halt.

“No one who came after him had tried to pick up the noble mission of King Danyalle the Second. Dozen Damns! No one even picked up a rock to search under it for the Parts. Perhaps no one had the courage. perhaps the knowledge that was available to him, was not available to them. Or perhaps after he died, the legend died with him. Who knows.

“Before he died; King Danyalle Borgeah the second replaced the crown of Weihtford with another of his design. Made with a standing platform, to fit the thirteen Parts. Together they would form half a circular disk. He summoned the elect goldsmiths of Torran, and they formed that crown which to this day, is worn by the Kings of Weihtford, and passed from one to the next. He summoned his minister who knew the Art of Sorcery, and he Sealed the Parts to the crown one after the other.

“The crown that King Gerhart Borgeah the Third wears today, is the proof I offer, for if you look at it, you will see the places intended to fit six more Parts of Truth. And that is my legend, that I know is true. Because before I carried it, it was carried by Nheve Norrkin; my mother, who came to carry it from another Legend Carrier, and so since the one who witnessed.” The old man finally finished, catching his breath, the last sounded like some sort of ritual.

Danyalle stared at him from his end of the counter. “I’ll buy the narrator a mug of your best.” He told the man behind the counter, idly rubbing a bottle with a linen.

The owner of ‘The Charging Bull’ inn looked at him, “he’s no narrator. That’s Ellvius Norrkin, my lord. He treats the sick and sells amulets and the like.” The man said.

“regardless,” Danyalle proceeded, “I’ll buy him a drink.” The man nodded. And Danyalle fished in his purse, he pulled out a silver Head, a heavy thing with what’s supposed to be King Danyalle the Eleventh’s profile on it. “actually,” Danyalle said, as he realised he had nothing smaller in his purse, and not many things bigger for that matter. “I would love to buy everyone a drink. Your finest.”



The balding innkeeper took a look around the taproom, other than Danyalle and himself, it had five men. It was near noon. "At your service, my lord." The man mouthed, smiling widely at the view of silver, and called a serving maid who was in her late thirties to pass mugs of ale. Danyalle could tell of course that he was being robbed.

Danyalle approached Ellvius, who didn't mind the company, he smiled at Danyalle as he neared, and fixed a chair for him to sit.

The man looked poor, his clothes the next thing to rags, his boots had more holes than leather. But he was clean, well shaven, washed, his long grey hair around a bald top brushed and tidy. He was too skinny, like a skeleton wearing a too big suit of sun-dark skin. His smile was missing most teeth, but that somehow didn't affect his speech.

"Did my lord enjoy my legend?" Ellvius asked, excited, as the serving maid brought two mugs of ale to the table, spilling a tiny bit, as she accidentally tilted one of the mugs while slapping it down. She nodded toward Danyalle explaining to Ellvius; "from the gentleman," before she left.

"I so thank your generosity, my lord." Ellvius said as he raised his mug and took a swallow. Danyalle picked up his and wiped the bottom with a handkerchief, lest it drips on his trousers when he drank.

"Tell me Ellvius," Danyalle said, quietly, causing the old man to bend closer in order to hear. "Have you ever actually seen the crown?"

"I cannot say that I have, my lord." Ellvius said, Shaking his head slightly.

"You see, I have Ellvius. And according to you, the crown should be missing six Parts of Truth?"

"That isn't how I phrased it, my...lord." Ellvius hesitated. *Dammit! I should be more careful.* "I simply say that the crown was made to *fit* thirteen Parts, of which only seven are sealed to it."

"What's the difference?" Danyalle asked.

Ellvius smiled. "There is a philosophic distinction, my lord. That's all about it." He mused.

"What if I tell you that there is no such lack in the crown," Danyalle said, he kept all expression from his face. "what if I tell you the '*Parts*' you speak of don't leave space for six more?" he tried.

“Then, and I apologise my lord, I will not believe you.” Ellvius simply said.

Danyalle’s mood turned grim. “You *have* seen it. You lied.” He decided.

“I assure you, my lord. I have not.” Ellvius persisted. “You may wonder why I wouldn’t take the word of a fine gentleman for something he knows better?” Danyalle gestured him to proceed with an extended palm. Ellvius took a swallow from his mug and continued, “its simple. I would have to pick your word over a Legend Carrier’s. And we Carriers do not lie about our legends. Never.”

“Well now,” Danyalle tried to interrupt, but was late. “You’ve claimed that King Danyalle the Second was the knight, from *‘The Knight and the Crown’* even though he’d died before the Templars had their first knight. you’ve got many other facts facing the wrong way. Certainly you can explain that, right?”

But before Ellvius could answer, a rapid sound of hooves hitting cobblestones sounded from out the front door of the inn. The door was closed. Danyalle quieted Ellvius with a gesture, and crossed the common room to a window to the street outside. It was two feet higher than the pedestrian’s head, as the inn had four steps at the front. It was perfect.

Danyalle peered outside hoping to see it was nothing. But sure to the dozen Gods, it was not nothing. Sir Dhaerric Stagard was dismounting at the inn’s front door. *How under the Dome of Gods does he find me?* Danyalle was about to believe that the Knight in the Prince’s Bodyguard used Conjury. In any case, this little game was over.

The front door was pushed open, and the tall knight stepped in, filling the doorframe. He was a hand taller than Danyalle, and of an age with him. He had pale skin and hair darker than midnight, he wore the golden cloak of the Royal Guards, and a longsword hung from his hip. The innkeeper looked troubled, he muttered welcomes and suggested a drink.

Danyalle walked toward Sir Dhaerric, until he was almost standing under his nose.

“Your Highness,” Sir Dhaerric said, “a lovely day for a walk, alone in Torran, wouldn’t you say?”

“Oh, don’t be so smug, Dhaerric.” Danyalle ejected. He didn’t show his irritation.

“I was not trying, Your Highness. Sir Devard ordered me to escort you back to the castle, if it pleases you, of course.”

“That can wait.” Danyalle said. “I still didn’t do what I left to do.” Dhaerric looked puzzled, *good*. “If you wish to accompany me, be my guest. Just don’t bring an army with you.”

Sir Dhaerric nodded, and said, “was that Sir Gaspher’s mistake, Your Highness? He brought an army with him?”

“And they still failed to keep track of me when I slipped,” Danyalle said proudly. “I am not planning to show up guarded by a dozen men in my father’s own capital.”

“show up where, exactly?” Dhaerric asked.

“Harrold leaves Torran today.” He explained, “I’m going to wish him farewell.”

“Of course, Your Highness.” Dhaerric bowed his head.

Danyalle turned to see the scene he was making in the inn. Needless to say, everyone was gaping at them. The innkeeper who was within arm’s reach looked as if he swallowed his tongue. And Ellvius Norrkin looked like he was studying a horse being offered to him at half its worth. Danyalle approached the old man.

“do you stay here, master Norrkin?” Danyalle inquired.

“Not really, Your Highness. I live near west-wall,” Ellvius explained.

“Be sure the innkeeper knows how to reach you.” Danyalle said.

“At Your Highness’ service.” Ellvius replied.

Danyalle turned to the innkeeper, “I will be needing my horse, and I believe that I can still afford buying master Norrkin a late breakfast.”

The innkeeper bowed his head. “of course, Your Highness.” He choked, and rushed to the kitchen door behind his bar. Ellvius nodded gratitude from his seat.

Danyalle turned back to Sir Dhaerric, “Very well, let’s be on our way.” He said.

Outside ‘The Charging Bull,’ *The Overcharging Bull*, Danyalle thought, he and Sir Dhaerric stood among a dozen Castle-Guards in their

deep blue cloaks. Danyalle sighed in exasperation, “just take two men, if you have to.” He said.

“I don’t see the need, Your Highness.” Dhaerric replied, as if he was doing some act of gracious kindness, which galled Danyalle worse. Sir Dhaerric gave the Guards orders to return to the castle, and inform Sir Devard Bolthorn -the leader of Danyalle’s Bodyguard- that the Prince was found, and is escorted by Sir Stagard.

‘The Charging Bull’s’ stable-worker came out from the broad ally that leads to the back door of the inn, with Danyalle’s black, Sir Dhaerric took her rein and pressed a copper in the boy’s hand. He patted her neck before offering Danyalle her rein.

The two of them were mounted, and started south at a slow pace. “where exactly did you agree to meet Sir Harrold, Your Highness?” Dhaerric asked.

“At noon, at the Southern Gate.” Danyalle answered.

The inn Danyalle was hiding in was in the Highstone street, a main street in the middle of Torran. That left them with some distance to cover, but they would still reach the gate some half-hour before noon. So Danyalle took unnecessary turnabouts. He rode up Vansmound, the highest hill in Torran, from where you could still see the sea to the north behind the port’s walls; well, sort of.

He rode past the Ruins, downhill, where you could see the tops of columns, those were part of Torran before it was rebuilt. They rode west and south, passing some narrow streets, barely wide enough for to horsemen abreast. It bit a good deal of their extra time.

During the ride, Danyalle asked Sir Dhaerric what he thought of Ellvius’ legend, conversationally of course. He told him the story and asked for his opinion.

“sounds like the garbage of legends, Your Highness. Pardon me.” Danyalle pardoned him, and didn’t argue any further.

At the southern gate, that wasn’t crowded badly this time of the day, they cut in past the travellers and exited smoothly, saluted by the gatekeepers. Harrold was a little tricky to spot, but they found him less than a mile away, accompanied by eighty soldiers or so. He was speaking to a squat man whose sword was hanging on his back, but he dismissed him at the sight of Danyalle.

“Your Highness,” Harrold exclaimed. Walking toward Danyalle as he dismounted. Harrold Borgeah was a tall broad-shouldered young man, five years older than Danyalle. He had the Borgeah green eyes, and red-gold from his mother’s side. He was fair-skinned with a square jaw and a heroic split chin.

“Sir Harrold.” Danyalle greeted, and handed the reins to Sir Dhaerric.

“I thought you’d forgotten.” Harrold said taking Danyalle’s arm to shake it.

“I wouldn’t.” Danyalle said. He smiled at his cousin, “that’s it then.” He said. “You’ll be on your way.”

“Alas,” Harrold said raising his brows, and pressing his lips. “I cannot stay. I need to build a reputation after all.” He laughed.

Danyalle nodded. “Torran will not be the same.” He said. “But the kingdom needs great men like yourself.”

“Oh, you flatter me. But I’ll take it.” Harrold chuckled, bowing and spreading his dark red travelling cloak.

“Are you sure you can’t spare time for a last walk?” Danyalle asked hopefully.

Harrold looked around him, his men were making last checks on the pack horses before setting off southward. “Maybe a quick stroll, while the men ready themselves.” He said the last loud enough to be heard by most of them.

They walked in a loose cycle on the side of the road, Sir Dhaerric trailing behind them. Danyalle found it hard to say farewell to his friend. by saying it, you would admit that you’re separating; each in his own way, not knowing when or if you’d meet again. So he spoke about other things until Harrold would bid adieu first.

He reminded Harrold of a hunting trip they went on some five years back. He congratulated him a second time for being raised to Baronet a week ago. He mentioned some mischievous pranks they pulled together when they were too young to care.

“I think your Magister still hates me to this day for that one.” Harrold finished, his eyes watering from laughter.

“We ruined an original book. Magisters think of them as living things.” Danyalle said.

“I like to believe that we’ve made the book more interesting.” Harrold claimed. “Gods bless those days.” He finished smiling.

Danyalle shuffled, running out of subjects to speak of. “Harrold,” he called. “what do you think of magic?” He asked thinking to tell him about Ellvius’ version of ‘The Knight and the Crown.’

Harrold cocked his head to the side, and went silent for a moment. “Am I the right person to ask this question to?” he countered.

Before Danyalle could answer, Harrold extended a hand toward the side of the road. The hand was empty, palm facing upward. He looked like he was concentrating on something. And he was. On the side of the road; a small rock trembled softly, then floated slowly three or four inches in the air, it lasted a second. Then as if the string holding it was cut, it fell and rolled to stop.

“Damn!” Harrold muttered under his breath. “it is hard to work with.” He said apologetically.

“Behave yourself, dozen-damns.” Sir Dhaerric shouted from behind, before Danyalle had the chance to speak.

“Beg pardon?” Harrold said, smiling.

“You’re a *knight*.” Dhaerric proceeded heatedly. “you just used an Art! Have you no shame?”

“for goodness sake,” Harrold said tiredly. “where do you people live? I deeply apologise, Sir.” He said, with faked smile. “but your twice mistaken; firstly: I am not a knight, but a week a Baronet...”

Dhaerric interrupted. “Just the same.” He said.

“secondly: There is no shame in using one’s Art. Actually let me tell you that, most heroes and knights you know songs about, were Art Users”

Sir Dhaerric’s face went crimson. He opened his mouth then closed it, refusing to answer, or not finding anything to say.

“Where were we?” Harrold asked, smiling victoriously.

“Actually,” Danyalle said. “ I wasn’t taking about the Four Arts.”

“You mean *storybook* magic? The sort with the old witch turning the prince into a sad statue?”

“No!” Danyalle said laughing. “Something between.” He explained.

“let me see” Harrold said tapping a finger to his smiling lip. “I think I know the sort.” He finally said. “let me tell you something, Your Highness. We know that the Four Arts were created around five-to-six-hundred years ago, right? But before that, people didn’t know them. They didn’t know they were possible. Well maybe that’s not the full story. Maybe there is something magical that we can’t imagine, because we’re not used to. Does that answer your question, Your Highness?”

Danyalle smiled. Harrold could always make him smile. “It actually does.”

Harrold looked back toward his men. They were ready and waiting for a while. Harrold looked at Danyalle, regret in his eyes.

“You humoured me long enough, I believe.” Danyalle said.

“I wish I could have staid a while longer.” Harrold said.

“No.” Danyalle uttered, “just go save the country from thief Carters and angry Jacks.” He teased, causing a soft laugh from Harrold. “Until we meet again.”

“Sooner than we expect. Take care, my friend.” Harrold said.

“And you, take extra care.” He took Harrold in an embrace, then let him go.

\* \* \*

The ride back to the castle was silent. Sir Dhaerric sensed Danyalle’s mood and said nothing. They entered the castle proper, stabled the horses in the main stable, and walked into the western tower, all without uttering a word.

Magister Bernaerd found Danyalle as soon as he stepped into his chambers.

“Your Highness.” Danyalle’s Magister -and manservant, and clerk, and mess-cleaner most of all- said, “thank the Twelve! I’ve searched for you everywhere. You said you’d be here at noon.”

Magister Bernaerd was a tall skinny man, with deep blue eyes, and a mouth that has at some point gotten stuck curving down, making a

constant look of disdain appear on his face, he had a beard in a perpetual state of having been shaved three days ago, but he didn't look dishevelled, he actually managed to look decent despite it all.

"I'm fairly certain I didn't say *at noon*." Danyalle replied. "Anything urgent?" he added when he noticed Magister Bernaerd shuffling anxiously.

"Of most urgency, my Prince." The Magister said.

"Well then, spit it out, Dammit!" Danyalle demanded.

"You are summoned, Your Highness. His Majesty expects you in less than half an hour."

"For slipping away from my Guard?" Danyalle asked, somewhat puzzled.

"What?" If anything the Magister looked more at loss. "No! Not that. The King has mustered a Conference of East and West. And you must be there. In the Room of Maps"

If that did anything, it added to Danyalle's bewilderment. A Conference of East and West? Danyalle knew the term, from his lessons with his Magister. It was the highest form of gathering of authority in the kingdom of Weihtford, it was a closed meeting with the select few decision makers in Torran -historically only the King, the Minister of East, and the Minister of West,- it wasn't a pleasant one as well.

In a Conference of East and West; the attendants were presented with a problem, that they needed to solve in the best way possible. Simple enough. Except they were not allowed to leave the gathering room until they did. It could take days.

And once it did. Eleven odd days, with the King and a fine lot of Lords arguing over some matter or another, the logs recorded how many time they used the chamber pot, and what sort of meals they have eaten - the Jal who recorded was even keen enough to include what portion each Lord had eaten from their dishes.

"Do Princes attend these?" Danyalle asked.

"When they are ordered to by the King, yes." Magister Bernaerd said, hurryingly. "You'd barely make it in time, Your Highness. Let's have this conversation while walking there, if you will."



Danyalle nodded, and about-faced, and started pacing out of the room, side by side with Magister Bernaerd.

“Very well,” Danyalle began, picking his first question. “When was the last time the Conference was mustered?”

“It was-” Magister Bernaerd stared at him sideways, a disappointed look in his eyes. “You should remember that.” Danyalle explicitly said nothing. “It was around fifty years ago, less actually. It was called by your grandfather.”

“King Danyalle the Fourteenth?” Danyalle asked.

“Your *other* grandfather, King Lebyeas.” The Magister countered. “It was before he was deposed by his brother. That was in fact the subject of that particular session.”

Danyalle nodded, Lord Lebyeas was the only grandfather Danyalle knew. He was the older son of King Danyalle the Thirteenth, but he outlived his younger brother, with a simple trick, of *not* trying to invade Hanceburg and getting yourself killed by an angry farmer.

“Who is attending this session?” Danyalle asked.

“I wasn’t informed, Your Highness.” Magister Bernaerd replied, with a straight face. He could be obnoxious.

“I meant following tradition. who would rank high enough to be in such meeting?” he unnecessarily explained.

“You’ll find out soon enough.” Magister Bernaerd answered.” *Right.*

“What am *I* expected to do there?” Danyalle continued asking.

“In the Conference of East and West; all those sitting are considered equals until the session ends. Your Highness’ voice will be of the same weight of His Majesty.” The Magister explained.

They walked fast, going down broad flight of stairs, and crossing a narrow corridor running between the staircase and a wall to its right. It was a servant passage, but Danyalle didn’t understand why would someone take longer ways to where his heading. That cut to a crossway, straight would lead to the side of the kitchens, to the right he went.

Soon they cut left where they met another broad decorated hallway that leads toward the Room of Maps. Danyalle laid a hand on Magister Bernaerd’s shoulder, and he nodded, and turned to walk the other way.

The room was dramatically guarded by two blue-clad guards, holding halberds, making the door look more important and official. One of them held the door open for the Prince. And he walked in.

The meeting room was too well-lit. By blue gaslights, its walls were painted lower half green, and upper half dim golden, it had a long set of racks with maps of any part of Weihtford, and many parts of other kingdoms, it had a hanging map showing a fairly accurate representation of the entirety of Eidyn -from Nerrali and Daynemark in the north, to Hanceburg and Viti in the south. The Room of Maps had one wide table with seven chairs arranged at one end.

On the chair on the left to the one at the tip -obviously where the King will sit- sat the Lord Minister of West; Stepan Borgeah, Danyalle's uncle. He was the first arrival, and the only other person in the room.

Lord Stepan was the perfect form of a gentleman. He was a gallant man, well dressed in the latest Hanceburger fashion, a dark red silken shirt with small buttons of aged ivory, collar and cuffs kept simple, under a low cut golden-yellow vest with one pocket in the middle right, and a small fine brocaded jacket of both colours. His shaved face was elongated, and his sharp eyes were green. His hair was brown with frosted sides.

"Your Highness," he greeted. "you look well today."

"Speak for yourself, my lord" Danyalle teased. "Is there a moment in your life you are unprepared for a ball?"

"You just say that because I am your favourite uncle." Stepan replied, smiling. "I better be by the by." He added with as much threat in his voice as his joke would allow.

"You undoubtedly are," Danyalle said, and his uncle's smile deepened. "do you happen to know what sort of problem we are gathering to solve this lovely evening?"

"I happen to be the only person who knows the full of it." Stepan proudly answered. "other than His Majesty of course."

The door was opened again by the stooge guard, and it admitted Lord Valtrric Stagard, the Lord Minister of East. Not so surprisingly, the man was in contrast with his countering equal. Danyalle assumed they didn't yet discover colours in Soeyo; just like his son Sir Dhaerric, Lord Valtrric wore only black or grey -black that instance,- and they loved leather straps, someone must have told them they were a form of

decoration, he wore one diagonally across the chest for no reason Danyalle could see. He had black hair and beard, invaded by grey on the edges, and cold blue eyes. He was a decent but unstylish man.

“Your Highness,” he saluted, and Danyalle nodded. “Lord Stepan.”

“Lord Wolt,” Stepan replied. “You stuck to your words, and changed the boots.” He laughed.

“My word were ‘I will burn these Devil-cursed boots,’ but yes I stuck to them.” He said grinning while taking a seat across from Stepan.

Danyalle realised he was still standing so he took the seat on his uncles side.

“some shitty days; to call for the Conference, aye?” Wolt said with a small deal of regret in his voice.

“Shitty indeed,” Stepan confirmed, tiredly.

“Ferald of Izen said something across the lines of ‘ten days of truce with your neighbour, are ten days spent with each of you choosing which chicken to steal first’” Danyalle replied.

“Amen!” Stepan laughed.

Wolt puffed from his nose , smiling. “we’ve had many more years than ten days, and our neighbour’s greed was swelling, eying our fattest cow instead.”

“That is a very nice name for the Holly Land.” Stepan laughed yet again.

The door opened, to intromit two men in the middle of a hot conversation. One was Lord Treigson Nouwils, the High Captain of Navy, Duke of Nouwils Holds, and a half-dozen other titles, he was; discounting the two Ministers, the second most powerful man in the kingdom. He had the thick build of rough soldiers, and the soft compassion of romancers, the intellect of Magisters, and one of the best military minds in Weihtford.

The man accompanying -and vexing- him was Lord Merrwin Halfheart. A man of a recent creatively named House. He was the King’s Treasurer, with a self-fabricated reputation being able to track a halfpenny after two years of having spent it, that no one could bother taking the time to prove false. He was a fat man -or that he appeared fat, because he was short,- with short red hair and a grizzled red beard the colour of a rust stain.

“All I’m saying is that the pirates themselves don’t cost the kingdom as much as your war against pirates does.”

“What kind of educated man would make that claim, lord Merrwin?” Lord Treigson asked, as he halted in his place near the door.

“Beg pardon,” Halfheart exclaimed. “I am talking about facts,”

Lord Stepan smiled wryly and winked at lord Wolt, nodding toward the Treasurer.

“What about long economy?” the lord said with exasperation.

“What do you know about economy and providence?”

“I happen to have studied economy under a master economist, from the Grand University from the age of eleven,” lord Treigson muttered, while walking toward the chair next to lord Wolt’s, and was followed by the other man. “good afternoon my lords, Your Highness.” He said taking his seat.

The door opened, cutting short lord Halfheart’s next protest. And two runners went in, one carrying a large black- leather-backed volume, while the other arranged an inkbottle, a silver pen, a small crystal sand container, and a wiping cloth in front of the empty chair next to Danyalle.

Shortly after they left, and before anyone had the chance to start a conversation, Jal Teudor came in accepting a supporting arm from a servant. The scrawny old slightly hunchbacked Jal was wearing a grey-green robe, that he held a fist of while heading to claim his chair.

Everyone stood, and muttered something of the sort of “Your Wisdom,” or “my blessed Jal” or the like. And Jal Teudor waved a hand - the one he had been using to lean on the servant, mind you,- and protested half-heartedly with his hoarse slow voice “please, sit down, no need; no need.” They didn’t, until he sat.

After minuets, the guard at the door announced loudly, “Attend! His Majesty King Gerhart the Third of House Borgeah, Twelve-blessed.”

And Danyalle’s father paced into the room.

Everyone stood, and bowed their heads, greeting His Majesty, and he nodded back in the general direction that included everyone, they remained standing until he sat and gestured with his hand.

“I hope I am not too late, my lords.” King Gerhart said.

“We all arrive in our own right time.” Jal Teudor mused.

“We wouldn’t have begun without you, Your Majesty,” lord Stepan joked, causing a wave of quiet laughter.

“I wish you could,” the king said. “But let us not mind that. Your Wisdom... shall we begin?”

Jal Teudor opened the old volume, painstakingly flipped the pages one by one, until he reached an empty paper after a full one. He cleared his throat loudly, unscrewed the pen’s lid, opening the inkbottle, then dipped the pen and started, “under the Dome of Gods, and witnessed by Their watchful eyes, hoping to be blessed and accepted: We begin Session the Sixteenth of the Conference of East and West, mustered by His Majesty King Gerhart the Third of House Borgeah as is his right.” The Jal’s freckled old hand moved so fast, that the nib of the pen blurred while scribing what he was saying. Danyalle’s jaw almost fell.

“The session is attended by:” and he counted the men sitting around the table, with their most immediate titles, excluding himself. “And recorded by Jal Teudor, servant of Gods and Treseanty, ambassador of His Holiness Prophet Segrihar, on day the second of Caenmoon, of the five and six hundredth year after the death of Jikal may he be blessed.” His voice was lecturing, looking left and right in the eyes of those he was priesting. He finished writing his speech halfway through speaking it.

“Your Majesty, remove your crown, and place it on the table.” The King did, he positioned the crown where the hands of the seven men could reach it. “Begin by stating the subject of this session, Your Majesty.”

There was a moment of tense silence. Then His Majesty spoke sharply, “Lord Stepan, would you please repeat your report.”

Lord Stepan nodded deeply. He took a deep breath and started, “gentlemen, you are all in the light of the recent offense to our dominance on our own land, that was committed by King Leunwell of Fourgates, producing a so-called ‘the legal map of Fourgates,’ and including the Holly Land as part of it.

“It was treated as the arrogance of the Fourgater King -which isn’t a strange thing for them,- as we held the land in fact, but something has changed.” His mouth thinned to a line as he raised his brows.

“I have received a rather disturbing report from a... a worker I have implanted in the Grey Palatium. The report speaks of a certain interesting

guest King Leunwell had received a short while ago. A representative of the Holly Land.”

“It couldn’t be!” Jal Teudor exclaimed. Danyalle checked the paper he was writing on to see if he wrote his protest, out of curiosity. He did.

“Forgive me, Your Wisdom, but it could, and was.” Lord Stepan returned, with a slight edge, as if he blamed every Jal for what he said. “Apparently, the Jal who approached Leunwell Bavecues ranks well above an ambassador, he even might be a Cardinal.

“The matter they discussed unfortunately remains a mystery. But we know that it is pressing enough to call for a private meeting between the Jal and the King and a handful of others.”

“You begin to see the problem we have at hand.” The King said. “The two events are most likely to be related. We might be looking at the gravest danger in the history of our kingdom. Treason from the Holy Land.”

Jal Teudor’s mouth quirked in distaste, as he wrote the last.

After an extended moment of silence, Lord Wolt spoke. “This is madness.”

“I assure Your Majesty, there must be a measure of misunderstanding. The Holy Land is ruled by rational, loyal, Gods-fearing men. They would never come to *treason*.” The Jal was of course talking about a very specific sort of treason; the Holy Land would never be in an open rebellion against its including kingdom of Weihtford is what he meant. The Cardinals who in actual fact rule the Temple and command the Templars, historically plotted the assassination of three Weihtfordian Kings.

“Beg your pardon, Your Wisdom, but we are not here to speculate.” Lord Nouwils delivered respectfully, but sharply. “We are faced with facts. Facts we should not try to deny.”

“Still...” the Jal started, then went silent.

“I say we don’t give them the chance to attack first.” Lord Valtrric said.

“*If* there was any need for attack in the first place.” Lord Stepan pointed out. “The Holy Land is not a helpless fat cow, my lord. The Templars are certainly a steering power of the world, they number in scores of thousands.”

“The real danger is,” the King added, “if that force was directed on us.” And everyone fell silent again.

“The duty of Templars is the protection of the Holy Land, and war against infidels.” Jal Teudor said, lecturing.

“We just need to make sure we are not made the infidels the Land needs protection from.” Merrwin Halfheart commented, gaining an agreeing nod from both Ministers.

“No one should be powerful enough to choose their own king. Not even the Prophet, may he be blessed.” Wolt Stagard said, adding the last as an afterthought after seeing the Jal’s glance.

“Again,” Lord Treigson said, “we must work with facts at hand, my lord, not what should be. The Holy Land *does* in fact possess such power.” He finished, brows lifted in a situation-cannot-be-helped sort of way.

*Indeed*, Danyalle thought, the Holy Land Possesses the power to defend itself, and choose the king it likes. They supposedly were a good source of revenue -from pilgrimage and services provided by Jals-, but once you subtract the amount Weihtford -and every other Treseant kingdom- pays annually for Temple taxation, you’re left with next to nothing.

Danyalle didn’t understand, why would Weihtford go to such trouble just to keep the title ‘Defender of the Holy Land.’ But again he did. It was the same reason the two guards pretended to guard the door to this room, the same reason Sir Gaspher brought a dozen guards to guard him during a walk in the city. Because that was expected from them.

It was the same, if someone said improper things about your mother, you were expected to punch him in the nose. While it’s true he earned it honestly, it was not logic that drives most to direct the punch, but... tradition maybe?

It galled; it was the biggest source of irritation for Danyalle. He hated people acting the way they think they should, without stopping to think why they should. It was fun to watch, when people acted like the world was a cheap Hanceburger play, they were driven sometimes by the silliest of motives.

Meanwhile, they get blind when it comes to others. Like this particular instance. King Leunwell is a descendant of a long imperial lineage that dates way before Weihtford even existed. His Sarpic ancestors

ruled much of Northern Weihtford -yes, including the Holy Land- and he saw his duty in retrieving...

Danyalle eyebrows rose on their own, as he realised something, the Conference was advancing, and he lost track of it, but he interrupted Lord Stepan.

“Excuse me my lord,” he said, stalling the Minister. “There is something you didn’t list with the problems.”

Lord Stepan extended a hand, admitting Danyalle to please himself.

“Lord Robard Connuae’s ‘potential rebellion.’” Danyalle added. House Connuae was also an old Sarpic House. The man was rumoured to have had an illegitimate coronation, and his people have started calling him ‘king,’ the truth of the matter was still foggy.

“It’s very probable that this is also connected to the Fourgater offense.” Danyalle continued. “The man is dusting of old claims and titles, in the style of Fourgates. There must be more than inspiration to it. I say they conspired to pull their movements at the same time.”

Danyalle’s words were met with solemn silence, which wasn’t surprising. What he suggested could mean a very long very hard war at best, and the end of the nation at worst.

“If what you say is true,” the King started, “then even now, we are underestimating the scale of the offense.”

After a moment of calculation, Lord Stepan spoke, “I support His Highness’ argument, Your Majesty. The news we are getting from Syvarra are unsettling, and I suggest we append this to our list of troubles, and treat it as part of the problem.”

The King nodded once, Lord Valtrric cursed under his breath, and Lord Nouwils shuffled in his place.

“We can all see there could be only one possible response” Lord Wolt said. “We rally our forces and go to war.”

“My goal is to stop war from happening, Lord Wolt.” The King replied. “We must at least try to find a way to prevent it.”

“It is inevitable, Your Majesty.” The angry Soeyan lord delivered. “I am not a blood thirsty warrior, but I can’t see a way to prevent it, save delivering parts of our land to our enemies willingly.”



“A king who surrenders an inch of his land without blood,” King Gerhart snapped, “deserves to rule not an inch of it. No my lord, I am not planning to deliver the Holy Land to Fourgates, nor will I allow Syvarra to split into its own, not that I can help with my own blood.”

Lord Wolt nodded deeply, and fell back in his chair.

“But,” the King continued, “If there is a way to settle this without blood, that is the way I’ll take, I ruled for twenty peaceful years, and I am not planning to end my reign with a desperate war on two opposite fronts.”

Then the chaos began.

Suggestions and proposals rained from all directions. The King suggested negotiation with the Temple, which he himself rejected after voicing it, and added the condition: Any solution they proposed must keep the dignity of the crown of Weihtford unstained.

The King’s suggestion inspired Lord Nouwils’, that they try to bribe the Templars, by first choosing Weihtfordian leaders and buy their support to reject the treason, which naturally got rejected by everyone.

That suggestion -supposedly- inspired Lord Halfheart, to propose that they stop their war against the pirates, to save the costs that the kingdom might need in case of war. This suggestion was dismissed as irrelevant.

Danyalle suggested that they allow Lord Connuae to name himself ‘King of Syvarra,’ under his current oaths to Weihtford and the King, -the way the High King of Hanceburg allows some southern kings to keep their title,- to save trouble on Syvarra’s side. Which got rejected by the king, saying that the title would be only the beginning. Lord Stepan pointed that there currently is no reason why they should grant him the title, which would raise many questions from friends and foes alike.

Lord Wolt suggested that they besiege Syvarra for the time being. And that even if the matter of the Holy Land was solved peacefully, they will be left with an open rebellion on the Weihtfordian soil. Which was discussed at length, reaching the conclusion that Robard Connuae still didn’t announce any sort of rebellion, didn’t raise an army, didn’t move in any way that incriminates him.

Lord Stepan pointed that the Syvarran Duke paid the kings taxes last Aelmoon, less than two months ago, which points that he is either trying to seem unsuspecting, or that he is still in the king’s peace. Lord Nouwils

mentioned how the last time Syvarra was besieged -five hundred years ago, that is- the siege lasted two years, with Syvarra barely disturbed.

Many proposals were presented, all gaining minimum support, all for good reason.

Hours passed. The servants brought in dinner, which was honey roasted chicken, slices of ham soaked in sauces and buried in spices, a rich colourful soup that tasted heavily of parsley, the dessert -which Danyalle didn't touch- was a half-dozen sorts of fruit cakes arranged in a pyramid.

"that's it," the King snapped, brushing his hands from the remains of a lemon cake. "we vote on the next proposal. And it better be a good one. I plan to sleep in my bed tonight, thank you very much."

The tension was getting high, and Danyalle cursed whoever invented such an awful thing as the Conference of East and West, it loses its value, as good ideas need a clear head, which the Conference fails to provide.

"I have something, Your Majesty." Lord Stepan said.

"Please!" the King replied extending a palm.

"It is a suggestion that might solve the problem peacefully, and keeps the dignity of the crown. But I fear it is only effective in revealing our enemies, and not in defeating them."

"Do speak, my lord" the king said tiredly.

"It is a simple solution," Lord Stepan started again, "we send an assembly to the Holy Land, to inspect the meeting this important Jal has had with King Leunwell. The purpose of this assembly of course will be to implement the law, it will be an official allegation. A Jal who is a subject to the King of Weihtford, might have committed treason, after all.

This will guarantee the assertion of Weihtfordian dominance over the Holy Land, render whatever agreement the Jal and the kingdom of Fourgates have reached null, and if he eventually was found guilty and therefor got executed, it will teach even the most important Jals that they are not above the law of Weihtford." Lord Stepan finished, looking so self satisfied.

The king exhaled audibly, then he voiced, "how would our assembly provide evidence to the collusion?"

"Never mind that, Your Majesty," Lord Stepan answered dismissingly. "the best part of this, is that we don't need any evidence," he

smiled wickedly. “It is in our favour whether or not the Jal was proved guilty. It is either he is; and he gets executed, or he is not; and the arrangement he had is denied officially by the Temple, and Fourgates gets nothing.”

The King didn’t smile, he didn’t look comforted in any way.

“One last thing,” Lord Halfheart said. “This only solves half the problem.”

“Indeed,” Lord Nouwils interrupted, “we *will* be left with the matter of Syvarra, and the potential rebellion.”

“If I am allowed to ask, Your Majesty, allow me to deal with Lord Connuae personally.”

“What are you planning, Stepan?” The King asked.

Lord Stepan glanced at the men around the table, then looked the King in the eye, and said, “I will try to prevent the rebellion, if I can, or end it, if it starts.”

The King appeared to have understood his cousin’s gesture, and didn’t ask any further in front of the present lords. Danyalle pushed down his curiosity.

“Who do you nominate for this assembly, my lord?” Lord Wolt asked.

Stepan Borgeah’s smile deepened, “You, my Lord,” he answered. “This trial should carry some impact, it should weigh well with the Kings own authority. So it has to be one of the Kings Ministers, and since I’ll be busy in the south...”

Lord Wolt nodded grimly. “Then I’ll have to be busy in the north.”

The King nodded. “shall we vote?” he asked.

And hands were laid on the crown, starting with Lord Stepan, then Lord Wolt, then Jal Teudor, then the King, then Lord Halfheart.

Lord Nouwils took his time. And Danyalle took his, and since the voting must be unanimous, unless the two of them voted, this proposal would be drafted.

After a second’s thought, Lord Nouwils put his hand on the crown, and all eyes were on Danyalle.

Danyalle's eyes however were on the crown. The crown that was described in detail by an old man who claimed to have never seen it. It looked different, now that Danyalle had a different perspective. It did feel lacking. There were in fact only seven parts of light deforming glass, the size of two fingers each, arranged in a half-circle on the golden platform decorating the top of the crown, and leaving space for six more, one between each two.

Finally, Danyalle rested his hand on what Ellvius Norrkin; the Legend Carrier, had called the Parts of Truth.

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