

Part II

The Losing Side

A lantern, a feather, and an hourglass. The items sit upon the head of the war table. Gathered around are two dozen of the most hardened veterans in Jaka. And a young, nervous girl, who stares with apprehension at the objects.

She reaches out her hand and touches the lantern. Three fingertips forming a triangle. *Lux Ingress* she states in her mind, and the lantern begins to give off a dim glow.

Removing her hand the light vanishes, and she moves onto the feather. Index and middle finger crossed, draw the tips down the spine. *Ignas* she states. The feather smoulders, then ignites into a small flame.

The hourglass has been flowing sand into the lower chamber since the test began. Half of the sand still remains. Holding its neck in her hand she stares in concentration. This cast is always the most difficult. She breathes deeply, and will the fabric of time to reverse. There is no statement for this cast, only willpower. After a moment the sand halts, but does not return to the upper chamber.

Close enough, she thinks.

Thea looks up at the twisted crone who oversees the tests. Her lips are pursed so hard it looks like she's swallowed a lemon, and her eyes glare with a fiery rage. Usually when Thea gets that look it's followed by a cane to the knuckles, but the old woman manages to contain the punishment while her father watches. He is the only one watching Thea now, all other eyes in the room are on him.

Usually the tests are done in private. But the Lords of the resistance have grown impatient. They want to see results.

"Focus." the Elder snaps. Her beady eyes never blink.

Closing her eyes, Thea breathes deep. She repeats the words in her head, like so many times before.

Gods of High, I share thine blood. Guide me down the path I seek. I share your power, but follow your words. I am your equal, and your servant.

The prayer is one used by the Conduits of old. Those born with the gift to channel the Gods own will and power through themselves. But to have such abilities, they must be granted to you. You must ask, and wait for a response.

She opens her eyes, and observes the diagram drawn on the table. A twelve pointed star, each point representing one of the High Gods. The diagram should form into the sigil of the God who chooses to answer your call.

It doesn't move.

The packed war room is silent. Thea feels the weight of her failure.

"Very good, Thea", a voice breaks the silence.

Thea's father would like to be known as nothing more than Jaka's Lord Protector, a temporary position until we win the war, but these men have named him their King. King Moran Fellner, chosen by the people of Jaka to lead them against the Vienna's. He isn't that old, maybe in his thirties, but the years of war have aged him. His shaggy brown hair is shot with grey, and the lines of his face cast deep shadows. He looks as tired as she feels.

"Very good? I don't know about that" scoffs Lord Curner Keper. He is old and feeble. Thin strands of ashy, white hair dangle loosely over his hardened face. "Knew they wouldn't respond. The Gods haven't chosen anyone in centuries."

"I may have to agree with Keper, Your Grace," grumbles a scruffy mess of black hair and muscle, Lord Grafhod of the Blackwoods, "The time of Gods fighting by the side of mortal men is gone. With all due respect we've put far too much time into this. If the young lady can't move chalk, how can she burn Vienna soldiers"

Moran surveys Lord Grafhod, as well as the rest of the awaiting nobles.

"I'm sorry this hasn't worked out as many of you hoped. My wife was always the expert in these matters." he gestures towards the feather, "Perhaps it is time to consider some alternatives."

Thea feels her face go a little red with embarrassment. She is not surprised that she didn't pass the test, she never has, but she still felt some hope that this time may be different. Thea stands up from my chair and walks to stand behind her father as another Lord, Otto Sparrow, speaks up.

“I have an alternative for you, Your Grace. Stop being so stubborn and make friends with Moreno. With the Sorvs on your side there’s no army in all of Onokam that can stand against you”

Otto flashes Thea a cheeky smile. He is a lot younger than the rest of the Lords, in his early twenties. With sharp cheekbones and dark brown eyes, the same colour as his long flowing hair he is one of the more handsome members of the council and a great deal more charming.

“Nobody asked you, Sparrow ” leers the grizzly, old Lord Curner Keper. He isn’t nearly as pleasing to look at as Otto. Thin strands of ashy white hair dangle loosely over a scarred and hardened face. “Those beasts have been our enemies longer than the damned Vienna’s. You’d have us fight alongside the beasts that killed our ancestors!”

“They don’t have to be our enemies forever you old fool” retorts Otto.

Lord Keper goes to stand, most likely looking to throw a fist at Otto, but Moran cuts in before that can happen.

“We have already discussed allying with the Sorvs. They aren’t interested, same with our own troops. We can’t fight a war with an army that is at each other’s throats.” his voice is firm but careful in tone, as to assure all parties that their voices are being heard. He has had to become an expert in speaking with the Jakan Lords, they are much more stubborn than the Northerners and much quicker to resort to punching their debating opponents.

“Well then I don’t know what you plan on doing”, Otto chuckles, “The Vienna’s outnumber you five to one, Anzeni refuses to play fair, and you lot refuse to accommodate the Sorvs. You may as well start kissing Queen Myra’s crystal shoes now.”

Lord Grafhod slams a heavy fist down on the table.

“Mind your tongue boy”, he growls, “You should feel lucky our kind King allowed you to keep your head, let alone sit at this table. And shouldn’t it be that the Vienna’s outnumber *us* five to one? You are our ally, are you not? Or maybe you’re beginning to live by the name those delinquents call you. What was it again?”

“The Bandit King” Otto responds coldly.

Grafhod scoffs, “A bloody murderer, that’s what you are.”

“Lord Sparrow has been cleared of those charges”, Moran interrupts, and with a prolonged gaze at Otto, “And that title.”

Otto smirks at Grafhod, which only makes him more angry. His knuckles turn white on the table. Moran shoots Otto a look of warning, and with an apprehensive nod he goes quiet.

“Though we will never fight alongside Moreno, we may have a chance with Harkon. I’ve been exchanging letters with the eldest Protivera boy, Lord Triton, he is currently working with the reformers in Hylestus. Some of them hate Nero as much as we do, and the boy believes we may be able to build an alliance with some. Possibly even his father, Galeedeus. And we can always negotiate with Anzeni ...”

“I don’t like the idea of negotiating with Anzeni. Their demands were absurd.” Grafhod interrupts.

“I agree.” chimes in Lord Hefford, one of Jaka’s many battle hardened leaders, “*Defend us and you shall keep Jaka.* They won’t help us reclaim the throne, they only want their bloody independence.”

“Those damned Ver are as trustworthy as the Sorvs, they’re all primitive.” spits Lord Keper.

“Or as much as bandits” Lord Grafhod replies, glaring at Otto.

The chamber quickly fills with shouting. It isn’t long before a few tankards of mead are thrown. The room looks as though it is about to break into war. As it’s filled with burly warriors of rough southern attitude Thea thinks she should be feeling concerned. Instead she can’t help but laugh.

Moran notices her, and surveys his daughter for a time, before he lets off a long ear-piercing whistle. The room falls silent, fists and tankards still raised in the air. Moran doesn’t seem to mind.

“It seems we are failing in our duties.” he utters, “We can’t make enough alliances, and our strategies need some serious rethinking. But we also have our faith.”

He looks over to Thea again and gestures for her to approach the table. Nervously she steps forward. Beside all these men she looks out of place. Her features are soft and supple. Her hair is long, silky, and white.

“Perhaps we should look into different forms of training for the Lady Thea.” he says with a soft smile, “It is what Mahlia would have recommended”

Thea’s heart drops when he mentions her mothers name. Before she died many believed she was the Luxiveran prophesied to return and bring peace to the world. She dedicated her life to the study of the divine, and the powers one might find in following them. Study that died with her.

“Oh, not with this damned magic again.” Lord Keper grumbles disapprovingly.

“I would have to agree with Lord Keper.” sighs Lord Dollos “Conduits may have been an important force in the days of our ancestors, but our constant pursuit of divine intervention hasn’t gotten us anywhere.”

“Have you no faith in our Gods?” scolds Lord Grafhod.

“I merely point out the lack of results” Lord Dollos responds softly.

“I should learn what my mother was researching.” Thea’s voice brings a sudden silence over the room. Many nobles look at me in shock. She knows it is against the rules for her to even be present during the war council, let alone speak out of turn. But none of these noblemen have proper manners anyway.

Thea looks to her father, expecting him to be giving me one of his warning looks, but instead his eyes rest on hers awaiting more.

“I have been studying with the Grey Ladies, learning all I can from their texts and traditions, and nothing has come of it.” Thea continues nervously, “But Mother knew more than the Greys, she studied many cultures from all over Onokam. If there is any chance of me fighting against the Viennas it lies in my mothers work.”

The room lingers in many unspoken moments as the Lords consider my words. She can see some look interested, maybe even impressed, but many look at her and Moran with disdain. It takes a while before someone decides to break the silence.

“Would you speak to the Eurlite?” Otto asks.

Many shift uneasily in their chairs. Thea is not surprised. The strange scholar who hides away in my mothers study is a topic frequently scrutinised by the Lords.

“Ah! A damned warlock!” blurts Lord Keper as he shoots to his feet, “First Sorvs, then Ver, and now damned warlocks. I will not fight on the side of beasts and demon worship!”

“Occuram is no warlock, my Lord” Moran asserts, “He is a devout and very intelligent man.”

“He is very mad.” mumbles Lord Grafhod.

“Occuram knows more about my mothers research than anyone, of course I would speak with him.” Thea responds.

“Like you’d get anything out of the bloody fool!” Lord Keper yells, “Forgive me, Your Grace, but I do not like the notion of the young Lady meddling with these dark forces. It’s bad enough she is at a damned war council.”

Many voices begin to murmur in agreement. Moran shifts uneasily in his chair.

“Your voice is noted, my Lord.” Moran mutters.

“Note mine as well.” grumbles Lord Garfhod, “I will do many things for you, Your Grace, but I cannot stand by and watch My Lady’s soul become corrupted.”

There are a few cheers in response to that.

Moran continues to rub his temples as he carefully surveys all of the Lords at the table. He takes a deep breath and lets out a long sigh. His amber eyes gaze into Thea’s, with a look of sorrow.

“*The last Luxiveran...*” he echoes the cursed words. “Continue your studies with Madam Olva.” he concludes softly. The crone locks her beady eyes on Thea once more.

Her heart sinks once again. Moran may believe her words, but in the end he must listen to the hearts of his people, lest he lose the few fighting men he has. She understands, and with a courteous nod makes her way to the door.

As she passes Otto he stands as well.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Lord Keper growls.

“My voice is as useful here as the Princess’.” he sighs, “If you need me, Your Grace, I’ll be on the battlements. ”

With a deep bow he follows Thea out the door.