

Shadows of the Limelight



Alexander Wales
2015

Shadows of the Limelight © Alexander Wales.

172 403 words

Text downloaded from <https://alexanderwales.com/>

Typeset by Mike Schwörer (<https://mikescher.com>).

Created with Typst and min-book

Contents

1. The Rooftop Races	1
2. The Queen of Glass	35
3. Nighttime Ballet	61
4. An Interlude at Sea	97
5. The Belligerent Bard	133
6. The Flower Queen's Court	169
7. Rapier Wit	199
8. Ash and Flames	229
9. The Letter	253
10. Detente	277
11. Trials	303
12. Light and Shadow	329
13. Iron Bound	353
14. Legends	377
15. Falls	401
16. Smoke and Mirrors	425
17. The King's Courtyard	451
18. The Rule of Three	475
19. The Childish Bride	497
20. The Bone Warden	521
21. Revolutions	543
22. Impressions	575
23. The Way Forward	609
Appendix: On the Nature of the Domains	629
Appendix: On the Nature of Standing	647

1. The Rooftop Races

Corta was going to kill him.

She had a reputation to maintain, he knew that, but he'd gone and been stupid anyway. Dominic had seen a small handful of people visiting her restaurant with missing fingers, and it was no secret that Corta had been the one to take them. That was what she did, if you didn't hold up your end of whatever bargain you'd struck with her. She wasn't a cruel woman, but she wasn't known for her mercy. She was a squat woman with thick thighs, broad shoulders, and large breasts, with a voice that was often louder than it needed to be. She had four sons, each larger and more muscled than the last, all essentially interchangeable so far as anyone who worked with Corta was concerned. Each of them was fearsome, but none of them commanded respect in the same way that Corta herself did.

She was one of the most important people among the lower classes in Gennaro, a woman who had clawed her way up from nothing until she was practically bumping elbows with the nobility. She had secured for herself a position at the very lowest tier of the *illustrati*, with enough fame to grant her the ability to shout a man to death — or at least, that was one of the stories that people told about her.

She was going to kill Dominic, he was sure of that.

The rooftop races were to blame.



"Have you gone to see Welexi?" asked Franco with a smile.

Dominic was trying to limber up before the race. He focused on stretching out his long legs. "No," he replied. "Too many crowds."

"You should look up every now and then, and maybe you'll catch sight of him," said Franco. "He can fly."

"I thought that was just a story," said Dominic. He ran his fingers through his shaggy black hair, wishing that he had thought to get it cut before the race. It hadn't seemed like it would be a problem last night, but now he noticed that it was hanging down into his field of vision. Maybe it had always been like that, and he was only noticing now for the same reason that he felt a pressure in his gut and a cold sweat in the small of his back.

"Well of course it's a story," said Franco. "But they tell stories about things that are true all the time. Welexi has giant wings made of light, huge ones, each two or three yards across. He flaps them like a bird."

"And you've seen this?" asked Dominic. He stood up tall and started rotating his shoulders.

"Of course," said Franco. "I just caught the tail end of it, but he had the wings alright."

"So you didn't actually see him fly," said Dominic.

"Come on Dom, you don't need to be so skeptical," said Franco. "But no, I didn't see him fly. I hardly doubt that people would lie about a thing like that though, would they? They love Welexi, but they wouldn't lie for him like that."

Dominic shrugged. "I don't know. All I'm saying is that I've heard all of the same stories about the illustrati that you have, and not all of them have the ring of truth. It may be that Welexi can fly. I don't really doubt it too much. But you have to be careful about what you believe if you don't want to get taken for a fool." Franco could always be seen with some pamphlet or another, printed on the cheapest yellow paper that would still hold ink, each filled with another wild story about illustrati fighting pitched battles with their elements clashing against each other, or searching out exotic treasures in foreign lands.

"You'd call me a fool? This coming from the man that bets so much on himself?" asked Franco.

Dominic shrugged. He cocked an ear. He could hear the crowds growing noisy. "Come on, I think it's time."

The rooftops of Gennaro were almost uniformly covered with red clay tiles, except in places where the roofs were flattened for extra living space. The taller buildings had balconies and covered corridors that were open to the city air, and at the moment all of them were filled with people. Some of the roofs had people sitting or squatting on them. The lower classes drank wine from glass bottles with woven basket covers, and they spoke loudly to one another, sometimes shouting over the rooftops to their neighbors. Above them, where the wealthy watched from the balconies, the wine was drunk from goblets, and the conversation more demure. The air smelled of smoke and seawater, and there was a mild breeze that kept the sun from being too fierce. Dominic took one last moment to drink from his canteen,

then stepped out into the sunlight with the other racers. The audience — his audience — cheered.

“Vidre was there beside him,” said Franco, as though this moment weren’t enough to send their hearts hammering. “I’d let her sink one of her glass daggers into me for the slightest taste of her sweet lips.”

“Only one dagger?” asked Lorenz, one of the other racers. “I’d let her use both, just to have the scent of her hair fill my nose.”

“You think so little of her?” asked Rafaello. “Why, to have just the faintest sniff of her morning breath I would let her cleave my arms and legs from my body in one fell swoop.”

“One fell swoop?” asked Michel. “Your devotion to our most esteemed lady Vidre is lacking if you wouldn’t let her use a club to amputate you, which I would do just for the sight of her upper eyebrow.”

“But the upper eyebrow is her most fetching part!” protested Franco with a laugh.

This continued on for some time, with the racers trying to one up each other. Dominic didn’t join in. That sort of braggadocio had never been his way, and he had a great deal on his mind besides. They were all being paid a sum of fifty capi for participating in the races, with the winner getting an extra hundred on top of that. It was a tidy sum given that it was only about an hour’s worth of actual work, and there were other considerations as well, like a measure of fame and the affections of pretty girls. It wasn’t difficult for Corta to gather up six young men willing to risk their lives for the entertainment of others.

Dominic had won the last six races. The money was a pittance in comparison to how much Corta was making, and how much the men and women who watched from the balconies were gambling with each other, but the first win had comfortably padded out his meager living arrangements, and ensured that he could drink good wine and eat meat with every meal. When it came time for the second race, he had bet almost all of the money left over on himself, on the theory that he wouldn't be too much worse off if he had to go back to living in poverty a week early. He'd done the same on the third race, and the fourth, each time watching the pile of coins multiply. He spent little of it. He had so much money that he had to open an account at one of the banks, a large place with an interior courtyard and vaulted ceilings.

For the fifth race he had gotten a note showing proof of credit from the bank, written on fine paper by a man with a greasy mustache and a floral scent. Dominic had been ready to have to explain to Corta how this was easier than carrying thirty pounds worth of coin into her restaurant, but she was completely unperturbed and took the note without question or comment. He'd won that race at three to one odds, and Corta had ensured that the bank's ledgers reflected that at the end of the day. It wasn't nearly as exciting as being handed a pile of gleaming coins, but it was thrilling all the same when he put it in any real terms. He had enough money to pay for a place of his own, if he wanted to, instead of sharing a room with two other men. He could buy passage across the Calypso, if he wanted to,

or even across the Pensic if he chose to consign himself to the bowels of some colony ship. He left the money untouched though, and saved it all for the sixth race.

This time Dominic watched carefully as the banker wrote out the proof of credit. There was a thin wax seal on the upper corner of the note, and the banker had an elaborate signature that would have been difficult to forge. The note came with a hold on the account, so that he couldn't simply give proof of credit to Corta and then take all of the money from his account if he lost. The actual styling of the numbers had been given less attention though, and it hadn't taken Dominic too much time to turn a one into a two, once he'd bought a quill and ink and spent an afternoon practicing. He'd been ready with an explanation of how he had doubled his money with a different bet, one made with another person across town, but Corta had simply taken his note as though she saw dozens of them every week, giving it no more scrutiny than the goblet of wine she idly drank from. He had run the race as hard as he possibly could, and taken his sixth win with a comfortable lead. The odds were two to one now, but Dominic had been able to effectively triple his money with the forged note. The elation he'd felt afterward when the money was in his account overshadowed the thrill of winning by a considerable margin.

The odds were down to three to two, which was the worst that Dominic had seen. That meant that people were too confident that he was going to win. The payout would hardly be worth anything. Dominic had stared at the ceiling when he was trying to get to sleep, listening to the sounds

of the city outside while he wavered on whether he was going to bet again. He had enough money to open up a shop somewhere in the city, or buy his way into an apprenticeship of some kind. He was only seventeen, not yet too old for that sort of thing. He could start over and become the sort of man that his father had always wanted him to be, and he'd have some comfortable padding besides that. At three to two, that was the sensible thing. But on the other hand, the simple addition of a fresh mark on a proof of credit would be enough to change the odds significantly. Dominic had four thousand capi, which he could turn into twelve thousand.

He'd gone ahead and done it. There had been plenty of time for regret and second thoughts afterward, once the bet was on the books and the note of credit was locked away in Corta's strongbox. What's done was done, and there was no going back on it now in any case. If the note of credit had passed muster once, there was no reason that the deception would be uncovered now — not unless he lost, and Corta tried to collect the money from him.

As he stood on the rooftops and listened to the other racers, he was sure his heart was beating faster than theirs.

Corta came out onto the rooftops with them just as the crowds were expressing their discontent. She carried herself like there couldn't possibly be a more important person in the entire world. Her hands rose high above her head, which brought a weak cheer from the crowd, and then she called out to them.

"We have six fine racers gathered here today!" she shouted. Her domain was sound, and she was famous enough to have a measure of true power, though it wasn't clear what her upper limits were. Her voice boomed loud enough for everyone watching to hear. "Six fine racers," she repeated. "Yet only one can win." She went down the line of racers, clasping each on the back and giving them a short introduction for the audience. The races themselves didn't take all that long, so Corta liked to grandstand and strut around in front of her captive audience while she had them. She saved Dominic for last. When her meaty hand landed on his shoulder, she dug her painted nails into his flesh.

"Dominic de Luca!" Corta yelled to the crowd. This close, her voice was loud enough to rattle Dominic's bones and leave one of his ears ringing. "Son of a baker, a stoic runner, and the winner of the last six races with practiced ease!" That wasn't entirely true. The fifth race he'd only won because the city guards had interfered, and they'd been down to four runners in the sixth. He was faster than the others, but circumstances had been on his side. "I know that many of you have bet on him, thinking he's a sure thing. And others have bet against him, thinking that his luck cannot possibly hold for long. Watch this one closely!" Her grip tightened, and she leaned into him. "You had better run for your life," she whispered.

Dominic got down into position with the other runners as Corta continued her speech. He did his best to tune it out, since he'd heard it so many times before.

"Three laps around, six flags to touch, the first one back crowned winner," shouted Corta. "No interference of any kind." This last was said with a wink to the crowd. Interference was one of the primary attractions of a rooftop race. A few of the nobles had taken to bringing rotten vegetables up to the balconies with them, and it was generally agreed that this was both unsporting and hilarious. Given that serious money was riding on the races, there was a heavy incentive for interested parties to change the outcome, and this too had simply become part of the spectacle. Corta's four enormous sons were stationed at various parts of the course to prevent the worst abuses, but the races had become more and more hazardous as time went on, much to the delight of the audience. Last time two of them had carried truncheons, and now all four did, though this was more by way of warning than because they would actually use them.

This part of Gennaro had been built centuries ago, during a time when the city council had enacted a ban on carts in all but a few sections of the city. As a consequence of that, the roads between buildings had been built with only pedestrians in mind, and so the gap between neighbors was small. More importantly for the race's purpose, it meant that the gaps between rooftops were narrow enough to leap over, though still hazardous. Dominic's eye flickered across the red tiles as he charted his course, mostly to reassure himself. He already knew it by heart.

"Three! Two!" Corta was shouting out the countdown, joined by the crowd. Dominic grew nervous in the final

second, and felt bile in the back of his throat, but that was exactly as it had been for the six races before, and when Corta shouted "One!" he was off ahead of the others.

Dominic leapt over the first gap, which wasn't more than three feet, and pounded on ahead. Corta had called them flags, but they were nothing more than strips of red fabric tied to convenient locations. The first was hanging from a chimney, and as soon as Dominic pressed his hand to it, he shifted his momentum, on to the next one. The crowd cheered, and despite the exertion, he smiled. He had scouted out the area under moonlight the night before, making sure that the tiled roofs were stable and that there were no obvious obstacles that he'd need to avoid in the broad daylight. The crowds cheered him on, even as the first overripe tomato splattered down just two feet from him. He was fortunate that the nobles had been drinking for at least an hour now and their aim had become truly terrible.

As Dominic pushed forward, he could hear the others, who were not much more than a stride length behind him. The roofs were treacherous enough that he didn't dare to look back, not even when he was on a relatively straight section. There were too many chimneys and crenellations to jump over, or occasional arches to duck under, and too many people to watch. The lower class had staked out positions close to the race, and there was always the possibility that one of them would throw a wine bottle or decide to jump in, though nothing like that had happened so far. And

because the races were not quite legal, there was always a chance that the guard would turn up.

"Wait, you forgot your hat!" shouted Franco from half a step behind. This drew laughter from the crowd, and Dominic could imagine that Franco had a smile on his face, but it was the sort of useless pandering that he disliked in the races. If Franco could spare the breath for a joke, then he could use that breath on running faster.

Dominic was on the second lap when there was a scream from behind him, and a sickening crash that was followed by a longer, more mournful wail of pain. The reaction of the audience was a collective gasp of disbelief and cries of terror, though Dominic could swear that he heard one or two of the nobles laughing from their balconies. He pressed on all the same, letting his feet guide him where he needed to be. It wasn't the first time that someone had taken a fall. Most of the roofs were three stories up, and the results of a misstep were never pretty.

One of the spectators had decided to get too close to the action, and was wrestling one of Corta's sons on the rooftop, right in Dominic's path. He took a detour that required an enormous jump of nearly ten feet, which drew gasps and cheers from the crowd and gave him a comfortable lead when he stumbled into a landing. It had been a hard risk to take, especially following on the heels of hearing one of his friends be injured, but he'd done it almost without hesitation. He touched the flag on a balcony railing, and turned towards the next flag after that.

Halfway through the third lap, Dominic was two flags ahead of the next closest racer. He thought that it was Franco, based on one brief glimpse he'd gotten when taking a sharp corner, but either way it didn't seem like it mattered. The race was hard to focus on when victory was so assured, and when the relief of winning was building in him like a pot getting ready to boil over. An imminent win made Dominic almost delirious with joy, and that too was as it had been in the six races before. Sweat was dripping down his back, and he was radiating heat despite the breeze, but all was right with the world. That was when he saw Welexi hanging in the air.

The enormous wings were made of a soft white light, and as far away as he was, that was nearly all that Dominic could see. The man between the massive wings was small in comparison, just an opaque figure binding the two glowing white wings together. As Dominic watched, Welexi flapped his wings like a bird, keeping himself suspended high up in the sky, higher than the tallest buildings in the city. It was easy for Dominic to think that he was seeing an angel.

All it took was that one moment of losing focus.

Dominic felt the tile slipping away beneath his foot even as he tried to push off from it, and an easy jump suddenly saw him pitched forward, staring at the alleyway three stories below him. He reached out blindly, and managed to grab onto the roof on the other side to prevent himself from falling. His stomach hit the edge and the wind was knocked from him, but he didn't slip down further. He tried to clamber back up as quickly as possible, but Franco and

Rafaello had both leapt over him effortlessly in the time that it took Dominic to find his footing. He pushed himself harder than he ever had before, trying to close the distance before one of them reached the finish line, but it was too late.

Dominic came in third.

Corta was going to kill him.



Dominic rested his head against the pedestal of Gennaro's statue. The pedestal was ten feet high, with the statue another fifty feet of intricately carved stone on top of that. Gennaro was one of the *illustrati* of legend, presented in the statue as a man with a thick beard and an arm stretched out in front of him, pointing to the east. His domain had been water, and at the base of his statue were waves carved in marble, splashing up near his robes. Dominic had always liked the statue, in part because of how much history it held; Gennaro had commissioned it himself. Dominic could always imagine that the statue would be there for a hundred more years.

Corta had been kind to him, in her own way. He'd heaved up his breakfast after the race, and she had come to pat him on the back as though there were some honest affection between them.

"I'll take a man's money, but I won't take his pride," she said with a smile. "I'm not one to gloat. Take the day off — no deliveries, no jobs. Come by the restaurant tomorrow

morning and we'll go to the bank together. It can't be an easy loss, but I'll make it as painless as possible."

Dominic had walked through the city streets in a cold sweat after that. He was going to have to run away, there was nothing else for it. The note of credit came with a hold, and there wasn't any way to break that. It was possible that he would be able to slip into the bank in the early hours and take out his money, but if it were transferred into its weight in coins, it would be nearly impossible to move. He could get the money in the form of a promissory note that he'd take to another bank, but he didn't know whether he'd be able to get that note honored in another city. He didn't even really have any idea where he was going to run away to, or how he would get there, nor how he would protect himself against Corta. She surely had some reach within the Sovento States that extended beyond just Gennaro. He could change his name and disappear, he was fairly confident in that, but then he'd been confident in his ability to win the rooftop race, and he was keenly aware of how that had turned out.

Either way, he would have to wait to get the money, so there was nothing better to do than rest against the statue. He could pretend that it was simply another day, and nothing was wrong. Tomorrow he would run.

Dominic's chest and stomach hurt from where he had hit the edge of the building, and his forearms had been scraped up enough to bleed. His tunic was a mess, and would have to be washed. He stood up slowly, using the marble pedestal for leverage, and looked up to the statue of

Gennaro, which stood firm and resolute as ever, pointing off east, to distant lands. You couldn't trust the stories about the illustrati, but Dominic had learned all of the stories about Gennaro anyway. Gennaro had founded the city in the early days, and ensured that it was safe from anyone who tried to challenge it. He could walk on water, and would run straight across the sea to engage directly with pirates or rogue navies. He wielded water like a whip, cracking it hard enough to break bones, though it was also said that he was kind, and slow to hurt his enemies. He was everything the illustrati were meant to be, a symbol of goodness first and a strong arm for defense and negotiation second.

Dominic's domain was shadow. He had nowhere near the level of power that Corta had, and she was only barely at the lowest level of illustrati. Still, the rooftop races had gotten his name circulating, especially after he'd had six wins in a row, and he had to figure that news of his loss would make the rounds even more than the wins had. People had started to take note of him, in however small a way. He couldn't really feel the difference in terms of speed or strength, but he'd been able to feel his domain for the past month. The shadows seemed more alive to him now, and he could move his own shadow with a bit of focus, rotating it until it was perpendicular to the direction of the sun. He could see a little better in the dark, though it was hard to know whether he was just imagining it.

He was going to practice moving his shadow around before he realized that it had become too cloudy for that; his

shadow was diffuse and indistinct. He tried moving it anyway, just for something to distract himself, but the change was barely noticeable. A person couldn't get stronger from training their power, only from an increase in fame or notoriety, but it was supposed to be possible to gain a greater level of finesse. Mostly to take his mind off Corta, Dominic looked beneath his feet at where his shadow was and rotated it slowly around himself. If he was thinking about that, he would stop thinking about how Corta was going to kill him.

The clouds parted, and Dominic was bathed in sunlight, which made the shadows sharp and clear. When he looked up, he saw a man falling from the sky and heading straight towards the statue of Gennaro. Motes of light hung in the air behind the falling figure.

The man seemed to descend in slow motion when painted against the vast expanse of the sky. He struck Gennaro's outstretched arm and snapped it off with a terrible crash. Dominic was standing close enough that a chunk of marble nearly hit him in the head. He flinched backwards, too slowly to react properly, and was saved from a caved-in skull by luck alone. When he lowered his arm from in front of his face, he saw a man with skin the color of a coffee stain laying near the statue. The man was perfectly bald, and his silver armor was torn, like it had been ripped into by some enormous beast. The marble tiles of the plaza had been shattered where he had landed.

Dominic moved towards the man. It had to be Welexi. He was bloodied and broken, and he wasn't moving. Dominic

moved closer, through the rubble that Welexi had created during his meteoric descent, and touched the fallen man lightly on the shoulder.

Welexi convulsed and coughed up a thick clot of blood, then looked around wildly. He tried to stand up, but cried out in pain as his leg gave way beneath him. One of his eyes was a deep red, and the other looked half-crazed. He wiped blood from his mouth.

"He's coming," said Welexi. His voice was unsteady, nearly cracking. Light shot forth from his injured leg, and encased it in a soft white glow. Welexi stood up with great effort but no obvious unsteadiness this time. He cast a glance towards Dominic. "He's coming."

Dominic backed up. More people were moving forward from around the plaza, and they were all talking. He heard Welexi's name mentioned several times, mingled with notes of confusion and fear.

A loud booming sound came from the other end of the plaza, and Dominic looked over to see dust rising up from the caved-in roof of one of the markethouses. A man in dark red armor stood in the center of the destruction with his hands on his hips. His face was nearly lost within a mass of black hair and a thick black beard. He leapt down from the building, dropping three stories with no seeming concern, and slammed into the plaza floor with a loud clang of metal against marble.

Zerstor was as widely known as Welexi, and immediately identifiable by his armor. His domain was rust, and the armor he clad himself in was corroded in a way that would

have made it useless on any other man. He couldn't fly, but he could leap long distances. There were prohibitions against speaking his name out loud, but everyone did it anyway, in part because he had never shown his face in Gennaro before, and in part because the stories about him were too lurid and too outlandish not to share.

Dominic wracked his brain for more information. You couldn't trust the stories about the illustrati, because half of them were false, but now Zerstor was standing just a hundred yards away, and walking closer. Zerstor held his hand out to the side, and a few of the crude plates that made up his armor flew through the air and snapped into position to make a long, rusty sword.

"Get back!" shouted Welexi. He was quickly forming light around himself, sealing over his armor where it no longer protected him. There was a brilliant flash, and afterward he held a spear of white light in his fist. "Get back!" Welexi shouted a second time, and this time Dominic realized that he was talking to the growing crowds, not to Zerstor. Dominic had heard about the fights between the two causing collateral damage and civilian casualties, but he made no move to leave. He wasn't about to miss this.

"Five fights is too many," said Zerstor, revealing a mouth of broken yellow teeth. "Do you recall when I left you bleeding in the desert? I should have ended you there. But it was just you and I alone then, a cozy little battle fought across the dunes, and I needed someone to spread the story for me. I knew you would do it too. You never could keep

your mouth shut, even when it would have served you best."

"I spoke the truth, nothing more," said Welexi. They were still some distance apart, and Zerstor was making no effort to close the distance quickly. "To pretend that I hadn't been beaten would have been dishonorable."

"Perhaps," said Zerstor. He swung his sword out to the side. "If you try to run, I'll kill every last person in this plaza."

"I'm afraid you broke my leg," said Welexi. He let out a weak laugh. His forehead was beaded with sweat, and Dominic didn't see how it was possible that he would win this fight. "So I suppose this is it then."

"How does it feel to see your death closing in on you?" asked Zerstor. He smiled with his jagged teeth. "You always knew that it would be me that got you, didn't you?"

"I've had a thousand enemies," said Welexi. "That you haven't heard of most of them is testament to their fates."

"You say that for the benefit of these fine people," said Zerstor as he cast a glance at the crowd. He slammed a gauntleted fist up against his armored chest with a loud clank and stared at Welexi. "I was always special to you. A monolithic evil that you could build your reputation on. I had my reasons to leave you alive in that desert, but you had your own reasons for never killing me. You could have murdered me in Lerabor, but you chose not to."

"You set Sanguin on them!" shouted Welexi. "She washed the streets in blood! How could I have responded but to try to save the innocents?"

Zerstor had stopped his advance, and stood some distance from Welexi. He made no move to engage, but it was clear this was only a calm before the storm. The crowd around them had grown thick, and Dominic could see people watching from the windows around the plaza, and gathering up on the rooftops. Dominic's view was considerably closer. He was in the inner circle, with nothing but empty air between him and the illustrati. A small part of him recognized that the wise thing to do would be to slip backwards through the crowd and put as much distance between himself and the fight as possible, but the promise of witnessing a piece of history firsthand was too powerful of a lure. And besides that, what did he really have to lose?

"I grow weary of your moralizing," said Zerstor. "It never rang true for me." He turned away and looked to the crowd. "I know you better than to think you were stalling for the guards to come, but it seems that's been the result. Something to whet my appetite before I kill you, I suppose."

The parapetti were pushing their way through the crowd, with their polearms clearly visible above the throngs. No one was eager to move aside for them. This wasn't how the stories of the illustrati went; none of them had ever been brought down by a simple guard. It didn't even happen if there were a dozen guards, fought all at once. The illustrati varied in their powers, but Zerstor had to be one of the most famous men on the face of the earth. Though he was handicapped by having the domain of rust, it was virtually impossible that he would be beaten by any ordinary man. For their part the parapetti seemed to understand this, and

didn't move with much haste. An older woman cried out that they were going to their deaths, and Zerstor grinned.

"Leave them," said Welexi. He had finished all of his modifications of light, and his armor glowed from all the haphazard repairs that he'd made with his power. In his hand he held a solid spear of light, which was long and sharply pointed, but otherwise unadorned. "They're only doing their duty."

Zerstor nodded. "Yes, as people do."

One of the parapetti broke through, and held his polearm before him like it would shield him. The others followed close behind.

"I'll offer you a deal," said Welexi. There was urgency in his voice. "You walk free, past all these guards, and I will not stop you. You leave this city and its people in peace, without shedding more blood. In exchange, I have bards around the world that can sing of our battles. I have riches that I can give you, to spare these lives today."

Zerstor smiled. "You pretend at being protective to cover your own cowardice," he said. "That's a little too transparent for my liking. And besides, you know that there's nothing you can offer me. I'm driven entirely by fame, am I not? 'Not the false fame of bardic songs and embellished legends, but a trueness of character that cannot be faked.' You said that, didn't you, about yourself? Well, we're much alike, in that regard."

When Zerstor moved, the whole world seemed to be standing still. The first parapetto had enough time to lower his polearm a handspan, but Zerstor simply stepped

around it. All Dominic saw was the guard crumpling to the ground with a rusted hole in the center of his breastplate. Zerstor had cleanly decapitated the second guard when Welexi arrived behind him, thrusting forward with his spear of light.

Zerstor dodged, and the crowd scattered as he moved towards them. He whipped around at the same time, to face Welexi. His pitted sword was held cautiously in front of him, and it didn't waver in the slightest.

"If you're really so brave and noble, so ready to protect these people," said Zerstor, "then guarantee me that this fight is just between the two of us."

"I can't control what other people —"

Zerstor spun towards one of the parapetti, easily slipping within the reach of his polearm. When he finished his spinning motion he was holding the guard in front of him. The guard's head was gripped tightly in his armored fist. His perfectly balanced sword was held in the other hand and pointed towards Welexi, as motionless as before.

"You were about to speak the words of a coward," said Zerstor. He squeezed the parapetto's head with a sudden violent motion, and everyone in the plaza heard a sickening crunch as the man went limp. Zerstor let him slump to the ground. "Order them to stand down. Send them away. Tell everyone that this final fight is not to be interrupted."

Welexi didn't have the slightest trace of hesitation. "This is my fight, and mine alone," he called to the crowd. "If Vidre arrives, tell her that I have made a commitment. She might be the only one aside from me that could defeat

this monster. Everyone else stand back. If you value your lives, you will leave. Any agents of Gennaro among you, I command you to stand down by the power vested in me by the senatori not three days ago." He held his spear in front of him, and settled himself into a more aggressive fighting stance.

The two men began to circle each other carefully. The crowd gave them a wide berth, but didn't dissipate entirely, even as the dead parapetti were taken away by their comrades. Dominic was one of the closest, with a mass of people to his back. He was ready to take off running at any moment, if Zerstor turned his attentions towards the crowd, but there seemed little chance of that at this point.

Zerstor and Welexi moved slowly, sizing each other up, and shifting their weight so that they were never the slightest bit off balance. They were taking their time. A low murmur began to build from the crowd as people talked in low voices to their neighbors. Dominic was glad that no one had tried to engage him in conversation. He was fairly sure that the only thing he could have said was that they were about to see Welexi die. Welexi's left leg was the injured one, and it was encased in light like a thick plaster cast that allowed limited mobility. Whenever Welexi needed to step to the side with it, the motion was quicker and slightly tentative, as though he was worried it would give out.

Zerstor struck out first, swinging his sword at just the moment when Welexi was moving that injured leg. If Dominic had been able to make a bet in that brief fraction of a second, he would have bet that it was the killing blow,

but Welexi flipped backwards with astonishing speed and landed easily on his feet. His left leg was stiff, but he'd been exaggerating the extent of how that limited him.

Some primal part of Dominic had expected them to go at each other then, to tear into each other like he'd seen cats do when they were fighting, or like dogs with a piece of meat. He wanted it, in some way, a fevered, brutal brawl that seemed to have been promised to him. But Zerstor and Welexi went back to their circling, and continued on with feints and footwork. They reminded Dominic less of the four-legged animals he'd seen skirmishing in the alleys, and more of two birds pecking at one another. To be frank, it was disappointing.

Dominic almost missed it the first time it happened, and even after he wasn't sure what he'd seen was correct. Zerstor had thrust his sword forward, and Welexi had spun away, but something had happened at the point of contact between their weapons — or rather, failed to happen. The next time, Dominic was more sure of it. Welexi's spear had passed straight through Zerstor's sword. It threw their entire battle into context, with all the distance that they kept between them and their tentative jabs at each other. Neither was able to parry a blow, and if Welexi's spear could go through armor like it went through the sword, a single proper thrust would almost certainly give Zerstor a mortal wound.

As the fight went on, and the minutes passed, it became clear that Welexi was losing his stamina. Dominic wasn't willing to rule out that this was simply another ruse, but

it didn't seem like it. Welexi's bald head was soaked in sweat, which ran together with his blood to soak the collar of the shirt he wore beneath his armor. He moved slightly too slow, and a jab of Zerstor's glanced off his breastplate. A bloom of rust marked where the pitted sword had struck.

Welexi moved back, putting more distance between them, and summoned a second shaft of light into his other hand. His eyes were hard as he and Zerstor watched each other, and Dominic could feel his heart beating faster in sympathy. Welexi twirled his spears around, fast enough that they briefly appeared as disks of light, then charged forward.

His attacks were fast and furious, and a cheer came up from the crowd as Zerstor spent all his efforts on dodging away from them, the sword in his hand more of a liability than an asset. Twice Welexi got in a solid hit, but both times it was from the side rather than a stab forward, passing through the armor and striking Zerstor's side like a staff instead of a spear. Dominic held his breath as Welexi kept up his onslaught, hoping that the killing blow would happen any moment. The world seemed to narrow itself down to those two men, the beacon of light and the giant of rust, both moving faster than they had any right to. Zerstor stepped back to avoid another thrust of the spear towards his chest, and swung his sword towards Welexi's side at the same time.

There was a blinding flash of light. Dominic tried his best to blink it away, and he could hear the cries and groans from the people around him. Welexi's form was burned into his

vision, halfway split at the waist. Dominic had seen the sword moving, had seen it touch the armor again ... and then Welexi had turned into a being of pure light, like an apparition, so quickly and so powerfully that it was only possible to make sense of it after the fact.

Welexi stood in front of Zerstor, gasping for breath. He was entirely intact, his form fully physical once more. His eyes were wide. Zerstor had his sword held up in a defensive position, and if Dominic was having trouble recovering his vision, he could only hope that Zerstor had it worse.

Welexi spun his spears around once, then leapt forward again to press the advantage. With his vision half gone, Dominic could barely see except to note the rapid movements of Welexi's light. If Welexi was going to win, it would be now.

Welexi screamed in pain, and one of the spears went clattering to the ground. Three fingers were still gripped around it, but there was surprisingly little blood. The battle had turned in an instant, on a single strike that Dominic hadn't even been able to follow. Welexi staggered back now, with his ruined hand clutched to his chest and his spear out in front of him in his left hand. If the fingers that still clutched the spear of light were nearly bloodless, the wound itself was more than making up for it.

"Please," Welexi said, his voice so soft that it was difficult to hear. Zerstor stalked forward, with his sword leading in front of him. Dominic hadn't realized how close he was to the action until Zerstor passed within two yards of him. A quick glance backwards showed that the crowd had ebbed

and flowed, and after the blast of light had put up a greater distance. Dominic felt as though he was stuck in place. He was closer to the illustrati than anyone else, and he couldn't do anything more than watch.

Zerstor batted Welexi's hand to the side with his sword, and the second spear of light went tumbling down to the ground. With a burst of speed, the hulking man in rusted armor wrapped his hand around Welexi's throat and lifted him up into the air.

"A fitting end," said Zerstor. Welexi tried to form another construct of light, but Zerstor grabbed his uninjured arm and snapped the bone, loudly enough that everyone around could hear it. Welexi screamed in pain. "They won't be able to speak of you without uttering my name," said Zerstor. His voice was loud, and carried across the crowd.

Dominic's eyes were drawn to the spear of light that lay on the ground not ten feet away. Welexi was dying, and a foolish plan formed in Dominic's mind. It would be a gamble larger than the one he'd taken with Corta, but it was double or nothing at this point. Before he could consider it too deeply, he raced forward in a dead sprint and grabbed the spear of light from the ground, then tacked hard the other direction, just like he'd done on the rooftop, to propel himself at Zerstor.

There was only time for an instant of doubt when Zerstor turned around, his black beard thick with sweat and his eyes sharp and piercing, but Dominic wasn't acting on a level that permitted doubt. The spear had been moving

too fast anyway. It slid straight through the armor with no resistance, and struck Zerstor in the heart.

He'd been holding Welexi with one hand, and dropped him with a gasp.

His death wasn't instant, but it was close.



Dominic dropped the spear.

A confused cheer came up from the watching crowd, which rippled around the plaza until it was taken up by those who couldn't see. Dominic's arms and back were slick with sweat, and he was breathing hard. Everyone was looking at him. His plan had only gone so far as picking up the light and attacking Zerstor, and he was at a loss for what to do now that the moment had passed. He felt none of the elation that came with winning a race.

Welexi coughed loudly and climbed to his feet. His mangled hand was bleeding freely. He looked down at it and furrowed his brow for a moment. Tendrils of light grew from the wound and wrapped around the hand. Welexi turned his eyes to Dominic, and walked towards him on unsteady feet, with his left leg dragging behind him like a club foot.

"Name," Welexi said sotto voce. He had a rich voice like a fine liqueur, but this was the first time that he'd said anything that wasn't pitched for a crowd. Now it was low and hushed, like a secret shared between the two of them.

"Dominic de Luca," replied Dominic, trying to keep his own voice as low.

Welexi grasped Dominic's wrist and lifted his arm up into the air.

"Never think that you are without power," Welexi called to the crowd. They went silent at his voice, which carried far. "There is nothing in this world stronger than courage and the conviction to do what is right. This man risked his life to save mine. Zerstor, long a scourge on this world, now lies dead." He turned to Dominic, but continued to project his voice out to the crowds. "I name you Dominic de Luca, Lightscour. May the story of your boldness and bravery be told for decades to come."

Dominic's heart was hammering in his chest. He could barely believe what was happening. He had been given a name by Welexi himself. People were cheering around him.

"Come," said Welexi, again pitching his voice so only Dominic could hear. "I have wounds that need tending to, and we have business to discuss."

There were a thousand people shouting after the both of them. Dominic followed in Welexi's unsteady wake. The crowd pressed in on them. People touched him, tugged at his tunic, and pressed their flesh against Welexi, and they did the same to Dominic. It was a distinctly uncomfortable feeling. Behind them, Dominic heard the sound of Zerstor's armor being pulled apart for souvenirs. It was becoming too much, too fast, and all Dominic could do was follow behind Welexi and try to remain calm. Questions were being shouted at him, too many to answer. The crowd was

becoming more insistent, and more suffocating. Just when Dominic was about to start shoving back, Welexi grabbed his hand and helped him up into a closed palanquin carried by four servants.

"This was sent by someone trying to curry my favor, no doubt," said Welexi once they were both inside. "On hearing that there was a fight, someone's first thought was that they should mobilize a litter to carry me away, so that they could improve their own position in the world. Would my nemesis have been shown the same deference, had he proven the victor?" The palanquin started to move through the crowd at a glacial pace. Welexi leaned his head back and closed his eyes. The glowing light around his mangled hand had shaped itself into crude fingers. Up close, Dominic could see the lines on Welexi's face, and the exhaustion that he carried himself with. He was dark-skinned, but with a pallor. There was a wound on almost every inch of exposed skin, scrapes and gashes from his fall. Dominic had no idea how old the illustrati was, but to have accumulated so many stories he had to be at least in his forties, maybe older.

"Where are we going?" asked Dominic.

Welexi was a long time in answering. "My ship," he said finally. He opened his eyes, which were mismatched from his injuries, one of them blue and the other filled with blood. "I hope that's alright. Feel free to step out now if you'd like."

Dominic didn't make a move. He was sitting a half a foot away from the greatest hero of modern times. Their

knees were touching. Dominic had never been one to pay much mind to the illustrati's stories, but the stories of Welexi were well known. He'd single-handedly fought the Golden Horde to a standstill. He'd brought down warlords and brought an end to evil kings. Though it seemed like a lifetime ago now, Dominic had seen Welexi flying through the air like a bird. There was a reason they called him Welexi Sunhawk. Dominic wasn't invested in the lives of the illustrati like some of his friends, but here was a living legend, and a man of extreme power. He could make debts disappear with the snap of his fingers. Dominic had no idea what to say.

"The story will circle the city," said Welexi with a long sigh. He touched his face and hissed with pain. When he pulled his hand away, white light had bloomed across his skin, covering the worst of the cuts and scratches. He settled into his seat, with his head tilted back and his eyes closed. "The story will circle the city," he repeated, "By nightfall it will be on the lips of every man, woman, and child. Your name, mine, and Zerstor's, may he find some measure of peace in death. I don't imagine that you have much standing right now, hardly enough to know your domain if I read you right. But nevertheless, you will accrue an enormous amount of fame from this event."

"Alright," said Dominic. "That's ... thank you, for what you said at the plaza."

"You will have invitations," said Welexi, as though Dominic had said nothing. "The senatori, certainly, will invite you to have wine with them. If you deign to attend their

parties, you will be asked to recount the story again and again, until you have perfected it. It was a moment of bravery and heroism, the kind that people like to see in themselves. Any bumps or rough edges in the story will be smoothed out, if not by you, then by others. What Zerstor said now has an ironic echo to it, don't you think? They won't be able to mention his name without mentioning yours. Fitting, for his last words."

Welexi fell silent again, and the sounds of the crowds outside filtered through the heavy drapes inside the palanquin, which swayed and bobbed as it was carried through the city. Occasionally there were cheers, which cut against the somber mood that Welexi exuded.

"You wanted to be the one to kill him," said Dominic. When the spear had gone through Zerstor's heart, Dominic hadn't felt good about it. He'd been full of nervous energy, like he was about to puke or collapse. He had been too struck by disbelief to really feel happy that the risk had paid off. Now his heart was beginning to sink in his chest, and his mind was returning to Corta and what she would do to him. If Welexi didn't help him —

Welexi opened his good eye and looked at Dominic. "I think in narratives," he said. "It's an occupational hazard. Zerstor had built for himself an image of darkest evil, and blackened his soul enough to become a household name despite the bans and the taboos. I took the other path. It was natural for us to butt heads. Five battles. Murder writ large across the world, and I was always too much of a — he was right, you know. I could have let Sanguin drown a city

in blood to chase him down. If I tally up the damages he's caused, can it really have been worth it?" Welexi closed his eye and sighed. The palanquin swayed in a gentle rhythm despite the throngs of people still outside it.

"Let me tell you a story," said Welexi. "A prince is trying to secure an alliance, and agrees to marrying one of the three princesses, sight unseen. He meets the first, and she's incredibly ugly, so ugly that she must wear a veil at all times. He meets the second, and she's just as ugly as the first, if not more so. The prince is starting to regret agreeing to marry one of them. He meets the third sister, and do you know what she looks like?"

Dominic waited for some time before he realized that Welexi expected him to answer. "If it weren't a story, I'd think she'd be just as ugly as her sisters. But since it is a story ... I expect her to be beautiful, I guess. Or different, at least."

"You understand," said Welexi. "Stories have a logic to them, a way that they're shaped. I've traveled most of the world, and these shapes hold true. The story that Zerstor and I were shaping was to have its climax in the fifth fight, the fight where one of us was to die. I wanted that story. I lost loved ones for that story. But now ... now that story has been stillborn. There's a new story, with you at the center, a story about a mortal man stepping into godly affairs." He lowered his head and looked down at his mangled hand, where the soft light glowed. Then he turned his eyes up towards Dominic. "There's a new story here, and if you'll let me, I'll help you forge it."

2. The Queen of Glass

The *Zenith* was a small ship, with a complement of thirty men and women and little room for cargo. She had seven white sails that carried her all over the civilized world. When Dominic saw the ship, the thing that struck him most was artistry of it. By his estimation, half of the crew members must have been tasked with keeping every piece of wood freshly painted and every piece of gleaming metal polished. There were thin sheets of silver engraved with elaborate designs all over the ship, in the same style as Welexi's ruined armor, and carved wooden accents that displayed organic curls. The ship's railings were heavily lacquered, with none of the dents, gouges, or simple weathering that might be expected of a ship that saw regular use. And attached to the bow of the ship was an elaborate sculpture of glass, clearly Vidre's work. It showed a muscular man reaching forward, a fragile glass finger extended in front of him, as though he was trying to touch the horizon. There were no cannons, and nothing of its design suggested it was anything more than a work of art. Yet it was said to be the fastest ship in the world, able to outpace naval flagships and express packet boats alike.

The palanquin was carried past a line of watchful crew members, to a spot that had been cleared on the dock. Welexi stepped out to the roar of the crowds. He gave a low, somber bow to them, then raised his mangled hand to the sky. He'd used the light to shape a defiant fist. Blood streamed down his forearm, though it wouldn't have been

visible from a distance. Dominic followed Welexi up the plank and onto the deck of the *Zenith*, and his appearance drew another cheer from the crowd; the story had traveled ahead of them. There were hardly any waves, but Dominic felt unsteady on his feet — nearly as unsteady as Welexi looked. Welexi moved across the deck of the ship like a drunkard, down into the cabin, and gestured for Dominic to follow.

The crew watched them duck into the bowels of the ship without comment. They all wore identical white uniforms, finely tailored and far better than Dominic would have expected to see on a sailor. They had silvered buttons down the front of their jackets, and blue trim around their throats and cuffs. In the stories that were told about Welexi — the ones that took place at sea — the crew were nameless and faceless. With their appearance, it was easy to see how they could fade into the background, like they were just another piece of the ship's elaborate decorations. They even had similar haircuts. Dominic was keenly aware of his sweat-stained tunic and his shaggy hair.

The interior of the ship was used economically. The corridor that divided up the living space was only large enough for a single person to walk down, and then not without a bit of care. Welexi had already moved into the room at the far end, and Dominic followed. By the time he came in, Welexi was laying on a wide bed and bleeding onto white cotton sheets.

A woman in glass armor stood over him. She had blond hair with a tint of red to it, which was pulled back in

a simple braid. The armor was as clear as crystal, and a white blouse showed through beneath it. Glass was Vidre's domain, and where the armor would be suicidal on a normal person, on her it was both an impeccable defense and a potentially lethal weapon. She was famed for taking two glass daggers into battle, one in each hand, but those were nowhere to be seen at the moment. She had a thick white scar on the side of her face which passed through her brow and down her cheek, but it didn't mar her — if anything, it made her look more distinctive, more beautiful, and hinted at her dangerous nature. Dominic had heard dozens of stories about her, and now he was in the same room with the Lady Vidre. She had as many names as Welexi: the Queen of Glass, the Whore of Abalon, the Childish Bride, the Princess of Blades, Sharddriver, Thornscraper, the Hand of Pane. She glanced briefly at Dominic when he entered, but barely seemed to register him.

"Are you going to die?" asked Vidre.

"No," replied Welexi. "I don't think so. I lost more blood than is probably good for me, and my leg's broken, held together only by light. My arm too. That will heal. My fingers won't." He held up his mangled hand, with the fingers of light still formed into a fist. Only his pinky finger remained, and he was missing most of his palm. "I should have picked them up, so Gael could stick them back on. Send someone to fetch them. Or send someone to make a story out of them. Some urchins probably took them as soon as it was clear it wouldn't cost them their lives, but you might be able to retrieve them."

A short man with red hair and a bright green apron came into the small cabin, which really wasn't suited for three people to stand around in, and clucked his tongue. He carried a leather bag filled with metal instruments, gauze, and small bottles. Dominic had followed the stories of the illustrati well enough to recognize him too; he was a doctor by the name of Gael Mottram. He only had the one name: Red Angel. He had a dark history, though the stories were vague about what it was he had done, and when they weren't vague, they seemed too disturbing to believe. Experiments, they said. He was another living legend, a man who could kill with a touch. His domain was flesh. Dominic took an involuntary step backward.

"I came as soon as I got Vidre's message," said Gael. He laid a hand on Welexi. "It's bad." He turned to Vidre and Dominic. "Out, while I deal with my patient."

"Wait," said Welexi. "There are things I need to speak of with my young protege."

"I'm not —" began Vidre.

"Dominic de Luca saved my life," said Welexi. Gael and Vidre turned and looked at Dominic. "He is to be given our full resources, and a place on the ship, not as crew, but as one of us. We're elevating him."

Gael muttered under his breath and began tending to Welexi. Dominic's eyes went wide when Gael used his power on Welexi's ruined hand. The bloody flesh folded in on itself and twisted around exposed bone, then slid back over it. Shattered pieces of bone fell onto the blood-stained bed. Welexi cried out in pain and hissed through

his teeth. There was an angry red line where the sword had cut through his hand, but the bleeding at least had stopped. Gael began unstrapping Welexi's armor without much comment. Vidre had turned away as soon as Gael had made his move, and she was staring at Dominic rather than looking at the triage.

"Does he have any standing?" asked Vidre.

"He will," said Welexi. He was sweating, and his voice didn't quite reach the casual calm that he clearly intended.

"Does he have a useful domain?" asked Vidre.

"I have no idea," said Welexi.

"It's shadow," said Dominic.

The room was silent for a few moments, and then Welexi began to laugh. "Shadow and light, a story for the ages!" he said. His voice was weak, but he was smiling.

"You've lost a lot of blood," said Gael. He turned to the others. "We can talk about these developments later. The flesh is all healed, but I count ten broken bones, maybe eleven, and he's low on blood. He won't get any rest unless I put him out. He can't help but push himself."

Vidre pushed past Dominic, and he followed her as she went down the corridor and into a different, smaller room near the middle of the ship. She folded a seat down from the wall for him, and sat cross-legged on her bed. All around the room was glass — small figurines which sat on top of the shelves, long cylinders of glass that were held in place by leather straps, and a jar of glass marbles tucked beneath the bed.

"Dominic de Luca," said Vidre, like she was feeling the name with her mouth. "Tell me what happened."

"There was a fight," Dominic said. He'd heard the stories about Vidre and what she could do with those daggers. He'd also heard stories about what lay beneath that glass armor. He folded his arms across his chest. "Welexi and Zerstor."

"The story preceded you," said Vidre. "Details."

"I don't know how or where it started, but Welexi came falling out of the sky, straight through the clouds, with his wings breaking into pieces behind him," said Dominic. "He hit the statue of Gennaro. I thought he was dead. He woke up just in time for Zerstor to come bounding across the city. They talked. A few guards came, and Zerstor killed them. And then they fought. It was ... tentative, then fast. Welexi was injured from the fall, or from what came before it. He — he turned into light at one point."

"He gave himself armor of light?" asked Vidre with a raised eyebrow.

"No," said Dominic, shaking his head and remembering being nearly blinded. "He turned into light, just for a moment. Zerstor's sword passed straight through him."

"He can't do that," said Vidre.

"Well, he did. Ask anyone who was there," said Dominic.

"Within the next hour, half the city will be claiming that they were there," said Vidre. "And the people who actually were there will be saying that they had a front row seat."

This is why I'm talking to you now, so I can separate truth from fiction. Continue."

"Welexi tried to press his advantage after that," said Dominic. "But he got his hand cut off. Or, part of it anyway. You saw the result. It looked like Zerstor was going to win, he had Welexi by the throat, so ... I picked up Welexi's weapon from the ground, and I killed Zerstor with it."

Vidre stared at him. "Zerstor is dead."

"He is," said Dominic. He had almost as much trouble believing it as she seemed to. "The spear passed through his armor, into his heart."

"He's too fast," said Vidre. "There's no way that you would be able to hit him, let alone pierce — no, I suppose if you had Welexi's spear, if he was distracted — and of course that's why he wants you to come with us. Well. This buggers things."

Her words were like slap to the face. "Do you understand that I saved his life?" asked Dominic.

"I do," said Vidre. "And you're going to be elevated for it, which I'm sure wasn't under consideration at all."

Dominic parted his mouth to respond, but only ended up frowning.

"I don't mean to slight you," said Vidre, "But this really does bugger things. It's a counter-story that needs to find its legs. I need to get moving on this, speak with the senatori, the ship is going to have leave port tomorrow instead of two days from now because we can't have Welexi showing weakness. I'll have to inform the bards — look, are you

alright with coming with us? We offer fame, fortune, and power. I would say beyond your wildest dreams, but I've seen how big dreams can be. We leave tomorrow morning, that gives you the rest of today to get ready." She watched him carefully.

"Yes," said Dominic. The world was coming back into focus. He had a path laid out in front of him, which was more than he could say for his life as it had been an hour ago. "Of course."

"And?" asked Vidre.

"And?" repeated Dominic.

"You were supposed to ask me where we're going," said Vidre, like she was talking to a child.

"Where are we going then?" asked Dominic.

"Torland," said Vidre. "And from there to elsewhere, part of Welexi's quest for the Numifex. We won't be back in the Sovento States for years."

"Okay," said Dominic. She was speaking too quickly for him, and clearly impatient. It was starting to become clear that this was his life now. He would be traveling with the Sunhawk and the Queen of Glass. He was one of them now, or would be soon.

"You're supposed to ask what the Numifex is — look, we'll do all this another time, when I have more patience and you're less awestruck, or whatever it is that's clouding your head," said Vidre. "And I do hope that this is not you at your smartest."

"Sorry," said Dominic. "It's been a long day."

"Is there anything I desperately need to know about you?" asked Vidre.

"No," said Dominic, quickly enough that it almost wasn't a lie; his brain simply hadn't caught up to his mouth, and it was only after the word was out that a cascade of other thoughts came following which showed how untrue that "no" really was. Right at the top of the list was Corta. He had half a mind to ask Vidre for money, to explain that he owed a debt of four thousand capi on top of the four thousand in his account, but he could very well imagine her laughing in his face and telling him that he wasn't worth that to Welexi. He wanted her to note some falseness in his denial, to extract the information, so he would be able to lay things out for her.

Vidre simply took him at his word though, and that was that.



The crowds weren't as thick when Dominic left the ship, though there were still quite a lot of people milling about. When they saw him, a ragged cheer rippled through their ranks, but it was clear that they were waiting for someone else — someone more important. He came down the plank and passed through the sailors in their white uniforms, and was grateful that no one in the crowd immediately began to grab for him, as they'd done in the plaza. The fact that a few of the sailors carried swords might have had something to do with that.

"Is it true you killed Zerstor?" asked an older man, who Dominic took for a pensioner.

"I did," said Dominic. "It was luck more than anything." The people parted way for him, but not easily. He wasn't the man they wanted to see, but he was by far the most interesting person around.

"What did they say in there?" asked a girl a few years younger than Dominic.

"They just wanted to thank me," said Dominic.

"What's your name?" asked an old woman.

"Dominic de Luca," he replied. To his mild irritation, a few of the people had started following him, walking alongside him as he made his way to his parents' house. Afterward he planned to stop by his apartment and pack his meager possessions away, and get back to the ship before anyone could change their mind. He would be long gone by the time Corta came looking for him. "I'm Dominic Lightscour now," he said, remembering the name that Welexi had given him. Welexi had a hundred names, each of them a testament to some good deed: Whitespear, Sunhawk, Brightshield, on and on for ages. Dominic resolved that Lightscour wouldn't be the last of the names he received.

With another two blocks and twenty questions, only the young girl was still keeping pace with him. He hadn't quite ran from anyone, but many of those who could afford to sit around the docks all day waiting for something interesting to happen were older, and not able to follow quickly. The

girl dogged at his steps despite his long strides, asking more questions.

"What do you do for a living?" she asked.

"I'm a runner, packages for the wealthy mostly," he replied. Usually it was contraband of one kind or another, stolen goods to be sold to those who didn't inquire too deeply about their provenance, or teas and spices that hadn't passed through the customs office. Sometimes it was drugs — malum, mostly — and sometimes it was proscribed literature. Corta had fingers in many pies. Dominic wasn't supposed to look inside the packages, but he did whenever there wasn't an obvious seal on one of them. There'd been a time when he'd taken his own cut, but he'd stopped that when Santino had been caught doing the same and paid with his life.

He glanced around as they passed through a five-way intersection. He was vaguely worried about another mob forming. Thanks to Welexi, everyone knew his name, or would soon, but practically no one knew his face. He couldn't have been seen by that many people in all, maybe more if he counted the ones that had been watching from the rooftops or leaning out their windows. Eventually he would be known like Welexi was. He was sure that when he returned to the ship in an hour's time there would be all sorts of people wanting to meet him, senatori, merchants, and everyone else. He still had time before everyone recognized him on sight. If not for the girl, he would be virtually anonymous.

"How old are you?" the girl asked.

"I'm seventeen," Dominic replied. "Look, do you think we might part ways here? I'm worried that you're going to call attention to me, and there are things that I need to get done in the next few hours that I don't think are going to be possible for very long."

"Like what?" asked the girl. She continued on, right next to him, and Dominic contemplated running away from her before deciding that he had a little bit more dignity than that.

"I need to speak with my parents," said Dominic. "And with the friends I share a room with." And after that, slink back to the ship before Corta had any chance to take his hide. He had a day though, she'd said that.

"I can wait outside," said the girl with a smile.

"I would really prefer to be left alone," said Dominic.

Her smile dropped. "You're new," she said. "If you want to be an illustrati you need to have an ombra, and I'm as good as any."

"Aren't you a little young —" Dominic began.

"Not that kind of ombra," she said with a moue, "Like an assistant."

"You're still a little young," he replied. They were coming up on his parents' shop, and he wanted her gone before then. "Look, if you want to help me out, then just leave me to my business. In the meantime, start telling some stories about me. Like a bard. Alright? And if I need your assistance later on, I'll come find you."

To his surprise, the girl nodded. "You can find me near the Orrico fountain, in the small building with a blue door." She held out her hand. "Clarissa Fiscella."

Dominic shook her hand, and then she was off like a dart. She was playing to her archetype, in the way that those who sought fame often did. He didn't need a precocious youth in his life though, and he had no intention of ever seeing her again, let alone seeking her out. He would leave Gennaro tomorrow, and when he returned he would be a different person entirely. That was the opportunity that had opened up in front of him. He'd been thinking too small when he'd thought about asking Vidre for money to pay off Corta.

His parents were bakers, and the moment he opened the front door the smell brought him back to his childhood. He had spent many early mornings working dough with his father, and many evenings cleaning the shop while his mother rang up customers. He had stolen sugar from the sack in the back with his sister, sticking a wet finger in it and sucking it clean while listening for parental footsteps. His arms and hands had suffered innumerable burns from the accursed oven. That had been his childhood, the smell of it alone was nearly enough to knock the wind from him.

"Dominic!" called his mother when he stepped inside. It was warm in the bakery, as it always was. The rooms upstairs had never lacked for heat in the winters. "What are you doing here?"

"It's complicated," he replied. "Is dad around?"

"In back, I'll get him," said his mother. "We're making a cake for one of the senatori." She waved a hand towards the

loaves of bread that were stacked up in baskets on the wall, with olives, cheeses, and garlic baked into the top of most of them. "Pick out a loaf to take home."

Dominic waited, and stuck his hands in his pockets. His sister Nilda was behind the counter. She didn't say hello to him, or give him a particularly welcoming look. He nodded to her, but it was some time before she nodded back. After that, she began cleaning the counter. She was trying her best to ignore him, and so he ignored her in return. He wanted to ask where the others were, but he could make his guesses. Firmino and Marcello would be making deliveries, and Anna would be studying with whatever tutor his parents could convince to work for bread. The patterns of the family had been well-established when he left, and there was no reason to think that they had changed.

His mother came back into the store's central area and gave Dominic a tight hug. His father came much slower, wiping his hands on his apron. He looked much older than Dominic remembered — he'd gone gray at the temples, and where he'd always been a thick man, now he had a bit of a pouch. He was sagging, in more ways than one.

"Dominic," said his father. Dominic's mother stepped to the side, and looked back and forth between the two of them.

"Dad," said Dominic. He felt like a child again. "Look, I had to come by here because you'll probably be getting some people that are looking for me —"

"Are you in trouble?" his father asked with a frown.

"There was a fight in Nuncio Plaza," said Dominic. "Welexi and Zerstor, a final confrontation." He wasn't sure how to say the next part. It still didn't feel like it had really happened.

"Were you picking pockets?" his sister asked from behind the counter. She was scowling at him. "Nothing like a fight to distract people, isn't that right?"

"I was just watching," said Dominic. He tried to force down his anger. "Welexi lost part of his hand, cut off by Zerstor's sword, and it looked like he was about to lose, so I stepped in and ... it's probably better that you hear it from me, because you're going to hear it one way or another, but I killed Zerstor."

His mother gasped and put her hands to her mouth, but his father said nothing, and only gave Dominic the same sort of look that he'd always had when he was going over his ledger at the end of the day.

"How?" his father asked.

"Welexi had dropped one of his spears. I picked it up and ... it was over quickly. I got him by surprise." It was a hard thing for Dominic to put into words. There hadn't been much to it. It could have been any other person in the crowd. It seems like a dozen people should have been going towards the spear the moment Zerstor's back was turned, but it had only been him. "I got lucky." The more he thought about it, the more he thought about all the ways that it could have gone wrong.

"Gambling with your life," his father said.

Dominic nodded. There was no use in denying that.

His father shook his head. "Well, if you're telling the truth we'll get a surge in business at least. But we won't lie for you."

"Lie for me?" Dominic asked. He could already feel tightness in his throat.

"I won't make you out to be a hero," his father said. "I won't pretend you're someone to look up to. Now if that's all, I have a cake to bake." His father turned back towards the kitchen.

Dominic balled up his fists. "Dad, I'm leaving the city. I'm going to be Welexi's protege. Don't you understand how important this is? How big of a thing it is? I'll be gone for years!"

"So go then," his father replied. He folded his arms across his chest. "We wish you the best." Dominic spun on his heel and opened the door to the bakery. He had hoped that his mother at least would offer up an objection, but there was no sound from her. He wished that he could have said goodbye to his brothers, or his sister Anna, but standing in the same room with his father for much longer would have hurt too much. He would have to hope that Anna understood.

He turned the corner to get to his apartment, and came face to face with one of Corta's enormous sons.



Vidre sat in a dimly lit room with two bards on either side of her. Their names were Leon and Marco, and both had

thick beards and curly black hair. They sometimes claimed to be brothers, though that was just a bit of flourish you had to expect from men who crafted stories for a living. They had already talked about Welexi's injuries, and the stories that would have to be told to downplay them while he recovered. It was almost universally accepted that showing weakness wasn't worth whatever you gained in short-term sympathy, and besides that, the fight with Zerstor was a capstone on their time in Gennaro, and there was no point in an extended denouement.

"His name is Dominic de Luca," said Vidre. "He's going to be a new addition to our crew, Welexi's protege. His domain is shadow, which should help matters. There's a duality there. Light saved by shadow, we can use that."

"I swear I've heard that name before," said Leon.

Vidre shook her head. "I'd doubt that. He's a complete unknown."

"The rooftop races," said Marco. "I lost twenty capi betting on him."

"He's one of Corta's whelps?" asked Leon with a raised eyebrow.

"Corta?" asked Vidre. They'd spent the last nine days in Gennaro, and while Vidre had memorized a flurry of names, that hadn't been one of the ones that stuck. "Who is that?"

"She's a criminal, the kind that the senatori don't have too much of a problem with," said Leon. "There are the rooftop races of course, gambling, smuggling, bribery, aggressive loans which the banks wouldn't take, and a few other

matters like that. As far as the underworld goes, she's one of the top three in Gennaro." He frowned. "I left her out of my brief, I didn't think she was quite important enough."

"What does this say about Dominic?" asked Vidre. She had a glass of wine in front of her, which she hadn't touched. She was too on-edge for alcohol, and had a suspicion that she would have to keep her wits about her until they set sail. Welexi had looked downright sickly when she left. It would be the perfect time for someone to make an attempt on his life.

"Oh, likely your new boy is a criminal himself," said Leon. "Most of the racers are. Being fleet of foot makes you valuable among the criminal element, in case someone needs a lookout that can outpace the guards. That was the genesis for Corta's races, I believe."

"This presents a problem from a narrative standpoint," said Marco. He turned to look at his partner, then back to Vidre. "We've been trying to weave two narratives of redemption, one for Gaelwyn and one for you. Gael is going to be making up for his sins if he lives to be a hundred, and you're waiting for the proper moment for that part of your story to conclude. To add on a third redemption arc concurrent with those two is going to strain credulity, and by the rule of three, something has to be different about this one."

Vidre let out a long, low sigh. "Point taken. Welexi as serial reformer is questionable, but to say he's working on all three of us just doesn't work."

"Especially not after what Gael did in Grantholm," said Leon.

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room.

"We can try to scrub Dominic's past clean," said Vidre. "But we'd have to interrogate him first, and if he is a criminal he's already lied to me once. I could kick him off the ship, but that doesn't serve a narrative, and Welexi would likely object. So we pivot. It's not a story of redemption at all, it's a story of betrayal. We spread some rumors about a shadowy conversation down by the docks, or whispers from cloaked figures, and there's an implication that Welexi is going to find a dagger in his back, that he was too trusting or too good."

"Setting the boy up to take a fall?" asked Leon.

"No," said Vidre. "It's like I said, the narrative can't show Dominic valiantly saving the day and then immediately cast him as a villain, even if that's what his domain naturally suggests. We make the rumors vague. It's not necessarily Dominic plotting, maybe it's Gael. Maybe it's me."

Leon and Marco looked at each other.

"We need to shape this story," said Vidre. "Make it into something that people will want to share, to talk over. Betrayal works for that. There's an element of the unknown that will appeal to people. Will Welexi be betrayed by the monster, the whore, or the thief? Will he manage to survive? And if we need to bring a resolution, it can simply be that one of the crew was the betrayer, a poisoner or some-such thing. A viper snuck into his bed perhaps — some ridicu-

lous bit of showmanship no real assassin would ever use. We have months to figure that out."

"Possibly we complete the redemption arc for Dominic then?" asked Leon. "Just to get it out of the way. Dominic heroically saves his mentor for a second time, removing any doubts about his trustworthiness. Depending on what his actual crimes have been, or at least what comes to light in the next few weeks that can be treated as credible, perhaps it'll be easy to say he's turned over a new leaf."

"There's a problem," said Marco. He gulped down his wine. "We can't sell this. Not the bit about betrayal. It's too transparent. Leon and I are known to be in your employ."

"Use intermediaries," said Vidre. "You're going to have to anyway, to spread the rumors we need. Write under a pen name. Figure out a way to make it work. And in the meantime, write the songs and stories about the battle that Dominic brought to an end. I know this is extra work, but it's necessary. We'll be in touch." She stood up without waiting to listen to their complaints. "I need to go find Dominic."



Dominic's first instinct was to run, but Corta's son reached forward and grabbed him by the tunic.

"Mother would like a chat," said the large man. He was six and a half feet tall, with the musculature of a pit fighter. One of the sons had actually taken to that line of work, but Dominic could never keep them straight, and all of them were of similar build.

"Tell her I'll pay her," said Dominic. He struggled, and received a hard blow to the side of the head in return. Dominic wasn't completely useless in a fight, but Corta's son had too many pounds on him, as well as years of experience being his mother's enforcer. He also had a truncheon hanging conspicuously at his side. "It hasn't even been a day."

"We got word that things have been exciting for you," said Corta's son. Tito? Tino? All their names began with the same letter, which made them even harder to keep track of. "Mother wants you to not do anything foolish."

Dominic was marched forward with one hand pinned behind his back. A few people took note of them as they made their way to the restaurant where Corta made her headquarters, but no one said anything. Dominic was anonymous again, just another young man in poor clothing, not a would-be illustrati.

Corta was sitting in a booth near the back, her customary spot. The restaurant was empty. Dominic was pushed down into a seat in front of Corta. She grinned at him. She was a full-figured woman, with a blouse that was more unbuttoned than was proper, which showed off her breasts and the brassiere that struggled to hold them. Her wine-stained teeth were large and flat. She had thick rings of gold on most of her fingers, and these clinked against her goblet when she drank from it, which was often.

"You said I could take the day off," said Dominic.

"That was before I got word that you killed an illustrati," said Corta. She tapped her painted nails against the

wooden table. "And here I had thought you were nothing exceptional."

"I'll have the money to you tomorrow," said Dominic. "Like we agreed."

"Well, I hardly believe that, now do I?" asked Corta. She sipped at her wine. "I had wondered, after I heard, why a man would so readily risk his life. Even one so foolish as you, even one who had lost an enormous bet. It was a puzzle. So I took a look at the proof of credit you gave me, and I'm sure that you know what I found there. A four turned into an eight. I was going to kill you, but after having some time to reflect, now I think perhaps we can help each other. You're about to be famous."

"Alright," said Dominic quickly. "Partners. And I'll get you the money I owe you."

"Ah," said Corta. "But you were a little too fast to acquiesce, and of course we have the problem that I can't trust you in the slightest. What plans are going through that thick skull of yours? How do you intend a second betrayal? Do you think that killing Zerstor and saving Welexi gives you so much power that you can stand against me? Do you think that you can find an ally willing to tangle with me?"

The door to the restaurant opened, and light spilled in. The earlier clouds had passed, and the sun lit Vidre up from behind, highlighting the red in her blond hair. Where the light hit her glass armor it reflected into the restaurant, momentarily lighting up the place until she stepped inside and let the door close behind her. A pair of glass daggers hung at her hips.

"Ah, Dominic, I had wondered whether I would find you here," said Vidre. "It seems that you weren't entirely honest with me when you said that there was nothing that I should know about."

"Lady Vidre," said Corta. She didn't seem the least bit surprised to see the Queen of Glass come into her empty restaurant. "Come, have a seat."

"No thank you," said Vidre. "I'm only here to grab my charge." She stood some ten feet away from the booth where Corta and Dominic sat, with Corta's son looming close by. Vidre was halfway turned toward the door with an expectant look on her face.

"Yes, I'll just be going," said Dominic. He stood up, and Corta's son stepped forward to put a hand on his shoulder and roughly force him back down.

"Hush," said Corta. "The women are talking." She turned her eyes to Vidre and licked her lips. "You see, the problem is that dear Dominic owes me a sum of eight thousand capi, tried to cheat me, and furthermore is my employee —"

"I'll pay it," said Vidre with a shrug. "Anything else?"

"You can't simply pay —"

"Of course I can," said Vidre. "You have to know that eight thousand capi is nothing to me."

Corta glowered at Vidre. "And what is *he* to you?"

"I don't have time for this right now," said Vidre. "Dominic, let's go. Corta, I'll authorize you to take money from our vault, go to the Banco Albero at your leisure."

Dominic again began to stand up, and again Corta's son moved forward, but this time there was a sound of footsteps and a rush of air. When Dominic looked over, Vidre had one of her daggers pressing against the stomach of Corta's son, with the other dagger pointed lazily in Corta's direction.

"I don't like to judge a book by its cover," said Vidre. "But when I walked in here, I thought to myself, 'My, that looks like a very dumb man.' And lo and behold, it turned out that my first instincts were correct. I hate that — when a man is all surface, no hidden depths, no subversions of my expectations of him. It's so dull. Now, I suppose the only question that remains here is whether I'm going to have to paint the walls of this shithole of a restaurant with your blood."

Corta clinked her rings against her goblet with narrowed eyes. "Dominic broke contract with me," said Corta. "He tried to steal from me, after I provided for him for years. This is about more than money."

"Then the money is off the table," said Vidre. "I'm taking Dominic, no payment on offer."

"I will not allow it," said Corta. Her breathing had become very controlled. She had both her hands on the table.

"Her domain is sound," Dominic said quickly.

"Look," said Vidre. "I think you might have some misunderstanding of who I am. You have your own little realm of influence here. You're one of maybe fifty people in the city with any real power, enough that you can get some use out of it instead of just having a parlor trick. Perhaps you can even hurt someone with it. That's you." Vidre smiled.

"I'm one of the most famous women on the planet. There's a small temple in Luchistan that you can only reach by riding a mule for twenty miles up treacherous mountain paths, and they tell stories of me there. My name is muttered in small jungle villages, in huts on the frozen tundra, in every corner of this earth. I've killed hundreds of men with twice your power, and they were all trained soldiers. I'm stronger than you. I'm faster than you. I can bend steel with my bare hands and catch a cannonball in mid-flight. Do you want to make this about raw might?"

Corta wavered. She looked at her son, and then at Dominic, then back to Vidre. "Sound shatters glass," was her feeble reply. Her voice had been sapped of its confidence.

"And then what?" asked Vidre. "My armor shatters, and I'm left with a million shards of glass to kill you with. It wouldn't be a new experience. It wouldn't hurt me. I haven't been cut by glass since I was ten years old. The domain of sound has never scared me before, and it's not going to start now." She spun her daggers around in her hands. "I'm going to leave with Dominic. Do I need to kill you?"

"No," replied Corta. She sank down and drank what was left of her wine. Her eyes didn't meet Vidre's.

"Good," said Vidre. "And while everything I know about you could fit a pair of sentences, let me assure you that if you do anything to Dominic's family or his loved ones, or if you attempt retribution because of this unfortunate embarrassment, I will take a great deal of pleasure in slicing the skin off your face. That's the sort of thing they write songs about." She nodded to Corta's son. "That goes double for

you. And get some education, find a hobby, something. if you're going to be a thug, at least be less boring about it. It's offensive."

She put her daggers back onto her belt and walked to the door without looking behind her.

Dominic followed, though he wasn't nearly so nonchalant.

3. Nighttime Ballet

There were people waiting outside. Some of them had small glass trinkets with them, on chains around their necks, or held in their hands. It wasn't one of the enormous crowds, not one like at the fight or down by the docks, but there were enough people that it was hard to see the gaps between them. Vidre's followers tended to be younger girls and older men, the former because of some combination of envy and adoration, and the latter for more lecherous reasons.

"Thank you for your patience," Vidre said to them. "I have retrieved the fledgling hero Dominic Lightscour from the clutches of that criminal woman, and all is right with the world, save for one thing." She turned to Dominic. "You lied to me."

"I'm sorry," said Dominic. Everyone was looking at him. "I'm not sure what else I can say, how I can explain myself, but ... perhaps it would be better as a private conversation."

"It's easier to bend the truth when only one person is listening," said Vidre. "Anything you have to say can be said in front of these people. They kindly waited here while I went in to deal with your mess. Explain for them how you came into this predicament. And don't lie; I can see the truth in a man's eyes." She nodded for him to continue, and there was something in her countenance that made him consider his words carefully.

"I was a runner," said Dominic. Vidre couldn't actually tell when a person was lying just by looking into their eyes, he was almost entirely sure of that. It was just poetic language, even if she probably preferred people thinking she was being literal. He saw her raise an eyebrow just a fraction, and knew he had to continue. The thought of losing this opportunity was like a stab to the heart, and he needed to say whatever it was that Vidre wanted to hear, if he could figure out what that was. He went with a confession, and pitched his voice to the crowd. "But before I was a runner, I was a thief." There was some murmuring from the crowd. They were all watching him, unabashedly. "I stole from shops because I didn't have any money, and then I began to steal from shops because I was good at it, and I didn't realize the harm I was causing." Dominic had seen enough of his friends go before a judge to know how these things went. There were rules to it. Don't admit to anything specific, show contrition, promise reform, talk about your crimes like they're all in the past, and maybe you get a few days in the stocks instead of a year of back-breaking galley slavery. "After a while, all of my friends were thieves, and we started trying to show each other up. We would steal fancier things from more difficult targets, making a game out of it. The older boys taught us how to pickpocket. I started taking orders, so I could get my cut from the larger schemes, and then one day I realized that I had begun working for Corta without even knowing it."

Vidre nodded. "You could find a similar story in any city in the world," she said, more to the crowd than to him.

"That's how we sin, a little at first in a way that seems harmless, a bit of bread taken because we're hungry, and by the time we realize the depths that we've sunk to, it can seem too late to crawl out. We make our sin a way of life."

"Yes," said Dominic. The story was flowing easily now. "I didn't feel like there was any way to escape it. I picked up the spear and attacked Zerstor because it felt like my final chance." He watched Vidre closely, trying to divine the meaning of every small movement of her face and the subtle shifts in her posture. Outwardly she was projecting power, speaking to him like she was the sole person in charge of his fate, which was effectively the case with Welexi so badly injured. This was just as much an act for her as it was for him, a presentation that they were giving to the crowd, but whatever Vidre was feeling beneath that surface was hidden to him.

"I can see truth in a man's eyes," said Vidre. "But I can't see his future. You saved Welexi and thereby took a first step towards redemption. For that, I forgive your crimes. If you stray from that path, I will not hesitate to slit your throat, whatever else passes between us."

"I won't, my lady," said Dominic. He wasn't sure of the proper form of address. "I regret not explaining matters to you earlier, and I can only hope that I prove myself to you in the days to come."

"Welexi is injured, and in need of our assistance," said Vidre. "Consider that assistance your first task as his apprentice." She turned and began walking, and he followed just behind her. Some of the people who had been watching

left, but at least a dozen of them fell into step, hanging around like a cloud of bad air. Dominic's eyes were firmly on Vidre.

As the story went, Vidre had been sold into marriage by her father for a sum of forty drams. Her purchaser was the king of Geswein, who had seen her while strolling through a market and taken an instant liking to her.

He was forty-eight, and she was nine.

The king doted on her, more like she was his daughter than his wife. The indulgences were stories of their own, grand feasts of a hundred courses, cunningly crafted toys plated in gold, and festivals that lasted for weeks. Vidre had already become one of the *illustrati* on the basis of her royalty and the scandalous circumstances of her marriage, but the stories of her extravagant life spread quickly, and she was thereby granted extraordinary power for one so young. She used her domain to shape glass trinkets for herself and those who had found her favor. When she was unhappy, the glass would shatter beneath her fingers and form sharp edges that never seemed to cut at her flesh. For seven years she played in her husband's gardens, spending his money on earthly delights and generally being a terror to anyone that didn't amuse her. When her husband died, she was unceremoniously booted from Geswein by a group of merchants who had pretensions towards democracy and no respect for her nominal title of Queen.

She ended up in Abalon, a small kingdom with a hundred nobles. She had grown into a woman, and her appetites had changed. Where once it was toys and treats,

now it was men. It was said that she slept with all hundred of Abalon's nobles, sometimes two or three at a time, and when that had been accomplished, she moved on to the lower classes. The stories of her childhood were still circulating the world, and now they were joined by stories of adult promiscuity.

She stepped onto the battlefield by accident. She had been sharing a bed with one of the generals of Abalon during a brief border war, and had taken the whole thing for a lark until the camp was overrun. Her suitcase had been filled overflowing with her trinkets of glass, and from this great mass she fashioned weapons for herself. She was one of the major illustrati, her comings and goings spoken of in taverns across the world, and when the soldiers came to her tent, she moved through them like a wind made of blades. Thereafter she came out to meet the army and turned the tides of battle. It was sometimes said that she was nude for that battle, her bare skin hidden only by crystal-clear glass, but Dominic thought that was far-fetched, even for a story of the illustrati.

Vidre became something of a mercenary after that, as bloodshed joined her growing list of appetites. Money was of little concern to her, so she instead sought out wars that were interesting in some way. She had no training in warfare, but summers in the Conto Mountains and winters hunting warwolves in the Sverna Valley worked their own sort of magic on the woman clad in glass. Men were eager to teach her, if only to put themselves in her company. She sliced a path through dozens of wars, almost always at

the frontlines, her swiftness and strength compounding the advantages that her razor-sharp blades gave her.

She was just starting to get bored with the killing when Welexi found her, and they had been sailing together ever since.

That was how the stories went, anyway. As Dominic watched her walk, he tried to sort out what of it was likely true, and found that he had no real way of knowing. It was certain that it wasn't *all* true. They said that in her childhood Vidre had kept a puppy as her constant companion, and when the puppy grew too old for her liking she had fed it shards of glass just to see what would happen. Dominic didn't believe that one, but it was something his mother had repeated more than once. There was a persistent story told among his friends about how Vidre had once had sex with an elephant, but Franco had admitted to making it up. That didn't stop anyone from repeating it, with new details added every time. Before he'd met her, he was willing to entertain the possibility that the woman was almost entirely mythological. Now, he wasn't so sure. If it was an edifice, it was a masterfully constructed one.

When he realized that they were heading toward the ship, he almost asked whether they could stop by his shared apartment first, but his reasons for returning there were more sentimental than practical, and he couldn't very well say that he was going to be a hero and then ask for permission to pick up a second pair of pants — not with all these people around listening in. He would have to speak to her privately later on.

It was sunset when they reached the ship. Gaelwyn came out on the deck to meet them. His apron and hands were both bloody, but he greeted them with a smile.

"I put him out," said Gaelwyn. "A simple constriction of the carotid, not terribly good for him but better than having him endlessly pushing himself. After I released it, he stayed down. He needs more blood, but there's no one with that domain in Gennaro, not at the level of power needed for domain genesis."

"He needs to be able to make an appearance tomorrow when we leave," said Vidre. "Whatever that takes."

Gael's face fell. "He needs to stay in bed. It's a small miracle that he was able to stumble back here. It will take a month and a half at a minimum for all the bones to mend, and he's going to have to learn how to use a hand made of light, at least until we can make a trip to the Bone Warden."

"I'm not asking," said Vidre. "And you know that Welexi would agree with me."

Gael nodded, but he didn't look happy.

"And stay by his side tonight," Vidre continued. "There's a good chance that we'll have visitors. Not the courteous kind."

"What do you expect me to do about it?" asked Gael. His voice wavered.

Vidre rolled her eyes. "Whatever your conscience demands. Keep him company, tend to what wounds still remain, be there to raise the alarm. I'm not asking you to rip anyone apart at the seams."

Gael winced. "Alright. Another sleepless night. Before we leave tomorrow we'll need new sheets and bedding, he's bled through what was there. His armor is in a shambles as well."

"I'll see to it," said Vidre. "Our new companion and I need to have a talk, if you don't mind."

Gael went down into the ship with only a brief, pitying glance at Dominic. Vidre rested her hands on the pommels of daggers.

"The pecking order on the ship is becoming clear to me," said Dominic. He tried to smile, but it faltered when Vidre's mouth remained in a thin line.

"We got the public explanation out of the way," said Vidre. "That went well enough, I can give you credit for that." She looked to the dock, where the sailors with swords were making sure that people were staying well back. "I shouldn't have sent you out there on your own, I see that now, and I can take some of the blame."

Dominic kept silent. Vidre's eyes turn back toward him. Though the light was fading, Dominic found that his ability to see wasn't impaired at all. It wasn't exactly as though the deck of the ship was brightly lit, but he could see clearly all the same. His connection to his domain had deepened, and he ached to test his new limits.

"Any man who inserts himself into a battle between the illustrati is a fool," said Vidre. "If you stab a man through the heart, if you do it perfectly, if his blood is flowing swiftly, it takes a matter of seconds for him to drop. Any other mortal wound, aside from piercing or cutting through the

spine or the brain, will leave you with a man that can still fight you, even if he's not long for the world. I don't think you properly understand the damage that Zerstor could have done. Zerstor should have killed you before you could touch him. And even though you touched him, it shouldn't have killed him. And even though it killed him, he should have had enough time to drive his sword through you. I can't overstate how lucky you got. You were an absolute fool, one unhindered by his total lack of knowledge, and you were rewarded for it. What probably saved you was that Zerstor couldn't get over your sheer, idiotic audacity."

"You're upset that I wasn't punished," said Dominic. His cheeks were flushed, and he hoped that the lanterns the sailors were lighting wouldn't let her see it. "You think that if someone does something brave but reckless, they should be smashed down for it, ground into paste just because you think that's the way of it. You would rather I had died, and that Welexi had died too, just so that the world could be 'fair'."

"The next time I'm in the middle of a fight, the kind that unfortunately tend to happen with a large number of civilians around, one of those bystanders is going to think to himself, 'Well, Lightscour did it, why can't I?' I'll be bristling with glass, armed with unimaginably sharp blades, and I'll be going up against someone wreathed in flame, and this hypothetical idiot, inspired by you, is going to try to be a hero, and I'm going to have to watch him die for it."

Dominic was silent. Vidre's hands were clenched around her daggers.

"I've watched so many men die," said Vidre. "The ones that go willingly to their end are easy. They don't want to die, but they've accepted that it's a possibility, or even an eventuality. There are these other men though, the ones that think they're somehow invincible, who think that they're going to engage the enemy and walk away unscathed. Sometimes I was that enemy, and I had to prove their vulnerability to them. I hated it. Still hate it, though my line of work has made it more rare." She shook her head. "And I just came in and rescued you from a situation of your own making, and it's not so much that that bothers me, it's the fact that you haven't learned anything from it except for the fact that you can escape unscathed."

"I do understand," said Dominic. "I should have at least been more honest with you. It would have made things go more smoothly. I wasn't thinking."

"No," said Vidre. "That's the problem, you were thinking, but you were thinking that you could get away with it, and sail off across the sea with us before your recent past could catch up to you, without having to jeopardize your place on this ship. You underestimated how badly things would go for you, and you're lucky that I showed up when I did. I was only coming to speak with her, not expecting to find you there. If you had been dragged in there an hour later, we wouldn't have had a choice but to leave without you."

There was a small, stubborn part of Dominic that was fairly confident that he could have handled it himself. He could have convinced Corta into letting him go, pretended at being defeated so that she wouldn't see him as a risk, and made it back to the ship. He could feel some newfound strength coursing through him, though less than he would have expected. It seemed like it would have been enough to make a difference. He resisted the urge to say as much to Vidre.

"Welexi needs me," said Dominic. "I'm part of his story now. You can't have so much buildup between two titans and then have it end with a random civilian turning a defeat into a victory, Welexi explained that much to me. He's using me, and I'm getting a lot out of it, and that's all well and good. But that does mean that we're going to be traveling together, so ... look, I'm sorry. I am. I'm not sorry that things worked out for me, but I'm here now, and I want to get along."

"Fine," said Vidre. "I had one of the cabins cleared out, it's the second one on your right. Go get some sleep, and Welexi can deal with you in the morning." She turned and looked out towards the sea. There was indistinct chatter from the docks that drifted over to the ship. The ship was a fair distance from anyone; some of the sailors had been put to guard duty and closed off a portion of the docks. Dominic could still see them in the dark though, small clusters of men and women on shore leave, and a few people who were watching the ship, waiting for something exciting to

happen, even if the nighttime view left something to be desired.

"You said visitors?" asked Dominic.

Vidre didn't turn around. "How much did you know about Zerstor? I know there are laws in the Sovento States against talking about people like him, but I know how effective those laws tend to be."

"He was a villain," said Dominic. The sound of a man's skull being crushed had left its impression. "He killed people so that he could be famous, so that he could get power, so that he could kill more people, on and on."

"That unfortunately describes a hundred men and a fair number of women," said Vidre. "But Zerstor was special. He was smart. He picked his fights carefully. He made a name for himself by meddling, isolating those topics that people couldn't stop themselves from talking about and inserting himself into that discussion with all the subtlety of a cannon. He was an abolitionist for a few years. He would descend on plantations with sword in hand, or stowaway on slave ships and unleash hell when they were out to sea. He freed thousands, maybe tens of thousands."

"And they would talk about him," said Dominic. The purpose was clear enough. He had heard of illustrati freeing slaves, but hadn't realized that Zerstor was one of them. The Sovento States held no slaves, and didn't allow slaver ships in port. "They would tell stories about the man in rusted armor that saved them."

Vidre nodded. "And when the slaves were recaptured, they would spread those stories to other slaves. The slaves

wouldn't have the same incentives not to speak his name. The laws would stop them even less than they stop everyone else. Not that the taboos do much good in the first place," said Vidre. "Some of the slave masters took to cutting out the tongues of their property, in the hopes of curbing Zerstor's power, but a single person is inconsequential when it comes to our fame, no matter how much of a fanatic they are. Zerstor didn't really care about the slaves, of course. It was just a path to power. Once the legend had been cemented, he moved on to other schemes, other places that he could barge into the global conversation. He'd pick fights with powerful opponents, not for any real reason except that it would make waves. For a better part of a decade he was a thorn in the Iron King's side." Dominic had heard those stories. Zerstor had rusted hundreds of the Iron King's cannons, and they had fought each other a few times as well. "And then he was killed by a street rat."

"You said visitors," Dominic reminded her.

"Yes," said Vidre. "That was one of the ways that Zerstor was clever. He would team up with other rogues, so that both their legends would grow. These were always temporary alliances, never more than a month or two, but it was the sort of thing that people couldn't help but talk about. Zerstor and Sanguin, Zerstor and Boletus, Zerstor and the Animal Twins, on and on. He was a dangerous friend for anyone to have, only an ally for as long as you were useful to him, but there was something about him that many found compelling." Vidre sighed. "So there's a good chance that he came to Gennaro with someone, and with Welexi being

injured as he is, it would be an opportune time to strike. Those are the sort of visitors I'm talking about."

"Ah," said Dominic. He watched her carefully.

"They might also want to kill you," said Vidre.

He almost asked why, but it was obvious enough. He was Welexi's would-be protege. Of course that would make him a target. "I can take care of myself."

"Alright," said Vidre. "Let's spar then." She turned to look at him, and slowly shifted her position so her feet were shoulder-width apart and her hands were held loosely in front of her.

"I didn't mean like that," said Dominic. He made no attempt to match her fighting stance.

"Come on," said Vidre. "There aren't too many ways that I can get out my frustrations, especially if no one takes the bait and goes after Welexi."

"You'd kill me," said Dominic. "And you're fully armored."

Vidre looked down at her glass breastplate. "You haven't seen me fully armored," she replied. "When I'm serious about battle, I don't have an inch of skin exposed. The bodily domains are too dangerous." She pulled her armor apart at the middle, as though there was a hidden seam there, and laid the two half shells of it beside one of the ship's masts. "It should probably go without saying that one doesn't normally kill one's sparring partners. I pledge not to hurt you too much more than what Gaelwyn can fix. You think you can handle yourself? You think if Leiptora

comes slithering up on the ship you'll be able to do a damned thing about it? Show me."

Dominic settled into a crouch and put his hands in front of him. Vidre was four or five inches shorter than him, and he had at least fifty pounds of muscle on her, so it wasn't absurd to think that he could beat her, so long as she didn't have use of her daggers. What's more, he could feel his newfound power, a speed and strength that would be easy to tap. The whole city must know his name by now. The story of the fight in the plaza would have spread to every home and every tavern. He wasn't on her level, but physical strength was still supposed to count for something.

"My god you're a fool," said one of the sailors. Dominic realized only belatedly that they were being watched, not just by the faraway hopefuls, but by the men and women that made up the crew. The sun had set some time ago, and the deck of the ship was lit by lanterns. It was easy for him to see, almost as though it was daylight, and that would give him an advantage over Vidre.

"Seaman," said Vidre. "Give us a count."

"Three," said one of the sailors. Dominic's thoughts went to Corta's booming voice, and the moments before a race began. There was nothing on the line here though, nothing but his pride. "Two. One."

Vidre launched herself towards him and kicked forward with both feet, hitting him squarely in the chest. Dominic tumbled backwards and slammed his head up against the railing of the ship before slumping to the ground. The sailors applauded, and Dominic heard a few drunken

cheers from the docks. Apparently this humiliation was clear enough to be visible from there.

"I did a backflip when I kicked you," said Vidre. "You missed it." She was smiling wide and feral. "Don't ever try anything like I just did in a real fight, by the way."

"You're fast," said Dominic with a cough. The back of his head was throbbing, but he got to his feet anyway. "Really, really fast."

"I am," said Vidre. "Also quite strong. I also have a decade of experience, and trained under many masters. Ready for round two, or are you going to give up?"

Dominic spit over the side of the ship. "Ready."

"Three," called the same sailor. "Two," Dominic was ready this time, in a more defensive position and prepared to grab her, "One."

Vidre just stood there. She wasn't even in a fighting stance. She put her hands on her hips and cocked her head to the side, grinning at him. "Welexi looks down on exhibition matches. He thinks it's poor form to flaunt our power. The only reason I stopped doing them was one too many dangerous people making their way past my security. You sign up to fight twenty yokels at once, and all of the sudden there's a man growing horns from his forehead, ready to gore you to death."

Dominic responded by manipulating his domain. The lanterns were casting shadows where the panes of glass met at an iron strut, he thickened those until the light was completely obscured, as though the lanterns had been snuffed out. He was surprised by how easy it was, and smiled in

the darkness. Vidre was lit only by the waning moon, and without the benefit of night vision.

"At least you're smart enough to cheat," she said. She was still smiling, and still with her hands on her hips. It would still be bright enough for her to see him moving, but if he could catch her off guard it would be harder for her to block or dodge.

He lunged forward and threw a right hook, and Vidre calmly took the hit, right in the cheekbone. Her head moved only fractionally. She grabbed his wrist and ducked down to push her shoulder into his stomach, and before he knew it, he was sailing up over her, through the air. He landed on the deck of the ship, and Vidre pressed her boot lightly against his neck. Again, the sailors applauded.

"I don't know how much you think I'm boasting about my abilities, but you have a very long way to go until you can match me," said Vidre. "It's my hope that this will teach you some humility, but if not, at least it's fun to beat you up."

"Again," said Dominic. Vidre raised an eyebrow, and pulled her foot back. "Rule of three," said Dominic as he climbed to his feet. "The third time, I have to win."

"Depends on the story we're telling," said Vidre. "Are you the new recruit who gets his ass handed to him by a waif? Or are you the new recruit who beats one of the strongest illustrati on his first night aboard the *Zenith* and thereby shows his worth? Which story is more plausible? Which is more true? Is the third time special because you

finally get the better of me? Or is it special because I hit you hard enough that you can't get back up?"

Dominic didn't wait for the count this time, and moved towards her. For a moment he thought that he might be able to land a solid hit, one she wasn't prepared for, even if it was sloppy. It was foolish for him to think that he could catch her by surprise. She slid to the side, letting his punch sail past her, then punched him in the shoulder to knock him off balance. She followed this up by kicking his feet out from under him, and he landed on the deck of the ship with a loud thunk. The shadows he'd been maintaining faded away as he lost his focus, and the lantern light returned in full. The sailors cheered a third time.

"I yield," Dominic groaned from the ground. "I can only hope that beating me so badly has helped you to relax." He rubbed his hip, which had taken most of the weight of his fall. "Are you faster than Welexi?"

"Not usually," said Vidre. She wasn't even breathing heavily, and had dropped from her fighting stance to get into a squat and watch him. "My standing reaches a peak around Velen's Feast, and I believe I'm higher than him then. There are other seasonal variations, and sometimes a new piece of news or work of fiction winds its way into the public consciousness enough that there's some measurable impact. For the most part, he's my superior in terms of raw standing." She cocked her head to the side and smiled. "Just as you're my clear inferior."

"Consider my lesson learned," said Dominic. He was thinking about the bruises he would have tomorrow, then

remembered that he would only have to ask Gaelwyn for them to be removed.

When he looked at Vidre, she was stock still and tense.

“Stay out of the way,” she murmured. She kicked at the pieces of armor that were laying on the ground, and the glass flowed up to her. It solidified into place around her torso and limbs, and quickly extruded spikes at the joints. When the process was finished, moments later, not an inch of Vidre’s skin was bare, just as she’d said. The armor grew thicker with every passing second. When Dominic looked around, he realized that the sailors had all moved, huddled into corners or gone down beneath the deck of the ship.

Dominic’s one prior experience with a battle between illustrati had made him expect that there would be a grand entrance, and banter between Vidre and whoever she had sensed. That was how it always went in the stories. Instead, the fight began with little fanfare. A cloaked figure leapt up from the water and landed on the deck of the ship; Vidre fought him at once, with her daggers flashing out towards him. He was armed with a whip of water and lashed out at her, driving her back before her blades could find flesh. Dominic’s mind was racing, and he held his hand out to the side, trying to summon the shadow into a physical thing. If Welexi could do it with light, then surely it could be done with shadow as well. He grasped at the air and felt nothing.

The whip of water cracked forward and struck Vidre’s armor, which shattered and then reformed in an instant. She threw one of her daggers forward, but her assailant leapt out of the way. Vidre pushed towards him, and this

time managed to plunge the dagger into his chest. The glass dagger cracked and then made itself whole in her hand again, and she jumped back to dodge under the water whip. The assailant was wearing heavy armor beneath his cloak.

Dominic grabbed at the air again, and this time found himself holding a dagger of his own. It was a thin, nearly insubstantial thing, and he could see straight through it. He had no armor, and given how tenuous his dagger was it would have been a miracle for him to summon some. Vidre continued to fight against her assailant, and he had no way of knowing which of them was winning. Dominic remembered Welexi's fingers being cut off, and how quickly the fight had shifted. He imagined that this would be the same, their combat decided by a quick, decisive blow. Another crack of the whip hit Vidre's armor and broke it, but this time it didn't pull back together so quickly. Dominic began to move into position, extending the shadows to cover him.

The cloaked figure raced towards Vidre as she began to form a dagger to replace the one she'd thrown. He seemed not to care about her weapons. The thin tendril of water he'd been holding onto became a thick sphere around his hand, and he got in close enough to press it against her helm. It was clear enough that he was trying to drown her, to force the water down her throat until she choked to death. Her daggers kept hitting him, but beneath the cloak he was wearing something of impeccable make, and though her daggers were razor-sharp, they couldn't get through steel. She was stabbing at his joints, trying to find a chink in the armor, but he had the sphere of water

surrounding her head. Even if the helm was sealed tight, Vidre wouldn't have much air. Dominic moved forward, creeping silently, keeping his concentration on his shadow-dagger. He was only going to get one chance, and maybe not even that.

Vidre dropped her daggers entirely, and began tearing at the man's armor with her bare hands. She began ripping off pieces of it, wrenching the metal apart and sending links of chain rolling across the deck of the ship. Dominic could see water within her glass helmet. She tore the cloak from her attacker, and Dominic saw a spot on his left side that was now almost bare of plate or mail. He darted forward and swung his dagger in from the side at the exposed flank, and a man's soft cry of pain seemed louder than it truly was. From there he wasn't long for the world. Vidre punched him squarely in the face, crumpling his armor there, and darted around, out from beneath him. When the figure stumbled, Vidre pulled a glass dagger from the material of her armor and stabbed him in the side, over and over, with a grimace on her face, until she was halfway supporting him with a hand beneath his armpit.

When he slumped to the ground, Vidre finally let her helm of glass part and spill water onto the deck. She spit a mouthful of water to the side and let out a low hiss. Her arm was covered in blood up to the elbow where she'd been stabbing him.

"That's what you get," she said. She stepped forward and kicked the corpse, which produced a loud clang. "That's what you get!"

There was a muffled sound from the cabin, and Dominic barely had enough time to think *two of them* before Vidre was racing off again.



Gaelwyn had been watching Welexi sleep. All of the fleshly damage had been fixed, which just left the cuts to his skin, his broken bones, and a deficit of blood. Gaelwyn itched to open Welexi up. All it would take was a cut across the abdomen. Gaelwyn could push the muscles aside, taking the major blood vessels with them, and get a look at the intestines, kidneys, liver, and every other part that his power didn't touch. It was the fastest way to diagnose a perforation or a puncture. Internal damage could be insidious. He had asked, while Welexi was conscious, but Welexi had said no, and that was that. Still, Gael felt the urge in his fingertips. It was a nagging feeling, the need to make sure that nothing was seriously wrong. He touched Welexi's bare skin, and again made sure that his friend was still as healthy as possible, given the circumstances. Welexi's hand was going to be the biggest problem into the foreseeable future. Gaelwyn could have rebuilt the hand, but not the bones within it, and it would have been red flesh, without skin to cover it. Beneath the bandages there was a swollen line where the hand simply ended instead of continuing on. Vidre hadn't been able to recover the fingers to reattach them, so Gael had stitched together the ragged flesh as soon as Welexi went unconscious.

He heard something behind him, and turned around to see a man in full wooden armor. Behind him, the hull of the ship gaped open.

"No," whispered Gaelwyn.

Being an illustrati normally meant knowing the name of every person who came to kill you, but this man's face was covered with an oaken helm, and there were a half dozen illustrati with the right domain and the proper amount of power to push through wood like that.

"Please," said Gaelwyn.

The man held a length of wood in his hand, and stalked forward with it held high. It was thick at the end like a club, the weapon that the domain of wood most lent itself to. More important than that, a club was the sort of weapon that you used against someone with the domain of flesh. Gaelwyn could heal damage to his muscles almost instantly, but a club was best for breaking bones and cracking skulls. The man's wooden armor covered him fully, with no place to lay a hand on bare skin. That was the best protection against the bodily domains, everyone knew that. The mask of wood had a vent at the front for air, and two small holes around the eyes, styled like knots of wood. The eyes were intent as the illustrati stalked closer, ready to bring his club down the moment Gael was in reach.

"Turn around," said Gaelwyn. "Leave, please, just go, I won't even tell anyone you were here."

The man raised his club, and Gael stepped forward quickly, to put a hand against his chestplate.

Everyone knew that you had to be careful going against the bodily domains, and that became more and more true as you moved up the ranks, until you arrived at someone like Gaelwyn Mottram. A single touch could kill you. Everyone knew that the solution was to cover yourself from head to toe, so that there was no bare skin for them to find contact with. Lesser illustrati couldn't kill so quickly, but for someone like Gaelwyn or the Bone Warden, it was the only way that you had a hope of winning. Deprive them of the ability to touch, and you didn't have so much to worry about.

Everyone knew that.

But you had to be careful about what everyone knew.

Gaelwyn's power reached straight past the wooden armor. He could feel the yellowish-white fats and the thick red fibers of muscle, and in the first split second of making contact he brought everything to a halt. The arm that was holding the club jerked back, dropping it to clatter against the floor of the corridor. The man's eyes were wide, and Gaelwyn looked at them with pity. He had to imagine that the paralysis was unpleasant. Before his attacker could get any clever ideas, Gael formed new muscles in the neck and used them to gently squeeze the carotid artery, a quicker, more violent variant on what he'd done to Welexi. The changes in blood pressure caused a baroreceptor nerve response, and the man was out like a light. It had taken an enormous amount of practice to be able to do that without it being lethal, and years of study to understand the mechanism behind it.

When the man fell to the ground, Gael used his power a second time, reshaping the muscles one by one until every important muscle had been detached from its joint, not bleeding or otherwise harmed, but incapable of producing any movement. Gael had watched people try before. You could see the muscles moving beneath the skin, like enormous creatures trapped there.

"I told you not to," said Gaelwyn to the still form. He tried to keep himself mournful, and to not think about the thrill that came with having another person under his control. It wasn't something a person was supposed to get their pleasure from. He looked back toward where Welexi still lay in his bed and said another small oath.



Dominic came down into the ship to find Vidre and Gaelwyn standing over a man in wooden armor.

"This is why they hate me," said Gaelwyn. "This is why they curse my name."

Dominic stared at the body. Vidre tore the wooden mask away and looked down at his face. He was a handsome man with sandy brown hair, taking in shallow breaths. Dominic didn't recognize him, though that didn't say much. The only illustrati he could really put a face to were those stamped on his money.

"Wake him up," said Vidre. She was still in full armor from head to toe. "I have questions."

"Promise not to hurt him," said Gael. "Promise me."

"There might be a third," said Vidre. "We don't have time for this."

Gael crouched down and touched the man's armor, and he woke back up with a gasp. Vidre's dagger flashed forward and into his mouth, where she pressed it against his tongue. He went completely still and watched her.

"Wealdwood. Try to use your power and I'll stab straight into the base of your spine," she said. She ground out the words and stared deep into his eyes. "Your muscles have been rendered nonfunctional. Even if you warped the wood of this ship to make an escape, you would drown when you hit water. Cerulean Bane is dead. Answer my questions, and I'll let you live." She held up something that would have been nearly invisible in the lantern light save for the fact that Dominic could see clearly in the dark. "Illustrati-forged. Expensive stuff. And you both kept yourselves cloaked. Who is your employer?" The object was a ring of metal, a single link from the chain mail that she'd torn off during the fight. She slowly removed the dagger from Wealdwood's mouth.

Dominic wracked his brain trying to connect something to the names. After some reflection he realized he heard of both before; Cerulean Bane had rescued treasures from the depths of the ocean with the help of Aspect, and Wealdwood had been part of the Flower Queen's court before his exile. Neither were villains, and Dominic couldn't imagine either traveling with Zerstor. Vidre had asked her question with authority, but it had to be a guess on her part.

"I don't know," Wealdwood said quickly, as soon as the last bit of glass was out of his mouth. He was bleeding slightly, where Vidre had dragged the edge of her dagger across his lip. "He wore a cloak, he wouldn't tell us his name."

"What were you told to do?" asked Vidre.

"Come with you," said Wealdwood. The words were spilling out quickly. "Cling to the bottom of the ship, wait until it was out in the Calypso, then kill everyone aboard. I was going to make chambers for us, bulbs beneath the hull like barnacles. The two of us could sink you easily, then mop up whoever was left. That's what he said. After Welexi was attacked, he came to us and said that the plan had changed. We didn't even know he'd followed us to Gennaro, but we agreed to it. Cerulean was supposed to distract you, and I was ... I was supposed to kill Gaelwyn, and then the Sunhawk, and flee."

"What were you offered for this idiocy?" asked Vidre. Her knuckles were white around the handle of her dagger, and she was trembling slightly.

"Money," said Wealdwood. "Fame. Stories spread around the world, though this wasn't going to be one of them."

"Ask about the third," said Gaelwyn. He was looking around anxiously and squeezing his hands.

"There was never any third," said Vidre. "They wouldn't hold back like that." She glared down at the man beneath her. "He knows there's nothing to hope for."

"If you didn't know who he was, why did you think he could deliver on his promises?" asked Dominic. Vidre looked up at him, and narrowed her eyes before nodding.

"Answer," she said to Wealdwood.

"He had a ring," said Wealdwood. "Forged by the Harbingers."

"You went to war with us over a bauble?" asked Vidre. She positioned her dagger above his face.

"You said you would let me live!" cried Wealdwood. He tried to turn his head, but the only result was that the muscles in his neck twisted and crawled beneath his skin.

"Wait," said a rich, mellow voice from the bed. Gaelwyn was standing by Welexi's side.

"How much of that did you catch?" asked Vidre.

"Enough," replied Welexi. His arm was in a splint that was wrapped up against his chest, but he used his ruined hand and Gaelwyn's help to sit up. "Wealdwood, the Forest Knight, formerly of the Flower Queen's court and now adrift in the world. You hew to the old stories. You saw that you were falling from grace, and thought that perhaps this stranger had a power you knew not." He was slow and tired. "There was an aspect of story to him, a theatrical compulsion that you couldn't resist. He had a face he kept in the shadows, and your eyes were drawn to the ring, and the unmistakable presence it exuded. He told you stories about me, stories that you had no way to verify but which sounded right to your ears because of how they tore me down, and with his promises to propel you back

to greatness, that was enough to push you in the direction he wanted."

Wealdwood was staring up at Vidre's dagger, though he didn't have much choice in where to look. "It's true," he said.

"Tell me of the ring," said Welexi.

"It was made of a hard metal, dull grey, with a thousand facets," said Wealdwood. "And I felt it, like a feather landing on the skin of my mind. It was a real and true artifact."

"Set him free," said Welexi.

"He put a hole in the side of our ship," said Vidre. Dominic looked at her hand holding the dagger. He knew that she followed Welexi, but he had no idea how closely. If she wanted to murder Wealdwood right here and now, there was nothing that anyone could do about it. For a moment it seemed as though it was inevitable that she was going to drive her dagger down and destroy him, and Dominic wondered what would happen after that. Would Welexi have her removed from the ship? Or would he be complicit in the crime? But Vidre got up instead, and nodded to the hull where the wood was warped. "We need to have him fix it, before anything else."

"You promised me that you would let me live," said Wealdwood. He struggled fruitlessly.

"Promises to dead men don't mean much," said Vidre.

"We can't kill him," said Welexi. "There's no justice in taking the life of someone in your mercy."

"So we take him to the Bone Warden?" asked Vidre. "We somehow weather a voyage far out of our circuit with a man that can sink our ship at any time? We let him go and hope that he keeps his word? We're done with Gennaro, we don't need an extended coda."

"The path of goodness is sometimes a difficult one," said Welexi.

"Please," said Wealdwood. "I won't speak a word of this to anyone, I'll slink off into the night and never see any of you again."

"Close the hole in the ship," said Vidre. She grabbed him by the shoulder and dragged him over to the side of the ship, then placed his hand against the wood. He stared at her, and then his eyes swivelled down to her dagger. "Don't get any ideas," said Vidre. Dominic stepped closer to watch her. If it had been him, he would have tried to sink the ship, in the hopes of finding some leverage as it threatened to capsize. Once the ship was repaired by Wealdwood's touch, Vidre would have no reason to leave him alive, and he had to know that.

Wealdwood closed his eyes and concentrated. The wood grew slowly, shaping itself back into straight timbers. It took five minutes in total, all of it in tense silence. Welexi had gone back to resting, and Gael stood beside him, staring at the hull of the ship sealing up.

"There were people on the dock," said Dominic. "I don't know what it is that they saw, but if we want to keep this quiet we'll have to make sure that they're saying the right things. And we'll need to deal with Cerulean." One

of Dominic's tricks for getting through stressful situations was to focus on what needed to be done. Sitting there and waiting would have been more nerve-wracking than putting plans into motion. "We can weigh the body down and dump it at sea after we've gone."

"Good thinking," said Vidre. She looked down at the mostly dried blood that was caking itself to her forearm. "You're going to have to deal with the locals. Tell them a story, any story. I set someone up to ambush you as part of your training, a hazing ritual. Check to see how much they saw first. We need to get everything straightened here. I don't think the deck of the ship would be fully visible from the shore, but they might have heard something."

Dominic looked to Welexi. He had expected an objection, but Welexi said nothing. Perhaps this was the way it went between him and Vidre, when these things needed to be done. The stories had said that he had reigned her in, and turned a hardened killer to the side of good, but it didn't seem nearly so simple as that. When Dominic was sure that everything was well in hand, he strode back down the narrow corridor that separated the cabins and up onto the deck. The sailors were gathered together in their white and blue uniforms. Their low conversation stopped when Dominic came up. Cerulean Bane's body had been covered with a tarp. One of the sailors split off from the others and approached Dominic.

"Is everything okay up here?" asked Dominic.

"Yes," replied the sailor. "Is everything okay down there?"

"We have a prisoner," said Dominic. "And we need to get the body into storage. We'll be doing a burial at sea." That sounded better than saying that they'd dump the corpse overboard. "Do it quietly." He had no authority over these men, and they'd just seen him have his ass handed to him by Vidre, but the sailor nodded. "What's your name?"

"We're paid not to have names," said the sailor with a grim smile. "And for the hazards of being around illustrati." He looked to the tarp, and the long shape that the folds marked the edges of. "But it's Michael, if you ever need me for anything. I think we'll all be happy to be back at sea." He went back to the other sailors, and they resumed their conversation in low voices. Dominic watched until they began drawing straws to see who was going to move the body, and walked down the plank and onto the dock. He double-checked himself to make sure that he didn't have any blood on him, then looked back to the ship to see if he could tell what the crowd could see. It was as clear as daylight to him, but through their eyes, it would just be a confusion of shapes. He made his way down the dock to where the sailors with swords stood guard, and put a smile on his face.

"What was going on there?" asked an older man with a decanter of wine in one hand.

"Lady Vidre was instructing me on the finer points of single combat," said Dominic. "Apparently she thought I needed to be taken down a peg, and ended up taking me down three instead."

"We heard some yelling," said one of the others.

"I got a lucky hit in," said Dominic. "I agreed to settle our differences over a bottle of wine, one last taste of home before we set sail tomorrow. Does anyone have a suggestion?"

That seemed to be just the trick, and the men and women began to argue loudly among themselves. Dominic hadn't intended to leave the safety of the dock, not with Corta still out there and unknown parties who might want to take a piece of his hide just for the meager fame it would get them, but he couldn't very well ask about wine and then not go to get it. If he couldn't have seen what was within the shadows, he was sure that he would have been straining his eyes looking for a hidden assailant. The wine was given to him gratis, and he walked out with a cask that he had to hold awkwardly beneath one arm. All the way back, people peppered him with questions. They wanted to know how badly Welexi was hurt, why the *Zenith* was leaving tomorrow, what Vidre was really like, and whether he knew anything about Gaelwyn's time in the Iron King's service. Dominic tried his best to answer in diplomatic ways, but he was dog tired and didn't even remember half the things he said the moment they were past his lips.

Wealdwood was bound, gagged, and unconscious in Vidre's room when he got back. The door to Welexi's cabin was firmly closed, and Gaelwyn was nowhere to be seen. Vidre was at a small desk that folded out of the wall with a quill and parchment, which she set aside as he came in.

"Wine?" asked Vidre. Her armor had relaxed somewhat, leaving her face uncovered and her hands completely free. She had retracted most of the sharp edges.

"They don't expect anything, I don't think," said Dominic. "The wine was free."

"Don't leave the ship again," said Vidre. "These two were sent alone, but we have another enemy. One with an artifact, or the ability to convince people he has an artifact, and a seeming penchant for proxies. Until Welexi has healed, I'm the only one with the will and the ability to save you if there's trouble. Welexi can't, Gael won't."

"Gaelwyn doesn't need to touch flesh to kill a man," said Dominic. That was one of the things that had been moving around at the back of his mind. "Wealdwood was sealed up tight when we came in."

"Gael's power extends three inches from the surface of his skin," said Vidre. "Him and the Bone Warden both. They're the only ones with enough standing for it. Keep that secret close."

"He'd be unstoppable if he decided to fight," said Dominic. Not strictly unstoppable though. It would be possible to kill him from a distance, with a pistol or an incredibly lucky cannon shot, or even a crossbow that hit him in the right place. Maybe it would work with a very long blade of some kind, but there were a whole host of injuries that Gaelwyn could simply heal himself of in the midst of combat, so you'd have to go straight for the head. You couldn't let him touch you though, even through layers of armor.

"He wouldn't protect you," said Vidre. "He wouldn't even protect me. Only Welexi, and then only with a minimum of violence. He's not a murderer anymore. He hit

his limit." She ran her fingers through her hair, which was damp with sweat. "And if you believe that ... well, I can tell that you don't. You said that he was unstoppable, and then you began thinking of ways to stop him." She sat down on her bed, next to Wealdwood's unmoving form. "That secret getting out is one of the risks of letting this one go." She tapped at the papers. "And now I have to write letters of instruction to our bards, so that when the story of this assassination attempt inevitably gets out we can stay in control of it. We leave with fanfare, and it comes out weeks later, when we're not so immediately in the minds of the public. We make up our reasons for not telling anyone, but we technically have the authority of the senatori. It's something of a mess no matter what we do." She turned to the bed. "I have half a mind to kill him right now."

"But you won't," said Dominic.

"No," said Vidre. "Good girls don't murder their captives, however inconvenient letting them live would be. Look, I have to stand guard; Gaelwyn's tricks aren't all that reliable in the long term, not if he's trying to ensure that a person is going to live through it. So long as a man has his power he's a threat, even bound and gagged, even paralyzed. You should go get some sleep, because you're going to have to watch him tomorrow while I'm resting."

"Okay," said Dominic. He turned to go, but Vidre rested her hand on his elbow.

"I'm not going to say that I was wrong about you," she said. "But I will admit that you have some redeeming qualities. Try not to let me down."

"I won't," said Dominic.

He laid down in the small cabin they'd given over to him, and though he thought that sleep would be impossible, he was unconscious only minutes later.

4. An Interlude at Sea

Dominic's body was stiff and sore when he awoke in the morning. He was momentarily confused about where he was, until he saw the thick beams of the ship and felt its movement in water. The events of the day before came flooding back; the race he'd lost, the fight he'd ended, being threatened by Corta and saved by Vidre, and the two assassins that had come aboard the ship. It felt like it had happened over the course of weeks, instead of in the span of a single day.

He gave a start when he turned his head and saw Gaelwyn standing in the small room.

"I knocked," said Gaelwyn. He held a plate of pastries and fruit in one hand and neatly folded purple clothes in the other. His red hair had been slicked down and tucked behind his ears.

"Sorry," said Dominic. "Waking up in unfamiliar places gets to me."

"We do a lot of it," said Gaelwyn. "We don't always sleep on the ship when we're in port, but even my cabin can seem like a strange place when the air smells different and the noises of the city have changed." He handed the food over, and Dominic ate greedily. "Vidre got you some clothes for the send-off. We're not making a big production of it this time, but she said what you're currently wearing is unacceptable. I think some tailor must have been woken up in the middle of the night to get something altered for you."

He set the clothes on the bed. "Get dressed as soon as you're finished, it won't be long now. There are people who want an introduction."

The clothes were something only a noble would wear. There were garishly purple knee-breeches, black tights, and sleeves that were five times wider than they needed to be. The outfit included a cape with golden thread and a floppy hat that seemed to sit slightly askew no matter how he tugged at it.

When he slid aside the door to his cabin, he saw Vidre in full battle regalia. It wasn't the sleek and functional armor of the night before; it had a look of elegant style, with sweeping lines and filigree flourishes. The sunlight glinted off of it, enough that it would draw attention from across the docks. In certain places the glass was frosted instead of clear, creating an elaborate pattern that was suggestive of flowers. Vidre was wearing more makeup now; she had red lips and blush on her cheeks. Her hair sat in an elaborate circular braid on top of her head, pinned into place with small glass birds. Dominic felt his heart start to beat faster. He had seen her stab a man to death, arm bloodied up to the elbow, breathing heavily and ready to let loose a primal scream at the world. She was dark, and cruel, and dangerous beyond all reason, the kind of woman that you'd cut yourself to ribbons on if you tried to get close. There were dozen of stories about Vidre that ended that way, merchant-princes and holy men that ruined themselves in pursuit of her. The vertical scar that ran from her brow to her cheek was supposed to have been the result of one of

those liaisons. Yet in the morning light, it was easy to forget all that and feel the tug of infatuation all the same.

Vidre took one look at him, sighed, and began to fix his outfit.

"It was the best I could do on short notice," she said as she pulled down the fabric of his tights. Her hands were firm and businesslike. "We'll have to get you to a proper tailor once we reach Torland, I know just the woman, but for now ... gods this looks terrible. It will have to do though." She did up some buttons on his shirt that he hadn't even known were there, and pulled his hat off to one side, so that it flopped down to touch the top of one of his ears. Apparently that was how it was meant to be worn. "Now, I don't have the time to run you through who anyone is beyond what I'll say in introduction, nor do I have the time to make sure that you know the proper forms of address, and you're not going to see these people again for a long time anyway, so just for the next hour or so, you're the naive newcomer, startled by the world that you've been thrust into and not sure what to make of it. You're overawed by all these people, these legends of your city that you've been hearing about since you were a little boy. They'll like that. And I think it should go without saying, but do not mention anything about our inept assassins, especially not the prisoner in my cabin."

"Who's watching him?" asked Dominic. He was slowly remembering himself. He wasn't some besotted fool, he was an illustrati now, Vidre's equal. He straightened up. Pretending at being naive and overwhelmed was some-

thing he could easily do, but the only way to earn his place was if it was an act.

"Wealdwood is out cold," said Vidre. She caught his look. "But I also have two of my most trustworthy sailors ready to stab him to death if he wakes up and tries to talk or move, which he probably won't be able to do because he's gagged and bound. I took off all his armor last night, and Gael did some additional work this morning that will prevent him from doing anything more than breathing — and then only slowly — even if he does wake up. Satisfied that I'm not an idiot yet?"

"It never crossed my mind," said Dominic. He smiled at her, but she didn't smile back. On closer inspection, her makeup was especially thick beneath her eyes. It wasn't too much past dawn, and she had apparently spent the night watching over Wealdwood and writing letters without taking time to sleep.

"This is backstage," said Vidre, gesturing to the cabin. "Out there, it's a performance. Keep that in mind. Most of these people won't care about you, they only want to be seen with you."

Vidre walked down the ship's corridor and up into the light of dawn, where she received cheers and applause from the crowd, who were gathered considerably further down the docks than the night before. Dominic followed after her, and got the same treatment — perhaps even more so. He couldn't keep from smiling. Yet when Welexi came up from within the cabin, Dominic could see that this was the reason that hundreds had gathered on the docks so

early in the morning just for a send-off. Welexi wore the same silver armor that he'd had on the day before, cracked and torn. The spots of rust had been scoured away, and it was now beautiful in its state of decay. Bright light shone where the armor had been damaged, and not a bit of the leathers that Welexi wore beneath his armor could be seen. He'd used the light to fill himself out, and change the shape of his profile. The man Dominic had seen bleeding on his bed was muscular but slender, almost lanky. Welexi had made himself imposing now, with pauldrons of light that gave him the appearance of broad shoulders, and greaves that made his legs seem thicker than they were. Welexi was taller too, even more than his natural height, which must have been the result of his boots having a high lift to them. His bald head gleamed in the sunlight.

Dominic had trouble looking away. Welexi had been intimidating before, but now he was fearsome, an idealized warrior. When he moved, there were signs that not all was right. He had a slight limp that would be invisible to the crowds, and he kept his right arm unnaturally still. His damaged hand was covered by a gauntlet made of hard white light. The bruises had vanished, no doubt thanks to the work of Gael. Dominic could see a few places on Welexi's face where there were lines of small white stitches, which stuck out against Welexi's coffee-colored skin, but those too would be invisible from a distance. The crowd had begun cheering for him as soon as he stepped onto the deck. He waved at them, though his smile was strained.

"Let's get this over with," said Gaelwyn. "Having him move around is firmly against doctor's orders, however masterfully his casts of light have been crafted." Dominic hadn't even seen Gaelwyn come up on the deck. He was dressed in a clean green apron, and otherwise wearing a tan-colored tunic and trousers, with little of the accents that Dominic's own clothes had. It was a costume too, in its own way.

Two dozen people filed onto the ship, and Dominic was introduced to them all. Most of them were senatori, illustrati, or both, and while most of the names were familiar to him, little else about the situation was. They shook his hand, asked him some polite but meaningless questions, and smiled out at the crowd. Dominic had thought that the whole thing would be perfunctory, but it kept going on well after he had grown ready for it to end. Welexi was repeating the story of the fight, with Gaelwyn looking nervous at his side, while Vidre was looking happier than Dominic had yet seen her, touching arms and laughing at jokes. She didn't seem like she had killed a man eight hours earlier.

"Lightscour, your father is making a cake for me," said a man who had half his face covered by a white mask. Dominic found himself trapped in a half-circle of men and women in their elaborate costumes. He realized only belatedly that he'd been steered there by Vidre.

"He is?" asked Dominic. He vaguely remembered his mother saying something about that. He had forgotten the name of the man almost instantly, but it didn't seem to

matter. They were all speaking to him like he was an old friend.

"The cake is for my daughter Margherita's coming-of-age party," said the man. His smile was halfway covered by his mask. "It's two days from now; I do so wish that you had the time to attend. It was my understanding that the *Zenith* would be in port for another three days, perhaps longer, and we had been looking forward to seeing Welexi and Vidre there." Gaelwyn's name was conspicuously absent.

"It's unfortunate, I agree," Dominic nodded. "When I picked up that spear I had no idea I'd be leaving my home so suddenly. But Welexi has his reasons, not least of which is the bad omen that was Zerstor."

"It must be terrible to leave your family," said a woman with copper wires around her wrists and neck. "I've left Gennaro twice, once to travel to Lerabor, and once to Maskoy. The trip to Maskoy was marvelous; I saw the minarets towering over the city and ate far too much of the black-spiced food. The algalif took dinner with me a few times; he's a righteous man almost the equal of Welexi in his convictions, if not his physical prowess."

"Physical prowess? The Sunhawk was lucky yesterday," said a large man with a braided beard. He had the look of a foreigner. His name hadn't even had the hint of familiarity. "He was losing, and a boy steps out from the crowd to land a solid hit. A shame the fight was decided by that fortune alone, isn't it?" Dominic could feel eyes on him, not just from the half-circle of people around him, but from other

nearby clusters of people, who had gone silent to wait for his response. The large man's voice had carried far.

"It was fate, not luck," said Dominic. "Fate only conspired to bring the fight to me. I was standing right next to the statue of Gennaro when Welexi came crashing down, and I was closest to him when he looked half-dead. It might be easy to say that this was simply arbitrary, but I felt the tug of destiny. I picked up the spear and fought as Welexi would have fought, because I believed in the message that he preaches to the world. If their situations had been reversed, if Zerstor had been the one broken and bloodied, no one would have come to his aid. Those two titans reaped the harvests that they'd been sowing for years, and I was only the instrument of that realization. Luck had nothing to do with it." Dominic glanced to the side only briefly, but was gratified to see a small nod from Welexi's direction.

Conversation continued on for some time, veering back to less important matters. He learned more than he had ever wanted to about the algalif of Maskoy, and promptly forgot all of it. He was told about people he would never meet and estates he would never visit. Some of these people were local legends, but Dominic had never taken much stock in legends. It didn't seem to matter to any of them that he would be gone for a long time, and they asked surprisingly few questions about the fight between Welexi and Zerstor; they were more concerned with speaking than listening. It was an utter relief when Vidre slipped into the circle of conversation and politely informed everyone that the ship would be leaving soon, and they would have to

take their leave unless they wanted to travel to Torland. This drew a few laughs and smiles, and after another quarter hour of everyone saying their goodbyes, the visitors finally departed.

Dominic walked to the stern of the ship and looked out on the crowd. He was surprised to see a few familiar faces. Many of the racers were there, with Franco up on Lorenz's shoulders, waving frantically and making a scene. Corta stood with her musclebound sons, though she was speaking with other people instead of looking at the ship, which Dominic was glad for. And there was another girl waving to him that he almost mistook for his sister, until he realized that it was the girl Clarissa that had offered to be his assistant. He felt a slight pang of guilt at that.

Though he looked for them, his family was nowhere to be seen, not even Anna.

"That's Leon and Marco," said Vidre. She stood by his side, and pointed out two men with thick beards who were speaking loudly to the crowds. "They're the ones that will make you famous, at least in Gennaro."

"I'm already famous," said Dominic. He could hear his name — not "Dominic" but "Lightscour" — being spoken here and there. In part, the crowd was there for him. "Everyone in the city has heard the story by now."

"No," said Vidre. "News travels fast, but reaching every last person doesn't happen nearly so quickly. Even for something like this, there will be a fair number of people who haven't heard the story. And even among those who have heard the story, some will have forgotten it immedi-

ately, because it has no impact on their lives, or because they don't care about the illustrati, and you can't count those. Some will just be confused about what's happened, until they hear a compelling version of the tale from our bards, or someone that our bards have paid, or one of their friends who's heard it from the bards. An event by itself is just a nascent story — it's not until someone has put in the work of adding flourish and context that it can properly reside in a person's mind."

"So I'm going to get stronger?" asked Dominic. He stretched his fingers out then closed them into a fist. "I'll gladly accept that."

Vidre covered her mouth for a yawn, then looked around to see how much progress the sailors had made. "Much stronger," she said. "Gennaro has perhaps a quarter million people. There's more growth to happen here, people who will start to care about you, to invent stories of their own about the time you did some ridiculous, implausible thing. And given your history, there are people who will come forward claiming that you stole from them. Within a week, women will be claiming that you slept with them, or tried to, and men will claim that you were a long and lasting friend, or a bitter rival. That's one of the wellsprings of fame, and all of it will happen without you having to lift a finger. But this is just Gennaro. A large city, but not the largest." She pointed out across the harbor, to a few other ships. "Packet service across the Calypso will carry letters from myself, Marco, and Leon. Maskoy, Lerabor, Rannos, Grantholm, Parance — all the major centers of population,

one by one. We employ hundreds of bards. You'll wake up and feel the difference every so often, as the legend spreads to some new node of civilization. The scholars' best estimate is that there are a billion people in the world, and while there will always be people in some backwater that have never heard of you, eventually you'll have your own legend." She turned to look at him with tired eyes. "Assuming that you don't get yourself killed first."

Dominic would have frowned at that, but he was in good cheer, so he simply ignored her. Vidre had been trying to teach him a lesson about learning his place last night, and he'd stabbed Cerulean Bane all the same. There was little chance that she had missed that fact, but she hadn't yet said anything about it, and he hoped that she wouldn't.

Dominic looked around at the sailors, and then back to the crowd. He had a small, foolish hope that his family would arrive at the outskirts. They would have better sales if they could be seen with their son the illustrati, but not even that self-interest would compel his father to come. He hoped that his sister Anna had been kept home, but worried that she had simply chosen not to see him go.

When the ship finally cast off, the masses began to cheer for them anew, and Welexi came out to the back of the ship to stand firm and tall. There was a spot of glowing light on his back that burst outward into wings so large that they hung over either side of the ship, and the noise from the receding crowd grew louder. Dominic found himself waiting with bated breath to see Welexi fly, but there were only a few flaps of the wings before they folded in behind

him, arching several feet above his shoulders and nearly dragging on the ground before folding inward.

"They love that," said Vidre to Dominic. "It's authentically impressive, and impossible to fake. Nevermind that it takes him an hour every morning to get those wings created, and that he's going straight back to his cabin immediately after this. An hour's work for a dozen seconds of spectacle." She shook her head. "It's not all moonlit assassination attempts and courtyard battles. Most of it is tedium, endless meetings, boring parties, talking to people who are only trying to use you for their own ends. You had the abbreviated version of that this morning. But maybe it's worth it, for those dozen seconds."

The *Zenith* had moved into the bay, and though there were other ships around them, and no doubt spyglasses trained on them from the shore, Welexi moved away from the helm and back to the center of the ship. His limp was more pronounced now that he was without his audience, and he cradled his broken arm. Dominic followed.

"You need rest," said Gaelwyn. "You're low on blood and your bones need to mend."

"Do you remember how brilliant you thought the brace of light was?" asked Welexi with a smile.

"Years ago I thought it would help you to heal faster," said Gaelwyn with a cluck of his tongue. "Now I see that it's only made you more inclined to push yourself."

Welexi gave a weak laugh, and turned to Domininc. "Lightscour," he said. He looked Dominic up and down. His face was gentle, and the bulk of his armor had begun

to fade as pieces of light vanished from it. "If I had to pick the name over again, I would have chosen differently. In the context of your domain, it's a villain's name — not one who scours with light, but one who scours the light itself. Not a cleaner of rust, but a consuming darkness."

"I'm honored by it," said Dominic.

"You'll have a new name in time," said Welexi. "Something more appropriate to you, something we've given due consideration." He smiled, showing pearly white teeth. "I have full faith that you'll earn another name soon." With another small tug at his armor from Gaelwyn, Welexi turned to go down into the ship. Gennaro had disappeared behind them, and there were no other ships within sight. Dominic didn't really consider himself to have a home, but the city he'd grown up in had faded entirely. He was in Welexi's world now.

"What's the Numifex?" Dominic asked, before Welexi could disappear entirely.

Welexi turned around slowly and carefully. "She called it that?" asked Welexi with a faint smile. His eyes flickered to Vidre. "I'll have to inquire about what else my travelling companion has been telling you. That term, 'Numifex', dates back decades. Too early for you, and too geographically distant. There was a bard near Grantholm, a storyteller and an illustrati, who was famed for how his stories ended — namely, that they didn't. He would stretch a tale on for hours, and at the very end, he would say something like, 'And there I was, laying in bed with the beautiful lass, and I saw her begin to raise a dagger dripping with poison

— but ah, it's getting late, and the rest of it will have to wait until tomorrow.' Then the next night he would repeat the entire process again. It was bunk, all of it, but he was a good storyteller, and sometimes that's enough for some smaller measure of fame. Some pointed out the contradictions in these stories, but he would explain them away. He was always ready with another lie. It didn't seem to matter though; people always wanted to know what was going to happen next, no matter how improbable the story was."

"Get to the point before you collapse," said Vidre.

"One of the hallmarks of his stories was a chase for an object," said Welexi. "Not one, but many. These were gained and lost as his tales stretched on, never important save for how and where they propelled this bard, or what machinations they forced his foes towards. The point," he looked toward Vidre, "Is that it wasn't important. The object never mattered to the story, it could have been anything, something crafted by the Harbingers, the crown jewels of some forgotten kingdom, a spear forged by the gods — it didn't have any consequence, ultimately. The Numifex was one of these, the most nondescript of all these objects, and the one that he went after the most often. It was variously described as a golden orb, or a broken sword, or an eldritch tome. This bard wrote down his tales into many books, and he didn't even keep the descriptions consistent within a single volume. Over the years, it became a derisive term used by storytellers, and thus by the illustrati. The Numifex is what you call something that's meaningless save for its role in the story." He looked to Vidre and smiled.

"So ... we're going to Torland because we're tracking down a thing that doesn't matter?" asked Dominic.

"We're going to Torland for many reasons," said Welexi. "Not least of which is the request of the Flower Queen, and the news of civil unrest. But yes, I have long been tracking an object of ancient power, and there is a scholar who my recent investigations have revealed might be able to help me. Vidre, as I'm sure you've gathered by now, believes I'm chasing a phantasm."

"To bed," said Gaelwyn. He touched Welexi lightly. "I can practically hear the sound of bone grinding against bone."

Welexi nodded. "I believe that my physician may have a point. We will speak on these matters later." He hobbled off, moving slowly and stiffly, with his armor of light seeming to do most of the work.

"Come on," said Vidre. "I need you to keep an eye on our prisoner while I get some sleep. And after that, your training begins. We'll see what we can do with you in nine days time, shall we?"



Dominic followed Vidre down into the ship, and stood next to her outside the door of her cabin, where Gaelwyn had his hand on their prisoner's chest. He had been stripped of his armor, and wore only white underclothes and a gag.

"He's still alive," said Gaelwyn. He sighed with relief. "It's easy to knock a man out, but hard to make sure he'll

be able to return to consciousness. I'm going to bring him out of it."

"He's going to wake up?" asked Dominic.

"Restricting bloodflow is a short-term solution," Gaelwyn replied. "If you want a person to come out the other side without brain damage, anyway. There's also the issue of bedsores, given that he can't properly move."

"Wait," said Vidre. She turned to Dominic. "I meant to run this by you earlier, but you were the one to kill Cerulean Bane. He snuck up on me, got a lucky hit in, left me sprawling on the ground, and you defended me from the killing blow. You saw me helpless, and that's what gave you the courage and fortitude to fight."

Dominic frowned. "Why?"

"It's a better story," said Vidre. "It sets up a romance between the two of us that people will find compelling, and it makes the both of us come out looking better. People like when I'm vulnerable. People will want to see you as strong, brave, and willing to fight against the odds."

"Fair enough," said Dominic. His mind had tripped itself on the word 'romance'.

"You don't need to relay any of this to Wealdwood, just don't contradict it," said Vidre.

"Welexi is okay with this deception?" asked Dominic.

"It's true enough," said Vidre. "There's a chance — albeit a low one — that I would have died without your help. And without your intervention, it's possible that Cerulean

would have been able to slip back into the water. Is this going to be a problem for you?"

"No," said Dominic, and it wasn't. If he could have turned back time, that was how the fight would have gone, with him standing firm above Vidre, knife in hand against her aggressor, facing down impossible odds and winning. Besides that, Vidre had already spent the last night writing letters to the bards and others, so if he was uncomfortable with the mild deception, it was likely too late to do anything about it.

Gaelwyn worked his domain. Wealdwood stirred slowly, ineffectually straining against his bonds with his disconnected muscles. He froze when he saw Vidre and Gaelwyn. He tried to say something around his gag before realizing it was there. Gaelwyn nodded, and left for Welexi's room.

"Lightscour is going to watch you," said Vidre. "Give him any trouble, and I'll kill you without hesitation."

"Can I speak with him?" asked Dominic.

"You have a dozen books that you need to read," said Vidre. "Etiquette, history, dossiers, all manner of things you'll need to be passable at court. And I don't see what you would hope to get out of it. He's said everything that he knows."

"He's answered every question that you've asked him," said Dominic. "That's not the same thing."

Vidre shrugged. "I'm too tired to argue." She stepped forward and slashed at the gag in one quick motion. Wealdwood spit it to the side, and Vidre grabbed him by the jaw. "I'm going to take a nap." Somehow she made that sound

foreboding. "Lightscour has my full permission to kill you if he thinks that's in his best interests. If you scream and wake me up, I'll jam a dagger through your eye and go straight back to bed." She turned to Dominic. "Speaking of which, I'm taking your room for the day. Don't wake me unless it's urgent." She placed one of her daggers in his hand, then left the room without waiting for a response.

"Release me," said Wealdwood, as soon as Vidre was gone.

"No," replied Dominic. "Besides, you're not moving anywhere anytime soon. The bonds aren't doing much. If you had your strength, I'd bet that you could simply snap them."

"I could make a wooden pod and float away from the ship," said Wealdwood. "I could find someone to repair the damage the Red Angel has done." He tried to turn his head and failed. "Help me."

"No," said Dominic. "I want to know about your master."

"I've said already," Wealdwood replied. "He was always in shadows, with a hood that hid his face."

"But not his hands," said Dominic. "Those were visible, because you could see the ring he wore. What were his hands like? What color was his skin? How old was he? Did he have calluses?"

"White skin," Wealdwood replied. "Wrinkles. Thin fingers. He wasn't tanned at all, I don't think he was a worker."

"You said that you were surprised to see him in Gennaro," said Dominic. "Where did you first make the arrangements?"

"Please let me go," said Wealdwood. "Help me to escape, escape with me, and we can expose —"

Dominic shook his head. "All I want are answers," he said. "Something that I can bring to Welexi to help him solve this mystery."

"You want to be his lapdog?" asked Wealdwood. "What do you even know about the Sunhawk? About the Red Angel? About the depravities of the Queen of Glass?"

"Where did you first make the arrangements?" asked Dominic again.

Wealdwood's face fell. "Do you understand what Gaelwyn Mottram is? How many thousands of innocent lives he took?"

Dominic shifted in his seat. The truth was, he didn't know much about the people he was traveling with beyond what he'd heard in the stories, and those couldn't be trusted. "I want to know about this mysterious man," said Dominic. "They're planning to let you go, but if I tell them that you're hiding something ..." Dominic shrugged, and hoped that it came off with the same nonchalance that Vidre had affected.

"They'll kill me," whispered Wealdwood. "Not in front of you, but all it will take is a touch from Gaelwyn to weaken my heart, and the next time that I get into combat, the strain will make something pop, that will be it for me. They've done it before." He tried to turn his head again, and again

failed. Wealdwood's eyes moved to Dominic, and he licked his lips. "I first met him in the Iron Kingdom, in the city of Larance. I was running low on coin, and was forced to work at making boats, but fame is fleeting and I knew I wouldn't last for long doing that. The Knight of the Woods reduced to a simple carpenter, and I could feel the legends fading away, even after the scandal I'd run from. This man came to me one night and made me an offer. A return to fame, and fortunes beyond my imagining, and all I had to do was sink the *Zenith*." Wealdwood paused. "I refused. Even seeing his ring, and feeling its unmistakable signature of power, I refused him. He began to tell me stories of Welexi. They were stories that I already knew, of Whitespear striding onto fields of battle, or fighting in narrow castle corridors, of forest ambushes where the Brightshield defended merchant convoys against well-armed bandits. You're familiar with the legends?"

"Familiar enough," said Dominic. He didn't have an exhaustive knowledge, as he'd always tried to avoid the stories, but he had picked many of them up all the same. It was difficult not to, when that was all some people wanted to talk about.

"Welexi planned out his most famous fights. He worked in collusion with his villains," said Wealdwood. His brow was furrowed. "How else would so many of the battles have ended with his opponent slinking off to return another day? The man has a reputation for being soft, for letting people go, but to hear my benefactor tell it, this was all part of the plan. If two people fight, it raises the reputation of both.

But it went further than that. Those well-armed bandits? My benefactor spoke with some of the men, decades after the fact. They had been paid, paid to attack, and paid to fall back. That was how Welexi forged his legend, and it's only because he's so good with his lies that he hasn't been unmasked. People revere him now. They don't want to think the worst of him. But look at the company he keeps, no offense."

"It all sounded true to you," said Dominic. "And so you agreed that you would kill him."

"No," said Wealdwood. "We were never meant to kill him. Think for a moment. There was a gaping flaw in the plan if our intent was to kill Welexi." He paused, and a slow smile spread across his face, as though it was amusing. "He can simply fly away. And as our benefactor said, that's what he would do. He would watch his crew flounder from the air. He would watch Cerulean Bane choke Vidre out. And he would leave Mottram to sink to his death. We weren't trying to kill him, only weaken him." His face fell. "Cerulean Bane is truly dead?"

"Yes," replied Dominic. He rubbed at his chin. "So the plan was to weaken him, and then what?"

"We never knew," said Wealdwood. "Our part in it would have been done then. I met with our benefactor three times in total. The first was when he introduced himself, the second was when he paired me with Cerulean, and the third was in Gennaro, when he changed our plans. Cerulean ... we spent time chasing down the *Zenith*. We became friends. I used to joke with him about his name. It didn't make any

sense. Blue Bane? He's the bane of things that are blue? Or is he a bane that's blue? A bane of what?" Wealdwood closed his eyes. "And now he's dead."

"He's trying to gain your sympathy," said Gaelwyn. He stood just outside the door, frowning slightly. "Have you learned anything interesting?"

"No," said Dominic. "Just pieces of the puzzle." There was no gentle way to ask whether any of the accusations against Welexi could possibly have been true, even if Gaelwyn would have known. Nor was there a gentle way of asking Gaelwyn whether he could sabotage someone's heart. "I was hoping that I would find some small detail that would illuminate matters."

"Vidre wanted me to have a talk with you in private when I found the time," said Gaelwyn. He walked over to the prisoner and touched him briefly on the chest, knocking him out cold. "Welexi will want you in better fighting shape, which means making some modifications."

Dominic frowned. Matters of the flesh, he'd heard it called. The domain of flesh was associated with death so often that it was hard to remember that it was also used for other things, if you were rich enough. There was a taboo that surrounded the bodily domains, one which encompassed the changes they could make to a person.

"Your consent is important to me," said Gaelwyn. "If you don't want me to make you stronger, just say so, and that will be that."

"No," said Dominic. "I do. I've just heard ... I've heard stories about it going wrong for people."

"It can be dangerous, if you're just starting out," said Gaelwyn with a nod. He took off the green apron, and began to unbutton his shirt. "But I'm no amateur." He pulled his shirt to the side.

Gaelwyn Mottram was a short man, half a head shorter than Dominic, and to look at him you might think that he was small and bookish. Beneath his loose clothing he was hiding a body that would put Corta's sons to shame. There wasn't an ounce of fat anywhere. As Dominic watched, unable to look away, the muscles strained and twisted, like a crossbow being drawn.

"There was a time, after I left the Iron King's service, when I kept myself deflated and weak. It was a penance, I thought." He touched his abdomen. "It was Welexi who showed me that I didn't have to reject my domain." He looked up at Dominic, and began buttoning back up. "Of course, it doesn't do to show it. I heal so many people with every place that we visit, and I know half of them would turn away if I looked like the monster they thought I was." He gave a nervous laugh.

"And the side effects," said Dominic slowly.

"There are none, if it's properly done," said Gaelwyn. "It's the freshly minted illustrati of flesh that are the problem there. They pack more and more muscle on as quickly as possible, leaving stretch marks on their biceps and legs, warping everything out of proportion, until bone or connective tissue give way. Or they offer their services to some nobleman, who isn't willing to put in the work to keep the physique that they've purchased, and a year down the

road there are ugly rumors of a man with sagging skin that once held impressive brawn. Sometimes the illustrati won't know enough, and work on domain intuition alone, which can have bad results, and occasionally ruin something in a way that can't be fixed. Change the muscle, and you have to change everything else, and that means giving it some time." He nodded to himself. "We go in cycles, let the body rest. Remove any fat, pack on muscle, prevent the skin from stretching too much or outright splitting, make sure that you're not losing blood —"

"Losing blood?" asked Dominic.

"Not actually losing blood," Gaelwyn explained quickly. "But for every ten pounds of muscle you gain, you need an extra pint of blood, so the effect can be similar."

"Can I think on it?" asked Dominic.

Gaelwyn's smile was strained. "Certainly, certainly. But it's better to start soon, given the number of cycles we'll need to do. It's not painful at all. I can understand though, if the concept is foreign, or unfamiliar to you, how you might hesitate, I don't blame you for that at all — do we need to speak candidly?" He saw Dominic's look. "You've heard rumors about me, stories, tall tales, and if you're going to be with us it might be better to clear the air." He laughed slightly. "People hear about something like a crate of teeth or a headless child, and their imagination runs wild, and it would be so much better to simply explain things."

"You've been kind to me since the moment I got here," said Dominic. "But if someone asks me about your past, I don't think it would be good for me to shrug and say that I

never cared enough to ask. So if you don't mind," he looked to Wealdwood. "Is he going to be okay?"

"Just fine," said Gaelwyn. His hands fidgeted.

"Then yes," said Dominic. "I think it's better for me to know."



Gaelwyn was ten years old when he got his turn in front of the audience.

He stepped out onto the stage with a light shove from one of the masked attendants, and then there were ten thousand people staring at him. The master of ceremonies began to speak, the domain of sound making his voice boom out across the open air, and the words that came out were all about Gaelwyn Mottram, something between an introduction and a promotion. It was late in the evening, and Gaelwyn was far from the first, and so the master of ceremonies was working against the natural inattention of his audience.

"Let me tell you about Gaelwyn Mottram!" the master of ceremonies screamed. "When he was only a baby, a stray spark from a fireplace lit the thatched roof on fire! Baby Gaelwyn was trapped inside the house, about to burn alive! But he turned to the fire, and he commanded it with his first words, striking a deal — that the fire could forever find a home in his hair, if only it let him live!"

One of the attendants pushed Gaelwyn forward, towards where the dozens of objects arranged on a table. There

was one for every domain, some in small jars, some simply sitting there, and a series of cages that held the animals. He had instruction beforehand, but being the focus of attention was making him feel sick. The attendant leaned down and whispered in his ear.

“Find which one is yours, don’t waste our time.”

Gaelwyn reached out and touched them one by one as the master of ceremonies droned on. He was telling a story about how young Gaelwyn, at the age of five, stared down a grizzly bear. The stories were obviously untrue, but enough that the audience might be able to overcome their apathy for a moment. Ten thousand people, focused all on a single small boy, was supposed to be enough to allow his domain to be found.

He didn’t know enough to know what it was supposed to be like, when you found your domain. If you had the temporary fame of the crowd you were supposed to simply know, but as Gaelwyn touched the blocks of metal that comprised the metallic domains, he grew worried. Children were supposed to stay as long as it took, and the audience was often blamed for a failure. Too much time, and someone would be grabbed at random by the attendants and publicly whipped for a few minutes before being returned back to the crowd. The master of ceremonies aside, this was one of the things that helped to focus attention.

Gaelwyn touched every domain for long enough to be sure. Glass, sand, ash, and a candle that served triple duty as smoke, heat, and fire. He went through the animals

quickly, reaching into their cages to touch them and see their reactions to him. The cat looked up at him with a blank expression, and the dog seemed interested only in a piece of meat that sat on the table, and none of the others were anything more than put upon by the contact or simply non-responsive. It was none of the base elementals, or the derived elementals, none of the ephemerals, nor the animal domains, nothing manufactured, or organic — and that left only the six bodily domains, which everyone saved for last. They were set off to the side, clustered together. Hair, bile, skin, bone, blood, and flesh.

Yet even before he touched the quivering chunk of meat, he knew it for his domain. He was flesh, the temporary attentions allowed him to feel it beneath his skin, a whole part of himself that he'd never really given much thought to before. So it was no surprise to him that he could make the chunk of meat move slightly beneath his touch. He was happy to show the attendant, happy that he hadn't had to go through all of them a second time, and happy that no one had to be whipped. The attendant had nodded, marked something on a sheet of paper, and led him away.

He never saw his family again.

He shared an enormous building in the country with a hundred other children and twenty teachers. He cried often, early on, but less as time passed and life in the school assumed a sense of normalcy. The full meaning of the school wasn't fully apparent to him, as nothing was ever explained to the children, but gradually Gaelwyn came to understand. The Iron King was famous for many things,

but his cannons were chief among them. He could make them quickly, much faster than any forge, and he had used that ability to extend his empire around the world. At the school he was doing something different; taking the raw ingredient of childhood and forging something useful.

Gaelwyn took to his studies more than the other children. He was intelligent, and in this new environment he had a chance to show it. As the years passed, other students left, sometimes taken away in the middle of the night. Gaelwyn was one among many with the domain of flesh, but in the end, the Iron King would only need one. Gaelwyn knew what his role was to be before he was told, and took to studying his domain, not only what was written in the library's books, but his own body as well. He went from lean to powerful, growing slowly so as not to make mistakes, honing his craft in front of a full-length mirror. He was short, but he made his shoulders broad and his muscles thick.

One day Gaelwyn became the last remaining illustrati of flesh at the school, and the next day he was standing before the Iron King.

The Iron King stood eight and a half feet tall. He was a mountain of a man, an impossible giant, and when he saw the perfection of the king's form, Gaelwyn wondered what he could possibly be needed for. Yet on first touch, it became apparent. The king had not started out so enormous; he had been made that way. He was a sculpture of flesh and bone, changed and warped into his state of seeming perfection. Yet there were flaws; he had little feeling in his legs and

feet, and suffered disorders of the body. His joints were weakened, and though he was extremely powerful, above and beyond what was granted by his fame, he moved sluggishly. Gaelwyn was able to solve some of these problems, with time, and give instruction to alleviate some of the others, but eight feet was taller than a man should be, especially one that demanded such an excess of muscle. The Iron King weighed eight hundred pounds. He ate two dozen eggs for breakfast, and a whole chicken for lunch. By most accounts he was a titan, yet he was king all the same.

Gaelwyn wasn't allowed to work on the king at first. He was given prisoners to practice on, and instruction in making them as powerful as he possibly could in conjunction with one of the Bone Warden's acolytes. He refined his techniques and his artistic talent. It was easy enough to swell the muscles, but there was a difficulty in making sure that the men were still aesthetically pleasing afterward, and unintended consequences that could result from putting emphasis in the wrong place. Domain intuition wasn't enough, it took study of human physiology and a keen eye for the arts, both of which Gaelwyn was made to learn. He made mistakes, in those early years, but there was always a fresh body to practice on. He made a half-hearted effort to fix his errors, but one of the king's advisors had stopped in to say that his job wasn't to fix things — it was to never make a mistake in the first place.

Officially, Gaelwyn was the court physician. The Iron King didn't publicly admit to using the bodily domains to his advantage, in part because he had made the practice il-

legal, and in part because it might have hurt his reputation. The stories circulating about the Iron King claimed that he was born enormous, that his mother died in childbirth because of his size, that he could lift a wagon with one hand at the age of ten, on and on. His father had prepared him well for the role of king, with a mythology that he easily slipped into. Gaelwyn never shared the king's company in public, only in small, secret rooms, when repairs and modifications needed to be done to the king's flesh. It continued that way for a time, until a fateful day when the king asked a question.

"Where does blood come from?"

Gaelwyn recited the theories. The older theory was one of latent domains. Domain genesis was often considered one of the core abilities, and few domains lacked it; the Iron King could produce more iron simply by touching an existing stock of it, and with concentration and an exercise of will, produce it from thin air. The theory of latent domains postulated that every person contained within themselves all the bodily domains, and had a mild, entirely subconscious access to them. Bones knit by themselves, given time. Flesh would mend, if slowly. Hair grew, skin stretched, all — so the theory went — because people had an unspecialized and basal access to those domains. The answer to where blood came from was then the same as the answer to where any substance produced by the illustrati came from, which was a great and unsolved question of a different magnitude.

The second theory was that blood was produced by some organ of the body, in the same way that salivary glands — isolated only five years prior — produced saliva. Which organ was an open question; many thought it was the heart itself, in the course of its constant beating, while others said it was a secondary (or even primary) effect of the lungs or liver.

“Find out for sure,” commanded the Iron King.

Gaelwyn didn’t start by taking people apart. He started with rats, with hounds, with other animals whose biology was close enough to human. He wrapped himself in the problem, partially because there was nothing better to consume his time, and partially because he found it faintly absurd that no one knew the answer. Blood was so basic to life, so elemental to human physiology, but they had no idea where it came from. Gaelwyn ran his experiments, often several in parallel. He would remove a single organ from a rat, then drain a quantity of its blood, and compare these different rats to each other after several days. The heart was a tricky one, but the solution had been simple — remove the heart, then stitch together veins and arteries from a second living creature, so that both shared blood. It took many iterations to get right, with mysterious deaths that couldn’t be accounted for by the trauma of the surgery. He made investigations, and found that this was a problem long-known by the illustrati of blood, an incompatibility that they couldn’t explain.

He published a brief titled “The Classifications of Blood” which documented his methods and his findings. It was

the first of its kind, an attempt to bring the revolutions in study to the human body. The second volume he produced gave detail to the process by which blood was created in the marrow of the bones, something he'd discovered when he'd begun removing bones from his rats. Before, Gaelwyn had been elevated through the Iron King's sheer might and bardic organization. Afterward, it was through a measure of his own success.

Gaelwyn pushed himself, and the Iron King smiled on these efforts. There were new things to learn, questions that the Iron King found value in having answered. How long could a man survive cold? How long could he survive heat? There was no domain to govern the majority of the organs with a man, but could it be made safe to replace a sick organ with a healthy one? How were teeth made? Why did people have two sets of them? What governed the natural repair of bones, if the theory of latent domains was incorrect? What caused people to be misshapen, or to have disorders of the mind? Gaelwyn wanted to know the answers to these questions, even more than his king did. Curiosity was part of it, and he wouldn't deny that fame was too, but mostly it was that sense of progress that came when the air smelled metallic and his fingers were slippery with blood.

Many of his subjects were prisoners, but not all. He was given a building to conduct his studies in, and it housed a number of his subjects, many of them oddities brought in from around the Iron Kingdom. Gaelwyn never killed anyone, at least never by intent. With his power he could split the skin and tug at the muscles to look at the inner

workings of a person, to inject drugs directly into their vital organs or make observations of the body under distress. He was kind to his patients, and understanding. They were provided for. They were comfortable.

The Peddler's War brought changes. The Iron Kingdom was attacked, and when it fought back, more viciously than anyone realized it could, prisoners of war were given over to Gaelwyn. Gaelwyn published many volumes on the findings that resulted, and the state of the art was advanced immeasurably. He surrounded himself with assistants and like-minded colleagues, and rarely ventured from his hospital save to attend to the king's body and keep it in its optimal shape. The hospital was Gaelwyn's castle, and he thought of himself as a king in his own right, a ruler over human biology, an explorer forging straight ahead.

When the Peddler's War ended, Gaelwyn was nearly executed. The Iron King had won the counter-war, claiming land in the process, but Gaelwyn had become too well known, and too much of a political liability in a time of peace. He hadn't known before how much of a monster the world saw him as, nor had he heard the stories that were told about him. His mail had been censored. The domain of flesh was looked down on or outright hated, and the stories of mangled men and piled up corpses had only added to that. The Iron King settled on exile instead of execution, and Gaelwyn was thrust out into a world that hated and feared him. The bubble he'd been living in was popped, and he was left to face cold reality.



"I drifted," said Gaelwyn. "For three years. I heard the songs that they sung about me, watched on occasion as they burned my books. I kept myself shrouded. I was hunted from time to time, but I fought back. I was strong, monstrously strong, a tight ball of muscle and pain. I lashed out. I grew despondent. I tried to hide, and failed. And in the end, it was Welexi who brought me back from the brink."

"You saved his life," said Dominic. He had heard that story before. As it went, Welexi had been badly injured in a fight and nearly dead. He propped himself up against a lonely orange tree, waiting for the end. His heart had stopped when Gaelwyn found him, but for Gaelwyn, a stopped heart was an easy problem to fix. Ever after, Welexi had traveled with Gaelwyn, and acted in his defense.

"I saved his life," nodded Gaelwyn. "And he, in turn, saved mine."

Dominic wondered whether it was true. It was impossible to say just from watching Gaelwyn's expression, but Dominic suspected that it wasn't. There were many reasons to keep Gaelwyn Mottram close to you, not least of which was the fact that he was a powerful illustrati and — even assuming some exaggeration — one of the foremost healers in the world.

"I worry I'm a stain on his goodness," said Gaelwyn. "I worry about the answers that he has to make for me. The duels he's been forced to fight because I've vowed to take no further lives. Welexi wouldn't throw me away like the Iron King did, wouldn't ever turn his back on me, but I worry about what I cost him. It's been nine years since

the Peddler's War, and still people talk. Sometimes I think that I'm the only thing that they remember from that time, nevermind that the death toll between all sides was four hundred thousand men. I was a symbol. I still am."

"I'll take whatever enhancements you can give me," said Dominic.

Gaelwyn's eyes lit up. "You will?"

"I trust you," said Dominic. "Whatever is in the past is in the past."

He said it with his most ready smile, but the truth was that he knew he was going to take the offered advantage at some point in the future, so it was better to simply take it now, when he could gain the most benefit from it and solidify a bond between them. For all Gaelwyn had said in his story, there were few enough specifics. *Don't admit to anything specific, show contrition, promise reform, talk about your crimes like they're all in the past.* It was close enough to that script that Dominic had used, if he was being cynical. And Gaelwyn had never explained the headless child, or the crate full of teeth. In a world full of stories, perhaps it was simply easier to say that all the bad ones directed your way were inventions of the frightened and ignorant.

Gaelwyn touched him lightly on the arm, and the change began. Dominic's muscles twitched slightly, moving of their own accord. He sagged slightly, leaning against the wall. Parts of him were shrinking, or vanishing entirely. He felt like there were tides of flesh moving within him. And then, just as quickly as it had begun, it was over. It hadn't been unpleasant, exactly. Dominic flexed with newfound

strength, a physical might that seemed to nearly match that granted by his fame. He felt the need to go running, to stretch his legs out and punch at the air.

"That's the beginning," said Gaelwyn with a small, cautious grin. "We'll let your body adjust over the next few days. I'll watch this one; go do some stretching out, feel how things are working, and report back to me at once if you feel something wrong in one of the joints. And save some energy for later in the day. I know that Vidre wanted to put you through your paces."

"I will," said Dominic. "And thank you."



Gaelwyn rested his hand on Wealdwood's chest.

Would the world be a better place if Wealdwood never woke up?

5. The Belligerent Bard

Dominic felt like he had been sick his entire life, and had only now gotten better. Partly this was a result of the magic Gaelwyn had done, and partly it was Dominic's continued increase in standing, but the combined effect was that Dominic was brimming over with energy and power. He wanted to run, but the ship couldn't have been much more than sixty feet from bow to stern, and even if it hadn't been teeming with sailors, there wasn't enough of a straightaway to put on a good amount of speed. There were another eight and a half days until the ship arrived at Torland, and Dominic was already aching for the chance to sprint at full speed. He'd been able to do that at the outskirts of Gennaro, where the roads were straight and mostly empty; he could run until his lungs ached and he was drenched in sweat.

Dominic needed someone to show off for, or at least someone that could share in his excitement. He held out his hand in front of him, and with just a slight act of will, conjured the same dagger as he had last night. The closer he looked at it, the more it looked like one he'd seen in a display case in Gennaro. A smile split his face, and he couldn't have hid it if he wanted to. So long as his fame lasted, he would never be truly disarmed. More than that, it was a blade that wouldn't weigh him down. He would be able to run through the city streets and then reach out to grab his dagger from nothing. The intimidation aspect alone would make him the envy of all his friends, even if the blade itself had been completely non-functional. Dominic's smile

faltered when he remembered stabbing Cerulean Bane in the side, and then fell completely when he remembered spearing Zerstor through the heart.

Dominic shook away those thoughts, and looked at the shadows. He could make the shadows larger or smaller, shrinking them away entirely until he was left with no shadow at all. He closed his eyes to concentrate on the sensation of movement, and was mildly surprised to find that he could still sense the shadows, at least those along the deck of the ship. He continued for some time, testing his limits, from the range of his powers to the strength and speed of them. When Vidre found him, he was trying to alter the form of his dagger.

"You started training without me," she said with a yawn and a cat-like stretch. She had abandoned her armor entirely, though her daggers still hung from her belt. She was barefoot and wore a blue dress. Dominic realized it was the first time that he'd seen her without pants. She seemed almost absurdly feminine in comparison to the night before, if Dominic ignored the daggers. He could see the graceful curve of her collarbone and the flare of her hips.

"You can't have a dagger," said Vidre. She was watching him with a raised eyebrow. "Thematically, I mean. I use daggers, Welexi uses a spear, you need to pick something else."

"I like daggers," said Dominic. He thrust forward with the shadow dagger, stabbing at the air. The balance of it seemed perfect, even though the dagger itself was weightless. It was an odd sensation. "And besides, can't I just pick

whatever best suits the moment? Surely you'd use a sword if the situation called for it."

"Absolutely," said Vidre. "But as I said before, being an illustrati isn't all about fighting. It's not even mostly about fighting. If you want to be an icon, you have to craft an image for yourself, something that people will remember you by. You need a persona that causes an instant association. There are people who have no idea who I am, but they've heard the name 'Queen of Glass' before, and maybe some stories about my daggers, so when they see me in the flesh they make the connection. What you don't want is people arguing about what should be a matter of fact. I've gone incognito more than a few times, and listened to stories get brought to a grinding halt because two people wanted to argue about whether some illustrati wore a cape or not."

"Well, maybe he didn't wear a cape all the time," said Dominic.

"That's exactly the problem," said Vidre. "Variations in personal appearance make it harder for you to stick in someone's mind. If you see a person once, and they're wearing a cape, that's how you think of them until the next time that mental image is challenged."

"I've seen you in four different outfits over the course of two days," said Dominic.

Vidre looked down at her dress. "This one doesn't count. No one is around to see it. And as for the others, those were for different occasions. I have one outfit I wear for day-to-day, I have a formal suit of armor, and I have a full combat outfit. That's the whole of it though. All of them are distinct

from each other. If I do switch over to something that's not one of those three, it's generally a large departure — an outfit where the whole point is to draw attention to how unusual it is." She looked back down at her dress. "And of course, when I have some privacy, I can wear whatever I damned well please."

Dominic looked down to his dagger and let go of it. It faded away in an instant. "So I'll need to pick out something iconic for myself," he said slowly.

"I'll need to pick out something iconic for you," said Vidre. "You can have some input, but I have years of experience seeing what works and what doesn't, and I know who has claim to various looks. There's a fortunate dearth of shadow in this part of the world." She tapped her lip and looked him up and down. "We're almost certainly putting you in a dark purple and gold, which won't step on any toes. It's no use having people mistaking you for someone else."

"Fair enough," said Dominic. "I welcome the help."

Vidre gave him a quizzical look. "You're more pragmatic than I expected you to be."

"I suppose I'll take that as a compliment," Dominic replied. "Now then, a sword?" He held out his hand to the side and willed a long blade into existence. The sword that resulted was familiar to him, a shadow replica of one that he had stolen off a noble's belt and fenced for a small fortune. He hadn't consciously been thinking of that sword, but it had come to him all the same.

"Mildly impressive," said Vidre. "Our bards must be doing a better job than I thought."

"The sky's the limit," said Dominic. "And perhaps not even that. I'm fairly certain I could make wings of shadow."

Vidre smiled. "I have a scenario. You've attended a dinner party, followed by dancing, followed by parlor games, but now the hour is late. Your host asks if you would like to spend the night in a guest room. What should your response be?"

"What?" asked Dominic. Vidre only gave him a slight, expectant tilt of the head. "I suppose it depends on how far away I am, and how late you mean when you say it's late."

"Wrong. You decline," said Vidre firmly. "Your host will insist, and only then do you take pragmatism into consideration. If they do not insist, then it was only a nicety that was expected of them."

"Is that really how nobles do it?" asked Dominic.

"That's how it's done among the people you'll meet in Torland," said Vidre. "What is the proper form of address for the Flower Queen's husband?"

"Your Majesty?" guessed Dominic.

"Ealdwine of the House Marburg is a prince, not a king, and as such is styled with 'Your Royal Highness' on first address, and thereafter simply 'Sir'," replied Vidre. "If you referred to him as 'Your Majesty' you would be putting him on par with his wife, which at best would get titters of laughter at your expense, and at worst would be seen as a deliberate slight against the Queen."

"Well," said Dominic. He was blushing slightly, despite himself. "I didn't know that."

"You don't know anything," said Vidre. "There are a thousand things that you need to learn that are more important than learning how to fight, or how to properly use your domain. Etiquette is one of those things, and the names, stylings, and personal histories of the Flower Queen's court are another."



Time passed.

Vidre was a surprisingly gentle instructor. She never tried to make him feel stupid, and didn't berate him for not knowing things. Her corrections were clear and to the point. It might even have been tolerable, if she were teaching a more interesting subject.

"Never leave the table until a meal is over," said Vidre. She stood with her hands folded beneath her chest and her chin slightly lifted. The sailors worked around them, occasionally calling instruction to each other. Vidre ignored them completely. "However, if you absolutely must leave, where should you place your napkin to show that you intend to return?"

Dominic frowned, and tried to figure it out from base principles. There only seemed to be two options, the chair or the table, but he had no idea which was correct. It was also possible that the answer was "atop the bread plate" or some other ridiculous bit of specificity that he would never be able to guess at.

"I can't get some leeway as the naive newcomer?" asked Dominic.

"Not forever," said Vidre. "Some of your social missteps will be excused, and perhaps they'll even find it funny, but if you want to be regarded as someone on the rise, you need to make an honest effort. I can dress you properly and never leave you on your own, but that's a short-term solution. Later on you might play the boor deliberately, but that would work better if you were truly foreign. There are more than enough men and women that play the fool though, and I don't think you're particularly well-suited to it; not enough to go into competition with the people who have made their livelihoods on being buffoons."

"Fine," said Dominic. "I put the napkin on the seat of the chair then?"

"Correct," said Vidre with a smile. "You'll get there eventually. It took me two years with the best tutors my husband could buy, I don't expect you to attain mastery in a week's time."

At the mention of Vidre's one-time husband, a dozen questions seemed to work their way from Dominic's brain straight to his tongue. He managed to close his mouth tight enough to keep the words from escaping. Gaelwyn had been almost eager to share his past, to frame public stories in a light that flattered him, but Dominic didn't imagine that Vidre would want to do the same. For everything that was said about her, some of it had to be true, and he didn't want to make her air it out. He didn't want her to lie to him either, as he was halfway sure Gaelwyn had.

"Well," said Vidre with a sniff of the air. She turned away from him. "I think we're done for the day. Time for real

dinner instead of a fake one, at any rate. And after that, we throw Wealdwood and his companion into the sea.”



Cerulean Bane had been wrapped in a tarp. At some point before they'd left Gennaro, someone had been sent out to get armfuls of herbs, which had been placed in with the corpse. The result was a smell of oregano, basil, and thyme, which mingled with the smell of decaying flesh. Wealdwood had been dragged up onto deck, with his muscles restored enough for him to stand, but he looked away from the covered body. Welexi had stayed down in his cabin to rest, but everyone else was up on deck. The ship was nearly still in the water, and all seven sails had been furled. The sailors stood around talking quietly among themselves.

“A man can't attack someone and not expect them to fight back,” said Vidre. “It's better not to have to kill a man, if it can be helped, but sometimes it can't.” She had put her armor back on, and eyed Wealdwood carefully the whole time she was speaking. Dominic had thought she was going to start into a eulogy of some kind, but those two sentences were the extent of what she had to say on the matter.

“He tried to be a good man,” said Wealdwood. His voice was strained. His arms were bound behind him with thick rope, and his feet were embedded in a giant chunk of glass that Vidre had shaped around them. His muscles had been reconnected, but sapped of their strength; Gaelwyn had withered the muscles down, then bled the illustrati, explaining to anyone who would listen that there was a re-

lation between the ratio of blood volume to muscle volume. Wealdwood's arm had a thick bandage around it, which showed a dot of red. "But being a good man is hard. I didn't know him well. I was the talker, between the two of us. I wish I'd let him fill the silence more."

Vidre nodded. "Dominic, grab the feet."

They picked up the tarp. It was surprisingly light until Dominic remembered how much stronger he was now. Even with the armor still on the body, Vidre could probably have lifted it all by herself. The mixed smell of herbs and death filled Dominic's nostrils. Together he and Vidre moved the tarp over to the side of the ship, swung it back once, then tossed it over the edge. It splashed into the dark blue water and immediately began to sink. The smell lingered.

"Now you," Vidre said to Wealdwood. Four long pieces of wood had been brought up onto the deck, and Vidre gestured to them. "We're letting you go, against my better judgment. Thank Welexi for that. There's land just visible to the north. Your strength isn't going to be returned to you; you can find someone to do that for you, or build it back up naturally, but it's not our problem." She pointed to the four planks. "I'm going to take off your fetters, and you're going to make yourself a raft. The wood is a gift, from us to you. If you make any sudden movements, I will kill you. If you say anything unwise, I will kill you. If you use your domain to do anything other than making a raft for yourself, I will kill you. You have a narrow path to life here, try not to wander from it."

Wealdwood licked his lips and nodded. When Vidre pulled the glass from his feet, he went over to the provided wood and began to shape it. The sailors lost interest quickly enough, but Vidre stared at Wealdwood with unwavering intensity. Dominic had asked whether Wealdwood would be able to sink the ship while standing on its deck, and Vidre had replied that his power wouldn't extend so far, and besides that he'd be dooming himself. Watching her now, Dominic wasn't sure how confident she was in that assessment.

"Did you kill me, Mottram?" asked Wealdwood as he pushed the planks together. He ran his finger along the seam, altering the wood so that it was a single solid piece. The process gave off a faint sound of creaking. "Did you introduce some flaw in me? Simple enough to do, for someone like you."

"You are venturing into unwise territory," said Vidre.

Wealdwood's hands were shaking as he repeated the process on another of the planks. "Not knowing is the worst part," he said slowly. "I've expected my death from the moment I was captured, but I don't know whether this is a charade or not, a performance put on for your crew or a genuine act of clemency."

Vidre and Gaelwyn were both silent. A light breeze blew across the deck of the ship, carrying away murmured conversation among the sailors, and not much of that.

"I'll say whatever it is you want for me to say," said Wealdwood. "I can be a tool for you, an instrument of your will, if only you let me live." He was working quickly,

and finished merging the fourth piece. He turned to look at Gaelwyn. His eyes were brimming with tears. "Please, Gael, if you've done it, you can still undo it, you can still let me live, I'll tell them, all of them, the whole world about how you let me go, how you're not the man that you were, how you've truly changed your ways — or, or how you never were that man to begin with. Please, please don't let me die."

Gaelwyn's lips twitched slightly. His eyes showed little emotion. "You tried to kill me," he said, "What good would it do, to have me tell you that I haven't acted in retribution? You don't trust my word now, and wouldn't have reason to trust it just because I'd told you what you wanted to hear. If this is a charade for someone's benefit, I would touch you on the shoulder and tell you that I'd undone whatever it is you think that I've done."

Wealdwood finished the pitifully small boat in silence, shaping the flat rectangle of wood into a crude half-shell. His hands were unsteady, and his breathing was uneven, but he didn't ever quite cry. After the boat was finished, Vidre made him sit in it, then began pushing it towards where there was a gap in the railing. Her eyes never left Wealdwood. The Zenith wasn't too high up off the water, and it would be a short drop.

"Dominic," said Wealdwood, his voice thick with urgency, "If you never see me again, never hear word that I made it to safety, you'll know what was done to me."

Vidre shoved his boat hard, and it splashed down into the water. Wealdwood looked up at them, then began the work

of fashioning oars for himself. His arms looked pitifully small, and if he weren't an illustrati, Dominic would have put low odds on the man making it to shore.

"Sailors, go check the bilge and make a survey of the hold," said Vidre as she pointed to two of them. "Let's make sure this bastard didn't try something foolish, just in case. Everyone else, let's get moving again. The sooner we're in Torland, the better."

The sails came down again and billowed up with wind, and the ship began to leave Wealdwood in his small boat behind. Dominic watched from the back of the ship until the boat was only a speck. Vidre stood beside him.

"That's trouble," said Vidre. "Welexi thought that the man had learned his lesson by being at our mercy, but I'm doubtful. Wealdwood took a first step down the path to villainy — maybe it was his second or third, I don't know — but it's been my experience that people don't often turn around, not until they've reached the lowest low. I've already set too much in motion for Wealdwood. Gennaro will know what he's done within the next week or two, depending on how our bards think the wind is blowing. It's going to be harder for Wealdwood to come back to the light after that, even if we've effectively given him a pardon. So what will he do but turn to villainy?" She sighed and closed her eyes. The wind pushed her hair back, and for the first time since Dominic had met her, she looked content. "It's a problem for the future."

Dominic looked around, to make sure that Gaelwyn had gone down into the cabin. "Can Gael do that? Kill a man from a distance?"

Vidre didn't open her eyes, and a strand of loose hair danced in the wind. "He described the body as a temple, when he was one of his more poetic moods," said Vidre. "Easy enough to knock down, if you have a siege weapon, and that's all that most illustrati of flesh have. Gaelwyn is like an exceptionally skilled architect of temples. Is it within his capabilities to introduce a subtle change, so the temple blows down in the next strong wind, or collapses in on itself in the next heavy rain?" She kept her eyes closed and pursed her lips. "He keeps secrets. We all do. But yes, I think that if he wanted to, he could do something like that."

"Has he, in the past?" asked Dominic. The information was third-hand, or perhaps even more tenuous than that. The ultimate source was Wealdwood's benefactor, and it was an open question where the benefactor had heard it, or if he had simply made the whole thing up.

"If he has, I didn't give the order," said Vidre. She had drawn back her armor slightly, now that Wealdwood was gone. The danger was now well and truly past, and her muscles were relaxed. The piece of glass around her upper arm was clear enough for Dominic to see the muscles of her bicep.

It was only when he looked at it that it occurred to him that Gaelwyn might have enhanced her too. The thought of Gaelwyn's hand on her, touching every muscle in her body at once, shifting them around and trying to bring

about the most aesthetic shape, caused a cold feeling in Dominic's gut. It shouldn't have, he knew that, but it made her less beautiful in his eyes. What was to say that her skin hadn't been made smooth and soft by another illustrati? That her hair hadn't been made thick and full? The Bone Warden could fix teeth. Vidre's were straight, and the more he looked between her slightly parted lips, the more her teeth looked preternaturally white. Flesh, skin, hair, bone — she wasn't perfect, and there was nothing overt, but his guess felt right all the same. He shouldn't have expected anything less. Vidre was the sort of person who would take any advantage she could grab hold of. Yet she still had a scar on her face.

"How did you get that scar?" asked Dominic. It was white and vertical, and didn't disfigure her in the slightest. It was suspicious, in that regard.

"Not the time for stories," said Vidre. "You have books to read, and lessons to learn."



The next day, Dominic and Vidre fought.

"There is a difference between animal instinct and learned knowledge," said Welexi. He sat on a chair, fully braced in light, with Gaelwyn beside him. Dominic and Vidre were circling each other slowly. He had a sword of shadow, and she had crafted a sword of glass. "If you go into combat, you must have both. You must know on an intellectual level what your opponent might do, and weigh your options with a keen mind, and at the same time have

an understanding deep in your bones, in order to react without thought."

"There's too much distance between your feet," said Vidre. Dominic tried to correct it.

"It's instructive to think of battle as a drama," said Welexi. "At a certain point, we all know our lines, but what distinguishes a man is the character of his performance. Patience, attention, rage, confidence, all these things contribute to a person's expression of martial skill, and to be truly great, you must know how to respond to these subtleties, and control the subtleties of your own."

"That's not going to help him if he can't master the basics," said Vidre. "There's still too much distance between your feet. When you step over to circle I could dash in and get you off-balance, and from there it wouldn't be long before you died."

"Alright," said Dominic. He tried to shift his positioning. There were too many things to think about at once, and Welexi's bits of martial philosophy weren't helping matters. Vidre had gotten him into a proper fighting stance with his sword held in front of him, but when he moved he needed to focus on keeping his spine straight, his arms bent at the correct angle, his feet the proper distance from each other, his torso presenting a profile, and his shoulders square. As soon as his attention was focused on one of those things, one of the others seemed to slip. Worse, he was being taught only one of three basic stances, and those other two would have to be mastered as well.

"There are three planes of reference," said Welexi. "From head to shoulders, from shoulders to waist, and from waist to feet. Each is defended in a different manner."

Vidre darted towards Dominic with what he now recognized as exaggerated slowness, and he brought his sword forward to block her. After a brief contact, she backed away and fell back into a stance that was far superior to his in every way. For the time being, she was pretending at not being an illustrati; techniques for dealing with other illustrati varied widely according to Vidre, depending on the standing of the opponent and their domain.

"I'm reasonably confident that by the time we arrive in Meriwall, Dominic will be able to stand toe-to-toe with any normal man, one-on-one, in a fair fight," said Vidre. She circled slowly, stepping with care. On occasion she would leave an opening for Dominic, and that was his cue to attack. These openings were wholly by her intent, and he was sure that he was missing half of them, if not more. "That's good — better than expected. We should work more on etiquette and social skills."

"There is civil unrest in Torland," said Welexi. "The odds that we will be forced to fight are high. It is entirely possible that our first visit to the Flower Queen's court will result in her asking us to take care of some problem. Given that we're, ahem, short-handed, Lightscour needs to be able to defend himself at the least, not just against a background character, but a major player."

Dominic was becoming doubtful that this would happen. His strength, speed, and resilience would give him an ad-

vantage, but there was far too much to learn. Vidre had let him tag her once or twice now, but there was little doubt in his mind that she could kill him with ease if she had the motive for it. He felt strong, and his command over his domain had grown from the day before, but his confidence had been shaken by these combat lessons.

"Let's take a break," said Vidre. She folded her glass sword in half with ease, and clamped the glass down onto her wrist to make a bracer. Dominic dismissed his shadow sword, and felt like a faint weight had been lifted from his mind.

"Mimicry is in the nature of shadow," said Welexi. "Every shadow is a duplicate, in its own way. Armor will come easily to you, I think."

"Better sooner than later," said Vidre. She sat cross-legged on the deck of the ship. "If it's possible to get something in place before we reach Meriwall, that would be ideal."

Dominic held his hand out, and tried to force the shadow into a bracer like the one Vidre had given herself. Nothing happened until he held his hand slightly above his forearm to cast a shadow there, and after that it was easy to make the shadow a solid thing. He clamped the hard shadow into place around his arm, and held it up for inspection. He could feel the same faint tug of attention there, and wondered what the upper limit of his power would be. He'd heard a story of Welexi outfitting a hundred men with spears during some large battle.

"The question is whether it will make good armor," said Vidre. She touched the bracer and frowned. "We'll have to test how easy it is to penetrate or shatter. Welexi's is nearly as strong as steel, though steel isn't too strong in the hands of an illustrati." Dominic briefly thought of her fist crumpling Cerulean Bane's faceplate, and her bare hands tearing into his armor. She should have torn her hands up doing that, but they were perfectly fine, slender and delicate save for the calluses her daggers gave her.

"How likely are we to have to fight in Meriwall?" asked Dominic. "I'll be ready for it, whatever the challenge," he added.

"Civil unrest is a nasty thing," said Vidre. "And somewhat outside our purview, come to that. Our arrangement with the Flower Queen is that in the event of a defensive war we'll be called in on their side, along with a few of the other major players. I believe she hopes to quell dissent merely by having us present for a month or so. We're an implied threat to her would-be enemies."

"The Queen is a gentle soul," said Welexi. "We would protect her anyway."

"She's important to the balance of power," Vidre replied. "There will be a succession crisis when she dies, which will give the Iron King an opening, and that's not good for anyone."

"They went to war before," said Dominic with a shrug.

This was greeted with silence.

"We all played our part in the Peddler's War," Welexi eventually replied. "It will be a point of contention when

we reach Torland. It would do best not to mention it. The Sovento States were neutral, and you would have been eight years old when it ended, so I don't expect you to know, but it was a brutal thing. Thousands of corpses littered the killing fields. Men starved within their forts. There's some threat of it happening again; nine years is too long to go without one of the major powers making a play against the other. This is not a matter to be met with a shrug."

"I'm sorry," said Dominic. "I only meant ... I don't know. That it wouldn't be the end of the world."

"This is why your lessons are a priority," said Vidre. She stood up from the deck and touched her glass bracer. "Combat is all well and good, but it's words that will sink us. There are a number of gaps in your knowledge that need to be filled in as quickly as possible." She turned to Welexi. "Four hours of combat training a day, nothing more?"

"Agreed," said Welexi. "I see the wisdom of your approach now."

"Good," said Vidre. The smile she gave Dominic was sharp. "Now, Lightscour, let me give you an abridged history of the Peddler's War ..."



Halfway through their trip, Dominic began to have second thoughts about becoming an illustrati.

He was growing more powerful with every day that passed. He could see perfectly in the dark now, and read the books he'd been assigned without need for a candle.

He could make a number of pieces of armor for himself, including a rather sturdy breastplate which could almost match the strength of metal, but with none of the actual weight. He could leap at least fifteen feet into the air now, though he'd put a stop to that particular line of experimentation after almost landing in the sea. He was on the verge of being able to move around with his eyes closed, going by the feel of the shadows alone.

That was all well and good — those were the parts that he liked.

Unfortunately, there was an enormous quantity of learning to be done. There were two hundred people on Vidre's list, and each of them had at least two names, a domain, and some small bit of personal history. He had been given a rundown on the major nations that ringed the Calypso, their dispositions towards each other, their forms of government, principle trade goods, major cities, and recent wars (where "recent" seemed to stretch back at least fifty years). Worst of all was etiquette, which had numerous rules that followed little in the way of internal logic, and which seemed especially pointless. All of that was what Vidre called "the essentials". A small fraction of it he had already known, but most of it he had not. He would have slammed his head against the cabin wall in frustration, but was worried that he would leave a dent.

The combat training was almost worse. Every time he began to feel that he was doing well, some new aspect would be introduced that seemed to set him back to square one. On the sixth day, Vidre had said, "Alright, I'm going to

speed up a little bit," and he had nearly thrown his sword down and quit for the day. He'd thought he was doing well, but she was operating far below her limits. Every time he seemed to be matching her capabilities, she simply began using some hidden reserve that he hadn't even known was there.

"Oh come on," said Vidre over dinner. They were eating together in her cabin, a stew of lamb and peas, and she had her bare feet propped up against the cabin wall. "Don't look so glum."

"It's just frustrating," said Dominic. "I feel like I'm not getting any better."

"You are getting better," said Vidre. "You just didn't realize how much further there was to go."

"But it was easier for everyone else," said Dominic. "They didn't need so much time and effort."

"Like me?" asked Vidre. She speared a piece of lamb and plopped it in her mouth, then continued talking around the food. It was terrible etiquette, but in private Vidre didn't put up many pretenses. "I know the stories that they tell, of the girl who was laying in a goose-down bed. She was woken up with ruffled hair and went out to see what the commotion was about. She made some daggers for herself and walked right into the melee, taking to killing like it was what she had been meant to do. Does that sound even the least bit true to you?"

"I suppose not," said Dominic. "But I don't know what the real story is then. You trained for years beforehand with some secret master?"

"No, the truth is that I was terrified, and I wouldn't have fought back against the attackers if I had thought I had a choice. I nearly died, and I broke down afterward. The story started out as a lie for my benefit. It was a kindly officer who found me crying next to the two men I had killed. He told me that I had turned the tide of the battle, that I had inspired the troops and turned a sure rout into a triumphant defense. I believed it for a full two years. After that first battle, I received my training. The stories never mention the training, or if they do, it's glossed over, or corrupted into something like a search for a mystical technique, or a romance. Mostly, it's not even that. 'Time passed', and all the sweat, tears, and frustration of getting better are nothing but that single sentence. It's amazing how much of your life a bard can sum up in a handful of words." She caught his eye. "And yes, I understand that you want to skip over all of the boring bits and become a perfect gentleman of society without first learning the rules that society operates under. You want to skip right to being a fearsome warrior without having to learn your footwork or how to put up a proper guard. But you're already skipping far ahead of everyone else, and that should be enough, shouldn't it?"

"I suppose," said Dominic. Vidre was right though. He wanted to skip over the hard work. Yet knowing that this was what he wanted didn't make him want it any less, it only made him feel worse.



"I want to fight you at your best," said Dominic. It was the last full day at sea; the sailors were saying that they'd be through the Angel's Mouth shortly after sunset, and in Torland by evening.

"Why?" asked Vidre. She arched an eyebrow, but kept circling him carefully all the same. Her defense was not quite ironclad, but the flaws she'd put into it were subtle, and difficult to see.

"Lightscour means to test himself," said Welexi with a laugh. "He wants to see whether he is worthy of a place among us."

"More or less," said Dominic. He had never really felt that he wasn't worthy of a place on the ship. He only wanted to know how much further he truly had to go. There was a strong element of masochism in his request.

"Fine," said Vidre with a shrug. "We'll pretend it's an exhibition match. I'll only hold back enough to prevent your death." Her stance changed slightly, and the small imperfections which Dominic had been on the edge of seeing disappeared entirely. Her daggers were blunt, but he knew from experience that they still hurt. His own sword was as blunt as he could make it, and couldn't cut through glass; whatever method Welexi used to slice straight through armor had not yet been taught to him, if it was even a trick that shadow could do. "Whenever you're ready."

Dominic stepped slowly. The more they'd practiced, the more he found the ship constraining; there were too many obstructions, and too many people nearby. Vidre had said that real fights often took place in cramped quarters, and

that this was good training, but pacing the same section of deck for hours on end had only increased his yearning to run. Still, there were peculiarities to this landscape, and he could use them. You couldn't step too close to the mast, or risk being backed up against it. He had been proud of himself for seeing it some days earlier before he realized that Vidre meant for him to see it. He could force her to put herself in a position where she had to change direction though, and that might be enough.

She easily parried his first attack with one of her daggers, and stabbed him in the gut with the other, hard enough that he was sure it would bruise, even with the armor he was wearing.

"You're dead," said Vidre. "Sorry."

They backed away from each other, and began circling again. He waited until she had to change direction, and brought his shadow blade down hard. She dodged to the side, as though his attack were the most predictable thing in the world, and slammed him against the temple with the butt of one of her daggers. "Dead again."

Dominic's head swam briefly, and they were back to circling. He was beginning to regret asking for this, but it was better to know his limits. She was right though; it would have been easy enough for her to drive the blade straight into his brain. The daggers could be made sharp enough to slice a falling hair lengthwise; sharpness was part of the nature of the domain of glass.

He came at her hard the third time. He swept his sword in from the side, an uncontrolled hacking motion that was

calculated to seem like it was borne of frustration. When she saw his fist it was too late, and his punch landed right on her mouth. She swore and stepped back, then rubbed at her jaw. When she pulled her hand back, Dominic could see that her lip was bleeding.

"I'm sorry," he began.

"No," replied Vidre. She smiled, and touched her lip. "You did better than I had expected."

His heart swelled at the compliment, and at the fact that he'd been able to land a single hit against one of the most powerful illustrati in the world. His excitement was ungentlemanly, and he tried to hide it, but he wasn't quite able to hide his smile. Vidre was going to make him pay for that.

"We'll call it quits for today," she said. "I don't want to risk going before the court too badly marked by you, and there's still a wealth of review for you to do. I think you're almost ready for polite society."

Dominic didn't even complain.



Torland was just past the Angel's Mouth that separated the Calypso Sea from the Pensic Ocean, a large island that sat within view of the civilized continents. It was known for its mountains, though the few flat areas with wide meadows were where the vast majority of its people lived. In recent years, as the colonies to the west had begun to flourish, the capital of Meriwall had become a bustling port for every

ship that sought to pass from within the Calypso Sea. It was the last place a ship could stop at if they wished to cross the Pensic with full supplies, or needed to fix a last-minute problem with their hull, mast, or sails. The mountains at the heart of the island towered over the fields and towns that clung to the outer edges of Torland. The largest of them was a dead volcano, and while Dominic had heard that there was a sleeping demon at its heart, he had long thought that this was merely another legend. Looking at Tor Craighorn looming above the island, almost impossibly tall, it was easy to see why people felt the need to tell tales about it.

The first thing anyone leaving the Calypso saw of Torland was the Face. It was an immense figure carved into the mountain at a massive scale. His expression was enigmatic. His lip was slightly curled. One eyebrow was slightly raised. He seemed to be looking at you no matter where you viewed him from. Some people found the Face to be looking out on the continents with disgust; others thought it was bemusement. He could seem paternal or oppressive, and sometimes both at the same time. The scale was so large it practically beggared belief. The entire city of Gennaro could have been turned on its side and laid across the carving, and it wouldn't have reached from cheek to cheek.

The Face was King Laith's; he had sought to make himself immortal. Fame made you stronger, faster, and better able to recover from wounds, or simply not take them in the first place. When Laith had begun to age, he had thought that the solution was simply to acquire more fame. He wasn't the first of the illustrati, but he was the first of the modern

era. He paid far-flung missionaries to spread his image and name across the known world, and funded expeditions to seek out peoples who had never had contact with civilization. He ordered his subjects to worship him for two hours every day, kneeling before his image and singing songs of adoration. And on the mountain that gave Torland its name, he carved the image of his face, so large that it was a miracle that the project had ever been completed.

King Laith had died all the same.

"Laith said he'd return one day," said Welexi. His eyes were fixed on the stone face, still miles away from them. "On his deathbed, he knew that all the fame in the world couldn't save him, so he cast his hope in another direction. He had heard stories of reincarnation, and souls unhooked from their bodies. He gathered up people who would tell him what he wanted to hear." Welexi shook his head. "Laith is another of the wasteful dead that siphon from the pool of fame."

"Is fame limited like that?" asked Dominic.

"You've been lazy about your reading," said Vidre.

"There was a lot to read," said Dominic. Mostly he'd stuck to the biographies, and then only the ones that entertained him.

"Well, the answer is yes," Vidre replied. "Fame is limited."

"There are several schools of thought," said Gaelwyn. "I know quite a few men who would argue over these things. Vidre is right, but she cuts the debate down to only its conclusion, and there are those who would disagree with her

stating it so bluntly. It's actually one of the Five Questions, what happens to the so-called fame directed at the fictitious or deceased."

"If Laith has ensured his legend, he has diminished ours," said Welexi. "We are robbed of power, power to do good, because Laith was afraid of death. That is that."

After that, the waves lapped against the ship in silence.

Welexi took flight when they were a mile out, against Gaelwyn's advice. The red-headed doctor had frowned at the sight of those enormous wings sprouting from Welexi's back, but Dominic had felt a rare sense of wonder at seeing a man fly through the air. The ship was tacking against the wind, and Welexi flew on ahead of it. He could be seen swooping down over Meriwall, passing over the people in order to announce their arrival.

"How does it work?" asked Dominic.

"The wings?" asked Gael. Dominic nodded. "Welexi spent years, maybe decades, trying to get them to work. He made a study of birds and spoke with natural philosophers. There are diagrams of how the air moves that I'm sure he could show you. He worked with many illustrati of different domains in order to perfect the design."

"I'm not sure that answered my question," said Dominic. Welexi was a point of light, clearly visible only when he made a turn in the air and began to flap his wings again.

"He uses his power to shape the wings," said Gael. "The structure takes a great deal of attention, and he needs a mirror to watch as he forms it. There are something like muscles in it, parts of the construct that he can pull at

in a way that's become natural to him now, after years of patience. The wing pushes against the air and provides him with lift. Beyond that, you would have to ask him, but in most respects he flies just like a bird does."

"And I could do that someday?" asked Dominic. He imagined wings with black feathers, like a raven, flying over foreign cities at night and looking down on the lights below him.

Vidre laughed. "Well, that's the source of your curiosity at least. And no, it doesn't seem likely that you'll be able to fly. I've known more than one illustrati with the domain of air that's tried to get flight working, not to mention those with other less likely domains, and Welexi is the only one who's managed it."

"Shadow isn't supposed to be common," said Dominic. "So maybe no one was ever famous enough to have the power for it."

Welexi landed back on the deck and folded his wings behind him until they were only a small pack of light resting on his back. He frowned at his maimed right hand and reformed the light around it. The effect was mostly for aesthetic purposes; they'd taken dinner together a few times, and Welexi had always held his fork in his other hand.

"Torland is looking well," said Welexi. "Dom, prepare yourself for the unpleasant smells of the world's busiest port. Vidre, be ready for trouble."

"What sort of trouble?" asked Vidre.

"Kendrick Eversong, the Blood Bard," said Welexi. He spat the name. "I spotted him on the streets, and believe

he was coming to the docks to greet our arrival. He's never been violent in the past, at least not towards other illustrati, but my injury might change that."

Vidre shrugged. "Four on one wouldn't be odds he'd be willing to take. It's the spectacle that concerns me."

Dominic couldn't help but feel some elation at the fact that she'd included him.

Meriwall wasn't built on the sea; it was a mile up a thick, sluggish river that was visible from a distance as a forest of ship masts and a line of low buildings. The crowds had gathered to greet them long before they reached the city proper. It began as small clusters of workers who had taken a break to see the Zenith come in, but by the time they reached their dock just outside the high walls that gave Meriwall its name, the crowds were so thick it was hard to see where the mass of people ended. Dominic had avoided the crowds that surrounded the illustrati in Gennaro. He wondered if the reception in Gennaro had been like this one was. His sense of the illustrati as enormous figures of myth had returned to him with a vengeance.

Dominic wore the same purple clothing, overlaid with a simple breastplate of shadow. The clothing had been cleaned and tailored by one of the sailors. They fit him better now, but Vidre still frowned at the tights and cape, and told him they'd need to get him fitted for something more iconic when he made his debut at court. She had on the same suit of glass armor as she'd had when they'd left Gennaro. It hugged her form and presented hard, shiny surfaces. She'd also fashioned a circlet of glass around her

head, which held her hair in place. Welexi had on the same damaged suit of armor from before, though the quick alterations that Vidre had made to it had been refined, and now it looked more perfect in its state of ruin. It would be replaced once they had a spare moment in Meriwall.

Gaelwyn stood back from the others, and didn't present himself to the crowds in the same way that Welexi or Vidre did. From time to time the wind would carry a shouted word to the ship, "Red Angel", and from the way that Gaelwyn's jaw tightened, it was clear that he wasn't taking this as a compliment. The connection was slow in coming, but when Dominic put the thoughts together they twisted in his gut. Gaelwyn Mottram had been given prisoners of war, and this was the country that the bulk of them must have come from.

The lion's share of the crowd wasn't shouting dissent. Most people were there to see Welexi in all his shining glory, or Vidre in her faceted armor. They cheered loudly as the ship made dock, and the sailors moved forward to guard against anyone trying to get aboard. Dominic saw more than one woman trying to push her way through with tears streaming down her face. That sort of reaction was precisely why Dominic had always avoided the illustrati. He'd seen the gathered crowds a few times, but there was something unseemly about them, just as there was something unseemly about the crowds that watched him race across the rooftops.

"Ohhhhhhhh," sang a loud voice from within the crowds. People turned towards it, and a pair of hands lifted

up a man with a lute above the surrounding press of people. He was dressed in a crimson red, with black tights and a large red hat that sat slightly askew. He had pale white skin and a black goatee, with a slightly pinched face and a wide smile. His voice rang out with a note that was throaty and loud, enough to pierce the murmur of the crowd. It was a toughened voice, one lubricated with ale. His identity was easy to guess. When the Blood Bard was properly elevated, he began to strum his lute, and sing a song that the crowds went silent for.

*Welexi Sunhawk, Is easy to mock, He's cowardly as a chicken
He runs from the fight, Off into the night, For fear of gettin'
a lickin'!*

*During the siege of Arronbach, The powdersmoke was thick,
Welexi went to the doctor, And played at being sick!*

*Ask me any questions, About this man I know, To tell it true
Welexi is, As low as a man can go!*

*He's fought the villain Zerstor, A time or three or four, He
arranged the fights ahead of time, And Zerstor faked his roar!*

*I do not call him rapist, Nor exaggerate his misdeeds, But he's
a crooked cowardly craven, Always aiming to mislead!*

*He travels around with Vidre, A woman clad in glass, She's a
spoiled brat, a murderer, And a whore of the highest class!*

*The men of the realm must love her, They call her a saucy lass,
In exchange she likes to bend over, And let them take her in the ass!*

As the song had gone on, Vidre's armor had changed. Sharp black shards had grown from it, and the spikes elongated. Her face was a mask of barely restrained anger.

Welexi had not changed his expression at all, only folded his arms across his chest while he waited for the bard to finish. Neither made any attempt to interrupt him. Gaelwyn shrank back with downcast eyes. Dominic deliberated on his response. He didn't know what his own part was. The authentic response would simply have been confusion, but while half the crowd was watching the bard sing his song, cheering or booing at some particular line, the other half was watching the crew of the *Zenith*. Dominic settled for crossing his arms in front of him like Welexi had done. He twisted his mouth and furrowed his brow, and hoped that he looked more upset than befuddled. As the song reached its end, and the affront settled in, it became far less of an act.

"A pleasant enough song, if you enjoy flights of fancy," said Welexi. His voice was calm and even, and projected for a wide audience. The noise of the crowd was low. People were hanging on every word, and Welexi was speaking past Kendrick to them. "Doggerel verse isn't enough to change a person's mind, especially when your lyrics are soaked through with jealousy and irrational hatred. A better man would speak of his own deeds rather than belittle someone else, but perhaps that would be easier if you had accomplished anything of note."

"Ah, well, if it's actions you want," said Kendrick with a grin. His eyes shifted towards Gael. "I did happen to write another verse." He strummed his lute again and began to sing before Welexi could interject.

His name is Gael Mottram, The Harbinger of Death, He'll cut your vital organs out, Until there's nothing left.

Mottram's killed a hundred, He's ripped their flesh apart, He cut off legs, He tore out hearts, He gouged out eyes, He's used dark arts, He's eaten brains, And bo-dy parts!

Now he travels the ocean, Free as a man can be, His crimes have been forgiven, By her royal majesty!

But Mottram killed my father, In ways both vile and cruel, So Mottram, for your recompense, I challenge you to a duel.

Kendrick Eversong gave a deep bow to the crowd, and there were scattered cheers among them. A hulking man pushed his way between the sailors. He carried a thick package wrapped in a crimson cloth that matched the bard's outfit, and as the *Zenith's* sailors began to push him back, he threw the package overhand towards the deck of the ship. Vidre blurred forward and caught it without any apparent effort on her part.

"The terms of the duel," said Kendrick. "Negotiable. You know where to find me once you've thought it over." He began to strum on his lute again, humming the tune loudly. "Of course I know that dear Gaelwyn is a pacifist, so I suppose it shall be the two of us, shan't it Whitespear?"

It was a trap. That was clear enough. Gaelwyn had committed a host of crimes against the people of Torland, or at least they believed that he had, which was the important bit. It hadn't been mentioned at all in the course of Dominic's rapid education, but there was little doubt that this was a point of tension the bard was tugging at. The Blood Bard was a bit player in the scheme of things, formerly employed by the illustrati before he'd raised his profile. He wanted a duel to increase his standing, and had chosen Gaelwyn

because it was a justifiable way to get at Welexi. The motive was unclear. Having the champion of good defend Gaelwyn's supposed experiments would do damage, certainly, and there was little doubt that the Peddler's War was underpinning this whole thing in one way or another. That was as far as Dominic's thinking got before it seemed as though he would lose his window of opportunity.

"I'll stand in Gael's place," said Dominic. He moved up, past Welexi and Vidre. "I was nine years old when the Peddler's War ended, and had no stake in it. I don't step forward to retread the past. I step forward because for as long as I've known him, Gaelwyn Mottram has been a kind and caring man." The words came quickly, projected out to the crowd with a voice he'd practiced at sea.

Kendrick Eversong, the Blood Bard, nodded as though this were the most natural result of his challenge. "Very well then. I'll kill you in three days time, at Amare's Theater, and Gaelwyn's life will be forfeited immediately after." He rose his hands, holding his lute high. "All are welcome to enjoy the spectacle!"



If you want to hear the song from this chapter (sung by my friend David): <https://soundcloud.com/alexanderwales/as-low-as-a-man-can-go>

6. The Flower Queen's Court

Kendrick Eversong had been sipping on a mid-morning ale when a young boy came into the tavern, hollering about Welexi Sunhawk flying overhead.

The last piece of correspondence from Gennaro had arrived three days ago, which meant that it was nearly two weeks out of date. At that time, word had been that Welexi was intending to sail to Parance, which likely meant another two weeks until he came to Meriwall, if he kept to his patterns. Something had changed, but it was a mystery as to what. When Kendrick had worked as Welexi's bard, he was always dealing with stories coming in weeks or even months after they'd happened, responding to events that had happened ages ago. By the time word of a broken siege in Lerabor reached Meriwall, the siege had already been over for weeks. It had been a pain then, and it was a pain now, but Kendrick got up and went to work.

The man that carried him was named Clarence. He was short but wide, and extremely muscular, and had been chosen from among the Council of Laborers for precisely those reasons. The idea was for Kendrick to be held high above the heads of the gathered crowd, moving along as though he was floating. It was important for Clarence to be short so that he wouldn't be too visible to the crowds and draw attention to himself. Clarence and Kendrick had practiced together in a warehouse where racks of lamb were

curing, until they could move together in a way that didn't betray the amount of balance and strength it took.

"Something's wrong with Welexi's hand," said a wiry man from within the Council. He was slightly out of breath, with news that was only minutes out-of-date instead of weeks. "And there's another illustrati with him, looks like shadow."

"Gaelwyn and Vidre are on the ship?" asked Kendrick.

The wiry man nodded. It was really the long-awaited moment then. Kendrick had to resist the urge to show his anxiety. If only the *Zenith* weren't so fast, he wouldn't have so many gaps in his knowledge. The landscape had changed, and the gambit was now far less certain. There was a strong argument to be made for holding off and waiting for more information to come in, but theatrics demanded that the challenge happen now, when everyone would be assembled and the crowds would be thick. There was no guarantee that he would be able to get all three of them together in public again; Vidre in particular liked to slip off the ship at the first opportunity. In Kendrick's experience, news traveled in waves, and if you timed things wrong you would end up with those waves crashing into each other instead of adding their force to one another. No, it had to be now, whatever the risks.

When the *Zenith* docked, Kendrick was lifted up, and sang the song he'd been practicing for ages. From his new vantage point he could see Welexi's hand; "something's wrong" had been understating it by a wide margin, given that most of the fingers were missing. Vidre was looking as

radiant as ever, even with her mask of anger. Yet Kendrick's eyes kept going to the newcomer, the unknown element dressed in unfashionable clothing and a breastplate made of shadow, with shaggy curls of hair and a mildly confused look on his face.

When the man – no, the boy – stepped forward to accept the duel, Kendrick almost faltered. Yet he had honed his skills in improvisation over the course of a decade and a half, and he decided to run with it and figure everything out later. He wanted desperately to stay, to ask what in the hell was going on, or simply to listen to the speech that Welexi was about to give, but the narrative had to be centered on the duel, and that meant making an exit instead of heckling.

A slight movement of the foot got Clarence moving through the crowds, and Kendrick strummed his lute as though he had not a single care in the world.



The Blood Bard retreated, held aloft. He hummed his tune and idly played his lute, while Dominic watched him go.

Dominic nearly jumped when he felt a firm hand on his shoulder. He looked to the side, and saw Welexi standing next to him, with a benevolent smile on his face.

"This young man is Lightscour," Welexi said to the crowd. "Ten days ago he was living a hardscrabble life on the streets of Gennaro. Nine days ago he killed the Titan of Rust and Ruin." Ripples went through the crowd, hushed murmurs and gasps of disbelief. Welexi held up his ruined hand, the one with fingers of light, and the masses

again went silent. "Tonight at Amare's Theater, just after sundown, I'll tell the tale of how I took this wound. And three days after that, Lightscour will prove the strength of his convictions on that same stage."

He smiled wide, and the crowd burst into cacophony as people talked loudly to each other and shouted questions at Welexi. He merely gave a bow to them, and turned to the others. "The Flower Queen will expect us at Grayhull in not too much longer."

When Dominic saw Vidre's face, he took a slight, involuntary step backwards. He had thought he had seen all her shades of anger before, from the cold threatening calms to the primal fires of passionate rage, but this was something else entirely. He could see her anger in her eyes, and the slight tightness in the muscles of her face, but it was restrained; there was a mask in place. She was going to yell at him later, he'd known that as soon as the idea of stepping forward had occurred to him, but now he was worried that she was going to do him some actual physical harm.

"To Grayhull," said Vidre with a nod. "This was an inauspicious start to our time in Meriwall." She focused on her armor, and the spikes and shards it had been protruding began to retract in. There was a slight twitch to her cheek as her eyes passed over Dominic and Welexi. "Let's hope that the Flower Queen's Court is in better shape than we left it."

They proceeded through the crowds with the sailors accompanying them. The crowds were oppressive, and more noisy than they'd been in Gennaro. The people of the Sovento States were well-known for being self-assured,

confident, and oftentimes even boastful; that was part of their cultural charm, and Dominic had grown up hearing jokes and stories where the men from Gennaro, Triana, and Ponticelli were always trying to top each other. The Soventian peoples were often compared to an excitable dog by foreigners, which Dominic had never taken to be terribly insulting.

In contrast, the Toric people were simply loud. It was perhaps unfair for him to judge a whole nation by their reception in the capital city, but the voices weren't as expressive as they were in Gennaro, despite the volume. All the questions, even the pleasant ones, had a slight undercurrent, as though it would be an affront for no answer to be given. Many of the questions weren't pleasant at all.

"Did you work with Zerstor?" screamed one of the men who got too close to Welexi. The man was shoved back by the sailors, and Welexi kept walking, addressing his answer to the crowd.

"Zerstor is dead, and I've lost the use of my hand," said Welexi. "Kendrick Eversong is a petty, bitter man looking only to muddy clear waters in pursuit of his own fame. After the tale you'll hear tonight, there will be little doubt of that."

The crowd didn't just want answers to their questions. They tried to tell breathless stories past the guards, with desperate faces that barely paid attention to the road. Men shouted marriage proposals to Vidre. Dominic had seen the hangers-on who followed Vidre around in Gennaro, but that had been after nine days, when she was no longer

a novelty in the city. It wasn't just adoration, or curiosity, it was a rawness of emotion that extended all along the spectrum; hatred and despair were readily apparent, and not just directed in the ways that Dominic would have expected. A few people were calling Welexi a coward, or a traitor. Perhaps Torland was worse than other places, but Dominic could scarcely imagine putting himself through this same reception every time they made port. Yet that seemed like what it was going to be, if he made it through the duel.

All along the way to Grayhull, the only time they paused was when a mother thrust her son before Gaelwyn. The boy was weak, and sickly looking. It was a matter of two minutes for Gaelwyn to fix the boy's heart. The procession began moving again shortly afterward, but not before Dominic heard people shouting unkind things at the woman.

Grayhull Palace was an enormous building that stretched its three wings wide across the city, each the same size and shape as the others. It was given its name from the flat gray of it, which matched the visage of Laith's Face looming in the distance behind it. It was ornamented with gargoyles and shaped stone, and the vast walls were marked with immense bas reliefs which depicted scenes from the history of Toric rule. The palace was surrounded by carefully manicured grounds and expansive gardens, which gave a buffer of defensible space and privacy for the royal family. The Queen of Flowers was well-known for inviting commoners in to visit once a week in order to see the majesty that her domain had produced. The crowds were left behind at

the front gates, and a half dozen guards became their new escort. It was a display of ceremony and nothing more; if the illustrati had been attacked, the guards would be nearly useless, and if the illustrati had been attacking, the guards would quickly die. The last nine days had impressed upon Dominic the gap between the illustrati and normal men.

They were led into a tastefully appointed receiving room to wait for the Flower Queen's attention. When the doors closed, Welexi sagged and staggered to lay down on a chaise lounge with floral embroidery. He was sweating and slightly pale. All of the pent-up conversation came flowing out.

"You should have let them carry you," said Gaelwyn. He rested his hand on Welexi's. "Six weeks at a minimum, I was clear on that, showing a little humanity wouldn't have been the worst thing."

"You doubled down," Vidre said to Welexi. The pretenses had dropped, and there was no compassion. "We need to have a plan in place for when Dominic dies, a way to mitigate the disaster and ensure that Gaelwyn isn't killed. We shouldn't even let it get to that. We'd take a hit if we back out, but there's nothing compelling the duel besides honor and pride, and I could take Dominic's place —"

"It was a masterstroke," said Welexi. He groaned slightly as he shifted. "The Blood Bard set it up. He insulted us. He brought the Peddler's War to the forefront with his song. The siege of Arronbach? Just the name of it is enough for the veterans or their widows to feel a stirring. Most likely the Blood Bard has been whispering into ears since the

moment we left. The song was a direct challenge to me, with Gaelwyn as a proxy, bringing up old memories and forcing my hand. I could have beaten him soundly in a duel, but no doubt he was prepared for that, either to make himself a martyr, or because he would know that clemency was expected of me." He turned to Dominic and smiled. "The Blood Bard had a plan, but the masterstroke was Lightscour's."

"I only took the opportunity when I saw it," said Dominic.

"If he touches you, flesh to flesh, he'll be able to move your blood," said Vidre. "The first thing he'll do is to draw it down from your head. You'll go light-headed then unconscious in a matter of seconds, and from there he'll desecrate your body before killing you. So you'll wear armor to prevent that. He'll force blood through the cracks and gaps in it. He'll push blood down your throat until you choke, just like Cerulean Bane tried to do to me. I can make my armor airtight, but you can barely make a breastplate for yourself. Even if you could find or produce armor with few enough gaps in it that Kendrick couldn't push blood through, how would you hope to defeat him?" She clenched her teeth together. "He doesn't bleed unless he wants to. You could give him a thousand cuts and he wouldn't spill a drop of blood. Stab him through the heart and he'll use his domain to keep his blood moving. He'd die when he went to sleep, but that would still give him more than enough time to beat you. He can restore the vital essence to his blood without needing to breathe, and that means that he's not going to

tire out, not until his muscles start physically failing him, and you'll have dropped long before that happens. In a fight to the death, he doesn't need his lungs, or his heart, or his vital organs. You'll have to break his bones and slice through connective tissue to stop him, and he knows this, so he can just dance back and forth all day while spewing insults and wearing you down."

Dominic felt his stomach turn. He hadn't realized how dire the situation was, in part because he'd known little about the domain of blood. He was trying to find a loophole somewhere, a way that he could ensure that he would win. A single decisive strike to the head would do it, but the Blood Bard would know that too, and defend against it —

Welexi gave a weak laugh from where he was lying. "I appreciate the theatrics, but these are problems that can be overcome," he said. "I have every confidence in Lightscour's ability to triumph over the Blood Bard. He's disrupted whatever plans were in motion, and turned the narrative in our direction."

"Until he loses," said Vidre. "What do we do when Dominic's blood is dripping through the floorboards of the stage?"

"The path is set," said Welexi. He waved his hand in an idle motion. "The first half of the story has been told, and unless you have a better idea for how we might conclude it, we must continue on with what we have haphazardly planned. The story has a natural flow to it. You must remember that the Blood Bard is not so strong as Sanguin

was; Dominic is not in so much danger as you would have it."

It seemed as though Vidre was about to offer a retort, no doubt about how quickly Dominic would die, but the doors to the room opened, and an attendant with a ruffled collar stepped in.

"The Flower Queen, Her Majesty Gwyndellon Gloriana of the House Walton, will see you now."



The throne room was enormous, and took up three full stories in the center of Greyhull. The walls were the same smooth gray of the building's exterior, curved where they met the floor to give an impression of trees, and the ceiling was an elaborate creation of iron and glass that let through the morning sunlight. The floor was covered in flowers, and flower petals, in a wider variety than Dominic had ever seen in his life; the air smelled almost sickly sweet with their fragrance. It was a riot of color, and laying on the throne, with her bare feet up in the air, was the Queen of Flowers. She kicked her legs and smiled wide when they walked in, showing pearly white teeth.

While they were announced by the attendant (with "His Illustriousness", save for Vidre, who was technically a Queen and followed that styling) Dominic looked at the Flower Queen's court. The Flower Queen was a slim woman with slightly elfin features, and a youthful, girlish look that couldn't possibly have been natural; she was nearing fifty years old. She wore a dress made from orange and purple

flowers which left her shoulders bare, and her hair was down and flowing freely. To her right was her husband, Steelminder, who was more clearly showing his age with a gray mustache that matched the walls and slightly red cheeks that spoke of too much ale.

Ringed around them were more than a dozen illustrati, most of them clad in their domains: a woman with hair of fire, a man with yellow eyes flanked by two hounds, elaborate metal armors and bright colors on everyone he saw, each trying to be distinct. Dominic had been made to memorize the details of two hundred people, and was thankful that he wasn't being tested on his study just yet. He was sure that the woman whose head was on fire was Ember, and he could make a fair guess at the rest, but he would be in trouble if he was thrown into freely mingling with them.

"Sunhawk!" trilled the Flower Queen the moment the attendant was done with his droning introductions. The Flower Queen leapt up from her gilded throne and strode towards them with her hands on her hips. "It has been far, far too long." She reached towards Welexi and wrapped him in a hug, then pulled back and looked at his maimed hand. Her eyes went wide for a moment as she tried to focus on it, then she blinked once slowly. "But whatever happened to your hand? And your sword hand at that!" She shrieked slightly, as though she had just seen a mouse.

"A fight with Zerstor, Your Majesty," said Welexi. He held the hand up and flexed the fingers of light with a fair bit

of concentration. "I'm on the mend, you need not worry about that."

The Flower Queen's head turned towards Vidre, and her body followed sluggishly afterward. "And my fellow Queen, of the poor, misbegotten country of Geswein. You look as lovely as my flowers, as you always have."

"Your Majesty," said Vidre with a small curtsy. "We had heard there were troubles, and came to lend our aid."

"Oh, plenty of time for that later," said the Queen, "I would hate to talk business so soon after you've set foot on Toric soil, it would be terrible form, especially before I've talked to Gaelwyn." She smiled towards the physician and stepped close to him. "Gaelwyn, I've received the most interesting book on botany from the algalif of Maskoy, 'Meditations on the Heart of the Palm', but I've been having a little trouble with some of the terminology, and I'd like a little of your time. In private, shall we say?" She gave an exaggerated wink that had to be obvious to anyone paying the slightest bit of attention. "You are so knowledgeable in matters of natural philosophy, if you catch my meaning."

She turned towards Dominic, and he realized her pupils were too wide. "And that brings us to this new young creature," she said slowly. Her words were not quite slurred, but it was a close thing. "Lightscour. From the Sovento States, I can always tell a man from there, and you are a fine specimen, aren't you? Another student of natural philosophy, if I dare to say it."

She turned to Welexi. "A stranger in our midst, in these troubled times." She blinked slowly at Welexi. "Did you

know, I bought you a hawk?" She pouted slightly. "There was a merchant in from the far east, and the hawk he had looked just like you. Very brown, if you'll forgive me saying so. I thought it would be a wonderful present, but we fed it too many grapes, and it perished after only a week."

The throne room went silent, save for a polite cough, but there was nothing more to that story.

"If you're feeling unwell, ma'am," said Vidre, "Perhaps we might speak with your advisers and allow you to rest."

The Flower Queen sagged. "Oh yes, of course, the matter of the Council of Laborers, such a dreadful thing. A small dispute over trade and they think that they have some leverage over me, as though I'm a boulder they wish to stick their pole under and shove out of the way." She giggled slightly and bit her lip. "Perhaps they do not know how often boulders crush people?"

The Flower Queen wasn't drunk, Dominic was fairly sure of that. It wasn't malum either, because that put people straight out and left them incapable of rational thought. Yet he was certain that he wasn't far off the mark; the Flower Queen had ingested something that was making her act like this, and given the reactions he'd been glimpsing in those moments that he took his eyes off the Queen, this was embarrassing for everyone involved. For all that he had etiquette drilled into him, he was unprepared for this situation.

"There will be a show tonight, ma'am," said Welexi. "Just after sunset at Amare's Theater. If you've had a chance to have something to eat by then, we would appreciate if you

would come, but in the meantime we have much to prepare for, and a number of people that we will need to meet with, including your advisers."

"Yes," said the Flower Queen with a distant voice. "Yes, yes, I see." She drifted back to her throne, where Ember took her by the elbow. The Flower Queen began to cry.



The Flower Queen's husband caught up with them just outside the throne room.

"She's gotten worse," said Steelminder. His gray mustache did little to conceal his frown. Dominic couldn't remember the man's age, but the illustrati almost certainly looked older than he was, in contrast to the queen. "Ember has been helping her to make a concentrated form of the flower, a tar instead of a syrup, and my wife's desire grows by the day. This business with the Laborers has only pushed her harder, and there's talk that the Iron Kingdom might seek to reignite the war."

"We should have been told, your Royal Highness," said Welexi. "We're to understand that this is a continuous condition?"

"No," said Steelminder. "No, but the moments of true sobriety — the moments when she chooses to be lucid — are getting further apart. There are diplomats and advisers, and the other illustrati, and I do my best to help run the kingdom, but to usurp my queen entirely is something I could never do. Once this business with the Laborers is cleared up we can try to bring her down gently, to wean

her, but with the stresses being as they are, I think you can understand the difficulty we're in."

"We will do what we can," said Welexi.

"There is the unfortunate matter of payment," said Vidre. "Your Royal Highness, I mean no disrespect, but we are at your service for several things, and fully internal matters are not one of them unless we can strike a new deal."

Steelminder looked between the two of them, and his frown deepened. "This matter is quite a bit deeper than that," he said. His eyes met with Vidre's. "I should think that you of all people would understand that a kingdom is never too far from being torn down by its subjects."

"The king of Geswein spent too little time on administration," said Vidre as she folded her arms. "He was more concerned with doting on his wife, and that was to the detriment of his subjects. Geswein is my home, of course it is, but I do feel some sympathy for those who felt that they could do better. If the fate of a country is at the whims of someone who would rather eat flowers, then perhaps your subjects deserve —"

"It's barely noon, and we've had a long day already," said Welexi. His hand rested on Vidre's arm, and she shrugged it off. "If it wouldn't be too much of a burden on your hospitality, might we be able to find some meats and cheese while we speak with your advisers about this trouble with the Laborers?"

Steelminder narrowed his eyes, and his mustache moved back and forth. "Yes, of course."

They were set up in a large room with windows that overlooked the gardens and statuary outside, and plate of food was brought to them shortly afterward with a wide variety of food on it. Gaelwyn excused himself shortly after eating to go set up in Meriwall's hospitals. Before he left, he pulled Dominic aside.

"Thank you," he said. Gaelwyn was fidgeting with his apron. "Even if it was just a ploy, just cynicism to increase your own fame, the words were meaningful to me. No one but Welexi has ever stood up for me before."

"I — it wasn't, you're my friend," said Dominic. Yet there was a small part of him that recognized that his actions had little to do with Gaelwyn, and the Blood Bard's song had been echoing through Dominic's head enough to wonder how much of Gaelwyn's past was yet to be revealed.

The advisers came in, and a long meeting began.

The central conflict was between the Council of Laborers and a small group of merchants, and this was about where Dominic lost the thread. It wasn't that he wasn't trying to pay attention, it was that a glorified trade dispute seemed to have little to do with him, and all that aside, Welexi and Vidre seemed ready with all of the questions.

The table they sat at was finely made, with matching chairs. It showed the imprint of an illustrati; there were no joints in it, and nowhere that they could have been hidden, which was a way of making the craftsmanship more obvious. The patterns of the lacquered wood were like nothing that you would find in nature, with warps and whorls that caught the eye and held an artistry of their own. As

Dominic understood it, craftsmanship was looked down on by the illustrati save for when it could produce something with an aesthetically pleasing appearance. A fair number of the statues in Gennaro had been shaped by someone with the domain of stone, and the *Zenith* was a product of illustrati hands, which was part of the reason that it was so quick across the seas. As a general rule, illustrati made armor for individuals, not armies, and it wasn't solely because most of them didn't have the ability. Vidre could have gone to work repairing windows or crafting glassware, but for the most part she devoted her time to the business of being an illustrati.

"— because we can't simply kill them," Vidre was saying. Dominic quickly tried to figure out where the conversation had been, but he hadn't been paying the slightest attention to what was said.

"I'm sorry," said Dominic. "What?"

Vidre scowled at him. "I was saying that this is a problem, because we can't simply kill them," she said.

"I believe Lightscour has been gathering wool," said Welexi. He smiled slightly. "Vidre was saying that we can't kill the illustrati in question, because that would weaken the nation far too much in terms of offensive and defensive capabilities, and if we're to assume that the Iron King is looking for a continuation of the Peddler's War, this would strip away much of Torland's deterrent."

"That assumes that the Iron King isn't behind the incipient rebellion in the first place," said one of the advisers, a pinched-faced man with thinning hair.

"Even if he is, this is likely a way to damage Torland in preparation," said Vidre. "It's not his way to weaken someone and then ally with them."

"The Iron King is nearing ninety years old," said Welexi. "He was slowing down, even at the end of the Peddler's War. The news has been sporadic from within the Iron Kingdom of late; he hasn't made a public appearance in nearly a year."

"How does the Blood Bard fit in with all this?" asked Dominic. He desperately hoped that this wasn't something that had been covered while he was staring blankly at the finely made table.

"Unknown," said Vidre. She raised an eyebrow and looked at Dominic. "The Peddler's War is a point of discontent. Gaelwyn's war crimes will be brought up, which reflects poorly on the Flower Queen given that she pardoned him. They'll paint it like she cared nothing for the men and women that died in his labs, which is a part of the larger narrative of a woman disconnected from the people she nominally rules. Amare's Theater holds eighty thousand people. Kendrick will be speaking to them, ready to drive the point home. Our options are all terrible. Intervention from the Flower Queen exacerbates matters; it would be like offering a pardon all over again, maybe worse. Pulling out of the duel now, having already accepted it, would make us cowards and let them say that the illustrati don't have to answer to the common people."

"But you said that the rebellion was illustrati," said Dominic.

"No, if you'd been listening, I said that there are illustrati at the forefront," said Vidre. "Almost by definition a leader needs fame, save for the masked statesmen of Kenning. It's a common enough ploy; you pretend to care about the common people, gain their trust and respect, and use it to propel yourself to the top. That was what happened in Geswein. The merchants said that they were making a democracy, which became a representative democracy, and all the representatives happened to be within the same small group of merchants. The same thing will happen here, unless we can stop it, except the punchline will be invasion by the Iron King. That's without considering all the traitors within these walls."

"Lightscour will win the duel," said Welexi. "He was only recently a commoner, the son of a baker, risen up from poverty. How can they criticize someone who is at heart one of them? He's from a different country, and a different culture, but he's out of place within the nobility, and an outsider to these affairs in the way that you or I are not."

Vidre sighed, and looked at the advisers, who were shuffling their papers around and trying not to be seen listening in. They hadn't contributed in quite some time. "We need this win then. Dammit all." She looked to Dominic. "Three days to find a way for that to happen."

Dominic felt slightly sick as the conversation wound its way to other topics. The duel was seeming less and less like a good idea the more the prospect of it had been discussed. When he'd stepped forward, he'd thought that it would be a simple thing, almost like the sparring matches he'd had

with Vidre, or the rooftop races. He knew how to fight now, that wasn't at issue, but there was an enormity to this that was making him uneasy. Eighty thousand people would be watching if the theater was full, and it would decide — at least in part — the fate of this country, and possibly the entire shape of the world. He'd thought that the duel would be a sideshow of their time in Torland, but now it seemed like it would be the main event. Kendrick Eversong had no doubt given it a span of three days in order to drum up excitement and get the largest possible audience. Dominic was beginning to feel that it would also give him too much time to think.



Amare's Theater was an enormous open-air structure with tiered seating that seemed to climb to the sky. It was a perfect half-circle with a large stage. People began filing in well before sunset in order to see the show that Welexi was about to perform. It was one of the largest buildings in all of Meriwall, visible from most the city, and Dominic was nearly dizzy just looking at it, let alone being inside it. The murmur of the crowds was diluted by the empty space, but the sheer volume of people was almost oppressive.

"We're disrupting the performance of a play," said Vidre. They sat behind the stage, and she was pacing back and forth. "Securing this place on such short notice was costly, as was hiring the choir."

"We have money," said Welexi. He was laying down, unmoving. Dominic didn't have all the details, but he knew

that Welexi would need all of his strength. The bones hadn't had enough time to mend themselves. "This performance sets the narratives we need in place. It's unconnected with the current state of politics in Torland, and helps to cement Lightscour as disruptive."

"I was only mentioning it," said Vidre. "Gaelwyn should have been here by now."

"Is he in any danger out there?" asked Dominic. "If they truly hate him, will they try something?"

"He'll be fine so long as he defends himself," said Vidre.

"Will he?" asked Dominic. "He seems to think that perhaps ... I don't mean to say that I believe he's so terrible, but the way he's been trying to atone makes me think that he might imagine that taking a beating is his penance."

"No matter," said Vidre. "That's him now."

Gaelwyn was dragging his feet, and had a defeated look. He smiled weakly when he saw them, but the smile quickly fell.

"Eight people," he said. "That was all that came to visit me, for all the hours I was there."

Dominic had expected hundreds. He had thought that there would be a line around the hospital of people wanting to be cured of what ills he could erase with a touch, even given the stigma against the bodily domains. Gaelwyn had offered the same aid in Gennaro, and while Dominic hadn't gone to see it himself, he knew that the work was mostly met with approval, in part because Gaelwyn was a physician above and beyond what his domain granted him. To

have your flesh changed and warped was taboo, but having a doctor heal you was not, so it was easy to pretend that one was the other when it suited you.

He was going to ask Gaelwyn about it when the choir began to sing. Welexi stood up and walked onto the stage. The sun had fallen, and the lanterns that lit the theater had been snuffed. Save for the stars above and the voices of the choir, the theater was dark and quiet.

An enormous white man made of light appeared on the stage beside Welexi. He stood fifteen feet tall, and though Dominic was looking at it from behind, he could tell that the form was Welexi's own. The man had a spear in hand, and twirled it around effortlessly, practicing his forms and thrusts with it. Dominic was entranced by it.

"You never went to the shows in Gennaro?" asked Vidre. She was standing beside Dominic, watching his face. Her voice was low, though with the size of the theater it was doubtful that anyone would have been able to hear her.

"No," said Dominic. He shrugged. "You charged money for it." Now he wished that he had gone.

"Limited seating in Gennaro," said Vidre. "We have to filter people out somehow. We're nearly filling Amare's now; it's likely that we could have gotten away with a small charge to defray the costs." She wasn't watching the show at all, even when a second man of light showed up, this one larger, bulkier, and covered in a cloak. When the man pulled back his hood, Dominic recognized it as Zerstor, though the features weren't fully in place.

"They're insubstantial?" asked Dominic. He had a hard time imagining that they weren't.

"Insubstantial and difficult to control," said Vidre. "What you're seeing is the result of decades of practice, and this current production was part of why I wish we'd had more time at sea. The choreography isn't perfect." She was right; if you looked closely, you could see that it was a mock battle, like the sort two inexperienced actors would make. "Kendrick used to work for us."

"What?" asked Dominic. He'd been too focused on watching the show, and had been caught off guard by the change in subject. He glanced to Gaelwyn, who was sitting apart from them and too far away to hear.

"He was a natural philosopher of a different kind," said Vidre. "His area of study was music. He came to Welexi a dozen years ago, before I was around. You've seen the way that we dress, the way we make a statement with our appearance and impress ourselves upon the world. I've talked about why. It's not uncommon for us to have sigils and brands to identify us, flags we can fly and symbols to mark our most devoted followers. Welexi's is a white spear laid diagonally across a rounded shield. Kendrick's idea was to have something similar for music."

"I don't understand what that means," said Dominic. He watched the enormous white figures fighting each other. Now that Vidre had mentioned it, he couldn't help but see the flaws in how the fighters moved.

"He thought that every illustrati should be associated with a sound, or at least the most famous of us," said

Vidre. "We all have songs, too many to count, and stories beyond that, but what Kendrick sought was a unified audible identity. He carefully selected five notes, and began weaving them into Welexi's songs. Those five notes would be at the beginning, and worked in throughout. When Welexi was announced at a formal event, the trumpets would play those five notes." Vidre hummed them, and Dominic realized that he'd heard it many times before without even being aware of it. It was part of the song the choir was singing. "When he went into battle, the common men would hear those five notes and be inspired by them, knowing that he was out there, fighting on their side. It was a clever enough idea, and Welexi hired him on as his bard in Meriwall. He wanted to come onto the ship, and asked about the possibility several times, but Welexi always refused him. Every time that the ship came into port, Kendrick would ask to leave on it. I was there a few of those times; it was tragic, in a way."

"So what happened?" asked Dominic.

"Gaelwyn happened," said Vidre. "There was already some tension given how the war ended, but after Welexi fell in with Gaelwyn, that was the end of it. Kendrick was a coward about it. He kept drawing money from our account while he spread his own legend. When we found out, Welexi was furious. That accounts for much of the bad blood between us and him."

"Why are you telling me this?" asked Dominic.

"Kendrick's going to tell you his own version," said Vidre. "You're going to be on this very same stage with

him, and he's going to tell lies, and they'll be mixed with the truth so well that you might not be able to know which is which."

On the stage, the battle had moved on; the form that represented Welexi was limping now, and fighting off enormous sword strokes with his spear, barely blocking each time. A second spear appeared, and now they began fighting again. It wasn't exactly how Dominic remembered it, but it was close.

"I'm not sure I know the truth," asked Dominic. He was trying to see a way that the fight with Zerstor could have been faked. Every time that he thought of a way that it must have been a real thing, he imagined some way that it could have been part of the performance. The only part that didn't seem to make sense if it was fake was — there, Welexi's hand being cut off, represented in the show as spray of light.

"Better for you not to know where the unmarked graves are," said Vidre. "All I mean to say is that Kendrick has his reasons for hating us. I don't want you to learn later on that he's not the bastard you thought and falter when you need your strength. He has his reasons. Some of them are surely cynical, but ... his father really did die in Gaelwyn's hospital. It was what's called a living autopsy."

When everything looked dire, and the choir was singing their most mournful tune, a third figure appeared, holding the spear of light. It was Dominic, dressed in street clothes, or as close as you could get to the effect in shades of white. It wasn't like how it had really been though; the figures

of light faced each other down, and there was even a brief battle between the two before the killing blow came.

When one form of light pulled the other to his feet, the crowd cheered, in a way that should have raised Dominic's spirits.



Dominic had trouble sleeping. He'd been given a large bed in one of the seemingly endless bedrooms of Grayhull. His thoughts were scattered, and kept touching on different subjects, never staying on one for very long. Tomorrow they would begin training him for the duel, which meant that the day had been an almost total waste on that front. Vidre's words were floating uncomfortably in his head; he had tried to be friendly with Gaelwyn afterward, and didn't think he had been able to pull it off.

Welexi crept into the room, bringing a glow of light with him. "Lightscour," he hissed. "Are you awake?"

"Yes," replied Dominic.

The room flooded with light, and Welexi came to the side of the bed, smiling. In his hands was a small wooden box. He handed it over with a grin. "Open it."

Dominic sat up and frowned. He opened the box slowly and looked at the grey shape inside. It was a Harbinger artifact. Dominic stared at it, and wondered how he knew that. He picked it up slowly and turned it around in his hands. It was a thick, matte, gray rectangle with no discerning features, yet he knew that it was a Harbinger

artifact all the same. He closed his eyes briefly, then opened them again. Again, it was immediately obvious that this was a Harbinger artifact. The thought kept coming into his mind. It wasn't a conclusion that he had drawn based on its appearance, it was only something that he knew, in the same way that he could look down at his hand and know it without any particular chain of inference.

"Quite the effect, isn't it?" asked Welexi. "Knowing, without knowing how you know. That seems to be all it does, so far as I can tell, but it's the first real piece."

Dominic frowned and handed the box back.

"Wealdwood was telling the truth, about the weight on his mind," said Dominic.

"Oh, not necessarily," said Welexi. "It could be that he had heard second-hand from someone else and knew enough to match the description. But I do believe that it was true, and that someone else might be traveling down the path I've been on for years." He closed the wooden box. "The Harbingers are real, and I have proof of what they knew."

"And ... what is it that they knew?" asked Dominic.

"The answers to the Five Questions," said Welexi. "'What is fame?' We have working definitions, certainly, enough that we can attempt to manipulate it and find some success. Yet if you ask the scholars, there are a hundred variations on how they would formulate it, and they simply cannot agree. Yet the Harbingers knew. Of the other questions, these central inquiries of our age, the answers are even less clear. Yet the Harbingers knew. They had to, in order

to build something like this." He patted the wooden box. "Haven't you ever wondered why the *Zenith* has no special powers? I often have. It's a well-known ship, talked about in much the same way I am, and people cheer when they see it come or go. Yet it has no domain, none of the special resilience of an illustrati, and its speed is due solely to the construction."

"I suppose I never thought about that," said Dominic. "A sword is just a sword, no matter how many people know about it?"

"But why?" asked Welexi. "We have no idea, for all that it's been thought on. Why are none of my sailors illustrati? We've tried to keep them anonymous, there were too many that tried to elevate themselves, but why are they not imbued as a collective? The Harbingers had the answer to that, and more. They could freely transfer fame from one person to another. They could create new domains from nothing. I've been chasing this story for years, Lightscour. Years. And this small grey object is the first thing I've come across that shows the truth." His smile was fierce. "The Flower Queen might think that all of this is about her kingdom, and Vidre might think we're trying to stop war between all the countries of the Calypso, but this," said Welexi, tapping the wooden box, "This is the real prize."

Dominic wasn't quite ready to nod along. "If they were so great and powerful, what happened to them?" he asked.

"They discovered the opposite of fame," said Welexi. "Not obscurity, that's only fame's absence, but the true opposite. The Harbingers destroyed themselves with it." He

leaned back. "Vidre will tell you that I've pulled together a story from too many different threads, but you're on my side, aren't you Dominic?"

Until that point he hadn't realized that there was a side to take. He swallowed once, and said, "Yes, of course."

7. Rapier Wit

Vidre walked through the city streets of Meriwall, incognito. She had a hood up to hide her hair, and had pinned it back in a tight and efficient way. In the stories, a woman who was traveling as a man was always revealed by her hair, which was dramatic but also stupid. The sole tactical advantage to that reveal was an element of momentary distraction, and that wasn't enough for it to be worth it. A woman who couldn't secure her hair properly had no place trying to be sneaky, in Vidre's opinion. The rest of the disguise was a bulky coat and thick pants, with fifty pounds of glass armor to give her some bulk. The beard she wore was made from beaver fur and tied in place; she was less sure about that part of the disguise, but it was easy enough to stick in a pocket. With the disguise on, she was a burly, if short, man, and no one would bother her. The only way it could have been more convincing would have been if she'd had Gaelwyn reshape the muscles of her face, but asking him for that would mean that Welexi would know, and she wanted to avoid that.

Leaving Grayhull Palace had been simplicity itself. Getting back in would be slightly more difficult, but only because she didn't want them to raise the alarm. Half of the illustrati that Vidre had seen were taking the same concentrated dose of narcotic that the Flower Queen had, albeit less intensively. The other half were more concerned with palace intrigues and political positioning. Only a fraction of them were in fighting shape, and the palace had no illustrati

as guards. If the Iron King attacked, his illustrati would move through Meriwall like a flash flood, leaving buildings toppled and trees uprooted.

Kendrick Eversong still lived in the same place; she'd checked on that before donning her disguise and making her journey. The lower portion of the building was a shop that had previously sold heavy fabrics and now fishing equipment. Kendrick owned the entire building, which he'd inherited from his father, but he only lived in the upper half of it.

This area of Meriwall was primarily home to shops and industry, with few living spaces, and the crooked roads meant that line-of-sight was poor. When she'd assured herself that no one was looking, Vidre set her sights on the two feet of roof outside one of the upper windows and leapt up towards it. She landed perfectly, stuck her hand straight through the glass like it was a cobweb, unlatched the window, and stepped into Kendrick Eversong's bedroom with her daggers drawn.

It was late, but he would still be out carousing, and probably singing that infuriating song in whatever tavern would have him. He wouldn't be one to squander the fame he'd just gotten, and no doubt if he'd seen the show he would be spinning up some new verse to replace the old one about Zerstor, or claim that the fight in Gennaro had been something of a lover's quarrel, or a mock battle turned real. Vidre could see the shape of those stories, but they were weaker than what Welexi had presented on stage, and couldn't hope to match the reality of the missing fingers.

Kendrick's bedroom had a large bed, a number of outfits draped over chairs and dressers, and half-melted candles sitting on a multitude of surfaces. Vidre looked around only briefly before moving into the next room, which Kendrick used as a place for reading, composing, and occasionally meetings. Six years had done little to change it. The smell of tobacco smoke was stronger, and there were more books on the shelves, but it was still substantially the same. There was a small staircase at the back of the room that led down to the street; Vidre pulled a chair from behind a desk, placed it so that she could sit with moonlight striking her face, and waited.

It was only a half hour before Vidre heard raucous laughter coming up from the otherwise silent streets. It came closer to the house, and Vidre worried briefly that Kendrick would bring people up with him, but then the conversation began to grow distant, and the sound of a single man's unsteady footsteps came up from the stairwell.

"Kendrick Eversong," said Vidre, a fraction of a moment before he would have noticed her.

Kendrick swayed slightly and peered at her. "What heavenly beauty is this that I find lying in wait?" he asked. A grin spread across his face. "I find myself flushed and flustered by this marvelous militant, clad in her domain, a reflection of its sharp yet brittle nature." He swayed slightly. "Come to kill me, Vidre? No, but you're too practical for these theatrics, were that the case. You use the drama only when it suits you, and slip out of the role of actor just like you've slipped out of so many dresses over the years."

Vidre's hands rested on her daggers. "Purify your blood. This isn't a conversation that you want to be drunk for."

Kendrick sighed, but closed his eyes and did what he was told. His swaying stopped, and when he spoke, his words were precise. "I do note that you didn't say you weren't going to kill me," he said. "Was my song really so offensive?"

"What do you hope to gain from all this?" asked Vidre.

"All this'," repeated Kendrick Eversong. "If you mean this conversation, then I suppose my hope is to see you disrobed and bent over my bed." He leered at her, in a way that men sometimes did when they wanted to make her uncomfortable. It had stopped having an effect long ago, but coming from Kendrick she felt a small twinge of sadness that her face would never show. They had once been friends.

"There's no audience here," said Vidre.

"If by 'all this' you mean the duel, then I suppose my aim is to put an end to the — I'm certain — wonderfully charming Lightscour, and then do the same to the monster Gaelwyn Mottram," said Kendrick. He made no indication that he had heard what she'd said. "And if 'all this' is to mean anything after that, then I would suppose you've already made your guesses about that. It's no secret that I'm in with the Council of Laborers. I'm certain that you didn't come here to talk politics though, and seeing as you're still dressed, I suppose it's not a yearning in your loins. So that means you're here to make a deal."

Vidre shrugged.

"A play is always better when everyone is following the same script, isn't it?" asked Kendrick. "I consider you a great thinker, did you know?" Vidre only stared at him. "You know that coming here gives me ammunition against you, and you know that it allows me to know that there's a very good chance I'll win this duel, and you came here all the same in order to try to work something out. So I'm left wondering what incentive I would have to make a deal, do you see?"

"Your victory is far from assured," said Vidre. Her hands clenched around her daggers. "I can still take Lightscour's place, in which case there would be little chance of you walking away."

"At great personal expense," said Kendrick with a shrug. He leaned back against the railing of the staircase.

"My reputation would take a hit," said Vidre, "Welexi's reputation would probably also take a hit, and Lightscour's as well. I don't want to make you into a martyr either. But on balance, it might be worth it if I thought that the risk of us losing the duel was too high with Lightscour fighting. I wouldn't have any trouble killing you."

"There's no narrative to spin there," said Kendrick with a wave of his hand.

Vidre shrugged. "The narrative isn't always the most important thing." The fall back plan was to fabricate a romance with Dominic. If she could convince Dominic and Welexi, this could be done prior to the duel itself, and she could stand in Dominic's place in much the same way that Dominic was standing in Gaelwyn's, though she didn't

imagine that anyone in the audience would like it. Failing that, if it looked like Dominic was going to lose, Vidre could step in, claim that she wouldn't let her lover die, and kill Kendrick. And if Dominic lost so quickly that she couldn't do that, then she could pretend to fly into a rage using that romance as her motive and kill Kendrick before he had a chance to demand Gaelwyn's head. These plans had flaws in them, but they made the best of a bad situation.

"You negotiate by saying that you'll kill me?" asked Kendrick. "Well, I can't say that I care for that."

"That's the stick," said Vidre. "As for the carrot, you haven't made your demands."

"I have," said Kendrick. "Gaelwyn Mottram, dead."

Vidre frowned. "He's been my traveling companion for six years, whatever else he's done."

"So you'd have me believe that you're loyal to him?" asked Kendrick. "No, I rather think not. Gaelwyn is powerful, and a useful man, but he's a liability, now more than ever. It wouldn't have escaped your notice that much of the messiness of the Peddler's War could be cleaned up by putting Gael in a shallow grave. By all rights it should have been done years ago, as soon as Welexi saw the man who'd saved him. Do you remember me telling you how my father died? Ripped apart, piece by piece, because Gael wanted to know how the brain controls its limbs. They told me it took a dozen hours, as the Red Angel prodded at bundles of nerves in the spine with a needle. Can you even imagine the betrayal I felt when Welexi brought him into the fold?"

Vidre could have mounted a defense. Gaelwyn killed prisoners that the Iron King had condemned to die. He had saved hundreds of lives in the past six years, ever since joining up with Welexi. The lives lost in Gaelwyn's hospital counted for less, if they were men who would have died anyway. Eventually the balance of good and evil would swing the other way, if it hadn't already, and Gaelwyn would be a net good in the world. It would be possible for a skilled bard to paint Gaelwyn as a tragic figure. He was a man forged by the Iron King, and aimed like a cannon along a specific trajectory.

She'd given these defenses before. Yet with every year it became more difficult; there was something unsavory that lay within Gaelwyn, a way that he never took full responsibility for his actions, or pretended that they could be justified on their merits. His pacifism and nervousness were hiding something in his core; she had no idea whether he had killed Wealdwood, but her suspicion was that Wealdwood would never be seen again.

If she was being honest with herself, she'd first thought about getting rid of Gaelwyn after the fight with Cerulean Bane. She had heard the noise from down in the cabin, and her immediate reaction had been to hope that Gaelwyn had been killed. It would have been convenient for him to have finally gotten his redemption through a timely death.

This wasn't what she had planned when she'd decided to pay Kendrick a visit.

"Your original goal couldn't have been to kill Gaelwyn," said Vidre. "It was to bait Welexi, and the point of that was

— well, unclear to me, but I presume you thought he would show you mercy, and you would get a free stage to incite the people of Meriwall against their queen?”

Kendrick shrugged again, an elaborate roll of the shoulders. “Plans change.”

“You don’t want to die,” said Vidre. “Dominic doesn’t want to die. If we agree on this script together, it’s the only way that everyone gets what they want.” She took a breath and tried to map out her course. “Gaelwyn ... was a friend.”

Kendrick grinned in the moonlight.



After the conversation with Welexi, Dominic hadn’t been able to sleep. He’d thrown on his now-familiar outfit that Vidre had procured for him the day they left Gennaro, with its purple tights and baggy sleeves, and wandered the hallways of Grayhull. It was quite late; no one was awake, and the hallways were in darkness save for the moonlight. He could see perfectly, without need for a candle, and went so far as to admire the paintings on the walls in the pitch blackness. After looking around for a moment, he unlatched one of the side doors and stepped out onto the manicured grounds that surrounded the palace. He looked at the empty space in front of him for only a moment before getting down into a crouch, counting silently to three, and then sprinting forward.

The grass was slick with dew, and Dominic was faster than he’d ever been before. Each step put on more speed, and though the grounds were as long as a full city block,

he didn't have nearly enough room. A wrought-iron fence decorated with tastefully-sculpted spikes loomed in front of him, nearly fifteen feet high, and Dominic leapt over it.

He rolled into a landing on top of a house, and pitched over the side of it when he was unable to find his purchase. It was a two-story fall, and it hurt, but the pain was only temporary, and he'd suffered none of the broken bones he would have in his old life. Welexi had fallen down from above the clouds and suffered relatively minor injuries for it, and some day Dominic would be at that level too. For now, falling down from rooftops was no longer a concern. Dominic got up, brushed himself off, and leapt back up.

The rooftops of Meriwall weren't as conducive to a run as the rooftops of Gennaro, but Dominic was stronger and faster than he'd been, and could compensate more easily for the dips and valleys as he passed from house to house. The darkness was a friend to him, and no hindrance to his ability to see, and he was soon moving faster than he'd ever moved before, save perhaps for when the *Zenith* was moving at full sail and a strong tailwind. He began to sweat from exertion, and pushed himself harder, until he began to feel a familiar ache in his lungs that came more sharply with every breath.

He dashed across the city until the buildings grew thin, then dropped down onto a wide street and kept on going. A pair of constables spotted him, but made no move to stop or even call out after him. He hooked right, nearly skidding across the cobblestones as he made his turn, and leapt back up onto the rooftops to continue his run. He had no partic-

ular destination in mind until he saw the spires of Laith's Cathedral, and then he forged a lazy path towards it.

Laithism had been founded a hundred years ago, when Laith was in his waning years. He had been fading away, with all his attempts at gathering more fame or forestalling his decline doing little for him, and had invited spiritualists and scholars in from all over the known world. He had taken many of the ideas about reincarnation to heart, and began to write a lengthy tome filled with his own ideas on the subject. The central idea of Laithism was that he would one day rise again, and that the citizens of his kingdom would one day be ruled over by a King Eternal. The religion (such as it was) was only practiced in Torland and its colonies, and was largely seen as being both inauthentic and derivative. Much of Laith's book had been copied wholesale from other tomes; the ideas in it were already well-worn when it was written. Still, the clergy held some power in Torland, and the Vicar Most High was an illustrati in his own right.

The cathedral was silent and empty. Dominic began his climb. It was easy going, for the most part. There weren't any convenient handholds, but the cathedral was constructed like a tiered cake, getting smaller as it rose and having a number of nearly flat surfaces to stand on. Dominic could simply leap from one landing to another. He was halfway to the top, five stories up, when he realized that he was being followed.

A figure stood twenty feet below him, on one of the gently sloped parts of the cathedral's lower tiers. It was a short,

stocky man with a thick beard and what looked to be a pot-belly. His head was covered by a hood, but he was staring up at Dominic. The man was an *illustrati*, that was clear enough by the fact that he was on the roof, but Dominic hadn't memorized the list he'd been given well enough to know who it might be. It was also conceivable that this was the man that had set Cerulean Bane and Wealdwood on them, or someone in his employ. Dominic crouched down slightly and began to form armor around himself, which was a serious violation of etiquette if the man was friendly but quite sensible if he was an enemy. The figure leaped up towards Dominic, and landed on the rooftop near him just as Dominic finished making a sword of shadow — now a firm and substantial blade, not the wispy construct of his first night as *illustrati*.

"We need to talk," said the figure, in a high voice that momentarily startled Dominic. When he saw the scar, he dismissed his sword and armor and flopped down on the roof.

"How did you find me?" he asked.

"You weren't exactly being secretive," said Vidre. "I spotted you running along the rooftops, and thought that I should make sure that you weren't doing anything foolish."

"Sorry," he replied. "I know I shouldn't have. I just needed time to think."

"The palace isn't a prison," said Vidre. She pulled her false beard aside and drew back her hood. "We're free to come and go, so long as we don't commit any breaches of etiquette in doing so. Which, of course, is what you've done."

Leaving a domicile in which one is a guest without first informing the staff is a gross violation of protocol. Unless you did inform the staff?"

"Etiquette," said Dominic with a shake of his head. "I hate that word."

"This indiscretion doesn't matter," said Vidre. "I'll help you to sneak back in." She looked out over the city, at the river that meandered through the heart of it and at Laith's Face, always present wherever there was a view of the horizon. "I've cut a deal with Kendrick."

"The Blood Bard?" asked Dominic, but he knew this was a stupid question, the kind that only leaves the mouth because the brain is still trying to catch up. "What sort of deal?"

"The two of you will fight," said Vidre. "You'll get in a position where you have him at your mercy, and then spare his life. Welexi can't ever know of this, which means that Gaelwyn can't either."

Dominic frowned.

"Don't tell me you've grown some sense of morality all of the sudden?" asked Vidre.

"I could have won," said Dominic. "Not easily, but it was a test that had been put before me, and ... you want me to just breeze past it with this deception?"

"This kingdom is on the brink of a civil war, in case you hadn't been paying attention," said Vidre. "There will be other, truer tests of your ability. Dominic, I need to know that you'll go along with this."

"You should have asked before you went to talk to him," said Dominic. "I would have said yes, but ..." He trailed off. "I don't want to betray Welexi."

"You don't know Welexi," said Vidre. "In certain matters, he prefers to play the role of the hero. If that means that there's someone working behind the scenes to set him up for his moments of dramatic climax, that's perfectly acceptable. Why do you think we travel together? I can act in ways that he can't."

"Is this an arrangement that's been expressed explicitly, or ..."

"No," said Vidre. "No, of course not. Welexi believes in his own legend. That doesn't mean that we don't have an understanding though. There are certain things that he couldn't possibly ask for, but which he would want done all the same. This is one of them."

"You're guessing," said Dominic.

"You don't understand what I've done for Welexi," said Vidre. "When I came aboard the *Zenith*, it took me a month to get a look at the ledgers. It was Welexi, Chrysos, and Pescond in those days, with Welexi as their leader, but they treated him like his rule was unquestionable. It was Welexi who negotiated the contracts and decided where the ship would go, and Welexi who paid the bards. He couldn't ask for help, and when people offered help, his persona obligated him to turn them down, but after stopping in three different ports I started to get a feel for how the conversations would go. The bards loved him, because he was a hero, but they weren't getting paid on a regular basis."

Welexi was always ready with an apology and an excuse, but it wasn't until I looked inside the ledger that I saw what a mess he'd made of things. I don't blame him for it; the work of moving money is tedious, and he had no natural talent in that area. I took the ledgers from within his cabin, spent several days looking them over, and from then on I was the one who dealt with payments and receipts. We never once talked about it, no matter how grateful I could tell he was."

"And this is one of those things," said Dominic. What she'd said had made him feel better. There was little question that he was going to take the deal, given how frightening the thought of the Blood Bard was, but he felt the knot of stress untwisting itself. "What about the greater game though?"

"I don't know," said Vidre. "It's an open question, and one that Kendrick wasn't willing to provide answers to. Getting through the duel is the important part though. You'll go along with it?"

"Yes," said Dominic. "It feels like I'm walking a tightrope without knowing where it's going, but ... yes."

"Good," said Vidre. She looked out over the city, like she was contemplating something of her own. "Come on, I'll race you back to the palace."



Two days passed quickly. Dominic was given more instruction in single combat from both Welexi and Vidre, but it could only happen in the off hours, when the Flower

Queen's court didn't demand their attention. There were performances to see, tales to recount, and seemingly endless dinners to sit through as course after course of food was served. Welexi didn't speak to Dominic about the Harbinger artifact, but it underscored their conversations; the same went for Vidre and the deal that had been struck with Kendrick. Dominic tried to prepare himself as best he could, but when he wasn't speaking with the aristocracy of Grayhull Palace, time seemed to fly by. He took solace in the fact that it wasn't a real duel, and he wasn't at risk of dying; he might otherwise have resented the time spent pretending at enjoying the company of glittering, empty-headed women and arrogant, foppish men. He was offered the narcotic flower three times in total, and turned it down each time.

They didn't have Amare's Theater for the full day. The duel was only scheduled for an hour in total, and there were plays being performed both before and after it. Now that he knew there wasn't much risk to him, Dominic could look on all of it with a sense of humor; there was a fair amount of business involved in a production like this, a flow of people into their seats that was accomplished with a swift efficiency by the attendants who spent their entire day moving people around the theater. The upper tiers of seating would have an exceedingly poor view of the duel, but they were filling up all the same.

Dominic had given himself as much armor as possible, but Vidre had been right; he still wasn't able to get anything close to airtight. He had a breastplate, and a helm that left

the majority of his face exposed, and a number of plates of armor on his arms and legs for protection. Everything else was covered with fabric, which meant heavy gloves and thick boots. It was a cool day, but he could feel himself sweating, even before the fight had begun. Dominic could cast shade on himself, but that was only of marginal help.

The trick was to make the fight look real to everyone watching. Vidre had said that most people were used to the sorts of fights that they saw in plays, given that Torland hadn't seen a war in nearly a decade, but there was still a strong chance that someone knowledgeable would be watching them, and looking closely enough that they could make out some kind of deception. The hits would have to actually connect, which meant that the fight would have to be a real fight, at least in some sense. Dominic hadn't talked to Kendrick at all; Vidre had done the negotiation between their sides. There was a small part of him that expected betrayal, either from Kendrick or (less likely) from Vidre, but there was nothing much that he could do about that. He'd certainly had his own thoughts of betrayal, but both Vidre and Welexi had agreed that it was better not to make the Blood Bard into a martyr; Welexi thought it was likely that it couldn't be helped.

Vidre fussed with his outfit. "His natural instinct will be to get close, and your instinct needs to be to get some distance between the two of you. The further you are from him, the better. Polearms are good, but don't hesitate to form a sword to push him away. He'll want to talk, but that's a way of baiting you in and getting you to make the first

move, which will give you a disadvantage and waste your energy. Small cuts can win you the battle, if you can give him enough of them, because it'll take up his attention. Too many, and he's a dead man walking."

They'd talked about all of this at length, and Vidre was simply repeating herself. She seemed as nervous as Dominic was, in her own way, though it was only obvious in the decisive way that she moved around the backstage area and checked everything over time and again.

Welexi stood with the light bracing his broken limbs. He offered no words of encouragement, but the set of his shoulders and the radiant aura of his armor were enough that Dominic grew more confident just by looking at him. In Welexi's mind, the outcome of the duel was practically preordained, and had been ever since it was set in motion. He'd never doubted Dominic's abilities, not even in private, and that was far more reassuring than all the training and planning that Dominic had done with Vidre, and even more reassuring than the fact that the duel had a fixed outcome.

"One final enhancement," said Gaelwyn. He laid hands on Dominic without asking, and began mild tweaks that could hardly be felt. It felt brazen to do this in the relatively open backstage, but Gaelwyn didn't seem to pay any mind to it, and no one seemed to be looking. "You'll do well, I know you will."

"I hope so," said Dominic. He had no idea whether he'd said it convincingly; he'd always thought that he was an excellent liar, but he'd never had the stakes quite so high before, not even when he'd been lying to Corta.

"Prepared to die?" called a rich, well-worn voice from some distance away. Kendrick Eversong strode towards Dominic with a grin on his face. For all that the last three days had seemed to revolve around the Blood Bard, this was the first time that Dominic had seen him since they met at the docks. "I suppose no man is truly ready to die, save for those that bring an end to their own lives. Did you know I'm the favored? You should have bet on yourself, for if you die there's no cost to you. I've done the same, naturally."

"I don't want to kill you," said Dominic. It was better to establish that now, with everyone watching, so that showing mercy later wouldn't be suspicious.

"Well, this should be quite the easy duel to the death then," said Kendrick with a smile. He wasn't dressed for battle, and wore no armor, but Vidre had warned that he wouldn't; for how little protection he needed, it was better for him to have the maneuverability, at least in this sort of fight. He wasn't even wearing a helm, and Dominic couldn't help but wonder whether the Blood Bard would have made the same decision if the duel wasn't a sham. A single strike to the head was all that it would take.

"Shall we?" asked Kendrick. "It seems the most important members of society have come to see a killing, and the crowds are growing restless."

Dominic nodded, and they stepped out onto the stage together.

Kendrick was right; everyone of importance had come to see them fight. Amare's had a central area of the seating reserved for the queen and her court, which amounted to

forty people all told. They weren't watching the stage, even after Dominic and Kendrick stepped out together; instead, the illustrati and hangers-on were talking to each other, or sipping at heady wines.

"Gaelwyn Mottram killed thousands!" Kendrick shouted. The murmuring masses began to grow quiet at this. Kendrick and Dominic were standing apart from each other, but this wasn't anything that they had agreed upon. Dominic wasn't sure whether to let Kendrick talk, or just to start the duel. He shifted from foot to foot, and tried not to cast a glance back towards where Vidre was waiting backstage.

"Gaelwyn Mottram killed thousands!" Kendrick shouted again. "The Sunhawk will say that this was all under the orders of the Iron King, but the truth is that Gaelwyn was always a monster. He would give his would-be patients sweets in the morning and dissect them at night. Gaelwyn will tell you that he sought only to promote the useful sciences, yet there was no reason for him to be so cruel. He gave no soporifics to let his victims go quietly into sleep! He did nothing to dull their pain! He did not plead with the Iron King to stop these vile practices! I have read every piece of correspondence that I could get my hands upon, and Gaelwyn never once speaks of the burdens of his position. It is only a breathless excitement about what he has learned by his murders."

"He's changed," said Dominic. He realized that his voice wasn't loud enough; it would never reach anyone in the back rows, but even those in the royal seats would have

trouble hearing. Kendrick was projecting his voice, like bards were trained to do, and Dominic had to do his best to match it. "Gaelwyn has changed!"

"The Flower Queen did not know!" called Kendrick in response. "She provided him with a pardon on nothing but faith alone, and it was not even that. She wanted his expertise and power to shape her! Even now a fool could see how much younger she looks than she did four days ago. Like her ancestor Laith, she was willing to set aside the will of the people in order to have a continuation of her youth. A thousand of our countrymen were ripped into, their flesh taken from the bones of their comrades in arms and fed to them, and that was forgiven because the Flower Queen wanted to be more beautiful. This is how little we mean to her!"

"We're not fighting over what happened in the past," said Dominic. "This is about the present."

Dominic was trying his best to gauge the reactions of their audience, but it was difficult given that the various tiers of seating divided people roughly by their class. Kendrick had their attention, and that was bad enough.

"The past shapes the present!" crowed Kendrick. His smile didn't reach his eyes. He stood with his rapier held out like a baton. "Of the Flower Queen's crimes against the people of her city, the pardon of the monster Gaelwyn Mottram has not been the worst, but it's the only one that a lowly man like me can work to correct." He turned towards Dominic and held his sword out in front of him. "I'm only sorry that you were so foolish as to stand in his way."

Dominic's shadow sword came up to block the rapier, and Kendrick kept coming, moving his left hand forward to try to find purchase. Dominic spun backwards and got into a defensive stance; the fight had begun without him being entirely ready, and it wasn't clear whether Kendrick had already broken their deal.

They watched each other carefully. Dominic waited for the opportune time, when Kendrick's gaze shifted slightly, and transitioned his sword of shadow into a long spear with a sharp point on the end. The sun was out and the sky was fairly clear, which meant that his shadows were able to draw a little bit more strength.

Dominic made a lazy forward attack with his spear, which was both a probe of Kendrick's stance and a signal that their deal was still in place. Kendrick responded by leaping past the point of the spear and again trying to grab at Dominic. A single touch wouldn't be a disaster until after Dominic's clothing had been ripped, he'd asked Vidre about that a dozen times, but it seemed that Kendrick was trying to do his best to rip the clothing as a precursor to that. At the last moment, Dominic moved away, releasing his spear and conjuring up another one. It left them both in nearly the same position that they'd been in before, but Dominic had used some of his previous reserves of energy and was beginning to heat up.

It was a slow fight. Kendrick spent much of the time talking, which he could do without much cost to himself. The topic of conversation was invariably the Flower Queen, and how little she cared about the people of Torland. Every

time Kendrick would attack, Dominic would give a little bit of ground, but Kendrick was making no efforts to press his advantage; he was perfectly willing to let Dominic tire himself out. It was impossible for Dominic to tell whether this was a legitimate effort or simply part of a play they were putting on. Vidre had said that she would intervene, but Dominic was worried that Kendrick would simply call the bluff.

Kendrick was not a terribly good fighter; that made sense, as he was a bard by trade. He was also slower than Dominic. When Dominic realized this, he put himself on the offensive again, striking forward. Welexi had used two spears in tandem, but Dominic just used the one, trying to find a place to stick Kendrick. The proper use of a spear was to have one hand near the back, which provided forward thrusting, and one hand near the front, which provided a point for the spear to pivot around. Using his rear hand, he was able to thrust the spear forward quickly and then pull it back, and with a minimum amount of effort, Dominic was able to put Kendrick on the defensive. It would do little good without a hit though; Kendrick wasn't tiring. One of these thrusts found its mark in Kendrick's chest though, and even though the hit felt weak, Kendrick staggered back. The front of his outfit was white and ruffled, and soaked through with blood almost instantly until Kendrick stopped the bleeding.

Kendrick stared hard at Dominic and began to attack in earnest. Dominic was forced to drop the spear again, and pulled a thick sword from the shadows even before he could watch the spear fade. Kendrick's rapier was pushed

aside by the shadow sword at the last moment, and clanged off of Dominic's pauldron with a dull sound. Kendrick was a sloppy fighter, but he could afford to be, and he attacked a second time, following up on the first. Dominic was getting quite hot by now, even with shadow cast over him, and his sweating hands nearly caused him to lose his grip for the second parry.

"You want to defend him?" asked Kendrick. "Those who defend monsters are no better than them! They're equally worthy of destruction!" His cries broke the silence of the theater.

Dominic had no breath to respond with. He dodged a third attack, and parried a fourth, but it was becoming clear that if this fight was no longer a play, he was going to lose. The blood that had soaked Kendrick's white ruffles was worrying; if Dominic couldn't be sure that their deal hadn't been broken, then surely the same had be said for Kendrick. When a fifth attack came through, Dominic lashed out with his sword and trusted in his armor to protect him. Kendrick's rapier bounced awkwardly off Dominic's armor, and Dominic's sword bit into the flesh of Kendrick's arm.

Kendrick cried out in pain and stepped back. He watched Dominic closely and licked at his lips, then began to draw up a small globe of blood into his off hand. When this was a sufficient size, he formed it into a whip, and stalked forward, with a blood whip in one hand and a rapier in the other. Dominic dodged the first crack of the whip but not the second, which struck his armored wrist hard enough that the construct of shadow disappeared completely. The

third crack of the whip was aimed at Dominic's head, and he ducked beneath it, only to find blood dripping down onto him from above; Kendrick had released the whip from his control.

They fought on. Despite his best efforts, Dominic was beginning to tire, and the fight was feeling far too real. He needed to end it, either on his terms or on the terms that they'd agreed to. He found his chance when Kendrick made another sloppy attack. Dominic kicked out at him, and Kendrick fell to the ground. Before he could spring to his feet, Dominic planted a foot on Kendrick's chest. He brought his sword down quickly, until it was resting against Kendrick's neck. Just like that, he had won. A part of him wanted to end it right there, to simply press down with his sword until it had pierced Kendrick through the neck, but even that didn't seem guaranteed to kill quickly and cleanly. Besides that, it wouldn't have been what Welexi would have done. The crowd was cheering for him to do it, to end the duel with a severed head, but this was a moment to prove himself as a hero. All that aside, he and Vidre had agreed that it was better not to make a martyr.

"Yield," said Dominic. He pitched his voice to the crowd. "I don't want to kill you."

"Kill me?" asked Kendrick. He laughed, though he could scarcely draw breath. "You've already killed me. My heart's been pierced, and that's the end for me."

Dominic hesitated. "Gaelwyn can save you, if you yield." He kicked out with his free foot and sent Kendrick's rapier spinning across the stage.

Kendrick laughed again, though his laugh was hollow. "Prove that I have no convictions? Prove to everyone that I don't care about my country so long as my own life can be saved?"

"Better to live and fight than become a martyr," said Dominic.

Kendrick turned to the side, and it took Dominic a moment to realize that he was crying. "My father," said Kendrick. "Fine, let the bastard prove himself." This last was said so quietly that Dominic was sure he was the only one who heard.

Gaelwyn came onto the stage with timid footsteps. There were boos from the crowd. Kendrick tried to get to his feet, but Dominic's boot was still in place.

"Let him up," said Gaelwyn. "Eversong, for what happened to your father, I am truly sorry, but I hope that with time you can understand."

Dominic allowed Kendrick to stand up, and watched the scene carefully. He had won the duel, just as planned, and having fought it there was little doubt in his mind that it wouldn't have gone that way if it had been more natural. Still, there was something wrong with this scene. He kept his sword drawn, and waited. He halfway expected Kendrick to attack, and readied himself for it. People began to come out from behind the stage, with Vidre and Welxi among them.

"Something is wrong," said Vidre. She stood next to Dominic, with her own daggers out and ready for danger.

Gaelwyn approached Kendrick slowly.

"You will never be anything more than a monster," spat Kendrick. "Never anything more than someone's dog. For all that you present a false front, people will see through it. Pretending at being a moral creature will never make you one."

Gaelwyn reached out a hand. Dominic saw the danger; if two men with bodily domains touched each other, both would be at each other's mercy. Kendrick might be able to kill Gaelwyn, even if it would have to come at the expense of his own life.

They touched, only briefly, and Kendrick jerked backwards, screaming in pain. His head hit the stage, and he went still, just as everyone exploded into action. Kendrick's entourage swarmed his body, picking it up and taking it out of the way, while everyone else moved with weapons drawn.

"I didn't," said Gaelwyn. He stood with his hand still in front of him and a shocked look on his face. "He did it to himself, he —"

"We need to move," said Vidre.



Kendrick was carried down into one of the many rooms beneath the theater floor. His body had gone completely limp, and he was having trouble keeping from smiling. There had been two significant points of risk with the plan; the biggest was the risk that Dominic would kill him outright, but at a close second was the risk that this deception would be found out. Gaelwyn's reaction had helped matters tremen-

dously; Kendrick had been counting on the fact that the damage he'd done to himself with the surge of blood could be felt through Gaelwyn's domain sense. It really had hurt, but help was on the way, and testing had shown that so long as Kendrick could keep renewing the vital essence of the blood in his brain, little else mattered.

Clarence laid him out on a table, and Kendrick stood up slowly and aching once the door was locked. "A martyr," he said. "I've always wanted to be a martyr, but better not to have to die to do it."

"You are dead," said the cloaked figure, standing in a corner of the room. A pretty young woman stood beside him, one that he hadn't been seen with before. "Kendrick Eversong is no more."

"Yes, yes," said Kendrick. He'd only rarely met another person who insisted on so much theatricality in private, and he could see how it would be trying. "A new identity awaits, and a life in the Iron Kingdom."

"Are you injured?" asked the man.

"Yes," replied Kendrick. He looked down at his shirt. "I might have overdone it with the blood a bit, but I think I can move about. Nothing that will kill me when I'm not awake to keep the blood moving. If I can be seen to by a doctor, that would be for the best." He laughed. "You know, I think that Gaelwyn was going to do it?"

The cloaked figure nodded. "He follows a moral code."

Kendrick shook his head, but it didn't really matter if the benefactor had his quirks; the Council was being supported

either way, and Torland would soon be free of the Flower Queen's influence.



They stood around a thick table in Grayhull Palace: Welexi, Vidre, Dominic, Gaelwyn, Steelminder, and the halfway gone Flower Queen. No one looked particularly happy, save for the Flower Queen.

"It was a play for the audience," said Vidre. "We just didn't know the punchline. Easy enough to figure out after it had happened, but that doesn't help us much."

"We can cry foul," said Dominic. "We tell them to show the body. If Kendrick is still alive out there, they won't be able to do that."

"It depends on where he is," said Vidre. "Seeing the body wouldn't be enough, we would have to inspect it, and I can already imagine the affront that they would pretend at."

"It's all in the past," said Welexi. "There will never be any proof, until the day that we meet the Blood Bard again. People have already seen what they saw, and the narrative has already been set in place. Responding now, without the most concrete of evidence, will do nothing to stop that narrative. Tens of thousands of people were primed to believe that Gaelwyn was a murderer, and they will know what they saw, especially because it makes for a better story."

"So that's it?" asked Steelminder. "You've done nothing in the time since you landed on our shores but introduce further instability?"

There was a loud banging on the door, and a messenger burst in without waiting for anyone to respond. "The city's on fire," he said quickly. "There's a riot in the streets."

8. Ash and Flames

"We're going to have to execute Gael, of course," said the Flower Queen. She had a faint smile on her face, and looked around the room with sleepy eyes. She walked over to Gaelwyn and placed her hand against his cheek. "Oh, we'll have a marvelous trial first, just the sort of thing to let people know that this is a place with law and order. We can use the cathedral for it, I think that the arched ceilings will look quite nice. I can dress up all in white, the virginal queen once more, and no one will be able to say that I was anything but a champion for my people." She nodded to Gaelwyn. "Oh Gael, you were such a dear companion, I owe my figure to you, you know that, but the good of the realm compels it."

"My queen is being indelicate," said Steelminder, "But she speaks the truth. We must be seen doing something."

"No," said Welexi, as though that might be the entirety of his argument. "The city burns, and someone needs to stop it. That can include us, or it can be solely whatever illustrati retain enough of their senses to bring that supposed law and order to the city. Either way, Gaelwyn is not going to be harmed by the likes of you."

"Show some respect," began the queen's husband. His mustache was twisted into a frown, but the Flower Queen was looking at her fingers and smiling.

"It wouldn't work," said Vidre. "String Gael up and parade his corpse around town, and the commoners will see

it for the callous, pandering ploy that it is. Worse than that, they'll see it coming. There's no doubt been a campaign of agitation in advance of what happened after the duel, which means that the Council of Laborers is at least a step ahead of us. They'll have a plan in place and ready to respond to whatever we do, and that includes the obvious step — no offense Gael — of pinning it all on a patsy."

"The city burns," said Welexi. "The illustrati are needed to contain the fires and save those in need. If we can show at least that much grace in unfavorable circumstances, then we still deserve the power that's been granted to us. Call your illustrati to arms in defense of the palace; we'll take everyone who wants to join us into the city itself."

The Flower Queen waved her hand. "It will all die out," she said. "The fire that burns bright burns fast."

"My queen is right," said Steelminder. "If there are problems, and you insist that we don't take the sensible course of action, better to make a strong defense against the rabble."

"There will be more than enough illustrati to protect you here, your majesty," said Welexi. He wasn't able to keep his voice entirely free of scorn. "Fire poses a real risk given these winds, and the queen can't rule over ashes. Vidre, Lightscour, and I will go deal with fires at least, if not with the people themselves." He turned slightly. "Gael will have to stay within Grayhull for now."

"I can help," said Gaelwyn. "If it's not fighting, only putting out the fires, and I'm sure there will be people who need healing —"

"Better not to for now," said Welexi. "It would draw too much unwelcome attention. If I could, I would get you to the *Zenith* and position it a mile out to sea, but it's too far to ship, and if things have gone south I suspect that they've already set off while waiting for people to settle down. It wouldn't be the first time the ship has been in danger." He turned back to Steelminder. "Gather the illustrati. Everyone with a scrap of power should be here guarding the palace or out in the city trying to calm the riots."



There were only five illustrati that joined them. The biggest surprise was Ember, the Flower Queen's friend and alchemist-in-residence. She had fire instead of hair, which had flames that licked a foot high; her domain was ideal for their purposes. She was unarmored, but had traded her dress in for a more practical skirt and leggings. Aside from her, there was Houndstooth with his yellow eyes (who was flanked by his two large dogs), Arbarber, Dovefall, and Devodrain. Vidre quietly expressed the notion that the latter two had no business in going out into the city, but if they were only after their own fame, Welexi didn't seem to have a problem with it.

They were split into groups of two or three; Welexi spread his wings of light and took to the air by himself, and Dominic was paired with Vidre. They took to the streets, moving towards the nearest pillar of smoke. As soon as they were free from earshot, they both began to speak at once.

"He betrayed —"

"You should have —"

"You go first," said Dominic.

"You should have killed him," said Vidre. "I was wrong about that. I didn't count on him martyring himself. If you'd have been the one to kill him, and kill him for real, they wouldn't have had so much ammunition to use against us."

"You never should have made a deal with him in the first place," said Dominic. "This was his plan all along. This was why he wanted to fight Welexi. I never stabbed him through the heart, he only faked the wound and was good enough to sell the performance. He'd probably been practicing that trick for a year. Without me showing mercy, his plan would have failed."

"A good planner has many plans," said Vidre. "This was a path that he wanted to take, but there were others available to him. At least this way you're still alive."

The streets in this section of the city were devoid of people, but the sound of an angry mob could be heard a block over. Dominic wanted to talk more, but the time for talk seemed to be over. When Vidre leapt up to one of the roofs and crouched down, Dominic followed suit, and together they looked down on a hundred people standing in front of a burning shop. The smell of it filled Dominic's nose; there was a slightly metallic taste of ink.

"This is a font of their lies!" shouted a large man who stood with the burning shop behind him. "Day after day, penny dreadfuls to fill our heads with idle thoughts! We're cattle to them, draft animals to turn the mill, a fertile garden to plant their legend in! The Council wants a change!"

There were cheers from the crowd as the man continued on and the fire raged.

"I would say it's better to let this one burn itself out," said Vidre in a low voice. "Only the houses beside it have thatched roofs, which means that the fire is going to burn out of control if nothing is done." She shook her head. "And there are probably a dozen demonstrations like this going on all around Meriwall."

"We didn't come here to watch," said Dominic. He itched to jump down and confront the man, though he had no idea what he would say. He had seen enough of the Flower Queen to feel that the Council — whoever they truly were — had a point. She wasn't fit to rule, and her husband didn't seem at all concerned with reining her in. He had few illusions about the sort of people who masterminded Kendrick's fake death being better rulers, but it didn't seem like they could be worse. His side had been chosen for him though, even if he hadn't stepped forward to duel Kendrick in front of half the city. Whether he liked it or not, these were his people now. "Was the play-acting part of the deal?" he found himself asking.

"No," said Vidre. She didn't seem surprised by the question, and her eyes didn't leave the man who was still shouting to the crowd. "I can't exactly say that he betrayed us, but he didn't actually need to. He was perfectly fine with holding up his end of the deal. I should have seen it coming all the same, but I was too worried about you dying."

Dominic frowned. He didn't believe that altruism ran deep in Vidre's veins.

"Let's break this up then, before the fire gets out of control," said Vidre. She leapt down to the street without waiting for a response, with her daggers flashing in the air.

"Did you think of the printer when you took the torch to his shop?" she asked in a loud voice. Heads swiveled to look at her. "Did you picture him in your mind's eye? Tomorrow morning, when the fires have died down, he'll come walking into the charred husk of a place that he's worked his trade for years. He'll look down at the molten lead that was once his livelihood, and know that he was worse off. It never matters to the mob though, does it?"

"Stories," spat the large man. "The illustrati always come with their stories. How would you know who owns this place? You sailed in on your fancy ship three days ago." He flexed his muscles and cracked his neck, like he stood a shade of a chance against Vidre. "We've been under your thumb for too long. The lies turn to ash tonight."

Vidre stepped forward, and the large man barreled his way forward to greet her. The crowd hadn't quite backed away, but the man had made the mistake of making the fight between him and Vidre instead of Vidre and the mob; it was hard to kill an illustrati, but with enough people coming in from different directions at once, glass armor wasn't completely impenetrable. Dominic had been warned never to get so mired in battle that he couldn't escape the clutches of a dozen men trying to tear into him.

"Form a bucket brigade while I deal with this man," Vidre called to the crowd. "The printer would help to put out a fire at your houses, and if this isn't contained, it's

going to spread through the city. It doesn't matter what happened with the Blood Bard tonight. Tomorrow there will be —"

The man's face had twisted into a snarl, and he'd begun rushing towards Vidre. Her armor was already covering everything except for her face and hands, and she brought it around to cover those as well as he charged her. Dominic stood back, ready to smile as she demolished him, and ready to defend her in case there was any serious threat.

When the man was a foot away from Vidre, he burst into flames.

He was none the worse for it; he continued on with flames trailing behind him, like a torch being swung through the air. They covered his face and hands, and his shirt and pants had begun to burn off him almost at once. Vidre kicked backwards and leapt away from him, almost as though she'd known it was coming, and landed next to Dominic just as his brain was beginning to come around the conclusion that this man was an illustrati of fire.

"What do we do?" asked Dominic, but Vidre's face was covered in a thick layer of glass, and she was already moving forward with a long, jagged sword. Dominic summoned a shadow blade for himself and moved to flank, but he had far less in the way of armor, and the man's flaming hand would burn at first touch.

The man lunged towards Vidre again. The flames that consumed him rose higher, but she moved to meet him instead of turning away, and tumbled past. The man staggered, and Dominic realized all at once that Vidre was

missing her sword, and the man had it lodged in his stomach, piercing all the way through to stick out from his back. Dominic moved forward and made a downward chop with his shadow blade, and caught the man in the shoulder, which was enough to make him collapse to the ground. When the flames that covered his skin began to flicker out, Vidre stepped forward and brought her foot down to crush the man's skull.

The crowd had almost entirely left, and Dominic was thankful for it.

"The others are in danger," Vidre said as soon as her faceplate parted to let her breathe. She didn't even stop to pick up her sword, and instead began forming a new one as she ran. She crouched down slightly for a leap and was up on the rooftops without so much as hesitating to see whether Dominic would follow. He took off after her as soon as he'd regained his wits, leaving the burning print shop and the dead illustrati behind him. He was half a block behind Vidre, who was racing towards another of the fires as quickly as she could.



Devodrain had the domain of mist, and he wouldn't have traded it for any other. There was a tendency, especially in the Flower Queen's court, to bemoan one's domain and say in a silky voice that of course someone else had the better domain, for whatever reason. It had taken him too long to understand that this wasn't really sincere, and that people were only saying that they wanted the domain of flowers

as a way of insinuating themselves with the queen. He had been told a number of times that mist was a fine domain, sometimes by a pretty girl, and he hadn't realized that it was expected that he would demur and explain why he thought that Steelminder had the best domain of anyone because of the armor that he could craft. Never mind that Devodrain had no interest in crafting armor, and couldn't really understand anyone who thought that simply making things was impressive. Steelminder could make an elaborate breastplate with enough power to stop a musket, but that armor could simply be bought from Steelminder if you had enough money.

Obviously Devodrain wouldn't argue that mist was the most powerful of the domains; the men of the Flower Queen's court often discussed the combat practicalities of the domains, along with their primary users, and while there were arguments to be made for a few of them, mist was never remotely in the running. Nor was mist the best from a utilitarian standpoint; sound was enormously helpful in speaking to crowds, most of the metallic domains could be used for artisan crafting, and even flower could help to pollinate fields and make rich colors for dyes. Mist couldn't do any of that. Devodrain loved mist all the same. He liked the way it looked, and the way it felt, and the fact that it was one of the more unique domains. There were nine metallic domains, and they were all boring, because all of them were almost entirely the same.

He'd been paired up with Ember, who had considerably more standing than him, both in the real sense of personal

power and the more nebulous system of understanding that dominated the court. It had been a complete surprise when she'd volunteered to come with. Their domains were somewhat out of alignment with each other; mist was sometimes called a bastard domain, given that it had overlap with air and water, and water was supposed to be the counter to flame. They moved quickly through the city together, with Devodrain leaving a trail of mist in the air and Ember leaving a trail of flame to match it.

"Does it go out when you sleep?" asked Devodrain as he watched the flames licked at the surface of her head.

"Excuse me?" asked Ember.

"How do you keep the pillow from starting on fire?" asked Devodrain. He'd been meaning to ask this from since the time he'd first seen her. Devodrain had only been at court for three months now, and only an illustrati for a year in total. He had more questions than he knew what to do with, and had only gotten scattered answers. He had grown up on the other end of Torland, the lesser son of a noble house, and his education had (he felt) been distinctly lacking.

Ember smiled at him, and in answer to his question, the flames on her head died out. She wasn't quite bald; Devodrain could see a bit of stubble there. "That's the first time anyone has asked me that," she said.

"I thought it was something like domain form," said Devodrain. "Houndstooth has the eyes of a dog —"

"I didn't think you were being foolish," said Ember. Her head lit up again, with orange flames curling up towards

the sky and illuminating their walk. "Come, I hear someone proselytizing."

They rounded a corner and the conversation went quiet in a great wave, as people noticed their presence and alerted their neighbor. A building was on fire, and it didn't take much to see that it was a church of Laith, one of the smaller ones that served as lesser versions of the great Cathedral. The walls were made of stone, and so it was only the interior that was lit up, as the pews and tapestries turned themselves to smoke and ash.

"I can take over from here," said Ember with a pleasant smile.

The large man standing before the burning church, the one that everyone had been listening to, folded his arms across his chest. "A peddler of narcotics to our queen," he said. "Go no further. This church is a symbol of the corruption at the heart of the kingdom, a seed laid by King Laith long ago." The man pointed to the face carved into the mountain. "Hubris and a disregard for his subjects. Nothing has changed in hundred years time."

"You call the church symbolic. That's a little on the nose, don't you think?" asked Ember. "You shouldn't just call something a symbol, it should be obvious to everyone watching that it's a symbol simply by virtue of what's being done. If you have to explain to people why you're trying to burn down a church, maybe you're just making an excuse for bad behavior. And either way, it doesn't really matter, because I'm going to go put those fires out, and tomorrow

the church will be cleaned of the ash." She strode forward, and Devodrain was compelled to follow after her.

The large man moved into Ember's path. His muscles were larger than Devodrain had ever seen on the common folk, and he had a height that spoke of heavy meals or good breeding, possibly both. Still, muscles meant little to the illustrati, and if he so much as laid a finger on Ember, she would be able to burn him to a crisp. Whether that would be wise thing to do in the context of the ongoing civil issues was another matter entirely. Yet as Ember moved to pass him, the man grabbed her around her arm and lifted it up, holding her back.

Ember smiled at him. "Is this what you think being a citizen means?" she asked. "Burning down churches and threatening women? I don't have any clue whether you think that this is a fight that you can win, because obviously you can't. I'm more interested in what you think you're going to accomplish. Martyrdom?"

"The church burns," said the man.

Ember moved forward, but the man held onto her, and she frowned at his hand on her arm. "I've never liked the smell of burnt hair and melting flesh, but you've left me with little choice."

Her forearm burst into flames from the joint of her elbow to the tips of her fingers, but the man's face didn't change at all, and he didn't pull back from her. Ember's eyes went wide, and Devodrain called out, "Illustrati!", just as the man twisted Ember's arm around and threw her to the ground.

Devodrain wore a rapier at his hip, and had a fair amount of training in single combat. In part this was because dueling was a popular pastime in Torland — though it was almost never to the death, and instead ended when one of the participants took a minor wound. Devodrain began to pull his rapier out with an awkward motion that slapped the sheath against his thigh, and he made the mistake of looking down at it. He'd undone the latch earlier, but it had caught for some reason. When he looked up, the large man was standing in front of him, and bringing hands of fire towards Devodrain's face.



The smell of smoke filled Dominic's nostrils. He felt sick; he'd just killed a man for the second time. The whole thing had happened quickly, and didn't make much sense. Being an *illustrati* was supposed to mean that you knew who your enemies were, but Dominic had been given a full list of every *illustrati* of significant power known to be in Meriwall, and that man hadn't been anywhere on it. It was possible for someone to rise in standing quickly, and it was possible that the list was out of date, but Vidre hadn't seemed to know that they were looking at an *illustrati* in disguise until just seconds before he'd revealed himself. That meant that the man wasn't local to Meriwall, but combined with the fact that he was in league with the plot against the Flower Queen, that could only mean that he was an agent of the Iron King.

Dominic was a block behind Vidre when she dropped back down to the street, and the fight was already over by the time he got there. Ember's clothes had been burned off her, but she was otherwise unscathed; Devodrain's head was charred on either side, and his hands had been badly burned before he'd died. Laying on the ground, with a dagger stuck in his neck, was another large man whose fires were dying down. He wasn't quite identical to the first man they'd fought, but he was very similar in appearance.

"Get back to the palace," said Vidre to Ember.

"I — we had thought — it wasn't supposed to be a fight — if I hadn't matched his domain, hadn't been immune to the fires, but even then his hands on me —" Ember was shaking slightly, and not making any sign that she was going somewhere.

"Dominic, take her," said Vidre. She had a dagger in either hand. "I'll come to collect her once the threat has passed. Don't let her eat any flowers, because we're going to need her to quell these fires. Tell Steelminder that we're in a state of war."

"Are we?" asked Dominic.

"Dom, we don't have time for this," said Vidre. "You have no idea how to properly fight these people, just go. Pick her up and carry her if you have to."

"Alright," said Dominic.

Vidre launched herself up onto the rooftops again, and her armor glinted in the firelight for a moment before she disappeared out of sight. Dominic stood mute for a few

moments, looking at the place where Vidre had been, and then turned his attention towards Ember.

"Come on," he said. He tried not to look at where the fires had burnt away her clothing and exposed her, then decided that was foolish and only tried to pretend that this situation was normal. "We need to go, we're in danger here."

"I was stronger than him," said Ember. "I could feel his hands around my wrists. I could feel him trying to consume me with flames. But I was stronger than him, and it was only a lick of heat against my skin. He could have killed me if he'd had a knife, but he only had his hands, and I could have thrown him to the ground if I had thought of it. Most people don't touch you if you're on fire." She had a far off look in her eyes. The fire on her head had gone out, and she was now merely bald.

"I'll carry you," said Dominic. "Just promise not to burn me, okay?" He said it as a joke, a way to lighten the mood, but Ember had a look of horror and sadness. "It'll be alright," said Dominic.

Ember moved forward and wrapped her arms around Dominic's neck, pulling him into a hug. He knelt down and scooped her up, with his arms touching the bare flesh of her thighs. He steadied himself and began running back towards Grayhull, this time taking the roads so that he wouldn't have to make any jumps with his unwieldy cargo. Ember seemed to weigh nothing at all; Dominic still wasn't quite used to how easy his standing had made certain physical tasks.

"You'll be fine," he said from time to time. The day before, he might have imagined resenting Vidre for racing off and leaving this duty to him, but now Dominic was happy to be saving a damsel in distress. The shape of the story would change later on; in the version that he could imagine himself telling over a five-course meal, Dominic had insisted that Ember needed help, and bravely saved her life when Vidre would have abandoned the poor woman. By the time they arrived at Grayhull, Dominic could almost believe the revisions he'd been penning in his head. Returning to the palace was gallantry, not cowardice, no matter that Vidre was still out there fighting.

Once they had gotten past the guards and to the planning room they'd been using, Ember practically collapsed into the Flower Queen's arms. Steelminder twitched his mustache and stared at Dominic.

"It's war," said Dominic. "Vidre feels that the Iron King has made his move. The fires in the city were started by the agitators, but a few of the men stirring up trouble are illustrati as well. There was something off about them."

"Murderers," choked out Ember.

"War with the Iron Kingdom?" asked Steelminder. "We can't have it. There are treaties in place, and besides that, everyone knows that the Iron King hasn't been seen in at least a year. Why would he attack us from his death bed?"

"As much as you might not like it, it's happening," said Dominic. "Torland has allies that can be brought into the war, enough that the Iron King will be forced to fight a war on too many fronts at once." He tried to think of what Vidre

would do. "We need to send out letters as soon as possible, so that help arrives in time. It's not an outright war yet, not until we have some proof, but we can present the evidence."

Steelminder frowned. "You are not in charge here," he said. "My queen is." He glanced to the Flower Queen, who had Ember's head in her lap. The queen's head was lolled back and her mouth was hanging partway open. If not for the fact that her hand was petting Ember's bald head, Dominic might have thought the queen was either sleeping or dead.

"Is there a way to sober her up quickly?" asked Dominic. "Something we could give her to bring her into her right mind? I'm sure that you've had need for that a few times." He was getting desperate for some action he could take to make everything better.

"You are being indelicate," said Steelminder.

"There's a war out there!" Dominic shouted, all pretense of civility and etiquette forgotten. "Homes and businesses are burning, and people are risking their lives for the queen, and she doesn't care at all!"

"She cares too much," said Steelminder with an icy gaze. "She indulges herself because it's the only way to cope with the enormity of running this country day in and day out." He sniffed. "Another outburst and I'll have you removed."

Dominic wanted to hit the man, but the doors opened up once more. Welexi and Vidre stepped through.

"A half dozen illustrati of flame," said Welexi. "Each with their own enhancements, taller and more muscular than they should have been by rights, with thickened skin and, if

I'm not mistaken, bones more dense than they should have been."

"Your apprentice says war," said Steelminder.

"Worse than war," said Welexi. "Bigger than war. A half dozen illustrati, all with the same domain? The Iron King has done his best to manipulate fame, to take the lessons of Laith and apply them on a larger scale in order to gain valuable troops. He's been more than willing to have children tested. Yet the sheer expense involved in raising so many illustrati and sending them here for subterfuge ... it's not right."

"I listened to one of them talk," said Vidre. "If he was a spy, he was a good one. There was no trace of a foreign accent; these were Meriwall men through and through. That makes it even stranger. I might be able to believe that the Iron King was willing to expend the resources to create so many illustrati from whole cloth, but I don't believe that he would choose men from within this country, especially given how many he would have to test in order to get six of the same domain."

"But the danger is over," said Steelminder. "You beat them back —"

"We killed four of the six," said Vidre. "They killed four of ours in turn. The other two were long gone by the time we reached those fires, but they're still out in the city, and for all we know there might be more. People are looting businesses, throwing rocks through windows and dragging merchandise out. The unrest has turned to simple crime that the guards couldn't possibly handle, if they

weren't engaged in it themselves. It will take time for order to be restored, and it's not going to happen tonight. There's a storm on the horizon, which will help with the fires, and we need to go back out there, but the danger has not passed by any stretch of the imagination. War is coming, if it's not already here."

"There is an explanation for the men of flame," said Welexi. "One I've been mulling over." He paused to look around the room. "Someone is using the Harbinger's knowledge."



Kendrick Eversong was having a wonderful day.

The duel had gone pretty much as well as could have been hoped for, and the Council had sprung into action immediately afterward. The fires would draw in the illustrati, and the element of surprise would mean that many of them would die. The men who had volunteered to light those fires were at great risk, but they had known that when they had signed on for the benefactor's process. Kendrick's own part wasn't without dangers of its own, but he'd played his role to perfection, and nothing more could be asked of him. He wasn't entirely pleased with having to make a new life in the Iron Kingdom, but Torland would become part of the Iron Kingdom soon enough, and then he would be able to return, if perhaps not in the guise of Kendrick Eversong. No matter. That wasn't his real name anyhow.

The benefactor's pretty assistant came into the small room that Kendrick had been holed up in and bowed

slightly. She was a silent woman, and an illustrati in her own right. Earlier, she'd healed Kendrick of the wounds that he'd sustained during the duel, fast enough that Kendrick found it somewhat alarming. It had taken a while for him to cotton on to the fact that she must have been a beneficiary of the benefactor's process as well; the benefactor had never gone into detail, but at a minimum it seemed that the benefactor had the ability to change a person's domain. How the silent woman had been selected for the domain of flesh was as yet a mystery, one to add to the growing collection he'd had ever since the benefactor had shown up.

"Are we ready to go?" asked Kendrick. "My bags are packed." This was a little joke, because he was taking nothing with him, but the silent woman didn't smile, and only gestured for him to follow. He obliged, and stepped lightly behind her. He'd shaved his goatee and was wearing common clothes, which would make him difficult to recognize, but the path they were following was taking them deeper in the building instead of outside. Kendrick had never been to the place before, and looked around at the wooden walls with interest as they walked. It had been, or possibly still was, a sprawling shop of the kind the Council seemed to have in abundance.

"How have things been going in the city?" asked Kendrick. Predictably, this didn't get a response. "Everyone mourning my death? My only regret in all this is that I won't get to attend my own funeral. I think that if we had the right collection of domains we could have done it. You

would have been in charge of changing the shape of my face, and with different hair and possibly some darker skin, I could have been unrecognizable, at least until I opened my mouth. But even then, acting isn't exactly foreign to me. Did you see the performance?" Again there was no response. "Well, I did wonderfully. No one had any clue except for Vidre. I saw her face right near the end, and I was sure that she was going to put a stop to it all, but I suppose her woman's intuition didn't get her the whole way. It'll be a shame to lose her. The others, not so much."

He chattered amiably as they walked, simply because he enjoyed it. He did regret that he wouldn't be the one to end Gaelwyn, but those dice had never looked like they were going to come up in his favor. Gaelwyn wouldn't survive the coming weeks, Kendrick had been assured of that. The Iron Kingdom would scoop out the rotten core of Torland, and the glorified mercenaries would be taken out with it. The kingdom of Torland would be made anew, and if it would owe something to the Iron Kingdom, that seemed like a small price to pay.

The benefactor sat behind a desk, looking down at hastily written letters that must have come in from around the city. Sitting on one corner of the desk was a blocky gray device with a hole in the top that simply screamed Harbinger artifact. It had that same annoying insistence that the benefactor's ring had; you couldn't look at it without knowing that the Harbingers had made it. If the Harbingers had been able to encode that into an object, Kendrick figured that they would have been better off informing you

what the thing actually was. Trying to make sense of the Harbingers had always been a fool's game, and Kendrick's opinion on that hadn't changed after he'd seen proof of their existence.

"Why am I still here?" asked Kendrick. "I should be leaving." Every moment that he remained in Meriwall there was a risk that he would be discovered, however small. It was damned hard to turn a narrative around once it got rolling, but more pertinent to Kendrick, there was a high personal risk involved.

"Put your hand in the device," the benefactor said. His hood had been pulled back, and he was revealed as an old man with white hair, though they'd had enough meetings that this wasn't any surprise. The benefactor tapped the Harbinger artifact for emphasis.

"Why?" asked Kendrick.

"I received this only late today," said the benefactor. "It will change your domain from blood to sound."

"I didn't ask for that," said Kendrick. He was about to say that he couldn't very well be the Blood Bard without a domain of blood, but then he remembered that the Blood Bard was dead. "If I have a free choice of domains —"

"You don't," said the benefactor. "Priming the device is expensive. Changing your domain is necessary for the creation of your new life, and sound is a preferable domain for a bard."

"I can agree with that," said Kendrick. "But we didn't discuss this before —"

"I didn't know whether the device would be available," said the benefactor. "Originally it was to happen in the Iron Kingdom. Now, please. After this you sail away. A changed domain will prove beyond all doubt that you are not the Blood Bard."

Kendrick stepped and looked down at the device. The hole at the top of it wasn't circular; it was shaped like a hexagon. Kendrick's curiosity was piqued, but something about this didn't feel right. Still, if they'd wanted to kill him, the silent woman could have done that when she was healing him earlier, and there wouldn't have been much that he could do about that. He had to trust that he was still worthwhile to them as an illustrati; his legend would grow with his martyrdom, and the Iron Kingdom could make good use of him.

"It won't hurt," said the benefactor.

"Very well," said Kendrick. He gave them his best smile, the one that he used at the end of particularly bawdy songs, and stuck his hand into the artifact's maw. He had expected it to clamp down on him, or change its shape, but instead it simply emitted a loud, solid tone.

"You may remove your hand," said the benefactor.

"For people who understood fame better than we do, the Harbingers didn't have any particular flair for the dramatic," said Kendrick. He rubbed at his wrist, but felt only a slight tingle. He felt off, somehow, and realized slowly that it was because he could no longer feel his blood. "I would have used flashing lights and a song of some sort." Yet if he could no longer feel his blood, then surely he should have

been able to sense sound in some way. The domain of sound was supposed to give you a gilded ear. He should have been able to modulate his voice without thinking about it. Yet there was no domain intuition that Kendrick could feel. "What did you do?"

"Primed the device," said the benefactor.

Kendrick felt a hand on his neck and turned around to see the silent woman gripping him. His first instinct was to go for her blood, to push it up into her head and burst every vessel in the brain, but he felt nothing. The last thing he saw was a slight quirk of a smile on the silent woman's face.

9. The Letter

The city smelled of smoke. It soaked into Dominic's clothing and filled his nostrils. His sweat made black streaks on his skin where it touched the bits of ash. After the first hour, he'd developed a light cough that he was sure was going to get worse as the night dragged on.

A few of the fires had been easy to deal with. They had been in relatively affluent parts of the city, as befit the Council of Laborers' stated ideal. The print shop had burnt to the ground, but when the fire made the leap to other buildings, there were people ready with buckets of sand to toss on top of the embers. There had been a sizable crowd ready to see justice done, but few really wanted to see the whole city burn, even if it was one of the richer areas. The fire in the church had consumed the interior, but there was no risk of it spreading. It was a building of thick stone, ringed with a few precious feet of green grass that had now turned brown. It was a similar story at three of the banks; the illustrati of flame there had gone nearly unchecked. Rather than proselytize to the crowds, he had set himself wholly on fire and burned his way through the buildings with as much heat as he could manage. He had done an immense amount of damage, and burned through countless ledgers, bills of exchange, letters of credit, and the various paraphernalia of the moneyed. The fire itself had been contained within the ornate masonry and tiled floors, and hadn't spread outward.

Not every part of the city was so lucky.

The group walked quickly, and in tight formation. Ember had been coaxed from the Flower Queen's lap, leaving an imprint of tears there, and against the orders of the queen, Steelminder had chosen to accompany them with his steel armor covering him from head to toe. He had a sword so massive that it looked like it was designed for cleaving horses cleanly in half. Welexi flew overhead, while Vidre and Dominic moved their small party along at what seemed to be a glacial pace. Dominic's job was to act as the secondary lookout by peering into the shadows. The enemy was using incognito illustrati, and Dominic was tense with the feeling that they could be attacked at any moment. The fire ahead of them had gotten noticeably larger.

There had been a strong argument for staying in the palace and letting the commoners take care of themselves. Fires — even bad fires — weren't unheard of in Meriwall. The city had been marred by a serious one just twenty years prior. In the wake of that, the city had passed certain laws and made a few preparations. The constables had buckets of sand to put out errant embers, and there were bucket brigades to bring up water from the River Hathim that ran through Meriwall like a thick vein. When Steelminder had begun to talk about how thatched roofs had been outlawed, and how new construction was done with stone instead of wood, Dominic had grown more certain that there was still a need to act. He had seen enough of the city to know how much its citizens cared about those laws. He'd run across hundreds of thatched roofs without having the slightest

hint that they were illegal. The law had been put in place to appease someone, and actual enforcement had fallen to the wayside. That was a pattern that Dominic knew all too well from Gennaro.

"Just this one more, Ember," said Vidre. "We'll put out this fire, and then we'll go back to the palace and sleep the night away." Vidre was walking faster than anyone else, and kept having to make frequent pauses to wait for them to catch up. Ember had been given new clothes, which were now singed, but the illustrati-forged chainmail coat she wore would protect her modesty in all but the strongest fires. "I can carry you, if you'd like," Vidre said for the third time.

Dominic's watchful eyes caught Ember's for a brief moment. She was staring at the fire, which rose up over the rooftops. "It's so large," she said. "I don't know if I can."

"Let's get there first and then see," said Vidre.

The crowds began two blocks from the fires. Some of them were merely watching, while others were more clearly refugees whose homes and businesses were burning. Every one of them had to be looked at with suspicion; any of them could have been one of the hidden illustrati that the Council seemed to have in abundance. Given how heavily armored Steelminder and Vidre were, it was little wonder that the crowds gave them a wide berth. That was a small piece of fortune. They couldn't risk getting touched by one of the commoners, not if they could secretly be holding the domain of flesh.

"They'll tell stories about you, Ember," said Vidre. "They'll talk about how you saved this city from a fire that was set to consume it."

"I can feel the heat from here," said Ember. "My face is warm already."

"Fire can't hurt you," said Vidre. Her voice was calm and steady, but that was the only part of her that was keeping up the act. Dominic couldn't tell whether he was seeing anxiety or impatience, but there were emotions close to the surface that Vidre didn't have the energy to hide. The night felt like a fortnight; at a guess, it was four o'clock in the morning, and there had been stress enough during the day.

"Fire isn't heat," said Ember. "They're paired, and they have overlap, but they're not the same. And immunity is linked to standing, I know that much, so why should I be protected from an inferno? I could die in there."

"You can take it slowly," Vidre began.

"I can't," said Ember. They were three houses away now, and had come to a halt. Dominic was sweating profusely, and he had to avert his eyes from the intensity of the flame. He was casting long shadows, and directed them back towards the flame to put himself in his own shade. "I can't," repeated Ember. "I'm sorry, but you're going to have to do it without me."

"Kaitlin," said Vidre with a soft voice. Dominic had practically forgotten that Ember had a given name. "Have you ever heard the story of how I got my scar?" The glass faceplate had parted further to show the pearly white line that ran down the side of Vidre's face.

"I don't ... it was a fight, wasn't it?" said Ember. She was looking at Vidre now, with the fire raging behind her.

"It was early in my career," said Vidre. "I didn't have any experience with what it meant to be a fighter. I was really just a girl, cast out from my home and living off the kindness of strangers. I'd taken dinner with a few of the nobles of Abalon, and one of them had invited me back to his home. I was very free with my body in those days. When I came into his bedroom, and began to undress for him, he called me a whore and spit on me. I had been a queen; I wasn't about to stand for that. I got haughty about it, and began to curse him out. That was when he pulled out a knife and slashed at me. I was terrified. I clutched at my bleeding face and after I had fled, I spent the night crying. That morning though, even though the fear hadn't left me, even though the wound hurt terribly, I decided that I wasn't going to let it control me. We define ourselves by how we respond to pressure and strife. Running away is easy. Letting someone else deal with a problem is easy too. But that's not how we grow as people. It's not how we become a better version of ourselves. Kaitlin, you need to do this. Not because it's the right thing to do, though it is, and not because you're the only one with the right domain, though you are, but because this is the moment where you define yourself against the fear and anxiety."

Ember nodded along towards the end of this speech. She set her jaw and turned back towards the fire. "You're right." She stepped forward, and faltered slightly. Dominic could imagine the heat.

"You can do it," said Vidre.

"Yes," said Ember. She steeled herself and strode towards the burning tenements, and this time she didn't slow down.

Vidre let out a low sigh. "That was a near thing."

Steelminder coughed into his fist. "Your majesty, I had heard that the scar was symbolic, but the story itself ... I had never heard it. I know it was not meant for my ears," he looked towards Dominic, "But of course I will practice discretion in this matter."

"I appreciate that," said Vidre. "It's not a story that's made it into my biographies."

Dominic wanted to ask whether the story was true, but Ember had reached the first of the burning buildings. The flames died down where she walked. Soon she was inside the building, and hidden from view. The plan was simply to burn the buildings to the ground. Ember would increase the flames while drawing them inward, in an attempt to burn all the fire's fuel while preventing it from spreading to the other buildings. Space was at a premium in Meriwall, and the buildings had been numerous stories which jutted out at every level to monopolize the space above the roads.

"She'll die if the building collapses," said Dominic. "A thick wooden beam to the head would knock her out, and there would be no way to rescue her."

"A bigger concern is that one of the illustrati of flame might be in there, waiting for her," said Vidre. "Nothing to be done about it though. Just keep your eyes out for threats." She glanced up as a glowing white form passed over them. "More likely Welexi will see it first, but all the

same, we have little better to do at the moment. Be prepared to start making firebreaks." She glanced at the city block around them. "If we bring down those buildings, perhaps we can prevent the fire from spreading."

Ember might well have been sent to her death with a story about personal growth, and Vidre didn't seem the slightest bit concerned. It occurred to Dominic that the death of the queen's alchemist might be a good thing for the country of Torland. The narcotic flowers were produced by the queen and distilled by Ember. Dominic was certain that was how Vidre would think; if Ember managed to put out the fires, then that was some good accomplished, but if Ember died, it would help to restore the queen to her former self.

It took an hour and a half in total. A dozen buildings had been destroyed, and one of them had collapsed, but Ember emerged, if covered in soot and looking worn down. What clothing she'd had on had burned away, save for the steel chain shirt, which glowed orange with the heat. When she smiled, her white teeth gave a contrast to her ash-coated skin.

Dominic worried about an attack during the entire trip back to the palace. He worried that there would be another fire that would demand their attention. Nothing came though. He collapsed into his bed just as the sun began to rise.



"What do we know for a fact?" asked Vidre.

"Nothing," said Gaelwyn. He had slept far more than anyone else, but didn't seem much better for it.

"We know that they were enhanced," said Dominic. "Better muscles and likely better bones."

"That's a guess," said Gaelwyn. "If I had been there, I might have been able to tell for certain, or if I'd had a body to autopsy."

"We were busy," Welexi said with a smile. "Next time perhaps."

"There are at least three sides," said Vidre. "The Council of Laborers are local, opposed to the Flower Queen's rule, and trying to start a coup. The Iron Kingdom is presumably backing them, but even if it weren't, the Iron Kingdom will sense weakness and be ready to strike. That would be difficult without *casus belli*, because too many other countries and illustrati would be pulled in. The Flower Queen's side, which we can call the royalists, just want everything to stay the same."

"The Iron Kingdom has control of Harbinger artifacts, and the knowledge to use them," said Welexi.

"No," said Gaelwyn. "It's one thing to say that, it's another entirely to prove it. Vidre wanted to know the facts, and what you're offering is a hypothesis." He folded his hands across his chest. "I would require extraordinary proof to accept that something so truly unprecedented is going on."

"There's a mundane explanation," said Dominic. "The Iron Kingdom might have just made those men we fought

famous through the usual means. Pay enough bards and it's possible, right?"

"Now is not the time for skepticism, Lightscour," said Welexi.

"It's just an explanation," said Dominic. "I didn't mean anything by it."

"It doesn't matter," said Vidre. "What matters is how many illustrati they can field using whatever method they have. Our current guess, based on what we've seen, is five or six. Four of them are dead. I doubt that they would reveal everyone at once though. There's also an upper limit to the number that they could possibly have. If they had hundreds, they could simply have forced a surrender through brute strength alone."

"If they — the Council or the Iron Kingdom — have the ability to create illustrati from whole cloth, stopping them takes precedence over protecting Torland," said Welexi.

The room went silent for a moment as that declaration sank in.

"You would abandon this kingdom to its own devices?" asked Vidre.

"If need be," said Welexi. "If someone has found a way to upset the current balance of fame against power, or worse yet has grabbed onto the source of power by its root, then we're speaking of the end of the world as we know it."

"Does this change your proposed course of action?" asked Vidre. She laid her hands on the table and spread them wide. "Does this materially alter what we need to do?"

If it's a matter of calling in the *Zenith* and leaving shore, then I would have to disagree. Whatever is happening is happening here, now. We need to expose the link between the Council and the Iron Kingdom, if one exists."

"We'll stay in Torland," said Welexi. "For now."

"If they did use a Harbinger artifact, or Harbinger knowledge," said Dominic. "Is it possible that the Iron Kingdom wasn't involved at all?"

"Possible," said Welexi. He rubbed at his bald head. "But of course that raises the question of where they would have gotten such things."

"We're going in circles," said Vidre. "I'll ask again, *what do we know for a fact?*"

"There are three sides," said Dominic. "Or possibly two. The enemy has resources, to some extent, and those resources might exist outside the context of what we know. The enemy has a goal of some kind, which we are mostly ignorant of. They have plans, which we have so far ran straight into with open arms. Because we don't know what they're planning, we can't formulate a response, unless that response is defensive. Going on the defense leaves us weak."

"Well said," replied Welexi. He was intently gazing at Dominic. Dominic couldn't read the expression.

"We need to start talking peace," said Vidre. "We need to sober up the queen for long enough to get her talking to the Council of Laborers, or whoever speaks for them. If the queen won't do it, we need to give her husband the spine to act in her stead."

"You must speak more carefully in their presence," said Welexi.

Vidre rolled her eyes. "I am a queen, in case you had forgotten. I have leeway."

They left their meeting room and walked down the hallways of Grayhull Palace. Last night, while they had been out saving the city from rogue illustrati and enormous fires, many members of the Flower Queen's court had been having a celebration of sorts, and the palace was more or less devoid of illustrati as many of them were in their rooms nursing a hangover. Dominic had only gotten four hours of sleep, and desperately wanted more, but there was no reason to suspect that the enemy would relent, even with the loss of four of their members.

Vidre and Welexi seemed to be in some disagreement about the significance of those four. In some sense, it had been an even trade between the royalists and the Council; both sides had lost four. That was more than could be hoped for when the enemy had prepared an ambush. In another sense, the whole thing might have been avoided if they had gone about the work of quelling the riots and putting out the fires as though they were already at war. It wouldn't have done their side any favors to be seen in a tight cluster with heavy armor and drawn weapons, but it would likely have prevented the deaths.

"They're calling them the Phoenixes," said Steelminder when they got to the throne room. The Flower Queen was nowhere to be seen, and the throne itself was empty, with Steelminder sitting to the side of it. It wasn't clear whether

he had been waiting for them, or just using the wide open space to think.

"Who, your Royal Highness?" asked Welexi.

"The common folk," said Steelminder. "The story being passed around is that Kendrick Eversong has gone to the heavens, and his music so stirred the gods that they began granting extraordinary powers to the Blood Bard's friends. They were given power over fire because they acted justly in starting those fires. The Vicar Most High is quite displeased by this development. He actually suggested to me that we should start hanging people for heresy. There are bankers who lost their fortunes in the fires, with whole ledgers of accounts having irrecoverably gone up in smoke, and while the city has mostly settled, it seems certain that there will be riots again tonight." He spread his hands with his palms up. "My queen would like a solution to these problems."

"If there were a way to find Kendrick," Vidre began.

"They're having a funeral later today," said Steelminder. "Thank god the spies are still bringing information back to the palace. Kendrick's body will be on display for everyone to see."

Dominic considered that as Vidre swore. It would be possible to fake, if you could gather the bodily domains together to alter the appearance of an existing corpse. Gaelwyn had compared the subtle alterations that could be made to a person's face as a form of art, and to do it properly would require three or four illustrati who were artists in their own right.

"Gael, are you certain that you did nothing to the Blood Bard?" asked Steelminder.

"I," began Gaelwyn. "Your Royal Highness, I would never. I was going to heal him of his wounds, to prevent his death. When I touched him, he did something with his blood, enough to cause damage I wouldn't have been able to fix. It was as though he broke a dam within himself. I thought he had killed himself." He paused. "I'm not entirely certain that he didn't."

"I'm afraid that's no longer enough," said Steelminder.

"Don't do anything foolish," said Welexi, but even as the words were leaving his mouth, guards were entering the throne room.

"The situation has grown far beyond your control," said Steelminder. "A cynical man might believe that a trial was only meant to appease, but not all men are cynics. I am sorry, Gaelwyn, that it has come to this."

Dominic was ready to form a blade of shadows, but one look at Vidre and Welexi told him that this wasn't the course of action that either of them planned to take. The guards weren't illustrati; they were there primarily for symbolic reasons. Even though his injuries hadn't healed, Welexi could have killed all of them without breaking a sweat by twirling his spear around and piercing straight through their armor. Vidre could likely have done something similar. Dominic primed the shadows all the same, giving his focus to the shape that he might need.

"What charges does Gaelwyn face?" asked Welexi.

"Murder," said Steelminder.

"Please," said Gaelwyn.

"You understand that we have no desire to be outlaws in your land," said Welexi.

"There will be a trial," said Steelminder. "A fair one. We should have set this in motion before, but we bowed to your threats. If you had found a better solution to our problems, this could have been avoided. The trial can be announced before the Blood Bard's funeral begins."

Welexi hesitated.

"Take him down to the dungeon," Steelminder said to the guards. "Give him everything that he wants; it is possible that the trial will end in his favor, and an innocent man shouldn't suffer too much from having suspicion cast on him."

Gaelwyn looked to Welexi, but Welexi averted his eyes.



"It's a response," said Vidre. "Not a good one, but it's bold in a way that I wouldn't have expected from him." They sat at one end of a long dinner table, eating strips of sliced beef on top of a bed of root vegetables.

"Even our allies are enemies," said Welexi. He rested his face in his palm, and looked far older than Dominic had ever seen him look before.

"He was trying to define himself," said Dominic. He looked to Vidre. "By how he responded to strife and pressure."

"What is the story here?" asked Welexi, as though Dominic had said nothing. "What is the shape of it? An enemy two steps ahead of us isn't so strange. The reappearance of Harbinger artifacts is something that I've long expected. What resolution do we bring to this issue with Gaelwyn though? What story are we completing?"

"You're tired," said Vidre. "We all are." The bulk of her glass armor was sitting in two halves on the floor beside her, ready to be put on at a moment's notice. Dominic could see her age too, and the exhaustion that marked her face. Vidre was nearly thirty years old, but it was rare that she looked it.

"Gaelwyn needs to be exonerated," said Dominic. "That's the story."

"How?" asked Welexi. His voice was faintly suspicious.

Dominic licked his lips. His first inclination was to lie; they could falsify some proof, in the same way that the supposed crime itself had been falsified. But the more he looked at Welexi, the more he knew that Vidre was right; there were certain things that Welexi would rather have done away from his sight so that he could play the hero. The shape of the story was different, depending on whether the exoneration was done in good faith or as a lie.

"What was Kendrick like in private?" asked Dominic. He looked between the two of them. "You both knew him, didn't you?"

"He wanted to be an illustrati more than anything," said Welexi. "He was driven by a relentless sense of self. His desire for fame eclipsed all other desires; that was what

made him a bad person. He would have killed, if he thought that it would get him to the top. He would have — he did — cheat, lie, and steal, most noticeably from us.”

“You’re casting him as a villain,” said Dominic. “But people liked him. They must have had a reason to, and it wasn’t all lies.” He turned to Vidre. “He was flippant, wasn’t he? And overly dramatic? Was he actually that way, or was that just an act?”

“Those were things he chose to accentuate,” said Vidre. She frowned. “I don’t see where you’re going with this.”

“What I’m saying is,” Dominic began. He looked to Welexi. “Can I speak with Vidre privately?”

Welexi’s eyes narrowed. Without a word, he got up from his chair, taking his plate of food with him, and walked out the door.

“Inelegant,” said Vidre. “If you wanted to speak with me privately, you should have done so before raising those questions.”

“Was the Blood Bard in love with you?” asked Dominic. He saw her raise an eyebrow and continued on ahead. “It doesn’t actually matter, we can say that he was, I was just wondering whether there was some deeper history.”

“You’re hatching a plot,” said Vidre. “And yes, of course he was in love with me. He tried to woo me whenever we made port. Some of the songs he wrote about my beauty are still sung today, though of course that’s not what I would prefer to be known for. And yes, he had a flair for the dramatic, even when we were in private. It was a shield he put up, between himself and the world.”

"He left a letter for you," said Dominic. He tried to put some authority into his voice. "He knew that there was going to be a chance that he would be betrayed, so he arranged for a letter to be delivered to you in case something happened to him. The letter would prove that Gaelwyn was innocent, and point a finger at the Council."

Vidre stared at Dominic. "Any particular reason that people would believe this?"

"There will have to be something damaging to us," said Dominic. "How damaging — how *true* — will be something for you to supply. We can tell them that the entire duel was staged. He did trick us; it's reasonable that he would want to gloat. All we need to do is undermine his martyrdom and deflate the Council's righteous anger."

"I can see why you wouldn't want to speak of this in front of Welexi," said Vidre. "He would never agree to it."

"But you would?" asked Dominic. "If there are problems with this plan, outside the moral ones ... we're using a lie to erase other lies. If Kendrick is still alive, he won't be able to come out of the shadows without proving that the whole thing was a sham in the first place, and given how tarnished our reputation already is in this place, I think on balance we still come out ahead."

"It's a good enough plan," said Vidre. "Assuming that we can find a printing press, we can have copies of Kendrick's letter flooding through the city." She pushed her plate of food forward. "Composition will be the difficult part."



Dearest Vidre,

If you are reading this, then I am dead. I've always wanted to send a letter from beyond the grave, and I hope that you will forgive me for the melodrama. Dead men are allowed some leeway in such matters. Writing such a letter is supremely morbid, but the domain of blood lends itself to morbidity. This is not the first such letter I've written. I hope that it is not the first that gets delivered, but of course I wouldn't be writing if I didn't think there was a chance.

There are many reasons to compose such a letter. It is almost always a form of insurance. Sometimes the contents may be known to your rivals, and help to ensure that they have less incentive to do as they might otherwise do. That requires a fair amount of existing leverage, but at the same time ensures a lasting mistrust. In my case, however, it is a form of spite. I have been with this Council of Laborers for a long time, and my spite is directed at them only in the case that they decide to kill me. Personally, I can understand why they would. After the duel, I will have played my part.

I was anxious when I saw that Welexi had been injured, and puzzled when Lightscour stepped forward. It would have sunk our plans entirely. You can't imagine how happy I was when you came in through my bedroom window and tried to get in my good graces. When you proposed that we rig the match, I could barely keep from laughing. The plan leapt straight back onto its track; pretend to take a wound, pretend to require healing, pretend to be killed by that monster. It took me some time to work out why you would ask. You love Dominic de Luca. It was clear on your face in subsequent meetings. You, who had never loved a man, who had

let countless have their way with you, had fallen in love with what amounts to a puppy. You might think that I would be jealous, but I recalled the stories of what you did to puppies. You were always a dangerous friend to have. If you're reading this letter, that unfortunately means that I won't be around to see the spectacular conclusion. How much of it would reach my ears? Perhaps just a single line of a song written hundreds of miles away. Lightscour, shattered like glass at the bottom of a ravine, and that would be the only hint that you had grown tired of him.

You're still wondering about the spite. You never did know how to be properly wounded by an insult. It was always about base pragmatism with you. Very well. I write to name the Council of Laborers as my executioners. If I had known which of them was going to kill me, I would simply avoid my death. They are the ones to gain from ending my life though. It doesn't take the cleverest bard in all of Torland to recognize that. I'll admit to putting myself in a dangerous position. It seemed for the best, at the time, but I write that as a living man only pretending at being a dead one. Perhaps if I actually die I'll feel differently.

I won't ask for you to avenge me. I imagine that you're going to cut through the ranks of the Council of Laborers regardless of my wishes. Violence was always your preferred solution to any problem. You will have your work cut out for you, but by the time this letter reaches you, you'll already know as much as I do. If I had lived — and this letter being in your hands means that I did not — I would be bound for the rolling hills of Lerabor to start a new life.

I loved you, Vidre. But you knew that.

Vidre looked over the letter a third time. It took two full pages of paper, in somewhat cramped script.

"I don't like the ambiguity," she said. "I wish we knew more. As it stands, we're not changing the narrative enough. If we knew where the Phoenixes came from, we would have a better weapon."

"If," said Dominic with a shrug. "We don't know, so we can't say. It saves Gaelwyn, and that should be enough." Vidre seemed unimpressed by this line of logic. "Would Kendrick have been so cryptic about what was happening?"

"Absolutely," said Vidre. "He'd take joy in it. He was always joyful, even when he was being mysterious."

"Then we're ready?" asked Dominic.

"I suppose," said Vidre.

Welexi had been meeting with the Flower Queen and Steelminder, in order to work out the details of Gaelwyn's trial. The excuse they'd given him had been a flimsy one; Dominic had wanted to ask Vidre indelicate questions about her relationship with the Blood Bard. Once the letter came forward, it was impossible that Welexi wouldn't figure out that they'd been the ones to forge it — but then, perhaps he would choose not to pull that thread. At the moment, Dominic and Vidre were supposed to be out in the city, traveling incognito and gathering information. Instead, they'd found a quiet part of the palace and sat down to write. They would leave later on, and come back empty-handed, and it was doubtful that anyone was tracking their movements too closely. This was their fourth draft of the letter, and Dominic still thought that it wasn't quite right,

but he had met Kendrick on only two occasions, and those had been performances for the public.

An hour before Kendrick's funeral procession was to begin, a small boy arrived at the gates of Grayhull with a sealed letter clutched close to him. He handed it to the guards, who brought it to the valet, who in turn got it back into Vidre's hands. A performance consisting of subtle changes to her face followed as Vidre read the letter in front of Welexi and Steelminder.

"A gift from the Blood Bard," she said. "A barbed gift, but a gift all the same." She set the letter down. "This exonerates Gael. There are some unfortunate truths here though, ones that will need discussing." She took a deep breath. "Kendrick, Dominic, and I all came to an agreement about how the duel was to go."

Steelminder stared at her with an open mouth, then looked down at the letter. His cheeks began to grow red. "You're responsible for all this?" he asked.

Vidre turned to one of the porters. "Have the scribes copy this down, then take it to Cartwright's and have them begin setting the letters into their blocks. Tell them we'll pay whatever is necessary to have this done as quickly as possible." She turned back towards Steelminder. "How responsible I am depends on what you mean by 'all this'. If you mean the current civil unrest, then of course not. That had been set in motion long before we arrived. The duel I can take responsibility for though. I should have seen it coming."

"Your Royal Highness, I wasn't innocent in the matter," said Dominic. "Vidre can't take all the blame. What came after, the trick that the Blood Bard played, that was an opponent seeing weakness and moving in for the strike."

"I should have you both hanged," said Steelminder.

"It is unfortunate that we are the most skilled fighters in your realm," said Welexi.

Steelminder looked Welexi dead in the eyes. "You threaten me."

"No, your Royal Highness," said Welexi with an easy calm. "I only point out that we are useful to you, and that the position in regards to negotiation will worsen dramatically if we are gone."

Steelminder's red cheeks stood in contrast to his gray mustache. He seemed about to say something two different times, but on the third he visibly sank down into his seat. "Fine. Do what you must. If we've been given a weapon ... so be it."



Four men carried Kendrick's coffin. It was opened, to expose his face to the crowds that had gathered. Kendrick was well-known but not particularly well-loved. People liked him. Many had listened to his songs, either sung by others or by the man himself. He was too flippant and caustic to inspire much love though, even if it had been agreed that he cared deeply for his country, and had been doing his best to right a wrong. No one was going to speak ill of him so soon

after his death though; he'd had his life taken in full view of half of the city, by a man who had killed Toric men, women, and even children, all in the cruelest ways. It might have been one thing if the Blood Bard had fallen to the newcomer Lightscour, but comparing the Blood Bard to the Red Angel almost had to leave the Blood Bard looking nearly flawless.

The four men who carried Kendrick's coffin called themselves the Phoenixes. They had put on new clothing since their transformations last night, and now they moved around in simple tunics that had been dyed a deep red. They weren't illustrati; to the extent that any of them had been known, they were dockworkers or laborers. Now they were something else. The only black mark on their new reputations was the fire that had been started in Lowside, but that fire had come after the others, and it was slowly becoming common knowledge that it had been the work of one of the queen's agents in an attempt to frame the Phoenixes.

A voice began booming out over the procession. "*Dearest Vidre,*" it began. The source was a town crier, who was standing on top of a nearby building and reading from two sheets of paper.

The noises of dissent began as soon as he was done.

10. Detente

The Council of Laborers proved unable to formulate a coherent response to the letter. They had been running along with a single plan for too long. If they had imagined forks in the road, places where the plan had different paths to follow, they hadn't imagined this one. They first tried to deny the truth of the letter. They maintained that Kendrick was a noble martyr. This did not last particularly long; the narrative that the letter had offered was stronger than their denial could ever hope to be, in part because Kendrick was known for his exaggerations. The letter was damning towards both Vidre and Dominic, which called into question why they wouldn't have crafted something more beneficial, if the letter was a forgery. Various people who had been in attendance at the duel (and some who hadn't) claimed that they had seen the telltale signs that something wasn't right, and overnight a number of tavern-dwellers became experts in combat between *illustrati*, despite having only witnessed this single fight.

The Council eventually began to back down on their denials, but they couldn't abandon their claim to the truth entirely. If they had, it would have raised too many questions about those men they called the Phoenixes. Some of the alternate explanations being put forth by the people of Meriwall were surely worse than the truth; these ranged from a hypothesis about aid provided by the Iron Kingdom, to the ritual sacrifice of young children. Dominic had asked, but Vidre hadn't admitted to spreading any of

these rumors. Her whereabouts were often unaccounted for though.

Eventually, the Council made an overture.

Couriers traveled back and forth across the city over the course of a handful of days. This was a long-range negotiation between the Flower Queen and the Council of Laborers, a temporary prelude to the conversational melee that would need to take place in order to bring matters to a close. The Council didn't trust the queen not to have them decapitated, and the queen didn't trust the Council not to have her assassinated, which made the matter of getting the two of them together quite tricky. Early on, it was determined that the whole thing couldn't just be solved by letter. This was partly owing to the fact that the letters had begun to descend into petty sniping and line-by-line quotes which received a full paragraph of response, and partly because there was little drama involved in that sort of settlement.

Vidre sat with Dominic on top of Grayhull Palace. The city was splayed out in front of them, though the view was nowhere near as good as from the top of Laith's Cathedral. Here there was an actual landing, and a door that led to a stairway down into the palace itself.

"So we're glorified lookouts?" asked Dominic.

"No," said Vidre. "Glorified would imply that there's some glory in it. We're just lookouts."

"It seems like there would be a better use of our time," said Dominic. Vidre had pared her armor back for the day, down to her traditional breastplate with closely-fitting trousers and thick boots. The breastplate shaped itself to

her body and accentuated her curves, in a way that Dominic couldn't help but find alluring, even though he knew that was the desired effect. In serious combat, Vidre would reshape the concave surface to better deflect the blow of a sword.

"There's such a thing as tunnel vision," said Vidre. "If we buried our heads in the negotiations, we might miss what's going on outside the palace walls. Look for new construction, or a group of people conspicuously doing nothing. I don't think they'd assault the palace, unless the negotiations are a distraction." She touched her glass daggers and used her domain to make some slight change to their shape, so they would be better suited to some imagined task. Dominic was slowly learning Vidre's tells; she was nervous. "We need to talk about this romance."

"Ah," said Dominic. He wondered whether coming up to the rooftop was even necessary, or if it was all a pretense so they could speak alone.

"We're going to have to use the romance at some point," said Vidre. "People like romances. It will raise our standing. If we pull the trigger now, we might be able to distract the masses for a moment. The stories that they're telling about me and Kendrick are a start. The imagined romance between you and I deflects some of the attention away from the scandal with Kendrick. The story about you defending me from Cerulean Bane was told for the first time yesterday, and —"

"It was?" asked Dominic.

“Yes,” said Vidre. “It had to be. We made good time getting to Meriwall, but there will be ships coming in shortly that carry that news from Gennaro. It would make us look like we had something to hide if we didn’t get out ahead of it. The queen might ask for a recounting, just so you’re forewarned. As I was saying, that pushes the romance thread even more.”

Dominic watched a pair of gulls as they landed on a roof two blocks away. He had no idea how to respond to Vidre. She was beautiful, in everything that she did. Dominic wouldn’t have ever tried to deny that. There was a grace in the way she swung her daggers, and the sway of her hips when she walked. Even the small things like the nervous way she would touch the handles of her daggers had the ability to enthrall him. Vidre was known for her beauty throughout the world. She had meticulously crafted her image, and that edifice was part of the allure. Yet the days spent in close proximity to one another brought unguarded moments, and what was backstage — the canvas beneath the layers of paint — had its own appeals.

All the same, the infatuation only went so far. Vidre was more of a mystery than anyone Dominic had met, even moreso because he knew all the stories about her. She had presented several alternate interpretations of well-known events to him, but it was impossible to know whether this was just another layer of lies. He had known her for fifteen days now. In that time, she had killed at least three men and practiced a variety of deceptions against all sorts of people, including Welexi Sunhawk himself. If Dominic was willing

to admit an infatuation, he also had to admit to a sense of unease.

"What would this involve?" asked Dominic.

"Nothing much," said Vidre. "I'm known as a private person. People will make their own inferences if given a few subtle clues. They probably have already, as a matter of fact, it's just a matter of controlling those stories and bringing them in line with our goals."

Dominic was slightly unclear on what those goals actually were; it seemed that Vidre and Welexi were at odds with each other when it came to the more distant future. Vidre seemed content to simply sail around the world until the end of time, but that wasn't enough for Welexi. Dominic didn't know how he fit in with either of these plans. If everything in Torland went to plan, which seemed far too hopeful, then eventually he would stand next to Welexi and Vidre as an equal. Beyond that, it was unknown.

"It's the small things that people respond to," said Vidre. She stretched out and glanced towards him. "Lingering looks and brief, unnecessary touches. Smiles and laughs. That sort of thing. We won't need to display outright affection. It will be a simple fraud."

"Right," said Dominic.

"The only downside is that you won't be able to pursue other options, which I don't think you should be doing anyway. I saw how Ember looked at you after you rescued her," said Vidre. "There are already good reasons not to spend too much time with her. The same goes for the commoners."

"Fair enough," said Dominic.

Vidre gave him a slight, unexpected smile. "Good, then it's settled. Remember, nothing overt. We'll be leaving Torland soon if all goes well, and we can feed them back whatever story we wish through our bards. It's always better to draw these things out if they're meant to last. In the meantime, it'll help to distract from the politics that Welexi is trying to work on behalf of the Flower Queen, not that he's making much headway there."

"Why's that?" asked Dominic.

"He's tainted," said Vidre. "They're still singing that damned song in the tavern. There are new stories recounting the Peddler's War written by young men who hadn't even been born when it started. The common folk of Meriwall haven't made a complete turn against him, but I don't know how much longer he can keep up his image of a shining knight. There are other illustrati who would write the whole island nation off as a loss, and accept that they'd be a villain in one place and a hero in others."

"Not Welexi though," said Dominic.

"He's a hero," said Vidre. "He needs to be a hero. Even if that's not the wise thing to be."

"That's what makes him a hero, I suppose," said Dominic.

"Sometimes being a hero makes you a villain," said Vidre. "You can't please everyone all the time."



The meeting was planned to death.

The location had to be picked with care. It couldn't be the palace, because that was too much of an advantage for the queen and too much of a risk as far as security went. It couldn't be the cathedral, because the Church of Laith had too much of a connection to royalty, and furthermore the Council had been responsible for burning down a church. Amare's might have been the obvious place, but that was at the nexus of some unpleasantness on both sides, especially given that the Council hadn't managed to formulate a response that had done them any good. The list of places that would be suitable for a meeting and yet also uncontentious for both sides was a very short one, and neither side wanted to give in to the other's suggestions, just on general principle.

Traditionally speaking, Welexi's role would have been to step in as a mediator. He was known for being fair and impartial, and had played a key role in a number of settlements and accords. This was true even in the case when he'd been fighting on one side or the other. The business with Kendrick had tarnished his reputation in Torland, if only slightly. The letter which Kendrick supposedly sent from beyond the grave only implicated Vidre, but the prevailing narrative had always been that she was his knife in the dark. The letter had done nothing to challenge that line of thinking (since the letter borrowed quite a bit of its credibility from the fact that it fit well with the conventional wisdom). Unfortunately, Welexi's involvement was now somewhat problematic, given that the Council was

still maintaining that he was a symptom of corruption and indifference.

"I'm a better speaker than Steelminder," said Welexi. He and Dominic sat alone in one of the many rooms of the palace, having just finished with dinner. "I have more experience with constitutional documents and peace treaties."

"If they don't want you there, what can be done?" asked Dominic. He'd been surprised to be pulled in for counsel, if that was what this was.

"It will tarnish my reputation to be excluded," said Welexi. His face was set, and his armor glowed brightly with light. Like Vidre, he had his tells, and the illumination that came from his constructs was one of them. This was something under Welexi's conscious control, but he used it as a form of punctuating his speech and expressing himself so often that it was second nature to him. "What story are we forging here? The duel was meant to be exciting, but it's been revealed as a lie. It's too convoluted for easy consumption, and furthermore involves only you. Before that letter you were acting as my protege, but now it's only of your own volition."

Dominic didn't know what to say to that. In their conversation with Steelminder it had never seemed to be an issue. Looking at it in this new light, he could see how Welexi might take some offense. "What do you want to do about it?" asked Dominic. "We can't say that you had a part in it."

"No," said Welexi. "Heroes do not stoop to lying. You should have known that. Leaving the criminal past behind was a condition of joining us on our travels. I should have

been more clear on that. I fear that Vidre has been a poor influence on you in that regard."

"What we did wasn't criminal," Dominic replied. "There aren't any laws in place that say people in a duel have to try their hardest to kill each other. It was deceptive, but that was it."

"Do you wish to debate me on the difference between legality and ethics?" asked Welexi. He frowned. "No, it wouldn't do, even if you'd had the schooling for it, which you haven't. Lightscour, if you're to be my apprentice, you need to follow in my footsteps and learn from me. Why did you even do this thing with Vidre? Why collaborate with Kendrick? Was it fear?"

Dominic was silent. He hadn't come here to be dressed down, and what's more, he didn't feel bad about any of the deceptions: not the initial one with Kendrick, nor the second one with Kendrick's letter. When Dominic had been younger, and still living with his parents, he had occasionally caught his father's ire for some small thing he'd done. It hadn't taken long for him to realize that these moments often came on the heels of tax day, when money was tight and the ledgers had to be balanced. Welexi had been excised from the peace proceedings. He needed someone to direct his frustration towards. It was a simple, human thing, but Dominic had expected better of a self-proclaimed hero.

"Have you spoken with Gaelwyn?" asked Welexi. He cocked his head slightly to the side and stared at Dominic with piercing eyes. His face had fully healed, with the small cuts in the skin left behind by Gaelwyn's healing now

completely closed. He was handsome and imposing; he was the sort of man who begged to be made into a statue. "He's down in the dungeons right now."

"I haven't," said Dominic. He felt a small pang of guilt at that, more than for any of the other things he'd done.

"You should," said Welexi. "I had to deliver the news of your lies to him. He was none too pleased."

"I'll speak with him," said Dominic.

"Gaelwyn believes that if he had been informed of the plans, he might have been able to provide a better reaction to Kendrick's treachery, and I'm inclined to agree," said Welexi, as though Dominic had said nothing. "Lightscour, if Vidre asks you to engage with her in some scheme a second time, you must come to me and inform me at once. You have some loyalty to her, I can see that. You're smitten. Many men have been. But do you recall the Harbingers?" He shook his head. "I would have thought the artifact would leave some impression upon you, if not my words."

"I'm sorry," said Dominic. "If Vidre asks me to do anything out of your sight —" Dominic remembered the conversation he'd had with her earlier about pretending at romance. He wondered only briefly whether that was the sort of thing that Welexi would want to know about, before deciding that his answer would be the same either way. "I'll let you know."

"That's all I ask," said Welexi. "Gaelwyn has told me that I have four weeks before my bones are fully healed, though I think it will be closer to three. When that time comes, I will take a more firm hand in your training. I've often

found Vidre to be an excellent sparring partner, but in terms of instruction I think we would both agree that I am her superior. You have not yet distinguished yourself in battle, but the time will come." He smiled. "I don't begrudge your youthfulness. If I'm harsh with you Lightscour, it's only because I want you to grow into the illustrati you demonstrated yourself to be on the day we met."

Dominic walked down the hallways of the palace. He'd been there enough to know most of the main thoroughfares, though there was an entire society living behind the wainscoting that Dominic could admit he was mostly clueless about. More than once, he'd see a panel open up where he never would have guessed there was a door, only to see some maid or butler appear for a brief moment and then disappear back into another hidden passageway. Dominic didn't think that there was any place in Gennaro that had been so ornate as Grayhull was, nor so infested with staff. He had half a mind to ask Vidre whether it was safe to have so many mostly-anonymous people running about when any of them could potentially be one of the disguised illustrati, but he assumed that this was something that had been thought of long before he'd had the idea.

When Dominic heard the word "dungeon", he thought of a dank, dark, and cold place with chains and irons. He'd seen the inside of a jail enough to know their type, but a dungeon was supposed to be something more. In the stories, men were always killing rats to drink their blood, or shackled so tightly that they could never move, to say

nothing of what happened in the catacomb-prison of the Bone Warden.

Gaelwyn's dungeon had a tall ceiling, and the upper portion of one of the walls had finely made windows that would have been the envy of any shopkeeper on the main streets of Meriwall. Midday light streamed down into the room, providing ample illumination. The room itself was clean. The same furniture was used here as throughout the palace, some of it created with illustrati hands, and others simply made with considerable care. The room was larger than the bakery that Dominic had grown up in. There were two guards, who looked Dominic over closely, but they let him in without comment and closed the door firmly behind him.

"At least it's none too bad here," said Dominic. He tried to smile, but faltered when Gaelwyn opened a bleary eye and glared at him. He was laying on a lounge, with a foot dangling down.

"I'm somewhat drunk," said Gaelwyn. "It's not becoming on a physician, but there's nothing much that can be done about that. They're giving me all the wine that I can handle, and then some."

"I'm glad they're treating you well," said Dominic.

"Well?" asked Gaelwyn. "Oh yes, very well indeed. That's part of convincing me to stay within my prison cell. Tell me young Dominic, how much effort would it take for you to escape from here, absent any outside help and with very unfavorable assumptions?"

"Ah," said Dominic. He looked around, at the rug on the floor, the windows high above, and then to the door itself. He could picture the two guards standing behind it; they'd been wearing armor and carrying polearms, but that meant little. If they had any standing at all, it was so minor that neither of them had been clad in even the most minor token of their domain. "Five seconds, perhaps, depending on how I wanted to get out. I think ... perhaps I could make footholds of shadow and climb up to the window. Or simply jump, I suppose, if I didn't care about breaking through the glass. Fifteen feet means little to me anymore."

"You didn't mention the guards," was Gaelwyn. "But of course, they're listening to everything we say and making notes for the queen, so perhaps that's prudent." He smiled slightly. "It would suffice to say that this is not where they keep the truly dangerous people. It's for those, like me, who understand that there are consequences. It's a prison of mutual agreement. Hence the furnishings, and the wine. They want me to think that being accused of a murder I didn't commit, so that politically expedient theater can take place, is 'none too bad'."

"I don't think there's going to be a trial," said Dominic. "That letter exonerates you."

"Whether there's a trial or not has nothing to do with how obvious it is that I'm innocent," said Gaelwyn. "It's all about the public, and what they'll accept." He closed his eyes, and laid back. "If a peace can be brokered, do you think that my trial would simply be swept under the rug? I doubt it. It would be a fresh affront that the people of

Meriwall would likely not stand for, and it would strain the peace that everyone is currently working so hard for.”

“We’ll protect you,” said Dominic. “Torland can’t risk going to war with the four of us.”

“Three,” said Gaelwyn. “Everyone keeps forgetting that I’m a pacifist. More likely, it would just be two, because Vidre’s connection to me has always been weak. And more likely than that, it would only be a single person fighting for me: Welexi. You, Lightscour ... I believed you. I trusted you. I thought that you were stepping into the fight to protect me, to *save* me. I told you of my childhood, how I worked for the Iron King, the progress that I made, and I thought that you understood. But no. No, when it came down to it, it was all for show, wasn’t it? Better to have a duel where you can be assured of victory, even if it throws me overboard. Taking the duel was all about increasing your own standing. It was all about putting yourself at the forefront of peoples’ minds.”

“No,” said Dominic. “Gael ...”

“You only came down here at Welexi’s behest,” said Gaelwyn. There was hurt in his voice.

“There were other obligations that I had to take care of, the palace needed to be secured, we were working against a lack of knowledge and needed to —”

“No,” said Gaelwyn. “Answer me honestly, and know that I’ll confirm it with him. Did you only come down here because Welexi told you to?”

Dominic frowned. "Only is putting it strongly," said Dominic. "Welexi told me to come down, and that made me realize that I had been neglecting you."

"It's not in your instinct to be my friend," said Gaelwyn. He held out a hand. "Let me touch you."

Dominic didn't move.

"You see?" asked Gaelwyn. "You fear me, the same as everyone else."

"You're drunk," said Dominic. "I can return when you're in a better state of mind."

"I'm tipsy," said Gaelwyn. "Enough to lubricate the truth, the better that I can disgorge it."

"I apologize," said Dominic.

"Do you know, if you had *told* me that you and Kendrick were in cahoots, I might have been able to avoid the whole thing. I would have known to look for the signs of a faked injury. I would have been able to pull myself away from him the moment after I'd touched him. I could have kept my composure. I thought I'd killed him on accident, that's easy enough to do, but if only I'd been informed. If only, Dominic. But you didn't trust me with your plots."

"I'll make it up to you," said Dominic, though he had no idea how he would do that.

"Go away," said Gaelwyn. "We'll talk later. Welexi has been yearning to broker a peace. Perhaps he'll have time to try making one between you and I. In the meantime, I have wines to drink."

Dominic left, with a glance towards the stony-faced guards who were pretending they'd heard nothing. This was an unplanned story, one that he hoped would go no further than Grayhull, but he wasn't terribly optimistic. Dominic tried to imagine how the conversation would have sounded to an outsider. He decided that it didn't paint either of them in a terribly favorable light.



The negotiations between the Council and the royalty eventually happened just outside the city. There was an estate owned by a noble who was in the unique position of having a father who came from House Walton (making him of the same approximate lineage as the queen) and a mother who had come from a long line of dockworkers. He was generally disinterested in politics, only a minor illustrati, and rarely seen around Grayhull, even though he was welcome there. His estate, inherited from his late father, was one of the few places that had the proper symbolic meaning for both parties and didn't give either a great advantage.

"It's a trap," said Vidre. "But even if it's not, we should treat it as though it is. We're each allowed three at the table and another three for guards. All of ours in both positions will be illustrati, and we should assume that all of theirs are too. Even if we manage to sober the Flower Queen, which I'll believe possible when I see it, she's still useless in a fight. Same goes for the vicar. That means that if the enemy is smart, it will be four against six. If they can choose their domains, we're in for a very rough fight."

"Much of the agreement has been hammered out by courier," said Welexi. "Much of the negotiation has already been done. A peace has been hammered out, and now it's simply a matter of adding the embellishments."

"What kind of peace?" asked Dominic.

"A sharing of power," said Welexi. "If this were my country, I might have balked at it, but the Council wants to fold itself into the apparatus of the kingdom."

"The Flower Queen will allow that?" asked Dominic. "Why not do that right from the start?"

"She's unhappy," said Vidre. "But she's also been feeling the pressure. I believe there was some compromise regarding the line of succession."

Dominic frowned, but Vidre answered his question before he could ask it.

"You will have noted that there is a distinct lack of the pitter-patter of little feet in the palace. The Flower Queen is past fifty, and it is virtually certain that she'll never have children, barring some miracle or misdirection. For all I know, the possibility of falsifying an heir was discussed, but if it was, nothing ever came of it."

"So who becomes king when the Flower Queen dies?" asked Dominic.

"In the past? It would have been a succession crisis. House Walton was always a small one. The Flower Queen has no children and no aunts or uncles. There were three claimants, each with varying levels of internal support and strength of claim, but who knows which of them would be

left alive when the Flower Queen finally died. If she lives as long as Laith, she has many decades of rule ahead of her. With the peace that's been reached though, she's the last queen. When she dies, the vast majority of the powers of the crown transfer to the Council, and whoever becomes king or queen will be little more than a figurehead."

"So ... they won," said Dominic. "The Council gets exactly what it wants."

"If control of the kingdom some decades from now is what they want," said Vidre. "Most men don't work towards goals they won't see accomplished in their lifetimes. Hence my skepticism."

"It will be fine," said Welexi. "We will be there to stop any attack."

"You like our odds, four against six with unknown domains?" asked Vidre.

"It won't come to that," said Welexi. He held out his hand, and a spear of light materialized there. "But if it does, then my concern is not whether we will win, but whether we can do so while protecting the queen."

The estate covered a large area, but was small as these things went. There was an orchard in the back, a garden of flowers that left a sickly-sweet scent in the air, and tall hedgerows to keep out passersby. The place had been nearly emptied of people, and the small ballroom had been appointed for the negotiations. A coach carried the Council members in from Meriwall. Dominic watched from the door as it trundled its way down the smooth flagstones that made up the central entrance.

When the coach came to a stop, only three people came out of it.

"You seem to be somewhat short," said Steelminder. "Are the others coming?"

The man who'd gotten out first, an elderly fellow, had a smile on his face. "Oh, I had thought the guards were in poor taste. Weapons to use against each other doesn't make for good conversation, I've found. We've brought only those of us with a talent for speaking." All three of them wore simple clothes; the other two were young, a man and a woman, neither of which seemed like they could have had much experience. The woman had her hair drawn up into a tight bun that sat on top of her head.

"You have me at a disadvantage," said Steelminder. "The Council has thus far kept their names hidden, your, ah, Phoenixes aside." If he noticed the lack of formality on the old man's part, he said nothing about it.

"Chester Welling," said the old man with a pleasant nod. "And of course you understand that secrecy was something of a priority. The members of the Council have families and businesses. It would be unfortunate to lose those things should the kingdom feel threatened. But no, I think the moment has passed for that. No use making another martyr, eh?"

"I don't like this," Vidre whispered to Dominic. He could feel her hot breath on his neck, and was momentarily startled by the closeness before remembering that they were supposed to be playing at having a greater familiarity.

"Well, we hope to bring this whole business to a close," said Steelminder.

"It has been so very difficult," said the Flower Queen. She had sobered somewhat, thanks to the efforts of those around her, but this had left her morose. It was widely agreed that Steelminder would do the talking.

They went into the ballroom, where a long table had been set up, with a variety of documents. There were two scribes, who had been agreed upon by both sides. It was somewhat accepted that this process would take at least a day, even though the framework was already in place for it. Dominic, Welexi, and Vidre stood off to one side, carefully watching for sudden movements, hidden blades, and or hints of something untoward. There was nothing.

The negotiations themselves were tedious. Dominic heard them as nothing more than a stream of unintelligible words shortly after the first twenty minutes had passed. He would snap to attention every once in awhile and correct his posture, but he had no practical experience with guard duty. He now gathered that being a guard was mostly about staying awake and alert even when there's nothing going on. For the most part, it was the old man who did the talking. He hammered out each word, offering suggestions or minor changes that would clarify, or corner cases where their agreement might cause problems. In large part, he was the one driving the conversation, with Steelminder keeping pace. The Flower Queen slumped in her chair, and after her first two suggestions were shut down, she became silent and sullen.

After two hours, they took a break. What waitstaff remained at the estate brought in platters of food, one for each side of the table.

"I've never had such fine food in my life," said Chester. "There are many benefits to knowing the right people, I suppose."

"It's not polite to gloat," said the Flower Queen.

"Was I gloating?" asked Chester. "I was only making an observation. Besides that, the purpose of this agreement is not that I have won in some respect, only that we are moving towards a mutually beneficial understanding."

Vidre came closer to Dominic, and whispered in his ear. "Come with me?"

Dominic nodded, and followed her across the ballroom to a spot near a pair of wide windows. "What is it?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

"This doesn't feel right," said Vidre. "If the Iron King is involved, what does he stand to gain from this deal?"

"Nothing," said Dominic. "He's going to go before the Flower Queen does. To me, that points to him not being involved."

"Then where did the Phoenixes get their power from? What support were they given, and by whom?"

"I don't know," said Dominic. "These aren't new questions. If it's a trap, they'll have to spring it here. If it's a distraction, there are illustrati back at Grayhull who have pledged their support in stopping whatever happens." They both knew how much that support meant though.

"And the deal isn't so terrible for them that it has to be a trap of some kind. It doesn't always have to be violence." Dominic's roaming eyes caught sight of Welexi, who was looking at them with a raised eyebrow. "You should speak with Welexi about this."

"His mind is less twisted than yours," said Vidre. "I mean that in the kindest possible way."

"I just don't see it," said Dominic.

They went back to their guard duty after the recess was over, and stood around patiently while more lines were gone over one by one. The Flower Queen would have some veto power over the Council, but this power wasn't absolute. There were disagreements and clarifications to be made about the scope and nature of this veto, and the possibility of a "soft" veto wherein the queen would fail to exercise her right yet still hold up the process without saying no. It was unbelievably dull, and by the time they were into the fifth hour (and onto their second recess) Dominic had lost all semblance of interest. He wasn't native to Torland, and if their internal politics were slight one way or the other, it was never going to matter to him. This time it was Welexi who pulled him aside.

"I need to be able to take part," said Welexi. "I gave Steelminder as much instruction as I could, but he's rolling over to every new suggestion."

"Is that so bad?" asked Dominic, but Welexi's face told him that was the wrong question.

"The future of the country is decided here today," said Welexi. "We're acting as mere guards, here to protect

against knives, but it's the words that are doing the heavy lifting."

"It will be alright," said Dominic. "It's a terrible story anyway. No one will praise you for setting a cap on taxation. They'll only care that you were here at all, if that."

Welexi scowled, but if there was anything more that he had to say, he was cut short by Chester's loud voice calling for a return to the documents.

By the time night fell, Torland had a constitution, with the ink still wet on it. There was no attack, and after they'd come back to Grayhull, there was no fresh disaster waiting for them. Vidre seemed mildly disappointed, and Welexi was still upset by the fact that he had been excluded from proceedings. So far as Dominic could tell, the proceedings had gone exactly to plan, with no drama to speak of.



"Chester Welling is a mystery," said Vidre. She sat down to breakfast with Welexi and Dominic, with a stack of papers in her hand. Two days had passed since the new agreement was put into place, and the first Parliament of Torland was already meeting in a warehouse, with plans for a new building to house them being hurriedly drafted. "At first I thought that it was just a false name, but it's not. Supposedly, he grew up in Meriwall before traveling abroad with a sum of money given to him by the crown. His wife died young, when a supply of improperly stored gunpowder was ignited on accident. It's impossible to say whether that actually happened or not, given how long ago

it would have been, but none of the older people I spoke with remember anything like that happening. It seems that this was a story that he told about himself that everyone believed."

"Does it matter?" asked Dominic. "It's over."

"Of course it matters," said Vidre.

"I agree," said Welexi. "This man is an agent of our enemies."

"There's peace now," said Dominic. "And you said we're only staying until Gaelwyn's trial is over."

"The man has access to Harbinger artifacts," said Welexi.

"Or connections to the Iron Kingdom," said Vidre. "We can't rule that out. At any rate, the man who called himself Chester Welling has disappeared. He told people that he never wanted any power for himself, and didn't want to make himself into an illustrati by virtue of his role in the Council. He sailed off, though the reports about where he went disagree with each other."

"You think he might be the man that Wealdwood spoke of?" asked Welexi. "No, of course he is. Our adversary."

Dominic was silent, but he wasn't quite certain that he agreed with any of what they were saying. They had started with the idea that what was happening in Torland was part of an overture on behalf of the Iron King, a way of weakening the country in advance of an invasion, or a way to give himself some excuse for war. Yet if this old man who went by Chester had been a part of some plot, and he had accomplished what he set out to, then the end game of

the plot seemed to be a practically bloodless revolution. A dozen people had died, and a few buildings and businesses had been burned to the ground, but everyone had already agreed that it could have been much worse than it was. There didn't seem to be any disagreement about the fact that the Flower Queen was a terrible and ineffectual ruler, and now rule had been more or less stripped from her.

"Where do we go next?" asked Vidre. "When the trial is over, we have our options. I might try to narrow down Welling's destination, but for all I know he might have left us a dozen false trails."

"If he'd wanted to burn down the city, he could have," said Dominic. "If the intent was to open up Torland for attack, it failed. Why follow?"

"We've been attacked by assassins twice now," said Vidre. "Once in Gennaro, once here. The Phoenixes will never be tried for their crimes, that much is clear, but justice isn't what we're after."

"It's the story," said Welexi. "The adversary. If this worked out in his favor, then all the more reason to go on the offensive."

"Alright," Dominic frowned.

Yet if he looked at the end result, he couldn't help but get the feeling that perhaps he was on the wrong side.

11. Trials

Dominic stood on the roof of Grayhull Palace, and flapped wings made of shadow. He'd made them as long as he could, stretching them out to nearly three feet each. That wasn't quite as long as Welexi's were at their full extension, but it was as much as Dominic could manage before they began to lose coherence. He had grown more powerful in the last two days. He'd mentioned as much to Vidre, and she had pulled out a map of the world to show him the slow spread of his story. The most likely cause for the increase in fame was that one of the packet ships had finally reached Maskoy, and the death of Zerstor had become known to the people there. Dominic had tried making the wings before, but had never managed to create anything worthwhile. Now he had wings that looked respectable.

"Do those things work?" asked Ember. The queen's alchemist had followed him up to the roof, completely unbidden, and she had watched him carefully as he'd set to work crafting his wings. It had taken him half an hour before he had something that seemed right, and Dominic had nearly forgotten that she was there.

"No," replied Dominic. "I mean, I haven't tried, but I don't think they would. Welexi spends a half hour making his in the morning, and he's had decades of practice. His are also larger. There's something internal to them that makes them capable of lifting him up."

"Have you asked him for help?" asked Ember.

"No," said Dominic. "Partly because I'm worried that he would refuse me."

"The wings are one of his three great insights," said Ember. Fire licked her bare skull. "It would be understandable if he wanted to keep the secret. Flight is a powerful ability. The fact that he's the only one that can do it is a source of great fame."

"What are the other two?" asked Dominic. "The penetrating strike must be one of them, but ..." Dominic shook his head. "I should know this. I've been too busy reading the histories of the people of Torland to absorb all of the stories about my traveling companions."

"Oh, the third is a secret," said Ember. "That's the rule of three. The power to fly through the air like a bird, the power to bypass any armor, and a third so dangerous that he never uses it."

Dominic immediately thought back to the first fight between Welexi and Zerstor, and the moment that Welexi had seemed to turn into light. Vidre had said that it was impossible, and Welexi had never offered comment on it, but Dominic had never really stopped thinking about it.

"If the wings don't work, what's the point?" asked Ember.

"Image," said Dominic. "Welexi spreads his wings to show off for the crowds, even when he's not using them to fly. Obviously shaping the wings is the first step towards flight, but in the meantime, perhaps I can fake it if I need to. That would be a good story, wouldn't it, if Welexi's

apprentice managed the feat in a matter of months instead of the years that Welexi took?"

"It's a good story for you," said Ember. She shook her head, causing the flames to twist. "It's not a good story for Welexi. It overshadows him." She smiled. "Appropriate, in terms of domains, but no one ever made friends through surpassing their contemporaries."

A few days ago, Dominic might have argued that he and Welexi were already friends. Now, he was less sure. "Well, odds are I won't be able to fly without years of careful training. Welexi made a study of flight. He figured out how to build his wings by looking at birds, and he sat down to do some complicated math that I'm sure I'd need months to understand, let alone to apply it to flight. I'd probably also need considerably more standing than I have now." Dominic wondered whether any of that would placate Welexi. Ember was right; wings were unique to Welexi, and someone else having them was a threat of sorts, even if they didn't work.

"I never asked after you," said Dominic. "After the fires." That seemed like it was weeks ago, but it had only been a few days. Life moved faster as an illustrati. Soon they would be leaving this place, and the whole course of their adventures in Torland would be like they'd lasted for years, or possibly like it had all been over in the blink of an eye. "How have you been faring?"

"Oh, it was hard on me," said Ember. She shifted in her seat. "I had always liked being an illustrati."

Dominic had a feeling that this was why she'd followed him up to the rooftop. "You don't like it anymore?"

"That man's hands on me," sad Ember. "When he was trying to kill me. He was trying to use flame to do it, and if I'd been anyone else, he would have succeeded. And then going into those burning buildings to put out the fires, worried that a wooden beam was going to hit me in the head so hard that it would kill me ... well, you can imagine. I'm sure you saw the state I was in afterward. I kept thinking about the men and women who were in their homes, far enough away that they didn't even have to worry about the fires. They could sleep through the riots altogether. They had a low enough standing that they could simply let life pass them by. I envied them. I don't think I've really stopped envying them."

"Ah," said Dominic. He couldn't confess to having felt the same. "Well."

"I remember what it was like before I was famous," said Ember. "I think perhaps you're the only other illustrati at court that shares that memory. The queen, I love her dearly, but she was born into the fame and power. Most of the others as well. They were the sons and daughters of nobility, with their names being known to hundreds of thousands days after they were born."

"We don't have that in Gennaro," said Dominic. "We have nobility, and the senatori, but they don't introduce their children to the world until after their tenth birthday. I think I've heard it's too difficult to control a child if they have an appreciable amount of standing."

Ember frowned. "It's supposed to help keep a baby healthy."

"Well, I don't know," said Dominic. "As you said, I'm new to this arena. I didn't have much interaction with Gennaro's illustrati beyond a single morning. Maybe there's a reason they do it that way."

"Either way," said Ember. She shifted her dress around and smoothed it out. "The men and women here are born knowing who they are, and they are, in large part, invariant. The stories that they tell about each other, or about themselves, are centered around personalities and ideas that have been in place since childhood. They're not naturally kind to outsiders like you and I. Even after five years in the court, and serving at the pleasure of the queen."

"We're kindred spirits then?" Dominic asked with a smile. Ember's face was serious though, and she nodded.

"I know you're leaving soon, just after the trial has concluded, but I thought you might understand me better than they do." She smoothed down her skirts again, and then ran her fingers through the flames on her head. "I'm leaving this life behind."

"Leaving?" asked Dominic. "You can't leave. The queen needs you. You're valuable."

"The hair will be the hardest part," said Ember. "Did you know I shave my scalp every morning? My hair is immune to the fire, and to have real hair layered beneath hair of flames didn't look pleasing. I'd had the idea early on. One day I just —" she ran her hand over the flames, and where her hand passed, only bare skin remained. "If I don't want

people to know that I'm an illustrati, I'll have to stay bald until the hair grows back in. Perhaps I'll take to wearing turbans."

"Why are you going?" asked Dominic.

"I've said, haven't I?" asked Ember. There was a faint look of puzzlement on her face. "I was thinking of all the people in their houses. The ones who could go back to bed and forget that anything was happening."

"You want to be poor?" asked Dominic.

"Oh, well of course I won't be poor," said Ember. She seemed mildly alarmed by the thought. "I'll be selling all the dresses, and the jewels, and I am still an accomplished chemist, after all. I won't be poor. But I will be unknown. The fame will fade, with time."

"You won't be asked to fight fires anymore," said Dominic. "How often do you really get called upon by the queen? How often has your life been in danger, before the events of today? There were many in the court who stayed behind."

"It's sweet of you to try to talk me out of it," said Ember. "The Flower Queen would appreciate it, I'm sure. But no, I've already thought of every objection you might raise. My mind is quite made up. You're right that there were those who stayed behind at the palace, but they were there for the purposes of defense. It doesn't matter whether they were cowards or not; if the conflict had reached them, they would have been compelled to action. I want to live a life free of that compulsion. I want no one to depend on me, or really to think of me at all."

Dominic looked at Ember carefully. She had a calmness to her that he hadn't expected following the night of the fires and what he'd seen of her afterward. Now it was starting to make sense. Ember hadn't gotten over anything. She had instead decided on a drastic course.

"People will eventually forget me," said Ember. "The queen will find someone else to refine her flowers into narcotics, and the court will have a new alchemist. My hair will grow back, and my powers will fade, until I can no longer hold a flame in the palm of my hand."

"I don't remember life before fame so fondly," said Dominic. "Some of that was my own fault though."

"Well," said Ember. "At least wish me luck?"

Dominic nodded. "Good luck."

"And if you ever decide that the life of stories is too much for you ... well, perhaps you'll come across a lowly alchemist who you carried across the city one night." Ember moved towards him and kissed him on the cheek, and after she had left, Dominic could still feel the spot of warmth.



A building was being constructed to house the Parliament of Torland. The plans were still in flux, but a site had been agreed upon. Three banks had been burned to the ground on the night of the Five Fires. That prime real estate might have seen the banks risen again, if not for the agreement that the Parliament needed to be located somewhere that

spoke to its stature, and the general disarray that the loss of dozens of ledgers had caused.

There was no question of waiting until the Parliament had been built. It would have taken far too long, which would have left Gaelwyn stuck in his nominal prison for months if not years. More importantly, it would have blunted the impact of the story far too much. However, not being entirely without a sense of drama, the first Parliament of Torland had chosen to hold the trial on the site of the building.

The wreckage was quickly torn down and carted off, and the ground was swept and tamped down. There were places where the floor plans of the gutted buildings were still visible, and the lot still smelled strongly of ash, but that was all part of the theater of it. A new foundation would be built on top of the old. Years down the line, the first Parliament would be able to tell people how they had been there when Gaelwyn Mottram had been put on trial, and how that trial had been the first real action that the Parliament had accomplished, pushing Torland into the modern era of democracy. The foundation of the Parliament was first and foremost the people, and before there had been any no-doubt iconic building, it had been the people who did the business of government in the dirt and ash. Some of the new ministers were saying that already.

Chairs were brought in from all over the place, and a quick stage was built for the judge, witnesses, and the defendant. It quickly became clear that this was a moment which was to cement the Parliament in history, and so great

care was taken to getting the seating right; it was naturally going to translate over into the full Parliament, and there were inevitably going to be paintings. They ended up with two columns of seats which angled towards the stage, each with a large number of rows. There were many ministers, the better to reflect the diversity of Torland, never mind that the first Parliament was composed almost entirely of the Council of Laborers.

One of the benefits of holding the trial on an empty lot was that it allowed the public to freely watch. Just beyond the line of demarcation that showed where the trial would take place, there was a noisy crowd that watched the proceedings with considerably less decorum than the ministers were trying for. This was almost certainly by design, the better to give the ministers a sense of legitimacy simply by contrast.

"It's all a show," said Welexi. He stood beside Dominic, watching from the window of a building. Gaelwyn was not yet part of the proceedings, though he would be made to sit in a chair on the stage before too long. "The verdict has already been determined."

"Are you thinking of mounting a rescue?" asked Dominic. He hoped that the answer was no, and if it was yes, he hoped that Welexi wouldn't ask for material aid in that mad quest.

"What I mean is that the verdict will be 'not guilty'," said Welexi. "That letter was too effective for them to ignore it entirely. They could try to shape the story in a way that better suits them, but there are easier paths to accom-

plish their goals. The trial is not about the truth of what happened at Amare's Theater. It's not about who killed Kendrick Eversong. This is a trial which has been designed to manufacture legitimacy for this parliamentary system."

"How much of that is guesswork?" asked Dominic. "What are you going to do if the trial turns ugly and they decide to execute him?"

"Words have been exchanged. I've heard those words secondhand," said Welexi. "The Council has gotten what they wanted from the queen. They have no desire to turn their back on the agreement that we helped to hammer out." Welexi let out a long breath. "No, they'll not risk trying to kill him, especially given that they know it would provoke a reaction from me. Instead, they'll simply use the platform to give speeches. Speeches about the Peddler's War, and the ways that the queen has failed the country. Speeches about how the Parliament is a good and necessary measure to ensure that proper governance takes place. Gaelwyn's name will be dragged through the mud, over and over again, until he's left weeping. In the end, they'll declare that he's not guilty of this crime in particular, but of others, for which he was already pardoned. It will show that they are fair." He spat the final word.

Dominic watched the men down below. They wore different shades of black, and most gave the impression of having dressed up in their finest clothing for this occasion.

"Have you read their pamphlets?" asked Welexi.

Dominic shook his head.

"They claim that their numbers will prevent the tyranny of the illustrati from happening," said Welexi. "Obvious nonsense, of course. This trial has a judge, whose name will be heard far and wide. Fame gives power, but power also gives fame, and no man with a role so large could remain without standing for long. The constitution also allows for leaders within the factions, and it's natural that they will gain a significant amount of standing from that, assuming that they have some role in governance."

"They can hide their power," said Dominic. "There's no reason for anyone to know that they're illustrati. If people don't want the illustrati to rule, better to pretend at not being one."

"I could kill them all right now," said Welexi. He looked down at his hand and clenched it into a fist. "I wouldn't, of course. It would be immoral, unethical, illegal, and unwise. Yet a man can't help but think such thoughts when he sees an injustice brewing like this. It's part of why they're doing this, of course. I have enough hope that I imagine some of those men to be good. They might see the power we hold, and see that it's sometimes misused. And they're foolish enough to think that this is the answer."

Dominic looked at the crowds. He wasn't actually certain that Welexi could kill them all. He was fast and strong, and surely wouldn't have been in much danger, but a crowd of people could scatter quickly. In Gennaro, his group of friends would scatter whenever there was serious trouble with the guards, and most of the time the guards were forced to choose a single target for pursuit. Welexi was fast,

but it would take him some time to dispatch the ministers one by one.

"Do you ever think of not being an illustrati?" asked Dominic.

Welexi turned slowly and studied Dominic carefully. "I have always endeavored to keep my standing as high as possible. I know of nothing that would cause it to vanish."

"No," said Dominic, "I meant ... do you ever think that perhaps you might be happier if you weren't an illustrati?"

"There are burdens that come with our position, certainly. Yet I have never thought to myself that I would give up any of it," said Welexi. "Gaelwyn has often asked the same question. Fame is less pleasant for him. If something were to happen to me, I believe he might go back into hiding, where he was when we found each other. The world would be deprived of his healing powers." He waved his hand towards the proceedings below them. "As the world sometimes seems intent on doing anyway, by his will or not."

There was some commotion from the crowds as Gaelwyn was brought forward. He was in manacles that Dominic was sure could be broken with not too much effort. The manacles were secured to two poles with hinges on them, so that his captors wouldn't have to touch him as they marched him forward. There were shouts from the crowd, screams echoed around the empty air, but the ministers had put on calm faces. When Gaelwyn reached the crude stage they'd made for the trial, a chain was threaded through the

manacles to ensure that he could not leave the trial until its conclusion.

"Gaelwyn Mottram," a loud voice called out. The judge was sitting behind a podium. His name had been said, but Dominic had forgotten it quickly afterward. The man would be a minor illustrati within the next few days, and Dominic wondered what his domain would be. "You stand accused of the murder of Kendrick Eversong, the vaunted Blood Bard, loyal citizen of the realm. How do you plead?"

"Not guilty," said Gaelwyn, so softly that it was difficult to hear.

"He says not guilty!" called the judge. "Let the record show."

The beginning of the trial was marked by medical personnel. Meriwall had two coroners, and both had inspected Kendrick's body several days after the duel, when it seemed that an agreement would be arrived at. Both men gave official statements of explanation which posited that Kendrick's injuries were more consistent with a surge of blood than any manipulation of the flesh. The crowds murmured at that, but Dominic gathered that no one cared all that much.

Witnesses were brought forth to speak on Kendrick's behalf, including (to Dominic's mild surprise) Vidre. She came to the stand wearing her suit of glass armor, made a small bow to Gaelwyn, and answered every probing question put toward her.

"Kendrick cared about his country," said Vidre. "He cared about its people. Perhaps a little too much. He would

have torn himself apart if he had thought that this was what was best for Torland."

"You spoke with him, despite the things he had said about you?" asked the judge.

"I did," replied Vidre.

"And you harbored no ill will towards him?" the judge asked.

"Of course I did," said Vidre. "But I harbor ill will towards many people. I have enemies, as one might expect of someone in my position."

"Do you believe that Gaelwyn Mottram harbored ill will towards Kendrick Eversong?" asked the judge.

"No," said Vidre. "I never saw Gaelwyn express hatred or even dislike towards the man. He was fearful and saddened, but never hostile."

The judge nodded along. "And what is it you suppose happened on the day of the duel?"

"Kendrick saw an opportunity to do something for his country," said Vidre. "He had lived within the world of stories for too long, and the world of stories is a world of lies, as I well know. He thought that if he sacrificed himself his death might serve as a call to action for the people, and so, in the moment that Kendrick and Gaelwyn touched each other, Kendrick took his own life."

Welexi watched this with a frown. "You won't be called forward," he said. "Don't worry about that. Even though you were a central figure. They wanted someone pliant, someone they could rely on to craft a narrative." He turned

to look at Dominic. "You're not that person, not yet. I hope that you never will be."

The judge was in a side conference with a minister, and Vidre waited patiently for him. "They're going to ask her about the letter," said Dominic. "They'll have to probe."

"No," said Welexi. "As I told you, this was a sham. The trial is not about the act itself; it is about securing the currently tentative pillars of power. Kendrick's letter reflects poorly on the Council, which means it reflects poorly on the Parliament. It won't be brought up again, and everyone will eventually forget about it. This is how peace happens. We store our weapons away in caches, and watch the other party do the same, never quite trusting each other."

"They're going to say that Kendrick did it all by himself?" asked Dominic.

Welexi nodded. "They need him to seem slightly unhinged. Acting all alone. No matter that he was their vanguard, or that he was central to their plots. That letter can be best explained as a moment of paranoia, but I would wager you won't hear it brought up at this trial at all. That's the sort of thing that gets circulated later on, unofficially. Kendrick was trying to do the best for his country, but he failed it in some crucial way with a deception that was his entirely. He's both martyr and scapegoat." He sighed. "I will be glad when our time in Torland is over."

Dominic nodded, though the thought of going to another country to have some new adventure now seemed utterly draining to him. "Where are we going?"

"I would have thought Vidre would have told you," said Welexi. "We're going to the Iron Kingdom."



The second day of the trial was the worst. Gaelwyn had sat in the mild sun on the first day, trying not to chafe at the manacles on his wrists, and trying not to hear the lies that were being told.

He turned his thoughts towards biology, which was always a comfort to him, not only the tissues that he could control through his domain, but the entire majesty of the interlocking systems that made a body work. There was a tendency, even in his own writings, to see the human organism in the abstract, but it was more complex than that. If Gaelwyn looked at the creases on his knuckles, he had to wonder at the mechanisms by which those were formed. Skin was not like paper; it showed no crease from being folded. Skin would return to a given shape moments after it had been stretched, pinched, or pulled. The crease existed in order to give the skin of the knuckles room to stretch out. Yet how did the body know that such a thing was needed? It was a fine question to distract oneself with, because the answer nearly seemed as though it could be divined from base principles. There were experiments that could be run, of course. Gaelwyn couldn't recall whether babies had that same crease, but it wouldn't be too difficult to find out. He began constructing an experimental method in his head, and that kept him from listening too closely to the witnesses that were brought against him. (Lies spilled

from the mouths of the coroners; Gaelwyn had studied the decomposition of corpses enough to know that little useful information could be obtained from them so many days after the fact, especially relating to matters of the soft tissues.)

But on the second day of the trial, biology offered no escape for him. It was precisely the study of biology that was at issue; they were making a haphazard review of his life's work.

"I was fed the flesh of my friends," said a witness. He was supposed to be addressing the crowd, but he had eyes for only Gaelwyn. "Meat from their forearms. I refused, in the beginning. They tried to force the food down my mouth, but I clamped my jaw closed tight. The Red Angel came in and discussed the issue with one of his nurses, right in front of me. He needed a way to control me. He wanted to know what would happen, when one man ate another. Some of us were fed meat without knowing where it came from. Some of us were fed our own bodies, piece by piece. Every variation had to go into the ledgers. In the end, the Red Angel simply touched my face and willed my mouth to open, and I was made to choke down the meat of a man I'd fought beside." He spat to the side. "Fought beside on the orders of the queen."

Gaelwyn didn't remember the man's face. The hospital he'd conducted his experiments in had been large. Perhaps that one consultation had been the only time that the two of them had met. Most of the men who had been part of those trials had been vivisected; it was possible that this man was only telling a story that he'd heard secondhand.

"And for this crime," said the judge. "Gaelwyn Mottram received a pardon. Thank you for sharing." The witness nodded, and stepped down. "At question in this trial is not whether Gaelwyn Mottram committed crimes against the people of Torland. We are well aware of these crimes, and they are uncontested. We have no power to remove the pardon which the queen has granted, only the power to give a veto towards future pardons which are contrary to the dignity of the people of Torland."

There were more witnesses to come. A man who walked on crutches spoke about the amputation that had been performed on him, and nothing was said about how that experiment had led to better surgical practices in the Iron Kingdom and beyond. A woman talked about how her twin sister had been made insensate by surgery done upon her brain. An old man gave a long speech about how his son had vanished into the hospital entirely; no record had ever been found. The Iron Kingdom had not seemed to care too much, and the Flower Queen had never responded to a petition on the matter. The old man looked at Gaelwyn with rheumy eyes and asked after his son, but the name was foreign to Gaelwyn. Many people had gone through the hospital, some only briefly.

Gaelwyn wouldn't have done those experiments again. Yet how could everyone be so blind as to the good that he had accomplished? It would be one thing for them to say that the cost in humans lives was too high to justify what had been learned, a point which could be debated, but they seemed to treat the experiments as base torture with no

purpose at all. This was simply not the case. Welexi had coached him not to say such things out loud.

"In the matter of the death of Kendrick Eversong," said the judge. "How do we find Gaelwyn Mottram?"

The ministers replied, "Not guilty," with a grumble of discontent in the matter, and Gaelwyn let out a slow breath. It had been as Welexi said, and he was thankful for that. He was certain that without Welexi he would have hanged.

"Yet it is clear that even if he is not guilty of this crime, and has been pardoned for others which he surely committed, it is also clear that it is detrimental for this country to ever see Gaelwyn Mottram set foot upon its shore. In the matter of exiling Gaelwyn Mottram from Torland, its colonies, and its vassals, how do we find?"

A round of enthusiastic "aye"s went up from the assembled ministers.

"Gaelwyn Mottram," said the judge. "You are hereby exiled from this great country. Should you set foot upon its shores, the penalty will be death."



"They're exiling us," said Welexi. "We have a contract with the crown."

"Gaelwyn isn't part of that contract," said Vidre. "And it's only him that they're exiling. When we come back to Meriwall, we can simply ... I don't know. We can leave him aboard the Zenith, I suppose. Or if that's not sufficient, we can leave him in a different port and come back for him."

"He would die without me," said Welexi. "It is only through my protection that his safety is ensured."

"We'll figure something out," said Vidre. "It's an insult, nothing more. And if Meriwall is attacked, they'll need us. That would be a better time for negotiations."

"It's a compromise," said Dominic. "Better this than a guilty verdict, right?"

"It's not important," said Vidre. "We won't be coming back to Meriwall for years, and by then the Parliament may have collapsed. In the meantime, the trial raises Gaelwyn's standing, and he'll be more powerful for it."

"I don't need more power," said Gaelwyn. None of them had seen him come into the room. It was impossible to know how long he'd been standing there. "I can already heal with a touch. I don't need to be faster or stronger. It does me no good."

"We'll protect you," said Welexi. "I will protect you."

"Yes," said Gaelwyn. "I wonder sometimes if it wouldn't be better if I were exiled from the civilized world altogether."

"We leave tomorrow," said Welexi. "You'll feel better when we're to sea. I think we all will." He glowed faintly with light. "Let us leave this mess behind us."



Dominic was awoken in the middle of the night by a whisper in his ear.

"Vidre?" he asked. There was a woman's shape clouded by the darkness, standing at the foot of his bed. He shook the sleep from his head and remembered for the tenth time that he could see in the dark. The darkness washed away, and Dominic was staring at a woman who looked only marginally familiar. She was dressed as a serving girl. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"You leave tomorrow," said the woman. She had a flat voice, as though she were completely uninterested in him. "We've had our eyes on you since Gennaro. We think it's time to speak."

Dominic pulled his covers to the side and formed a blade of shadow in the same moment. He leapt up from the bed and fell into a fighting stance, with the sword in front of him. The woman made no reaction. "Help!" he screamed. "Intruder!" If it was just a serving girl snuck into his room, he would feel foolish, but it was their last night in Torland anyway. A man couldn't always be thinking about stories.

"Do you like the illustrati?" asked the woman. "Do you think that they are fit to rule?"

"Help!" Dominic screamed again, but the words came out sounding hollow to him. It was an effect he'd experienced once before; the domain of sound, held by his former employer. Shouting would do nothing for him.

"I'm here to speak with you," said the woman. "You may call me Faye. We know much about you, Dominic de Luca."

Dominic hesitated. It would be possible to dart to the side and burst through the window, hurtling himself down towards the ground and then bounding away to find Vidre.

Welexi and Gaelwyn were already on the Zenith, making preparations to leave early in the morning. The palace guards would be torn apart in the fight, and none of the illustrati were likely to throw their lot in with him. Instead of trying again to raise the alarm, Dominic stayed where he was. If the woman had disguised herself as a serving girl and snuck into his room, it would have been easy enough for her to kill him in his sleep.

He kept his sword pointed towards her. "I don't know what it is you'd wish to discuss."

"My question," she said. "Do you like the illustrati? Do you think they're fit to rule?"

"They're just people," said Dominic. "We're just people. People with fame and power, but people all the same. You can't talk about the illustrati as though they're a group."

"They are people united by their acquisition of fame," said Faye. She had small, unblinking eyes. "Some fall into it in one way or another. Ember was a proficient alchemist who came to the attention of the queen. You had a small moment of heroism. But illustrati are not just marked by the acquisition of fame, but the retention of it. They are seekers of power, consumers of attention. That marks them as distinct from the humble baker, don't you think?"

"Is that a threat?" asked Dominic. His sword wavered in front of him. "Speaking of my father?"

"No," said Faye. "I apologize, I know these circumstances are exceptional. I only thought that it might be a profession you could relate to more easily. I might have said fisher or cobbler instead."

"Then yes," said Dominic. "I can agree that perhaps illustrati are different from normal people." Welexi and Vidre had been like no one he'd met before. And with Gaelwyn, the thoughts of the testimonies that had been heard at trial were still flitting through his head whenever the name came to mind. "They're still diverse though. Some are heroes and some are villains."

"They are driven by the same things," said Faye. "And they are not fit to rule."

"You're behind the assassinations then," said Dominic. "Behind the men who tried to kill us."

"We knew you less well then," said Faye. "Now we believe that you might be amenable to our cause."

"And what is that, precisely?" asked Dominic. He had no idea what level of power this woman might have, but it was entirely possible that he could overpower her. The domain of sound was supposed to be a tricky one to fight when the illustrati had a higher standing though. Vidre had said that eardrums could easily be burst, and that was something that none of the bodily domains could fix. Sometimes it seemed as though every domain was Vidre's least favorite one to fight.

"Precisely?" asked Faye. "We seek to restructure the world in a more just way."

"The Council," said Dominic. "The Parliament. Were you watching today's trials? Did you think that this was justice?"

"We have not attained perfection," said Faye. "Yet surely you must admit that Gaelwyn has received only the lightest of slaps for what he has done?"

Dominic knew that if he were a better friend, he would have risen to Gaelwyn's defense, but the trial had left a bad taste in his mouth. "So you seek to depose kings and queens? Illustrati will rise in their place, as senatori or presidents. If the crown is diminished, there will still be illustrati."

"We have a solution for that," said Faye.

"A Harbinger artifact?" asked Dominic.

Faye shrugged.

"Well, I'm afraid I'll have to decline to enter this conspiracy," said Dominic.

"I've listened to your conversations," said Faye. Dominic blinked. Domain sense would turn the muffled sounds from behind a wall crystal clear. If this woman had been dressing as a servant, it would have been easy for her to hear all manner of things. "Welexi despises you. Vidre thinks you're a fool. They're both using you, in their own ways. And you disagree with them on fundamental issues which so far lie beneath the surface."

"I'm still going to have to decline," said Dominic. "Re-make the world with some other pawn."

Faye shrugged. "Some day, we may call on you, and hope that you have changed your mind."

Dominic nodded. "You know I'm going to have to tell them all of this, right?"

"Of course," said Faye. "There is little strategic information to be gained from revealing this conversation. Failure was not unanticipated. It's a disappointment, but little else. And of course we may still call on you, once you have changed your mind."

Dominic was ready to defend against an attack, but Faye simply walked from the room like she had just gotten done changing the sheets on his bed. He followed after her, but by the time he had gotten to the corridor, there was no sign of her. The palace had a dozen hidden doors. If it were possible for her to pretend at being a servant for at least the last few weeks, she would know all of the passageways for easy exit.

Coming to him was dangerous and daring, but they'd done it anyway. Which conversations had they listened in on that made them think that he was going to be their man? Dominic dismissed the sword and made his way to Vidre's room, trying to think on what to tell her. He wasn't sure that it made sense for them to raise the alarm; the palace was so large that there would be a hundred places to hide, and an illustrati would have little issue with making a quick exit.

Dominic raised his hand to knock on Vidre's door, and hesitated.

12. Light and Shadow

A salty breeze sent the ship away from Meriwall, off on the next great adventure. For all that they were being exiled, the send-off had still been rather grand. The Flower Queen had taken one last tea with them aboard the ship, with Steelminder standing beside her and a number of the more favored members of the court milling about and making conversation. Dominic had been around them enough over the past two weeks. He was ready to see the last of them, the queen included. Through it all, Vidre was not quite flirtatious with him, but she had done her part in keeping the pretense towards romance. The songs and stories that they were leaving behind were much more explicit about these things. Dominic had read one draft of a song which had male and female parts written for it, to be sung as a duet. It was filled with double entendres related to swordplay. In the coming weeks, packet service to the rest of the world would carry that new material to the public that so eagerly awaited it.

Dominic's eyes were on Laith's Face as the ship took its leave. He hadn't told anyone about his nighttime visitor, and wasn't yet sure whether he would. He'd already let it go too long; every hour that passed without him telling them was another mark against him. There was a series of excuses that had led him to this point. The first excuse, the one which occurred just before he'd been about to knock on the door of Vidre's room, had been that telling them was part of Faye's plan. She had been listening in on their

conversations, likely for the entire time that they had been in Meriwall. With all that information at her disposal, with one or more Harbinger artifacts in her possession, with the powers that came from being illustrati, she had decided to come to him the middle of the night to seek his assistance.

Vidre had said that a good plotter prepared for many contingencies. Faye and her master, the man who had called himself Welling, were known to be good plotters. They would have a contingency in place, in case the conversation had not gone ideally for them. Dominic hadn't hesitated because he'd realized what they had planned, only because he had realized that there probably was a plan. It had seemed to make sense to stop and think before committing to any action, no matter what. If Faye had anticipated that he would go to Vidre, what plan followed from that? Dominic had stood at the door thinking for a good while.

The first answer that came to Dominic's mind was that this was an attempt to drive discord between them. If a soldier came to his captain and said that the enemy had sought him out as someone susceptible to turning traitor, Dominic couldn't imagine that the proper reaction would be for the captain to trust the soldier more. The attempt at recruitment would raise suspicions which would ever after be difficult to cast off. This was doubly true given that Faye had eavesdropped on an unknown number of conversations. It didn't take a terribly paranoid mind to think that perhaps he had said some things that had made him a likely traitor. A paranoid mind, like Vidre seemed to possess,

might even think that this was part of a plot that a traitor might think up.

In retrospect, it was obvious that this was an excuse. At first he'd thought that walking back to his room was only a way to buy some time to think. That seemed like an excuse too. Dominic kept thinking back to what Faye had said. Did he like the illustrati? No, not particularly. Did he believe that they were fit to rule? Well, he had only seen Torland thus far, but he suspected that the answer was that they weren't.

Dominic stared at Laith's Face, and tried his best to forget, but that wasn't quite the proper view for it. Laith had spent enormous resources carving his face into the mountain. Had he been any more fit to rule than the Flower Queen was?

"Three days to Parance," said Welexi, breaking Dominic's reverie. The illustrati of light was in high spirits, despite their apparent exile from Torland. More and more, Dominic was coming to understand Welexi as a creature of moods. "I always feel refreshed after an adventure. Unless we receive another call to arms, or we have cause to visit the colonies, Meriwall now lays years in our future. The story is at an end, and a new story awaits on the horizon."

"A new story, but likely with the same players," said Vidre. She came up from the cabin of the ship wearing her blue dress and heavy boots. The only glass showing on her were the bracers she wore and the pins that skewered her hair in place. "We'll have to work hard to make Torland into a satisfying narrative. Some of the work has already been

done, to be sure, but it's a story with too many rough edges. Especially if we want to come out looking good."

Welexi waved his hand. "All in due time. Let's not dwell on Torland; it's behind us. Instead, let us speak of Parance and the Iron Kingdom, and the story that lays ahead of us. I spoke at length with Gaelwyn last night, and he feels that he might have some insights into the Harbinger artifacts that our mysterious enemy has used."

Gaelwyn had been giving Dominic the cold shoulder ever since the dungeon visit. They hadn't had much opportunity to spend time together, given Gaelwyn's imprisonment and trial. In those moments when they found themselves in each other's company, Dominic felt a sense of unease, if not outright hostility.

"There does not appear to be a biological component to whatever mechanism gives illustrati their powers," said Gaelwyn. "I had time to read, in my cell, and was brought a number of books which had been taken from the Iron Kingdom. I cannot vouch for their accuracy; if there were some principle which had been discovered, I doubt that the Iron King would have let it leave the confines of his country. Take what I say with a grain of salt."

"Get on with it," said Vidre. "We're not going to pillory you over inaccuracies."

Gaelwyn pursed his lips. "As we have been made well aware in these past few days, I led many experiments in the course of my service to the Iron King. Before the conclusion of the Peddler's War, I was involved with the study of the effects of twindom on standing. I was secondary to these

experiments. The Iron King had a number of philosophers in his employ, and I restricted myself to matters of the body."

"You're tarrying," said Welexi. "You can describe what was done, and we will not think less of you for it, especially not after the trial laid bare so much."

"The goal was to find the answer to the second of the Five Questions, as written by Elder Mantis two hundred years ago. How does fame attach to a person?" Gaelwyn held up a hand. "I'm working my way around to the experimental procedures, give me time. What we know from observation is that standing is singular. The Premiers of Oresant do not have a communal standing, despite the fact that they were almost always referred to in the collective. Instead, their standing varies with their personal fortunes. We know that standing cannot be transferred, or could not be without the aid of an artifact whose function we are ignorant of. People have tried, in the past, to suborn the standing of one another. Yet dressing up as Welexi Sunhawk and claiming his name does not give you his powers."

Dominic blinked at that. It was one of those obvious things that he'd never really considered. "But why?" asked Dominic.

Gaelwyn looked at Dominic like he'd forgotten that he was there. For a moment, Dominic thought that the question would simply be ignored and the stony silence would continue. The need to explain won out over keeping up the grudge. "That's the question," said Gaelwyn. "That's what the experiments were intended to discover."



Identical twins were rare. The Iron Kingdom was unique among the kingdoms that surrounded the Calypso, in that it kept careful record of births and deaths. This had originally been a matter of public good rather than scientific inquiry, but it was quite useful to the Iron King's thinkers all the same. The records were routinely collected from the parishes and brought to Parance, where the information they contained was organized into forms which were more readable. There were four twin births for every thousand, and identical twins were perhaps one out of those four. Mortality of infants and children meant that it was unlikely for any two children to both survive until the age of ten. Because twins were often born early and underweight, it would be even more unlikely for disease or accident not to claim one or both. Beyond that, there was the usual hesitance that some parents showed at letting their children be tested for domains. Still, the Iron Kingdom had a population of some thirty million people, which meant that it was only a matter of searching.

Cadoc and Siors came from the highlands of the Iron Kingdom. They had unkempt red hair and pale skin, much like Gaelwyn; it wasn't uncommon in that part of the country. They were ten years old, which was widely agreed to be the correct age to test for a person's domain. The audience of ten thousand had been prepared for them, and they waited with both trepidation and excitement, no different from the other thirty children that would be tested. The

only difference was the the amount of attention they were being given backstage.

Cadoc went first. He was introduced, and the master of ceremonies began his free-wheeling storytelling with the intent of rapidly increasing the youth's standing to the point where the domain could be chosen. Cadoc began to go through the known domains one by one, touching their purest forms so that he could know one for his own. Once a piece of stone clung to his fingertips, he was given the congratulations of the master of ceremonies and ushered off-stage with a note made in the ledgers. So far, this was nothing unusual.

When Siors was brought forward by the men in masks, he was introduced as Cadoc. The master of ceremonies took this in stride, and invented a story of how the domain seemed to have been confused, or didn't quite take. For his part, Siors was silent about the deception, as he'd been instructed to be by the men backstage. He went through and touched each item in turn, laying hands on the animals and bringing his fingers close to the flames of the candle. After half an hour had passed — quite a while as these things went — he still hadn't found his domain. The audience was beginning to express some real interest in him now, given what happened to those who were uncooperative, and his standing should have been high enough that he could easily find which domain was his, but he continued to have no response from any of them. In the meantime, in a separate room backstage, his brother Cadoc was displaying his new-found (and presumably short-lived) talents to the king's

scholars. For as long as his brother was trotted around, Cadoc's powers held.

It was known that twins did not share standing between them; this knowledge predated the experiment. However, it was also known that name alone was not enough. There had been innumerable heroes and villains with the same names throughout the ages. While impostors had been unable to steal the standing of the people they were pretending to be, it was entirely possible to pick a name that was already in use, or which had some cultural or historical significance. Prior to the experiment that had been done with the twins, it was entirely possible to believe that Siors should have received his own standing. The important conclusion it demonstrated was that standing relied to some extent on the beliefs of the audience; they saw Siors and were told he was Cadoc, so it was Cadoc that gained power.

The king's scholars were not yet done with the twins. After a brief period of discussion, it was decided that the experiment needed to be taken further. Siors was selected for elevation, while Cadoc was taken to the dungeons. Siors was stripped of his name, and was to be referred to by his brother's name instead.

Work was found for Cadoc nee Siors. He was given a position as an assistant to the tax collector, which helped him to see the sights of the Iron Kingdom. At the same time, it also allowed him to be seen by the people of the kingdom. Stories were circulated about Cadoc the young tax collector which played into the normal resentments that people felt towards one of his profession. No mention was

ever made of Siors, and so far as a select few people know, the new Cadoc never had a brother. What he felt about these machinations was unknown, but it didn't take a scholar to imagine that he might have had some reservations. He was never told what happened to his brother.

The man with no name (nee Cadoc) was kept in a cell. The plan was to have their lives mirror each other as closely as possible, the better to get some concrete information on what differences between them might be attributable to fame. He was given good meals and made to walk around his room, in the way that it was assumed his brother would be walking on the well-kept roads that laced the Iron Kingdom. Despite this, the man with no name proved unruly. Somewhat as expected, he had the powers of a minor *illus-trati*, which grew as the carefully crafted stories spread. After a near escape, one of the Bone Warden's acolytes was brought in at great expense; she twisted the bones of his arms and legs so that he would be unable to escape. The king's scholars showed some consternation at this, as it would undoubtedly make their experiment worse.

Six years passed, and the twin boys grew into men. The one who had been called Siors never gained any standing at all; it went to his brother instead. After the six years had passed, the Iron King noticed the expense of the man with no name's cell in passing and ordered the experiment ended.



"My role was minor," said Gaelwyn. "I performed the vivisections on the two of them, one after the other, looking for some difference between the two which would explain why one had powers and the other did not. I had a hypothesis that we would find something in the brain; an illustrati with his arm removed does not lose standing."

"Nor his hand," said Welexi. His right hand had glowing fingers, which he could now use with some deftness.

"I apologize," said Gaelwyn. "I didn't mean anything by it."

"I know," said Welexi with a smile. "I was only bringing it back around to more practical areas."

"Yes," said Gaelwyn. "Well as I was saying, the brain is the seat of the mind, and I was expecting that I would find something there. The flesh is known to me, and the bone is known to others, but the bodily domains cannot touch the brain except to ruin it. Yet in making my examination, I found no difference between the twins." He sighed. "It was an important thing to learn, but it's difficult not to be discouraged by negative results. This was some years ago, at any rate, and came near the end of my term of service; the latest from the Iron Kingdom builds on that experimental result."

"To what end?" asked Vidre. She'd gone to lean against the railing of the ship while Gaelwyn spoke. The ship was rocking gently on the waves, and they were all finding their sea legs again.

"There exists an idea of Cadoc," said Gaelwyn. "Just as there exists an idea of every person. Those ideas live inside

our minds, like small animals. I have an idea of Lightscour, as does Vidre, and Lightscour himself." He looked to Dominic. "We can be reasonably certain that these internal ideas are important in some way, and that there is a connection between ideas and practical reality. The idea of Cadoc attached to Cadoc, and Siors gained no standing because he was only building on the idea of Cadoc, not the idea of Siors. It's more complicated though, because names aren't the only thing that matters, and ideas themselves are nebulous. You and I assuredly have a different understanding of who Cadoc is. The animal that lives inside your head, the one we both might recognize as Cadoc, has a different character for you than it does for me. I should think, given what we know, that it might make sense to say that my idea of Cadoc is in some sense larger than yours. Yet we can presume that both would feed into Cadoc just the same, even given the differences, if Cadoc were alive."

"Which Cadoc?" asked Dominic. "There were two people who went by that name, in the end."

Gaelwyn nodded, not even seeming to mind who the question was coming from this time. "True. Yet all of the standing went to the first Cadoc, the one who originated the idea of Cadoc. There is some mechanism by which all the variant ideas of Cadoc become centered around one actual person, even if they are far removed from him. There is a link between the two."

"A link which Gaelwyn believes can be shifted," said Welexi. "The enemy has a Harbinger artifact which can accomplish as much."

"We don't know that," said Gaelwyn. "There are other mechanisms which can explain what we have seen. It could be that the artifact amplifies the idea in the same way that spreading a story does, though that leaves open the question of domains. It's also possible that the Phoenixes had their standing raised the old-fashioned way and the artifact's role was simply to change their domains — that being a less understood sphere of questions. These would make sense. Yet it appears to me that the most likely hypothesis is that the link between idea and person is altered in some way, and the domain comes with it."

"Which is why we're going to the Iron Kingdom," said Welexi. He stood tall and proud in the sunlight, with his dark skin smooth and unblemished. It was easy to imagine that he had been born for moments like these. "If it is the links that have been altered, it should be possible for us to find the originators — the first Cadoc. If it is the domains that have been altered, then the standing still must have come from somewhere."

"We're certain that 'somewhere' is the Iron Kingdom?" asked Dominic. "I don't see the benefit to the Iron Kingdom in giving Torland a parliament."

"The parliament?" asked Gaelwyn. "Were you there at the trial? They're no better than the queen was, the only difference will be in their foreign relations."

That logic didn't sound right to Dominic. The Iron Kingdom couldn't possibly be implicated by some imagined event that lay in the future. It was no secret that Gaelwyn had a complicated history with his home country though,

which would account for some of the distrust. In the interests of making peace, Dominic nodded along.

"We were going to the Iron Kingdom anyway," said Vidre. "If we hadn't been called to assist the queen, we would have gone there first after our stay in the Sovento States. Even if there's nothing to be found, no legends of fire illustrati who have suddenly gone missing, we'll have stories to spread and new stories to make. The people need to be reminded that we exist." She had turned one of her bracers into a dagger, and was balancing it on one finger.

"And we'll see the Iron King?" asked Dominic.

Gaelwyn and Welexi shared a look: worry from Gaelwyn, concern from Welexi. "No," said Welexi. "Not unless he calls us to him. Parance is the capital city, a day's ride inland, but the king makes his home another day past that, in a large castle he finds more suited to his tastes. The last few times we have been in the Iron Kingdom, we have not asked for an audience, and he has not requested one. Gaelwyn's status within the kingdom is questionable."

Dominic had no idea what that meant. From what he had heard, Gaelwyn had avoided execution at the end of the Peddler's War only through exile. The doctor had been something of a scapegoat for the war crimes perpetrated by the Iron King. Welexi had long-ago secured a pardon from the Flower Queen, allowing Gaelwyn to walk the streets of Torland. Dominic wondered whether some other agreement had been reached, or some understanding that negated the exile. Welexi's words did little to put Dominic at ease.



The ship's small room seemed cramped compared to the palatial bedroom that Dominic had spent several weeks in. The bed was naturally much smaller, and the window let in little light, not that he needed it. When he'd come back aboard the ship, Dominic had found a stack of books waiting for him, courtesy of Vidre. He'd been derelict in his studies, and now that the moments of crisis seemed to have passed, it was time for more learning. He was midway through a book on historic uses of the metal domains when Vidre stopped by.

"You're going to have to learn languages," she said. "Go further east than the algalif's court and you'll start running into problems. We're not going to stay circling the Calypso forever, and you'll have a far easier time if you start now instead of waiting until we're sailing down the Black Straits."

"Always more to learn," said Dominic with a sigh. He closed the book and looked at Vidre. He decided he liked her better without the weapons and armor so readily apparent. "Say, do you think the Harbingers have an artifact for helping people learn languages?"

"Almost certainly," said Vidre. "You can find all sorts of stories about what it was they could do, each story more outlandish than the last. Ask Welexi, and he'll tell you that it's virtually certain that they not only had a way of putting thoughts in a person's head, but a way of extracting them as well. However, even if that's true, it's not going to help

you. Learning languages is difficult work with no easy shortcuts."

"Did you stop by to give me lessons then?" asked Dominic. He found that doubtful.

Vidre stepped forward and sat at the edge of Dominic's bed. She brushed a strand of hair from her face and tucked it behind one ear. "I'm worried about Welexi."

"Oh?" asked Dominic. "Just the usual worries, or something more?"

"The quest for the Numifex — for the Harbinger artifacts — was always something of a sideshow," said Vidre. "We would make our circuit around the world, visiting distant lands and speaking with other illustrati, spreading stories and setting up bards to sing our songs and tell our tales. Now I think this quest is overshadowing the structure of our travels."

"Shouldn't it?" asked Dominic. He folded his legs in towards him and set his book on the floor. "If there really is a device that can change how powers are granted, isn't that more important than just," Dominic waved his hand, "using fame in order to get more fame?"

"I'm worried we won't find anything," said Vidre. "If that happens, I'm not sure how he'll take it. He sees the stories too clearly for my liking, and when a story doesn't go the way that he planned it to go ... well, you saw how he was before we left Torland. This time it was sullen anger, but in the past it's been depression. He's in high spirits now, but what will happen after weeks of fruitless searching?"

"What is it you want out of me?" asked Dominic.

Vidre frowned. "I don't only come to you because I want things," she said. "Sometimes I only need someone to talk to, and I think it should be easy to see why you're the only candidate worth considering, especially when the topic of conversation is going to be our cherished leader."

"I can talk, if you'd like," said Dominic. "I just didn't think that you would have come to me without first thinking of some way that I could help."

"Be his apprentice," said Vidre. "You've been pretending until now, but we both know that you speak with me more than you speak with him. You don't go to him for counsel, and he hasn't taught you much in the way of practical skills or combat expertise. If this Harbinger business falls through, he'll need his protege in his moments of doubt. It's what you would expect from a story. When all hope is lost, the young trainee rests a hand on his master's shoulder and talks about courage and fortitude. That's precisely the sort of thing that will keep him on an even keel."



Dominic held his shadow blade out in front of him.

"You've made sure it's dull?" asked Welexi.

"Yes," said Dominic. He touched the edge of the sword to confirm that it had no bite to it.

"Sparring is dangerous," said Welexi. He formed a spear of light in his hand. "And it's at its most dangerous when one party is inexperienced. I don't need to lose the rest of my fingers," he said with a laugh. He twirled the spear

around in his hand and nearly lost his grip on it. He was using his maimed hand, and quickly switched to his left hand instead without any comment. A good deal of the joy left his face before he continued.

"You know your stances, which is good," said Welexi. "You have a killing instinct, which is regrettable but entirely necessary. What we shall learn today is treachery."

Dominic gave an involuntary look towards Vidre, who only shook her head and nodded towards Welexi.

"Treachery?" asked Dominic.

"Fighting dirty," Welexi clarified. "You must know how to fight treacherously so that you can know how to think like your opponents will. Once you have that knowledge, you will be able to combat them. So, let us say that you come across someone with the domain of light. What do you expect of how he will fight?"

"He would fight like you," said Dominic.

"And if he were treacherous?" asked Welexi. "If he had no honor, and cared only about killing you, not about the story he would leave behind?"

"He would blind me," said Dominic. In fact, in that first battle, Welexi had nearly blinded everyone watching him; the afterimage had stayed for quite some time.

"Yes," said Welexi. "Good. And what would you do, in that circumstance?"

"It wouldn't matter for me," said Dominic. "I don't need the light to see. I would switch over to watching the shadows instead."

Welexi smiled. "You see, I had known you were clever. And this is precisely what most illustrati would do in that circumstance. Not all are so blessed with your domain, but Zerstor would use his second sight to track the rust, and the Blood Bard would spray you with blood in order to give him something he could see. Not all domains are gifted with a useful domain sense, and not everyone you fight will have enough standing for them to use it effectively. The animal domains will stay blinded. The domain of flame can't simply engulf their target in flame, because if they could, the fight would have already been over."

"I use glass dust, if I have to," said Vidre. "Though blindness is always chancy."

"Just so," said Welexi. "So today, I think you will practice fighting blind. Close your eyes and watch the shadows."

Dominic did as he was instructed, but immediately noticed a problem; Welexi's spear was made entirely of solid light, and though it cast shadows, there were no shadows upon it. Welexi himself was visible as a series of shadows cast by the ridges of his armor. His head was apparent from the shadow that his nose cast on his face, and the shadows that his eyebrows cast on his skin. It wasn't a good rendering of the man, but it was enough to know where he was. The spear was utterly invisible to Dominic's eyes.

"I can't see the spear," said Dominic. He opened his eyes to see Welexi's smiling face.

"Our domains are counter to each other," said Welexi. "If we were to blind each other, you with shadows in my eyes and I with light in yours, we would both be unable to parry

or feint. There would be no weapon for us to follow. Given a treacherous mindset and a killing intent, what would you do?"

Dominic gave the matter some thought. "I could swing my sword wildly and hope to hit something vital," he said. "Except ... if you knew that my domain was shadow, you would be more fully clad in armor of light, which would make you more difficult to see. If you were covered from head to toe, I don't know that I could see you at all."

Welexi grinned. The light that formed his breastplate began to spread itself out into interlocking plates of armor that covered his arms and legs. The helm was the last thing he made. Dominic closed his eyes, and found that all he could see was a reverse silhouette where Welexi was standing. Welexi was casting shadows across the deck of the ship now, but there were no shadows visible on him. The light wasn't nearly so strong as the sun, and tracking Welexi by the movement of the shadows he was making would be nearly impossible.

"So it's impossible for us to fight?" asked Dominic. He opened his eyes. "If I can blind you, and you can blind me, then I don't suppose that we could ever hit each other." Not only would Dominic be able to cloak himself in solid shadows, he would be able to strengthen his shadow and then swivel it around to project against his opponent. Hopefully that would be enough to completely obscure him.

"Just so," said Welexi. "And let us pretend for a moment that you are still intent on killing me. How would you accomplish that, if you were treacherous?"

Dominic kept his eyes on the man dressed in light while he thought. Being unable to see the opponent was a major difficulty, and his first thoughts went towards trying to rectify that somehow, but nothing immediately came to mind. His second avenue of thought was that given sufficient killing power, it wouldn't matter whether the opponent could be seen or not, but nothing came to mind there either. He closed his eyes and looked at the gap in the shadows where Welexi stood.

"I wouldn't try to fight you head-on," said Dominic. "I would kill you in your sleep instead."

Welexi's visor dropped, to reveal a smiling face. "It would seem that treachery comes naturally to you, Lightscour. That was a lesson that I almost learned too late; I was attacked in my sleep when I was young, and nearly died from it. Before that point, I had not considered that enemies would attack while I was at my most vulnerable. Now then, suppose that you are tasked with defending a traveling caravan ..."

As the lessons continued, Dominic tried his best to play the fool when it was required of him; he was certain that he knew far more about how to be tricky than Welexi Sunhawk did. The primary insights seemed to be about the domains and how to combat them, which Dominic was ignorant of. As the day went on, they practiced sparring, though Welexi was forced to fight with his left hand instead of his right. When lunch came, they all ate together, and Gaelwyn's previous cold looks had seemed to evaporate into the sea air.



The greeting they got at the town of Bordes was much more pleasant than the one they had received upon their arrival in Meriwall. The story of Dominic's battle with Zerstor had reached them almost two weeks ago, and they had been eagerly awaiting the illustrati. As they were making dock and waving to the crowds who had gathered to see them, Dominic rested his hand on the small of Vidre's back. She gave him a faint smile he was sure was calculated for the audience, which was nonetheless gratifying; it meant that he was performing his role in their fake romance correctly.

Dominic by now had a suit of armor that could almost entirely cover him. There were still gaps at the joints, but all of his limbs were covered in solid shadow. He had taken a look at the map of the world; the story had likely not yet spread too far east of the algalif's court, though it was unlikely that those countries would take as much interest in things which had happened a world away. The colonies to the west would receive word in some weeks time, but they were not yet so populated that any illustrati felt compelled to make the journey out there. Vidre had warned him that a time would come when his power began to plateau or even wane, but for now he was still on the upward climb, feeling better and stronger with every day that passed. It would be some time before he was forgotten in Gennaro and the story of Zerstor's death was replaced by some new tale.

If they had any cargo to speak of, they would have sailed up the Elnor River and used a series of canals and locks to

arrive at Parance. That route took three days though, in part because of the numerous stops that would need to be made, as well as having to deal with the Iron Kingdom's customs office at every step of the way. Instead, they made port at a smaller city that served as a point of defense for the river. They hired out horses, and left the *Zenith* behind.

"Better for us to run," said Vidre. She patted the flank of her horse and made kissing noises to it. "I can outrace a horse. We could be there in four hours instead of ten."

"Running is unseemly," said Welexi. "That aside, it's been some years since we've been to the Iron Kingdom, and we need to get the lay of the land. The greeting we've had so far has been pleasant enough, but if we're here to gather information, it would do us good to speak with the locals. The Iron King has not been seen for at least a year, and I'd like to know why that is before we get to Parance, or whether that's still true."

"He's old," said Gaelwyn. "He's been old for a very long time. It might be that he's on his deathbed."

"Which means a succession crisis," said Vidre. "A change in power that's far less clear-cut than the one we just took part in. I'm hoping we'll be gone from the Iron Kingdom before that happens, if it happens."

"The Iron King has no sons?" asked Dominic. "No daughters?" Everyone else had gotten up onto their horses. Dominic was giving his a skeptical look. It had a white diamond shape on its forehead, with a dull look in its eyes. Dominic had never ridden a horse before.

"It's the opposite problem," said Vidre. "The Iron King has many sons and many daughters, by many different women. There's no question about which heir is legitimate, because none of them are; the Iron King never married. There will be dozens of illegitimate claimants, each arguing over how theirs should be the new bloodline, or more likely, going at each other with muskets and bayonets. The Iron King keeps his power close to him. Even if he designated a successor, I doubt that the transition could be handled smoothly."

"We can be part of that story then," said Welexi. "Assuming that it happens while we're here. It's nothing to fear." He looked over at Dominic. "You've never ridden before? You could have said."

"Sorry," said Dominic. "I ... I somehow thought that it would be easy." He looked over the unfamiliar assortment of leather and metal that was somehow wrapped around the horse.

"You sit in the saddle," said Vidre. "We're not going to do any heavy riding today, not if we want to speak with the locals along the way. I can hold the reins for you, and all you'll need to do is stick your feet in the stirrups and try not to fall out. These aren't even illustrati horses; you should see the beasts that equine illustrati can make, given enough time."

Dominic climbed up by placing one hand on the pommel and one foot in the stirrup. He tried to remind himself that he was stronger than the horse. If he fell, he would bruise nothing but his pride; he'd taken falls of several stories

and had no broken bones to show for it. The horse seemed unimpressed by him, but after Vidre grabbed its reins, it trotted along. Dominic tried his best to look dignified.

Dominic had always thought of the Iron Kingdom as a place of rust and steam. The stories there always took place in mud and squalor, and if not there, then in the foundries where men with great scars worked with molten iron. Dominic saw none of that as they traveled. There were fields with furrows of damp dirt and small houses beside them, with long stretches of woods and the roar of the river beside the road they traveled. It didn't seem much different than Torland, nor even all that dissimilar to Gennaro. Dominic wondered whether life was similar the world over. If you went to the fields around Maskoy, would you find that the only difference was the crops that were grown? Would the people speak with a different accent, or a different tongue, but ultimately follow the same patterns? All the differences he spotted seemed superficial as they traveled down the road. It was easy to imagine that aside from landmarks like Laith's Face, the countries of the world had more similarities than differences.

He would change his mind when he saw the city of Parance.

13. Iron Bound

Vidre held the reins to Dominic's horse as they made their way through the Iron Kingdom. They were following the curve of the Elnor River, which made a snake-like path towards Parance. After the first hour, Dominic's legs began to get sore from riding. The fresh air and open fields were starting to lose their appeal. At heart, Dominic was a creature of the city. He was more comfortable when in a canyon formed by two looming buildings than with fields around him, never mind the creature he was sitting on.

"Have you been keeping up with your reading, young Lightscour?" asked Welexi. He looked perfectly serene and comfortable on his horse. It was as though he was preparing to be immortalized in a painting. Neither he nor Vidre were using their stirrups; they simply let their feet dangle free.

"Mostly," said Dominic. He'd spent his nights on the ship reading in the darkness. "I brought along *The Five Questions* and Greenwich's *Treatise on Theological-Political Structure*."

"Very good," said Welexi. He patted the flank of his horse. "Pay attention to what Mayhew has to say about the nature of fame."

"Mayhew is out of date," said Gaelwyn. The bad mood that had been hanging over him since Torland was now faded to a slight stuffiness.

"He seems to be more concerned with questions than answers anyway," said Dominic. He'd been reading the

book only sporadically. It was now stuck in his saddlebag, along with a few other possessions, mostly clothing that Vidre had helped him get fitted for, all in rich purples.

"Even his questions are out of date," said Gaelwyn. "If I recall correctly, he spends a great many pages talking about the importance of asking the right questions, but he fails utterly in putting that to practice. 'What happens to unclaimed fame?' It implies that fame is ordinarily claimed. A more precise wording wouldn't have put forward a hypothesis in the same breath as the question. Mayhew came from a school of pure reason though. He didn't engage in real experimentation. It would be foolish to expect better of him."

"Should I not read it?" asked Dominic.

"It's foundational," said Gaelwyn. The pretense of hostility had been dropped, which Dominic was thankful for. "Later writers will reference Mayhew often, so you need to know what he said before the counter-arguments written decades later make sense. What's needed is for a clever man to write a new book which does not rely so heavily on the thinkers of the past. I did as much for a number of areas of biology." He sniffed the air. It didn't seem to agree with him, as his nose crinkled.

"Are you pleased to be back in your homeland?" asked Dominic. He wondered whether they would see the hospital where Gaelwyn had done his work. He hoped that he would be spared that.

"Homeland," said Gaelwyn with a bitter laugh. "When I was young, home was the Highlands of the Iron Kingdom."

When I was growing, it was a school where my peers vanished one by one as the years passed. After that, my homeland was entirely contained within a hospital. Now I don't have a homeland, Lightscour. There is nowhere for me to return to."

Vidre coughed. "And your own home Dominic?" she asked. "It will be quite some time until we return to Gennaro, do you miss it more than you thought you would?"

"No," said Dominic. He was thankful for the deflection. "I had friends there, but ..." When he thought of them, he thought of sharing in the glory of his power, or showing them the incredible feats that he was capable of. He didn't imagine asking them how they had been. It was hard to say that he'd missed them at all.

"You had friends," said Welexi. "But you were already detached from your life when you left. You were a feather floating in the wind, ready to be drawn into our wake. I have said before that it was fate, and you do nothing but confirm it." He let out a throaty laugh, as though this were a grand joke.

"My sister," said Dominic. "Anna. I don't miss my father or mother, or my brothers, or Nilda. But Anna I miss. I wish I could hear how things were going back in Gennaro just so I could know what she might be up to."

"Yet you've sent no letters," said Vidre. She clucked her tongue. "If you miss her so much, it would be easy enough to include mail to her in with the packet service we send to the Sovento States. Letters take a long while to make their

way to us, given that we travel so quickly, but it's better than nothing."

"I suppose," said Dominic. In truth, it was one of those things that he had been putting off because he didn't want to do it. There was nothing that he could write to Anna that would make her truly proud. He might have described climbing the cathedral, or looking at Laith's Face, but there was little of what he'd done that he would have wanted to repeat to her. He was an illustrati, which was supposed to mean that he was a hero. Yet from the moment he'd watched Zerstor fall to the ground, he hadn't done one unambiguously good thing. Anna would surely hear the stories of what Lightscour had done; perhaps it was better for her to believe what the bards said instead of the truth. Putting such lies to paper directly seemed to be a line that was better left uncrossed.

They stopped at a ferry crossing for lunch. This was a great cause for excitement from the locals, who crowded around the horses as Vidre and Welexi stepped off.

"I think a midday play would be suitable as a warm-up for Parance, don't you think Lightscour?" Welexi asked with a wink.

"A play?" asked Dominic.

"I think you'll know your part, hrm?" asked Welexi. He held his hands out in front of him with his palm up. Light sprang forth from them, displaying a scene that was familiar from the first night at Amare's Theater. Welexi and Zerstor were both rendered in white light, showing the moment when they had first spied each other in Gennaro.

"There he was," said Welexi. The show at Amare's had a choir singing an old song, but here, in the presence of no more than two dozen people, Welexi could speak to all of them. The figures he was controlling were no more than a foot high each, more like puppets than the gargantuans that had been appropriate for a crowd of eighty thousand. "Zerstor had come to Gennaro, jewel of the Sovento States, seeking to end my life for good. Four times we had fought before. Though he had gotten the better of me two of those times, I'd been the decisive winner the other two. We saw each other at nearly the same time. When our eyes locked, we knew that this was the day it would end, one way or another."

The figure of Zerstor pulled back his hood. Two small children standing near the front gasped. Welexi waited a beat before letting the figures run towards each other with weapons drawn. What followed was a beautiful fight reminiscent of dancing. Dominic was certain it had almost no basis in reality. Welexi's luxuriant voice continued all the while, providing a narration to the back and forth, leading up until the moment that Welexi fell from the sky with specks of light falling off behind him.

"Little did I know that I had a shadow that day," said Welexi.

He nodded to Dominic, who had no idea what to do. Almost on instinct, Dominic formed a figure of shadow in his hands. That wasn't something that he'd ever done before. He had once tried to make a fifteen foot tall shadow to match the ones he'd seen Welexi produce, but he hadn't

been able to stretch his power quite so far. His foot-tall creation was crude and utterly insubstantial. With a little bit of work as Welexi continued to narrate the losing fight, Dominic made his figure more representative of himself, more muscular and with just a bit of curly hair on his head.

The small version of Welexi quickly lost a hand and dropped his spear of light, which was Dominic's cue. He moved closer to Welexi, and sent his small figure of shadow running across the open air to pick the spear of light up. The rendering was imperfect, but no one seemed to notice too much; this impromptu show was far beyond what anyone would have hoped to see at a ferry crossing. The small figure of shadow touched the small spear of light, which disappeared. Dominic hesitated for a moment before realizing why; the figures they'd both made were insubstantial, easy to put a hand through. They couldn't meaningfully interact. Dominic had his figure generate a small spear of shadow, then go fight with Zerstor. It was a sloppy, poorly choreographed fight, but when the spear hit home and Zerstor exploded with light, the crowd cheered as though they'd just witnessed a masterpiece performance.

Vidre was ready with spiced lamb between slices of bread when the show was over. She had already eaten, which meant that she was ready to distract the crowd with sculptures of glass and small trinkets to hand out. Gaelwyn moved through the small gathering asking whether anyone needed medical attention, which they were much more receptive to than the people of Torland.

"You could have given me a little more instruction," said Dominic between bites. "We could have planned that together beforehand, while we were on the road."

"There was no risk," said Welexi. "Perhaps you forget, but I do this for a living. If you had proven unable to rise to the occasion, I would have picked up the slack. If you had failed, I would have been ready with a recovery, or a jape at your expense. It would more firmly have established you as my apprentice. I don't think that would have been a bad thing at all."

Dominic ate in silence and tried to think about that as a positive. It was difficult not to come to the conclusion that Welexi had wanted him to fail, the better for Welexi to drive home a narrative that served him. The question was why he'd done it for such a small group of people. This became considerably clearer when they'd gotten back in their saddles and returned to the road, having left the score of people behind them much happier than before.

"How many of the king's men did you count?" asked Vidre.

"Three," replied Gaelwyn.

"There were spies?" asked Dominic.

"Spy implies many things," said Vidre. "Were there men who report to the king's spymaster? Yes, of course there were. We just came to a ferry crossing next to one of the most important roads in the whole of the Iron Kingdom. It would be foolish not to have eyes there. But that doesn't mean anything untoward is happening. If directly asked, two of those men would readily admit to making extra coin

on the side for a bit of service to the Iron King. The third one is there to watch the other two. He would be much more reticent with information, probably a minor illustrati with some small amount of power."

"But if we know there are spies, what's the point?" asked Dominic. He wished that he had paid more attention to the crowd so he could make a guess as to who the three men had been. Gaelwyn had been touching many people, though he asked for their consent first. Seeing which had accepted and which had not would have been a vital clue.

"For us, there's little point," said Vidre. "A letter addressed to the Iron King's spymaster was likely sent immediately when we brought ship in to Bordes, and we've sent our own letters announcing our arrival in any case. For others though, the spies are a vital part of tracking the comings and goings of important people, especially illustrati. If information can be gleaned about their personal matters, all the better. The Iron King will get a report about what we did for lunch, which will let him know that we're playing the part of demure guests in his country, come to pay a calling and, perchance, to renew what contracts we have with them."

"Except that if the Iron Kingdom is the power behind the assassins, we're walking right into the lion's den," said Dominic. He felt vaguely unsettled, and not just because of the swaying of the horse.

"Just so," said Welexi. "Assassins, or a succession crisis, or possibly both." He sounded quite happy about the prospect.



They came around a bend to find themselves staring straight at Parance. They continued forward, but if Dominic had been in control of his own horse, he would have stopped to stare, if just for a while. The buildings were tall enough to beggar belief. Some of the ones near the center of the city seemed to stretch up hundreds of feet in the air, not just spires like a castle might have or the rooftops of a cathedral, but entire livable spaces with clear windows and terraces. In other cities a tall building was likely to be a landmark. In Parance, there were dozens of them, possibly hundreds, all huddled together. The city was dotted with small plumes of smoke, which gave it a smell that was obvious even at a distance.

"Where will we be staying?" asked Dominic. He couldn't take his eyes off the buildings. Some of them stretched to what must have been nearly thirty stories.

"We have friends in Parance," was Welexi.

"We have people who will give us room and board in exchange for the fame we can bring them," Vidre corrected. "We've sent letters ahead of us requesting their hospitality. They can hardly decline. I wouldn't call Quill a friend though. Hartwain either. Dominic, have you memorized the list of people yet?"

"Not quite," said Dominic. He couldn't take his eyes from the city. There was something about it that was slightly unsettling, sheer size aside. He turned his head towards

Vidre, still watching Parance grow larger in front of them. "Hartwain has a domain of cats and Quill has ink?"

"Yes," agreed Vidre. "Quill always has his ear to the ground; hopefully he can fill us in on what's been happening here."

"You'll see fewer independent illustrati here," said Welexi. "Most of them are in the Iron King's employ one way or another. They've banned stories about outsiders as well, so watch your tongue."

"Outsiders?" asked Dominic. "You mean I won't be able to talk about the Flower Queen?"

"There are exceptions for common sense," said Welexi. "Just don't speak too loudly to too many people, or we'll have trouble with the Ministry of Legends."

"And we're not outsiders?" asked Dominic.

"In one sense," said Vidre. "In another sense, we serve at the pleasure of the Iron King. We have accounts here, as in other places, and a contract which allows the Iron King to call us in for aid under certain circumstances. Given that we represent a significant amount of military might, we are more or less exempt from meddling on behalf of the various Ministries."

They rode forward, horses moving slowly beneath them. They'd been in the saddle for far too long for Dominic's tastes. By the time they reached a stable on the outskirts of the city, his thighs were raw. They left their saddlebags behind and ready to be fetched by a servant once they'd found their lodgings.

It was nearly sunset. Long shadows were cast over the city, which Dominic used his domain sense to see straight through. With a start, he realized what had been bothering him about the cityscape.

"The city isn't natural," he said.

"No," replied Vidre. Dominic turned to see her smirking. "Few cities are."

"They're on a grid," said Dominic. "From above, it would look like boxes shoved together." He wished that he could stretch out wings of shadow and fly with them, so he could see the city from above. Gennaro and Meriwall both had something living about them, an animal quality that sprang forth from how neighborhoods had developed over time. Parance must have been laid out from the beginning to be this hulking monstrosity of a city. It spoke to a frightening level of planning. As they walked down the streets, Dominic noticed other small things that marked this city as distinct from its peers; there were large paintings hung up on nearly every building with faces on them, usually with a name below. These were done in a stark style, something close to a portrait.

"Those don't work, by the by," said Vidre with a nod to the paintings. "There are too many of them, for one thing, and even if there weren't, people just walk right by them without too much thought on their second time down the street. They're images, not stories. They don't stick in the same way. The same goes for the daily chants the Iron King often makes his subjects say. It allows for some level of standing, but the effect plateaus too easily."

The crowds were ever-present. People followed them, in a way that Dominic had almost gotten used to, but there was none of the shouting and jostling that they had experienced upon their arrival in Torland, nor the enthusiastic cheers that they'd received when they were leaving Genaro. At first Dominic suspected that they were simply less well-known here, but he could see enough eyes watching him to see that wasn't the case. They drew attention, but that attention wasn't expressed in obtrusive ways. Dominic wondered whether that had anything to do with the Ministry of Legends, or whether this was perhaps just how people in Parance behaved around strangers. Either way, he enjoyed being able to walk through the streets without being harassed.

They crossed a thick bridge of iron and arrived at one of the dizzyingly tall buildings that had been so visible from far away.



"What do you mean he's not here?" asked Welexi. His brows were tightly furrowed as he spoke with who Dominic took to be the master of the building.

"I mean he no longer holds residence here," said the man. He had thick gray eyebrows and an imperious tone. "Is there anyone else I can help you find?"

"It's past sundown," Welexi complained. "Where can we find him?"

"I'm not at liberty to say," replied the master of the building. The building was nearly thirty stories tall, which

meant that there must have been hundreds of people living in it. The master of the building would nearly qualify as a minor illustrati himself, and he acted like it.

"He's an illustrati," said Vidre with her hands on her hips. "Quill can't possibly be in hiding. He can't have just run off. I highly doubt that he would have asked you to keep his whereabouts a secret from us."

"All I can say is that he no longer holds a residence within these premises," sniffed the man. "Now unless there's someone else that you would like to see, I'm afraid that I must ask you to leave."

Dominic looked at Vidre's bristling armor, which had sprouted more shards of glass in the past few minutes. He had to admire the sheer gall of forcing out a handful of the most powerful people in the world without any semblance of a defense in place. For a moment, it seemed as though Vidre would insist that they be allowed to see the top two floors of the building, where Quill had made his home, but the moment passed and she backed down.

"Come," said Vidre. "We'll just have to try for Hartwain."

The streets outside were dark, but it was a small matter for Welexi to fix that. His armor glowed more brightly and illuminated the path before them, casting deep shadows that Dominic could almost feel. It was nearly the opposite of stealth; they could surely be seen from every one of the mammoth buildings around them. The long streets would mean that everyone knew precisely where they were.

"What do you think happened to him?" asked Gaelwyn.

"There's no way of knowing without speaking to a few people first," said Welexi. He paused for a moment and formed a spear of light in his hand, gripped so that it might be mistaken for merely a light source. Dominic noticed that Vidre's daggers were at her hips, ready to be drawn, and tried to get in the mindset required for a fight. It would be the work of seconds to draw his own weapon from the deep shadows around them.

"He told me once that he was one of the Iron King's bastards," said Vidre. "We were in our cups when he said it. I don't know whether that was true or not, but if he told me, he may have told others. If the throne of the Iron Kingdom is on the line, there might be those with an interest in cleaning up loose ends prior to the succession crisis. It would certainly make things simpler."

"He might have been exiled," said Gaelwyn. He had a morose mockery of a smile. "I've heard that's been known to happen."

"It could be any number of things," said Vidre.

"I didn't know the man," said Dominic. "But if he was murdered as a plot to secure the throne more easily, it would have been done quietly so as not to alarm the other potential claimants. The master of the building must have been instructed to sweep it under the rug. He knows more than he said, but probably not much more." He shrugged. "I don't know. We'll have to ask your other friends if they know what's happened to him." He looked to Vidre. "Your associates, I mean."

"Do we see the work of the mysterious man?" asked Welexi. "That's the question I'd most like answered. Chester Welling left days before we did; he might have arrived in Parance ahead of us."

"Or Quill was killed a year ago," said Vidre. "Saying anything more is idle speculation."

They walked the city streets. Dominic followed behind, unsure of where they were going. There was no danger to them at present; the four of them walking out in the open with bright light illuminating them would make for one of the worst battlefields that an enemy could possibly choose. The danger was somewhere in the future, when they bedded down for the night. Dominic recalled the ease with which Faye had entered his room. The domain of sound could deaden even the most extreme attempts at entry.

"We'll have to be careful," Dominic found himself saying. "If I were them, I would attack us while we slept."

"That's treacherous," said Welexi. "But not out of character for them. They tried as much when I was injured." He briefly glanced down at the missing half of his hand. His broken bones had mostly healed, but the hand would remain maimed until a number of illustrati could come together to weave bone, flesh, and skin together for him. "We'll bar the doors and sleep in shifts, at least for tonight. We might only be looking too closely at the shadows."



Hartwain's manor was small by the standards of Parance, only three stories tall. The facade was ornate, with

balustrades and cornices aplenty. A braid of metals ran around the outer door, one for each of the metallic domains. Welexi brought the large knocker down twice, which brought a small woman to the door after a minute.

"We're looking for Mistress Hartwain," said Welexi. "Give her our deepest apologies for the late hour."

The small woman nodded. "I don't believe she's yet asleep. I will have words with her, if you would like to wait outside?" The question was polite, but the door was only partially opened.

"Very well," said Welexi.

Vidre leaned towards Dominic. "Hartwain doesn't stand on formality. You'd do well to forget your etiquette lessons for the time being."

Ten minutes later, they were beckoned into the house. Dominic noticed the smell of cats before he noticed the cats themselves; there were three in the foyer, sitting and watching, and another half dozen in the sitting room that they were led into. Hartwain sat on a chaise with cats flanking her, both of them large and gray. She was an older woman, with multicolored hair in clumps of black, orange, white, and brown. Her eyes were green, with slits for pupils. She watched them impassively as they entered, sipping at a cup of some steaming liquid. Her nails, long and curved, clinked against the porcelain.

"Well, well," said Hartwain. Her voice was rough, almost calloused. "It's been quite some time. A woman of glass and a man of light, a monster of flesh and this one, new, a boy of shadows." She blinked her cat's eyes. "To what do I owe

this nocturnal visit?" All the cats in the room seemed to be watching the conversation intently. Dominic felt a dozen pairs of eyes on him.

"We had an open invitation from Quill," said Welexi. "We sent a letter ahead to him, asking that he make rooms available for us. Unfortunately, it seems that something has happened to him, which means we're without a place to bed down for the night. I know I did not request as much in the letter that was to announce our arrival, but we would appreciate what hospitality you could grant us."

"Let's not play games," said Hartwain. "There are places, just not the sorts of places that the world's mightiest illustrati can be seen in on their first night in the city. The birds and the mice would whisper about how you had taken a room at an inn like a commoner. You couldn't possibly have that, could you?"

"No," said Vidre. "But we also need to get our footing here."

"What happened to Quill?" asked Welexi.

"If we're not playing games?" asked Hartwain. "He's one of a dozen illustrati to disappear with no warning. The Ministry of Legends is likely behind it, though to what end it's hard to say. And now I ask a question in turn." She swiveled her head towards Dominic. "Boy of shadow. What was going through your mind when you attacked Zerstor?"

"Ah," said Dominic. He looked towards Vidre, then Welexi, hoping to get rescued, but no help came. "I wasn't really thinking."

Hartwain frowned. "Not a good answer."

"I was thinking that my life wasn't worth that much," said Dominic. "And if I died, it would be quick."

"A better answer," said Hartwain. She turned back towards Welexi. "This little shadow is the talk of the town. The Ministry of Legends has even encouraged some of it. I do believe that they might think him worth poaching."

"Lightscour has done much in his short time with us," said Welexi. "You can speak with him more later on. For now, we need to know more about what's happening in this city. The Iron King hasn't been seen in public for a year. We have word that someone has found one or more Harbinger artifacts. What can you tell us?"

Hartwain yawned and stretched out. "We can speak more in the morning," she said. "But for now, it would suffice to say that I don't know much more than you do. I'll have Celeste prepare some rooms for you, though it will perhaps be more cramped than you're used to. I am a woman of simple means, you understand."

Welexi frowned at that. "Thank you for your hospitality."

After a half hour, which was mostly spent sipping on tea with a bit of lemon in it, Dominic was led up to a room that had been made up for him. He carefully checked the windows and the doors; he was on the third floor, though that didn't mean so much for defense, given how high illustrati could jump. There was a door leading to an adjoining room and a closet with nothing much in it. Welexi would send for the contents of their saddlebags in the morning, when the real work of being in Parance would properly begin. There

would be bards to go visit and digests of news to consume, but for now they had a place to work from.

Dominic was mildly surprised when Vidre walked into his room and laid down on his bed.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"We're sleeping in shifts," said Vidre. "Or did you forget?"

"No, I just thought ... what about Welexi and Gaelwyn?"

"They're also sleeping in shifts," said Vidre. She began to take off her glass armor, which involved reshaping it into a coil of glass. "I'm going half-clad. I don't think we're in any particular danger here beyond the usual, but I'll have my daggers close by."

Dominic cleared his throat. "Are we sharing a bed then?" he asked.

Vidre smiled. "Well, that is what I told Hartwain. She plays at being a recluse, with a sad story about being left at the altar, but in truth she's a terrible gossip. The scandal will have traveled around Parance by the time the sun rises. Unimportant if we're killed in our sleep, I admit."

"You're not, ah," said Dominic. His words were failing him. Vidre was making no attempt at sensuality. She was merely removing pieces of her armor so that she'd be able to sleep better. She wasn't even proposing to take off all of her armor. Yet watching her become partially undressed was having an effect on him, even if she wasn't exposing more of her body than he saw during any given day on the ship. Yet there was something sour about the whole affair.

"It's an escalation of our romance," said Vidre. "The implication will obviously be that we had sex together, for anyone that hears about it, but there will be enough of a seed of doubt to keep it interesting. There will be variations on the story. We can pick the right one later on."

"It's manipulation then," said Dominic.

"We're illustrating," said Vidre. "I've seen men and women trying to tell only the authentic stories. The best of them tell fanciful stories that they can believe, but which aren't much grounded in truth." She nodded to the adjoining room. "Men who can imagine themselves as heroes, no matter the messy truth?"

"No," said Dominic. "I meant ... it's manipulation of me." He shifted uncomfortably.

Vidre stared at him, then narrowed her eyes. "I thought we agreed to this," she said. "This was a tide that was to lift both our boats."

"We didn't discuss it," said Dominic. "We didn't talk together about the stories we wanted to project, you just decided that tonight would be the night that a certain sort of rumor starts spreading."

"You're going to lecture me about taking action without consulting others?" asked Vidre. "Did you ask anyone for objections before you killed Zerstor? Did you ask before you challenged Kendrick to a duel? Or did you just do those things because they seemed like the right things to do?"

"Those were different," said Dominic. "I didn't have time to ask."

"What is it that's really bothering you?" asked Vidre. "Is it my history? Have you changed your mind and decided that you would rather your sterling image not be tarnished by association with the Whore of Abalon?" She watched his face carefully.

"No," said Dominic. He turned slightly from her, to look towards the window. "I've never cared about that aspect of your legend."

"But that's just it, isn't it?" asked Vidre. "You don't need to care about my history of promiscuity, you only need to care that other people care."

"I don't care that they care," said Dominic. "I can't feel so much of a difference in my power from one day to the next. Even if I could, I don't know that I would be able to ascribe the change to one specific thing. If it's the idea of Dominic that's important, as Gaelwyn said, then I have no idea what the best courses of action are to increase my own standing. I trust you in that regard, at least. If you," Dominic stopped. He had a sudden lump in his throat. "If you have done things in the past, they can remain there."

Vidre's features softened. "I'm sorry," said Vidre. She reached up to pull out the glass shards that held her hair in place. The coif fell down slowly as she plucked the pins one-by-one. "I shouldn't have made that accusation. Before I can apologize for any other misunderstanding between us, I need to know what it is you think I've done."

Dominic looked at her. She had been sculpted by illustrati hands to be achingly beautiful. Some different harsh alchemy had shaped her into a creature of nearly uncon-

tested death. "I wanted a partner," he said. "I wanted us to talk about things and make plans together. The best moments I've had since leaving Gennaro have been in your company. When you teach combat, or even etiquette, I have the sense that we're engaged in a dialog together. It's not a dialog on even terms, I know you have the benefits of experience and age, but it was nonetheless a conversation that we were having together. Do you remember writing the letter with me? Quibbling over word choices and which information to leave in or take out? Wasn't there something special in that?"

"A nation balanced on the knife-edge of our subterfuge is the epitome of what our friendship should be?" asked Vidre. Her words were mordant, but there was a faint smile on her lips.

"Something like that," said Dominic. "If it's important that people believe we spent a night of passion together, I only want you to explain that to me before you go ahead with it."

"Fair enough," said Vidre. "I can see where I might have been seen to be overstepping."

"Issuing apologies was part of our etiquette lessons," said Dominic.

"I'm sorry," said Vidre. "Next time, I'll speak with you first, if that's something that I can reasonably do given whatever constraints I might be under."

"That's all I wanted," said Dominic.

"And with that settled, you're taking the first shift of guard duty. I'll be sleeping as lightly as I can. I'll take

second shift, then wake Welexi for the third. Wake me when a few hours have passed. Don't lay down, or you're liable to fall asleep yourself. I can share the bed, or you can take the floor if you would be more comfortable. We'll find a better place to sleep tomorrow."

Dominic nodded. "Good night."

"Good night," said Vidre.

He had never gone on watch before, but it was roughly as dull as he had expected. He alternated between exercising his domain by making objects out of shadows, watching Vidre sleep, and looking out the window and into the city. He entertained notions of Faye making her return for another conversation. Dominic had no idea what he would say to that, other than to make the case for Vidre as not being possessed of the same attributes that made Welexi troublesome towards any attempt at removing the illustrati from power. He wondered whether that was really the end goal, but three hours of sitting in the shadows didn't do much in the way of helping him think.

14. Legends

Dominic woke up to a cat licking his face.

"I've always taken to dogs instead of cats," said Vidre. She was laying in bed next to him, watching him. She still had her armor on, but it was clear that she was only just waking up, same as him. Vidre frowned slightly. She reached over to brush a curl of hair from his face, then petted the cat. Her face was softer following a night's sleep. By the light coming in through the window, it was just barely past dawn.

Dominic pushed the large tortoiseshell cat from on top of him and sat up. He'd made sure that the door was closed the night before. He looked towards the door, worried that he would find it open, or that he would spot Faye standing at the foot of the bed with her daggers drawn.

"Relax," murmured Vidre. "It's a guard cat. I went to check on Welexi and Gaelwyn last night; when I came back into the room, this little fellow followed me in. He curled up near your feet, so I thought there wasn't any harm." She yawned. "No attacks in the night, as you might have surmised."

Dominic flopped back down on the bed, then turned to look at Vidre. "I remember the stories about you as a child. You had puppies."

"Yes," replied Vidre. She seemed in no particular hurry to wake up. "A new one every month. My husband hated dogs, but he loved seeing me with a small, innocent puppy

in my arms. I would go to sleep with a dog that had gotten too big, then wake with a new puppy, often fresh from his mother's womb. Eventually I had to ask him to stop giving them to me. There was a feeling that came with losing a dog I'd bonded with ..." She trailed off. The sleepiness seemed to leave her face. Vidre rose from the bed and began to put pieces of her armor back on. "If Hartwain offers you a cat, it's important that you accept it. If nothing else, the ship needs a new mouser."

"You don't talk about your former husband much," said Dominic. She'd broached the topic only once; Dominic had been too cautious to ask questions. He watched her pinning her hair back into place with spars of glass that twisted like living things in her fingers.

"It was more than a decade ago that he died," said Vidre. "Once you've lived a little bit longer, you'll realize how quickly the past fades away. Living as a new queen with all the attention in the world wasn't what I would call a hardship." She paused slightly. "He didn't touch me."

"Ah," said Dominic.

"I was afraid of my marital duties," said Vidre. "I was nine years old when we were wed. It was a scandal that happened right at a time when there was a lull at court. The first night I lay there in fear, but my husband made no move for me. The stories always make me out to be much younger than I was, but I was old enough to have some awareness of the world. I thought perhaps he would exercise his duty when I grew older, but as I moved from girlhood to womanhood the only change in his demeanor was that he took

less of an interest in me." Vidre looked around the room. "I'm certain that my makeup is a mess, but we don't seem to have a mirror anywhere for me to confirm it."

"You look beautiful," said Dominic.

Vidre squinted at him, as though he had made a joke. "Well, of course I'm beautiful. I'm well-known for it. I'm not terribly modest. The question is whether my makeup is a mess, and if so, how much." She stretched out. "At any rate, I don't expect you to believe the true history of my childhood — few do — but most of the stories from my youth have more to do with my husband than they do with me. Elaborate parties, twelve-course meals, fancy gifts and expensive toys, all were provided by my husband to me. He had ideas of how a girl should think and act, which led him to lavish all this unasked for attention on me."

"I believe you," said Dominic. "The stories never seemed to have the ring of truth to them. My mother said you fed glass to a puppy once."

"I would laugh at the absurdity of it," said Vidre. "But I've heard that one before. Any humor I might take from it is now long gone."

"I'm sorry," said Dominic. "I mean ... I'm sorry that so many of the stories about you are so unpleasant."

"Most of them I earned," said Vidre. "Some of them I invented myself, useful lies designed to help me accumulate power. Once I realized how much I'd been maligned for my childhood, it was the obvious thing to do." She cocked her head to the side. "I hear a coach approaching, which means that we have company." Vidre paused before continuing.

"Thank you for listening to me. It's as Gaelwyn said, there's an idea of a person that lives inside your head. Even if it means you think poorly of me, I'd like for your idea of me to match my reality."



They came down to the sitting room, where Hartwain was waiting for them. An enormous black cat was curled up on the chaise next to her; it was nearly the size of a pony, if not a full-grown horse. Dominic had to keep himself from jumping when he saw it, which caused Hartwain to smirk at him. Gaelwyn and Welexi entered the room soon after Dominic had taken his seat.

"I trust that the arrangements were adequate?" asked Hartwain.

"Very much so," said Welexi. "We will do our best not to lean on your generosity for long."

"We've had a visitor," said Hartwain. "It is of course the height of rudeness to entertain a caller while there are already guests present, but if you would give me leave to introduce him?"

The way she said it gave no room for argument. "Of course we would be delighted to make the acquaintance of anyone who has been given the privilege of calling upon you."

"May I present to you Jacques Fabben, the Minister of Legends," Hartwain intoned.

The man who entered the sitting room wore a long sash decorated with medals, along with a turban that sat high on his head. It was a style that Dominic was unfamiliar with. The man's face was nearly covered in a thick beard, which obscured the thin line of his mouth. He had dark, haunted eyes.

"My pardon for the intrusion," said Jacques.

Hartwain gave the introductions, though Jacques would have been well-familiar with them all even if he hadn't been in charge of the illustrati of the Iron Kingdom. Jacques gave a low bow towards Vidre, as befit her status as queen-in-exile, which she seemed to accept with an undue amount of amusement. Dominic had to wonder whether she thought of her deranged husband when she was given the royal title.

"May I ask what happened to your predecessor?" asked Welexi after the formalities were done with and the minister was seated. "Laurence was a dear friend of mine. I hadn't heard word of his retirement."

"He passed, I'm afraid," said Jacques. "Died in the night from causes that are as-yet unknown."

"A shame," murmured Welexi. "And I hear that the Iron King is in ill health as well?"

Jacques coughed into his fist. "Parance swirls with rumors even in the best of times, and these are not the best of times."

"He's sequestered himself away for more than a year," said Gaelwyn. "That seems more than rumor to me."

"I'm afraid my business keeps me mostly within Parance itself," said Jacques. "But I have not come here to discuss the Iron King, nor, I apologize, to take breakfast with the Lady Hartwain. I have come seeking the aid of the most powerful illustrati the world has to offer."

"What kind of aid?" asked Dominic. That was more blunt than Welexi would have put it. The minister looked at Dominic as though surprised to see him in the room.

"There has been a rash of disappearances," said Jacques. "Illustrati, all of them."

"Fire illustrati among their number?" asked Welexi. He had moved towards the edge of his seat. His armor was glowing more brightly.

"Yes," nodded Jacques. "You've heard then." He sighed. "A number of mills have been temporarily shut down until we can elevate more illustrati to take their place. The Iron Kingdom has a number of dependencies, but even with the redundancies we have in place, the losses have been hitting us quite hard. Without someone to heat the boilers, the mills can't run. That in turn slows down every merchant and artisan that depends on the output of those mills."

"We'll need a catalog of who's missing," said Vidre. "Have corpses been found?"

"None," said Jacques.

"What about Quill?" asked Welexi.

"He will be included in the catalog," said the minister.

An uneasy silence settled over the room. Hartwain stroked her enormous black cat with one hand, then gave a

demure yawn. She was feigning nonchalance, Dominic was almost certain of that. Whatever was happening in Parance, the enemy was acting exceedingly brazen. It would have been perfectly natural for Hartwain to believe that her life was in danger. Perhaps that was even the case. Dominic had his doubts though; if the fire illustrati had their fame and domains taken from them, then Faye and whoever she worked for were finding specific targets with some purpose in mind. The many cats in Hartwain's manor were eerie in the way they moved around and stared at him, but aside from the black cat, they didn't seem terribly threatening or useful.

Dominic's eyes moved around, taking in each of the illustrati in turn. They'd brought an enormous amount of fame to Parance, along with a variety of useful domains. He had the uneasy feeling that they were going to be bait, willingly or not.



The Ministry of Legends was one of a number of tall buildings near the river. They had opted to walk rather than attempt to fit five people into a small coach, though Jacques had gone on ahead of them. The four illustrati were armed and armored as though a war were coming, save for Gaelwyn, who had on only his everyday clothing and green apron.

"You didn't ask about the artifacts," said Dominic as they walked.

"If there are artifacts," said Vidre.

"No need to concern the minister with such things," said Welexi. "If he was willing to share such information in front of Hartwain, he likely would have done so of his own volition. If the Iron Kingdom is behind whatever is happening, better for them to have to put in some effort to find out what it is we know." He sucked at his teeth. "Perhaps speaking with Hartwain on the matter was unwise, but she's been a steadfast friend in the past."

"Steadfastly devoted to herself," muttered Gaelwyn.

"I doubt that she would have called you a monster if she had been appraised of what had happened in Meriwall," said Welexi. "She didn't know it was a sore spot that had been laid open. When she said it, she was only trying to make light. If she had actually thought you a monster, she wouldn't have given us rooms for the night."

The crowds were out in force. As had been the case the day before, many people stared, but no one approached them. The air smelled slightly acrid, even with a light breeze blowing through the city. There was an ever-present sound around them, a cacophonous mixture of horses, industry, and people. The river that ran through the heart of the city was barely a whisper in comparison. Gennaro had certainly been noisy, but it was a noise of the sea and the gulls that perched on every dockside building. Parance had its noise shaped by the tall buildings, lending a faint echo to every sound.

Dominic tried his best not to be continually amazed by the city, but he was afraid he was doing a poor job of it. The stories talked about the Iron Kingdom as having

muddy roads that its citizens trudged through. Every street that Dominic had stepped through was paved with thick, orderly flagstones. Where Gennaro had runnels that lined its busier streets, carrying water and filth in equal measure, in Parance there were small grates set into the sides of the streets. It wasn't clear where they led to. That was the sort of thing that kept Dominic's mind alight when he looked around him. They were walking towards one of the immense buildings, those that reached thirty stories up into the air. Did people walk up that many stairs every day? The buildings were made from iron, clearly enough, which would have helped with keeping them from collapsing, but it still must have taken the work of hundreds of people.

"We need to establish a few rules for going into the ministry," said Vidre. "Don't accept food or water. Don't touch anyone. Don't handle anything you're not intimately familiar with."

"You're speaking indelicately," said Welexi. "We cannot go casting aspersions on those who we call allies." His eyes flickered to the people around him. Dominic thought about the talk of spies they'd had the day before. The Minister of Legends had left in his coach to meet them there, but obviously the Iron Kingdom would have had someone trail them. They represented a significant amount of military might.

"The Iron Kingdom has lost a number of its illustrati," said Vidre. "They can take offense all they want, so long as we stay safe. It wouldn't even need to be action at the upper

levels of the Iron Kingdom, it could be a rogue member intending to secure a position once the succession happens."

"There's no construction," said Gaelwyn. He was looking around the city as they walked, with more of an analytical eye than Dominic had. "The tallest of these buildings are new; a hundred yards was as high as they went the last time we were here, spires and decorations aside. Quill lived in the tallest of them. Now they've managed more than that, quite a few times. All within the years since we were last here. Yet there's no construction. We should expect to see a few buildings in a half-finished state even now, trying to surpass their brethren or continuing the city's quest to pack as much flesh in as few square miles as possible."

"You find this suspicious," said Vidre. "Or at least germane to the conversation?"

"It's troubling," said Gaelwyn. "It means that something has changed within the Iron Kingdom." He pointed up towards one of the buildings next to the river. "If you see there, that one was completed only recently. The outer skin is unembellished for the final ten floors in a way that the others are not."

"Why rush it?" asked Dominic.

"Image," said Vidre. "They're projecting a scene." She was looking around the city as well, scanning the tops of the buildings. "Same as any illustrati. But the purpose here is not the accumulation of power, only its retention."

"To what end though?" asked Dominic.

"They don't have enough iron," said Welexi. "They're not building more of these monstrosities because they can't."

It bodes poorly for the Iron King's health, if that line of reasoning is sound."

"The succession might already be happening," said Gaelwyn. "Worse, it might already be over, without any fanfare."

This was met with a still silence that let sounds of the city be heard. Dominic wondered whether the spies that were surely following them would report this back to their masters. If the Iron King had died some time ago, his death had not been announced to the world. While he was a large and imposing figure in the politics of the world, he rarely left Castle Launtine even before his supposed illness, only taking trips every few weeks to look in on his kingdom. He otherwise invited people to his castle if they had business with him, which kept him somewhat divorced from the city of Parance. Dominic tried to think of all the people who would have to be in on such a deception for it to work — there were courtiers, messengers, ministers, and all manner of men and women who would deal with the Iron King on a daily basis. Some of them could be deflected by the excuse of sickness, but there were limits on how long that could last.

The bottom floor of the Ministry of Legends was an open, cavernous room, filled with a variety of people gathered together in clusters. A number of them wore red waistcoats with black sashes across them, which Dominic took to be a uniform of some sort.

"This is where the business of illustrati is conducted in the Iron Kingdom," Vidre said to Dominic in a low voice.

"It works less well than they would like you to believe. You can organize the telling of stories, or outlaw tales about certain people, but in large part you're trying to regulate how people think. It's a basic fact of history that people often think in inconvenient ways."

Gennaro had its own laws to similar effect, but there it was widely agreed that no one should take those laws seriously. Gennaro was also rife with corruption among the guard, not to mention the senatori, so perhaps this was a matter of more general problems with the city. As Welexi spoke with two men in red behind a large desk, Dominic's eyes wandered the open area. What was the purpose of all these uniformed men? Presumably they each had some role to play, yet Dominic couldn't imagine that this was the most efficient way of creating and maintaining illustrati.

Dominic followed behind as they were guided to a small room off the side of the open reception area. One of the uniformed men spoke briefly into a horn mounted on the wall, then gestured into the small room. When the four illustrati were in, a metal door was drawn shut, locking them within. Dominic gave a start when the floor beneath him started to move.

"It's called an ascending room," said Vidre. She was watching him with a smile. "We're being pulled up by a winch."

"Clever," said Dominic. He felt unsteady. The tenor of the air was changing as they rose, but the walls of the ascending room made it impossible to tell how fast they were moving. "Is it safe?"

"You're an illustrati," said Welexi. "I survived a fall from above the clouds."

"With broken bones," said Gaelwyn. "Bones which are not yet fully mended."

"So is it safe?" asked Dominic. He had started thickening his armor of shadow and forced himself to stop. No one else seemed concerned with the possibility of the ascending room making a rapid descent.

"Safe enough," said Vidre. "It's used every day by hundreds if not thousands of people."

The climb continued for far longer than Dominic felt it should. He couldn't tell whether the sensation of swaying was his imagination, or whether the air had actually gotten thinner. The building that housed the Ministry of Legends didn't reach the height of even a small mountain, but Dominic felt light-headed all the same.

When the ascending room finally came to a sudden, jerking stop, the door to it opened to reveal another of the ubiquitous uniformed men, standing there waiting for them. He led them down a long hallway, then another much shorter one, to the office of Jacques Fabben, who was waiting for them behind a desk. Dominic was thankful that the room had no windows; he was spared the feeling of looking out over empty air, or being fully aware of their extreme height. He settled into his seat and tried his best to pretend that they were on the ground floor.

"A small office for one with such a senior position within his Ministry," said Vidre.

"I apologize for the lack of amenities, your Majesty," said Jacques. "There are renovations being done on the floor above, so for the time being, this is where I must do my business."

"You have records for us to look through?" asked Welexi.

"Yes, of course," said Jacques slowly. He fumbled at one of his desk drawers for a moment before pulling out a sheaf of papers.

"I note that this temporary office has no windows," said Vidre. "Curious that they weren't able to find you a better place, isn't it?"

"I didn't want to inconvenience anyone," said Jacques. He leaned forward, over his desk. "Now, the illustrati we've lost track of worked primarily in the mills, though there a number of more independent illustrati —"

Vidre stood up from her seat. She drew her armor up over her as she moved, adding on glass until it was more thick and protective. She moved to the room's single door, inspected the knob for a moment, then tried to open it. When it didn't open, Dominic stood up as well, pulling up more armor and making a sword appear in his hand.

"I was given to understand we could leave at any time?" Welexi said to Jacques. His tone was even; it almost seemed like he was enjoying himself. "I do find it curious that this small, temporary office would have a lock from the inside."

Vidre drew back a fist, coated it so thoroughly in glass that it resembled a sledgehammer, then slammed it into the door. This was met with a resounding clank of metal. Pieces of the door fell away, revealing a thick slab of iron where

the wood had been covering it; Vidre's attack hadn't even dented it.

"I'm sorry," said Jacques. There was sorrow in his voice. "He asked it of me, and I could not resist him."

"Who?" asked Welexi.

"We need to get out of here," said Dominic. "We need to break through the walls, or —"

Vidre whirled around the room, with her daggers trailing behind her. She left marks on the walls, deep enough to cut through layers of paper, plaster, and paneling. When Vidre had cut to the metal on each wall, she began on the floor and ceiling as well, raining plaster down on them.

"Who?" asked Welexi again. "Who is your master?"

"The Iron King," said Jacques, in nearly a whisper.

"We need to get out of here," said Vidre. "Now."

"How?" asked Dominic. He had his sword of shadow at the ready, for all the good that would do. "How thick are these walls?"

"Too thick," said Vidre. She spat on the ground and spun her daggers in her hands. "I can punch through steel plating, but solid iron a few feet thick ..." she shook her head. "Everyone, hold your breath."

Dominic barely had time to take a deep gulp of air while Vidre formed a sphere of glass in her hand. The sphere crumbled to a fine dust, which Vidre began to liberally spread into the air. She screwed her eyes closed, allowing the full use of her domain sense.

"They're sucking the air out of the room," said Vidre. She dashed over to a small bit of paneling and ripped it from the wall, then quickly formed a stopper of glass. "That should buy us some time."

"Not poison?" asked Dominic.

"They want our power," said Welexi. He still hadn't budged from his seat. His eyes were firmly on Jacques. "We've come to the heart of the matter. The Minister of Legends has turned against us, which means that we now count the Iron Kingdom as an enemy."

"That does us no good unless we escape from here," said Vidre. She moved towards Jacques with daggers drawn. "Tell me the plan."

"I do not know," said Jacques. "I was told only to bring you to this room and keep you here." He looked between the four of them. "He did not say it was a trap."

"Yet you knew," said Welexi.

"A person breathes two gallons of air every minute," said Gaelwyn. "I am in agreement with Vidre that our situation is dire, especially given that an unknown quantity of breathable air has already been removed."

Vidre advanced on Jacques again. "Tell me how we escape."

"There is no escape," said Jacques. "There would not be, for the Iron King to have done something so brazen."

Vidre's dagger flashed forward and slit the minister's throat.

"Vidre!" shouted Welexi.

"He was breathing our air," Vidre replied. "I've given us an extension on life." She turned to survey the room, oblivious to the blood on her dagger or the slight choking sounds as the minister pawed at the wound in his neck. "We need to find a weak point and break through there. If I made a large enough lens for you to focus light through?"

"We would cook before we began to melt the iron," said Welexi. He stood from his seat and spared only a glance at the minister's body. Dominic recalled what Vidre had said some days before; there were certain things that Welexi needed to have done but — whether for his image or his internal beliefs about himself — could not do himself, or even ask.

They moved around the room trying to find a way to break out, but the metal was thick enough that it seemed impossible. Each punch or hammer blow brought another loud clang that echoed around the room, destroying more of the dressing that had marked it as an office on first glance. They could make dents in the metal, but there was nothing to grip onto to tear into it, even with implements forged of light and shadow. Vidre briefly removed the stopper she'd placed in the vent, but that did nothing but confirm that someone was sucking air from the room, fast enough that it created a noticeable breeze.

"If we run and jump," said Vidre. "All at once, towards a single side of the room, we might be able to knock this cage loose from its moorings. The rest of the building will only be a skeleton of iron, not so solid."

"And then what?" asked Welexi. "We cause this room to tumble hundreds of feet to the ground?" He shook his head. "It won't work."

"Then we die here," said Vidre. She had the same manic intensity that Dominic had seen on her face when her life was on the line, she held her daggers tight in her hands, even though both of them were useless in the current situation.

Dominic tried to think of everything at their disposal, some weapon or tool that they'd been overlooking. The construction of the room emphasized the solid, with walls that were at least three thick feet of pure iron. They were all strong, but not quite so strong that they could punch through it. And when it was impossible to break through an obstacle, better to avoid it altogether.

"Your constructs of light can move through metal," said Dominic. He looked at Welexi. "When you were fighting Zerstor, your spears passed straight through his armor. It's a technique at your disposal."

"It does no good," said Welexi. "When they pass through, they do no damage."

"No," said Dominic. His breathing had already become labored. "But you can turn yourself into light. You became this luminous being and his sword passed straight through your midsection." Dominic looked toward the iron door, which was at least as thick as the wall and so far as they could tell, slotted into the plate of iron that made up the floor. "You should be able to run straight through the wall."

Welexi frowned. For a moment, Dominic thought that he would deny the ability altogether. Instead the illustrati of light replied with a soft voice. "You don't know what you're asking of me."

"It takes effort, I know that," said Dominic. Vidre was continuing to bang away at the walls, oblivious to the conversation.

"More than that," said Welexi. "It takes a loss of self. A moment of no longer being human."

Gaelwyn stepped forward. "And is that so high a price to pay, in order to save us?"

Welexi didn't answer. Instead, he squared himself up and turned towards the flat metal of the door. There was no countdown or warning, only a simple sprint from one of the fastest people in the world. At the moment he made contact, he became so bright that Dominic was momentarily blinded, even though he'd known that it was coming. When he blinked away the stars in his eyes, Welexi was gone.



Welexi came out the other side, reconstituted by some alchemy he did not understand. He was riddled with fear, as he had been the three times he'd used the technique before. Was he the same man he'd been before? Were his thoughts his own, or were they now mixed with the imaginings of his domain? He had only a few seconds of heavy breathing and clutching at his heart before the man standing in front of him came out of the daze. The man held a sword up in a defensive position, but it was short work to

slide a spear past it. The first opponent fell to the ground just as the others rounded the corner; these were illustrati and would not be so easily dispatched. Welexi welcomed the fight, the better to let his mind move away from squirming, uncomfortable thoughts. He turned his armor bright enough that it would be blinding and moved forward with spear spinning in his hand.

Both the illustrati were clad in their domains. It was a weakness of the illustrati that they gave such a tactical advantage to their enemies by revealing themselves so; in his early years, Welexi had gone as long as he could before revealing his domain as light, or even revealing that he was an illustrati at all. He had dressed in a simple soldier's uniform, or something that befit a caravan guard. Only when the moment was right would he give up the advantage of anonymity. He had become a hero by leaving those ways behind, by shining forth like a beacon, yet there was still a pang of regret at times, knowing that the way of the hero was difficult.

The two illustrati he now faced had no clever ideas about hiding their natures. The one on the left wore blue and yellow, with jagged bolts of lightning embroidered into the cloth of his coat. If that were not enough, a circlet of electricity sat upon his head. Lightning was an erratic domain, difficult to control and hard to understand even to those who claimed it as their own. The illustrati of lightning would stay towards the back, trying to throw thick bolts from a distance. Up close, he would channel the lightning directly through his hands. He would be hampered the

most by blindness. The one on the right had armor of ice nearly encasing him, which was growing thicker by the moment. A chill had already started to seep into the hallway, along with a few generated flurries that would let the illustrati see even when his eyes failed him.

Welexi darted forward, aiming for the left. He made a lunge to the right to mimic a feint, but released his spear to the left. It struck the illustrati in the arm, which produced a cry of pain. Welexi met with the illustrati of ice soon after, another spear freshly made in his hands. He was stronger and faster than either of these men could possibly be; these days, as his body had aged, this was how he'd won most of his fights. The illustrati of ice dodged away from the spear thrusts, driving him backwards. When Welexi saw a spot of snow land upon his spear, he dismissed it and summoned a new one; there were still bits of ice on him and a creeping cold in the air, but it was difficult if not impossible to judge the position of a weapon merely by seeing two points on the hand that held it. Welexi kept his armor as bright as possible, though it gave him no true impediments.

The illustrati of lightning was the first to die. Welexi stabbed him in the stomach with a spear after an errant bolt of lightning slammed against the iron door. As soon as the spear was dismissed, blood began to spurt out in great quantity. It would take some time for the man to die, but he would be in shock soon enough. A second spear through the chest ensured his death. Welexi narrowly dodged to the side as an ax of ice came swinging down, but this put the second illustrati far too close. Welexi slammed his fist

forward to catch him on the chin, shattering armor of ice in the process. That put the illustrati off his footing enough that it was easy to sink a spear past his armor and into his heart.

Welexi was left breathing heavily in the hallway, more from the lack of oxygen inside the prison than any real exertion. He tried to clear his head and think about his goals; he needed to find a way to open the death trap back up. He slipped forward with a spear in either hand, trying his best not to remember how he'd escaped.



"There's no guarantee that he'll find a way to release us," said Vidre. She had given up on attacking the iron walls. Now she was slumped down in one of the chairs, trying to keep her breathing slow and even.

"We don't even know if he made it through," said Gaelwyn. "He might have been trapped inside the wall itself."

"We have no choice but to wait for rescue," said Dominic. "We should try to conserve our air."

Dominic tried to limit his breaths. It was difficult, because each breath seemed to do less than the one before it. There was a vague sense of panic at the back of his mind. He kept half an eye on Vidre, remembering the way she'd slit the minister's throat even before they'd started to feel the effects of suffocation. He didn't think that she would try to kill them to prolong her own life, but the casual violence had shocked him. Early in the morning they'd talked about her reputation and the truth of the stories that were told about

her. She hadn't remarked on all the men she'd killed in her time, but it was clear that this was part of what she'd meant when she said that most of her reputation was earned.

Dominic was light-headed, with wandering thoughts that seemed to run themselves in circles. It wasn't quite a dream and not quite a hallucination, though none of it made much sense. In the stories, people always had portentous dreams that revealed something about their hopes and fears, but Dominic only saw mice chasing after cheese and a fat man belching smoke from the top of his head. He turned to remark on this to Welexi, but realized that he'd gone somewhere. Vidre had gotten up from her chair and was banging against the door again, even though she was using up their precious remaining air.

There was a hissing sound from the door which caused Dominic to scramble towards it. Vidre had her face stuck near a small, widening hole, trying to suck in more air as it came through. Dominic saw a hand reaching through the hole with calloused fingers, which made no sense until he saw that there was a man behind that hand. He had a knife of light pressed against his neck, held by a hand with missing fingers which had been replaced by constructs of light. They illuminated a face that was pale and splattered with blood. Behind him, Welexi was preternaturally calm.

"Continue," said Welexi's voice.

"I feel dizzy," said the man, an illustrati of iron by the way the metal peeled back at his touch.

"Gaelwyn will heal you," said Welexi.

Dominic turned back to look at the chairs. Gaelwyn hadn't moved at the sound of air. His eyes were still closed. Dominic moved forward to pick him and throw him over his shoulder. He moved past Welexi as soon as the opening was wide enough to permit him to, and laid Gaelwyn out in the hallway, where the air wasn't fouled. His heart was still beating, but it was faint.

"Is it clear out there?" asked Vidre.

"I have no idea," said Welexi. "I've killed too many to have great confidence in our ability to make an easy exit." He looked past Vidre to where the minister was sitting with his head lolled to one side. "They will not take this lightly."

Dominic slapped Gaelwyn on the face, just hard enough that he hoped to provoke a response. Gaelwyn opened one bleary eye, then closed it again. It was a good sign for his well-being.

"They won't take it lightly?" asked Vidre. "What they've done is an act of war, nothing less." Her breathing had settled down and the color had returned to her face. Both glass daggers were long and pointed, now almost short swords. She had them gripped so tightly that her knuckles were white. "If war is what they want, war is what they will have."

15. Falls

The one-armed man staggered toward Gaelwyn and laid his hand upon the physician. His face was pale; blood dripped from the stump where his arm had once been.

"Please," he whispered.

Gaelwyn sat up slowly and gave the man a careless touch. The bleeding stopped at once as the meat around his shoulder folded in on itself. The grinding sound of bone touching bone set Dominic's teeth on edge. The man sagged to the floor with a haggard expression and began to cry.

"It's too quiet," murmured Vidre. She was standing at the end of the short corridor that separated them from the long hallway which led back to the ascending room. "Unless you were exceedingly stealthy, the alarm will have been raised."

"I'm afraid there was much shouting," said Welexi.

"Most of the people in this building wouldn't have been aware of what was happening," said Dominic. He helped Gaelwyn to his feet, barely thinking about their flesh making contact. Gaelwyn would be able to feel almost the entirety of Dominic's body through that connection. "They'll only know that we left death and destruction behind us." He turned to look at the minister's corpse.

"Leave the moralizing for later," said Vidre. "What's our next move?"

"They'll respond in full force, thinking it's an attack," said Welexi. "We must assume hostility. We leave through one of the windows."

"How high up are we?" asked Vidre. "Three hundred feet? You're the only one with wings."

Dominic watched the one-armed man while they argued. What was to come after they made their escape from the Ministry? It was clear that they couldn't stay in Parance for any longer than they had to. They'd have to get back to the ship as quickly as possible, trying to outrun the news of what had happened, but if anyone was aware of what had happened here, they would already be racing ahead to cut off that path. In fact, it seemed likely that if the enemy planned for them to be assassinated in Parance, the ship would have been seized upon first word of their arrival. The iron room was a trap, but it was only a small trap nested inside a larger one.

"We won't be able to escape the kingdom with broken legs," said Dominic.

"We aren't going to escape," said Welexi. "We're going to confront the Iron King. This story doesn't end with us running away with our tails between our legs, it ends with the ringleader put to the sword and made to answer for his crimes."

"We're going to kill the Iron King?" asked Dominic.

"Or whoever rules in his stead," said Vidre. "Seems sensible enough to me, all things considered. If we tried to run, they'd chase us. There would also be our enduring reputation to worry about, if the weight of the Iron Kingdom's storytelling engines was brought to bear against us."

There were sounds from the corridor beyond where they stood. It was the thunder of footsteps. Vidre's armor had

already been built up to be thick, but now it slammed down into place around her, leaving no contact with the outside world save for two vents that passed by either cheek to allow her to breathe. Welexi's armor was nearly as concealing. He held a spear of light in each hand. Dominic tried his best to thicken his armor, but he'd sparred enough to know that he would be a hindrance to the others in the tight quarters of a hallway.

"I can't fly while carrying another," said Welexi. "But I would be able to use my wings to slow the descent for another."

"And leave the others to be spitted?" asked Vidre. She furrowed her eyebrows.

"I could return," said Welexi. "We would move one by one. It would be a matter of minutes."

Vidre leaned over and looked down the long hallway. She pulled her head back and swore. "They're already in position."

"All you'll need to do is hold the hallway," said Welexi. "I'll take Gaelwyn out the window then return."

"Minutes is too long," said Vidre. "Dominic and I will fight our way down together."

"Agreed," said Welexi. "I will return to offer what assistance I can."

"Wait," said Vidre. "Where do we regroup?"

Dominic heard an unfamiliar sound from down the hallway. They were hidden in their alcove; he trusted Welexi and Vidre to keep them safe, but if they were driven back

into the iron room there wouldn't be any hope of escape. The sound was something like hissing. Vidre must have heard it too, since she steeled herself and faced the doorway that separated them from the longer hallway. A metal ball the size of a human head rolled into view. Vidre swept forward and kicked it with her glass boot hard enough to shatter the glass, sending it flying back down the hallway to where it had come from. The explosion happened a half second later.

The noise came first, followed quickly by a rush of air. The wall between them and the grenade — a term Dominic was only passingly familiar with, but that must have been what it was — burst outward, with small bits of wood filling the air. Dominic's teeth were rattled and everything sounded as though he was underwater. Vidre's armor was shot through with cracks. Her left leg, visible within its shattered glass casing, was red with blood.

"Move!" shouted Vidre. The word was understandable more from the shape of her mouth than the sound, which barely reached Dominic's ringing ears. She darted down the hallway, moving toward the explosion. Welexi followed, with Gaelwyn behind him, but they went the other direction when they got to the central hallway, towards the large window that gave the hallway its light. Dominic came after them, just in time to see Welexi hook Gaelwyn beneath his arms and leap from the window without ceremony. His wings could be seen unfurling for a brief moment before he dropped from sight.

Dominic followed Vidre through the smoke, nearly tripping over blood and viscera. Welexi had already been down this corridor before, when he'd fought his way out of the iron room; he must have left bodies behind. The smoke was thick enough that Dominic tried to navigate through only his domain sense, but the smoke made the shadows diffuse. He plunged forward anyhow, just in time to see Vidre slice a man in a red uniform across his throat. At his side was a sling with two more of the enormous grenades within it. Vidre moved forward without giving him a second thought, on to the next; there were no obvious illustrati among them, only men with wide-barreled pistols and sabres.

"Dom, darkness!" called Vidre.

Dominic deepened the shadows around them, until nothing was visible save for what his domain sense showed him. Vidre had more glass powder to allow her some proxy to sight; she sliced through the helpless men quickly and efficiently, sometimes leaving a glass dagger stuck in one of them while she pulled a spare from the shards of her armor. For his part, Dominic did not fight. The quarters were cramped and he was far less skilled than Vidre was. He could have used his sword of shadow to spear those men that still squirmed on the ground in her wake, but he didn't have the stomach for it.

"Hold," said Vidre as she lowered a bleeding man to the floor. She was holding him up by the dagger stuck in his stomach. "No illustrati," she said into the darkness. The deep shadows made her a ghostly image to Dominic's eyes.

It was harder to read her face like this. "They're preparing something further down. Or at least, that's what I would do."

"How much further until we can jump?" asked Dominic.

"I don't know," said Vidre. "Come on."



They had rode up together in the ascending room, carried by unseen ropes thanks to the might of an unseen engine. It had been nerve-wracking to Dominic, in part because of the way the room swayed and shook. This was nothing compared to their journey to the bottom of the Ministry of Legends.

They were fighting against an unstoppable tide of men. Vidre was favoring her left leg, though she made no complaints about it. If another of those grenades went off at close range, Dominic worried that they would be seriously injured, if they didn't outright die. Most of the men in red had sabres, but a few of them had pistols as well. With her glass armor in place, covering her ears, Vidre couldn't hear the sizzling sound of a fuse running short. She took a single shot to the gut which pierced her armor entirely, but though Dominic saw blood, Vidre only stopped for long enough to kill the man and seal her armor closed again.

The wooden stairway did not follow a straight path down. It zig-zagged back and forth, occasionally stopping abruptly, only to pick up again at the other side of the floor. This provided a number of ideal choke points for the men in uniform to put up a defense, when they weren't trying to

fight a battle on the stairs (one the guards would invariably lose). In the course of descending four floors they twice encountered a grenadier, who pitched forward grenades that ranged in size from an apple to a melon. When they saw one, Dominic and Vidre would both duck behind a doorway or try to scramble out of the way. The explosions caused more damage to the building than to Dominic or Vidre, though Dominic was left with a headache.

Vidre had killed perhaps twenty men by the time they encountered their first illustrati. He stood at the end of one of the central hallways, dressed in heavy metal armor but with his wrinkled face and gray hair exposed. Vidre whipped one of her daggers at him, but he flicked it aside with a casual gesture as it approached him. Vidre created a second dagger and ran towards him, which was all the incentive he needed to fill the hallway with an enormous wind that slowed her down. Dominic followed behind her, hoping that he could be some use for once; a few weeks of training had not yet made him an expert soldier and they hadn't once discussed how to defeat an illustrati of air. Dominic assumed that one of them had been responsible for sucking the air from the iron room they'd been trapped within.

As the illustrati redoubled his efforts to create a wind that would knock them off balance, two men came out from a doorway behind him with rifles, which they aimed squarely at Vidre. She cursed and threw herself sideways into one of the rooms. Dominic was nearly thrown from his feet by the wind, but he followed behind Vidre all the same.

"Darkness," she said. Dominic heightened the shadows until they were standing in pitch black. A quick look around the room showed a long table with pots of inks; this was one of the places where those paints were made. A few of them hung up on the walls, though the room was dominated by its windows. They were still hundreds of feet from the ground. Vidre stood facing doorway with her daggers drawn.

"It's Calligae," Vidre said, mostly to herself. "Stupid bastard took up residence in the Iron Kingdom a few years ago. He was a friend once."

Dominic held a sword of shadow in his hand. It was still unused. The illustrati of air would be coming for them, or summoning reinforcements while they hid. Neither option was good. Vidre seemed indecisive for once, unsure of what the best course of action would be. She couldn't let herself be shot too many times, not even with her glass armor as thick as she could make it. The illustrati of air alone would be an issue. Vidre tossed more glass powder into the air — Dominic's lungs were sore from breathing the stuff — and frowned at whatever she was seeing in the darkness.

"No darkness," she said. Dominic dropped the shadows. "We're leaving out the window."

"It's too much of a drop," said Dominic.

"I don't know if I can beat Calligae, not if he's got an army behind him," said Vidre. "He's almost certainly an innocent in all this besides that. We're going to have to risk some broken bones."

"If we break our legs we'll never leave this city alive," said Dominic. "And we don't know how to find Welexi and Gaelwyn."

Vidre held a finger to her lips. Her daggers wavered slightly in her hands. She would need to see Gaelwyn after they got out of here, if they got out at all; her leg and her stomach both showed red behind the glass.

A gust of wind blew through the doorway, causing papers to fly up from the long table and rip free from the walls. A figure came darting into the room, though not the one that they'd been expecting; this was a new illustrati, someone in burning red, molten armor. The air shimmered around him as he dove towards Vidre. She stepped to the side rather than try to face the heat coming from him. He landed on the floor, causing fires to light up where he touched it, then lunged at Vidre a second time. She tossed her daggers at him and ran, leaping over the long table and then crashing out of the window in a swan dive. The molten man shared a brief look at Dominic then began to advance on him, which left Dominic no real choice besides following Vidre. He sprinted towards the large windows, surrounding himself with more shadows to blunt the impact, but the wood and glass broke away easily. Dominic found himself in free fall.



Dominic was forming the wings of shadow even as he made his exit from the Ministry of Legends. They were small stubs when he began to properly fall. By the time that first

second had passed, they were long enough that they might be doing something to slow him down. He began to spin, first a gentle turn and then fast enough that the buildings around him were something of a blur. It was something in the way he'd made the wings that was doing it, by the tug he felt at the point they attached to his armor, but he didn't dare dismiss them to try again. Dominic had no idea how quickly the ground was approaching, nor how much the small wings were helping to slow him down. He focused his efforts on trying not to be sick, which he accomplished mostly by closing his eyes tight. Papers fluttered down around him, some of them printed with the faces of illustrati.

He landed with a jolt and realized with immense relief that his legs were still working. Dominic opened his eyes and dismissed his wings, only to find himself standing atop a building that was still a hundred feet up from the ground. He took a moment to get his bearings. Dominic was further from the Ministry of Legends than he'd thought possible, more than a block from the shattered window that he and Vidre had leapt out of. There was no sign of Vidre, though that was little surprise; she would have taken a much more direct trip to the ground. Dominic must have twirled like a leaf on the wind, slowed but uncontrolled. There was no sign of Welexi or Gaelwyn either, but thanks to twisting stairways, Dominic had no idea which side of the building they'd even left from.

A flicker of motion brought Dominic's attention back to the Ministry building, just in time to see Calligae leaping

out the same window. For a moment Dominic thought the old man was actually flying, but it was only a sort of glide. A full second passed before Dominic realized that the illustrati's glide was taking him to the rooftop that Dominic was standing on. Dominic deepened the shadows around him once again and began to run, as fast as he'd ever run before.

The rooftops of Parance were uneven, dropping precipitously from building to building before rising again. Dominic dropped two stories down to a rooftop plaza, then burst through a pair of large doors, bringing the deep shadows with him. A group of musicians with string instruments held with long fingers were groping around in the darkness, but the breeze Dominic could feel on his neck was enough for him to ignore them and push his way towards the nearest door, which he kicked open with a splinter of wood. He barreled his way down the hallway he found himself in, looking for somewhere that he could lose his pursuer. When he saw a flight of stairs, he took them, going up instead of down, then raced to another open window so that he could jump down to the street.

There were gasps and cries of terror as he brought the darkness with him. The landing was hard on his joints, but while the drop had been from high up, it wasn't nearly bad enough to injure him. Dominic raced past the blinded people, trying his best not to look back. He ducked into the first alleyway he could see, then dropped not just the shadows, but his armor as well. The purple clothing he wore was more conspicuous than he would like, and his complexion

was darker than the people he saw in the streets, but if Calligae was still following, Dominic hoped that a casual air would be enough to deflect immediate attention. Dominic would have to steal more simple clothing in order to blend in. It was unfortunate that the people of Parance didn't seem to hang their clothing out to dry as was done in Gennaro.

Dominic walked down the alley with a casual stroll, looking for somewhere that he could duck into without making a scene. He heard shouts from the street behind him, which he assumed were caused by Calligae landing in pursuit, but it would take some time for him to question the bystanders, and by then Dominic hoped to have melted into the city as best he could. When Dominic came to the end of the alley, he found himself on another of Parance's city streets, with a cafe close by. He smiled with an ease he didn't feel and sat down at a table near the back, just in time to see soldiers marching down the street at nearly a run. Calligae didn't come barreling down the alley as Dominic had feared; by the time Dominic had gotten his cup of coffee, it was starting to sink in that he had accomplished the first part of his escape. That left him a wanted man in the middle of Parance, separated from his party and with only a trifling amount of money.



They hadn't agreed on a place to meet. The grenade had interrupted that conversation. Afterward, he should have talked it over with Vidre, but he hadn't imagined that they

too would be split up. The last thing that Welexi had talked about was taking on the Iron King himself, which would mean going a day's ride from Parance to Castle Launtine, but that had seemed like foolishness itself even before the four of them had been scattered to the winds.

Dominic wasn't sure how to find the others, if they were even alive. Vidre had fallen some two hundred and fifty feet, if not more, without the benefit of even small, ineffectual wings. If she'd been able to land without injury, she would have found herself right next to the building they'd been trying to escape from, likely in an area swarming with the very men they'd just been in combat with. Welexi had broken through a window on the top floor of the Ministry of Legends with glowing wings displayed to the world; the shards of glass falling to the ground would have brought people forward like moths to the flame, even before the most famous man in the world was seen making a dramatic exit. By the time Vidre had made her own landing, the base of the Ministry would have been awash with the sorts of people who are drawn to catastrophes. Dominic's experience told him that soldiers, guards, and illustrati would be among them.

Dominic finished his coffee slowly. Welexi and Gaelwyn wouldn't be in much better shape than Vidre. While Dominic could at least make an attempt to blend in, Welexi was far too recognizable. Dominic had a darker complexion, but Welexi's skin was the color of burnished bronze, too dark for him to easily fit in with population of Parance, especially not with his bald head and regal stature. Gaelwyn could

pass as another redheaded man from the Highlands of the Iron Kingdom, which was more or less what he was, but Welexi would stick out like a sore thumb.

If they all went into hiding like Dominic planned on doing, he had no idea how they would find each other. If the Iron Kingdom were not looking for them, the place to go would be Bordes, where their ship waited in port. Unfortunately, not only was Bordes a day's ride away, it was almost certain that there were spies and soldiers watching the ship, if they hadn't seized it entirely. That meant that Dominic would have to find the others somewhere in Parance without any real way of communicating with them. They had only been to a few places since coming to Parance, not including the Ministry of Legends, which was unsuitable as a meeting spot for obvious reasons. The problem was that the Iron Kingdom's spies would know everywhere that the four of them had been as well; Dominic recalled leaving Quill's former building with their weapons drawn and Welexi's armor lighting up the city street. They hadn't been the least bit inconspicuous.

Dominic drained the rest of his coffee, leaving only dregs, and kept his eyes on the street. He had seen more than a few people moving towards the Ministry of Legends. The ones in uniform moved faster than those who were not. Dominic wondered how much time he would have before the manhunt began in earnest; if the average member of the Iron Kingdom's bureaucracy had no idea what sort of trap had been laid, it might take some time to untangle the events of the day and tie them back to the nominal culprits.

There was no question that they had killed the Minister of Legends, or a great many people within the building whether illustrati or not. That made Dominic feel slightly sick. It didn't seem to matter that it was compelled by necessity.

He came to no firm decision on where the best place to meet up with the others might be. After some time he decided on Hartwain's, though he wasn't quite foolish enough to go knocking on the door to the manor. Instead he would steal whatever he needed for a suitable disguise, then loiter a block or two away, not only to watch for the others, but to see whether Hartwain's house was under surveillance by anyone else. Dominic had only been in Parance for a day; he hoped that his face would be difficult for anyone to recognize.

He left the cafe after a group of soldiers had gone by, stole trousers and a shirt from a house whose lock he quickly picked, and made his way across the unfamiliar city until he arrived at Hartwain's manor house. When he got there, his heart sank in his chest.



The door was slightly ajar and the windows were all shattered on the ground floor. Dominic saw no one on the street, so he crept closer, ready to bolt at the first sign of danger. Fleeing from Calligae's pursuit had gone much better than he'd thought it would; the ability to fill a space with shadows combined with Dominic's power as an illustrati and natural fleet-footedness meant that he could likely

outrun anyone following him, no matter who they were. He tried to keep his heart from hammering in his chest as he slipped inside the manor. If there had been any talking, he would have kept his distance, but whatever had happened to Hartwain, it seemed as though it was already over. The interior of the house showed the same disarray that was clear from the outside, with pictures hanging crooked on the walls and furniture knocked askew. There was blood as well, mostly in small dribbles that were smeared on the floor and spattered on the walls.

Dominic slowly pushed open the door to the sitting room where he'd taken tea with Hartwain. The sliver of light revealed a number of cats, a few of which were looking right at him. Dominic felt an urge to run away and leave this place behind, but tried to ignore it. When he heard a low growl from behind him, he wished that he had listened to that inner voice. He turned slightly to confirm that the immense black cat, the one which almost certainly outweighed him, was standing directly behind him. Its footsteps had been entirely silent.

"Won't you come in, Dominic?" asked a voice from within the sitting room.

Dominic reluctantly pushed the door the rest of the way open, revealing Hartwain laid out on the chaise, unmoving, and Faye standing in the center of the room. There were dozens of cats of every variety around her, each of them looking at Dominic. In her hands, Faye held a blocky gray device with a fist-sized hole in the top. Dominic was immediately aware that it was a Harbinger artifact, by some

uncanny trick of the mind which only the Harbingers knew. He looked at Faye, whose face showed no amusement or compassion. At the same time, she didn't seem particularly surprised or angry to see him.

"You tried to kill me," said Dominic.

"We tried to kill Welexi," said Faye. "Apparently something went wrong, if you are here." Her hair was mussed. She had a wound on her forehead near the hairline, three parallel marks that could only have been from the claws of the big cat which had sat down right behind Dominic. The wound hadn't been bandaged, but despite that it was completely bloodless. Faye had other wounds about her, along with places where her clothing had been ripped and torn, but there was no blood anywhere on her person.

"You could apologize," said Dominic.

"I am sorry," said Faye. "Our organization is composed of many different people with different views on how things should be done. It was agreed that Welexi is among the greatest threats we face, but opinions varied on what losses were acceptable. I argued in favor of taking you aside, but it was thought that this would raise suspicions." She shook her head. "I arrived too late for my opinion to mean much. Nevertheless, I am sorry that I did not campaign for you harder."

"Do you really think that I'm still going to join you?" asked Dominic.

"I don't know," said Faye. "I hope that this meeting is fortuitous in some way." The cats watched Dominic, all eyes turned in his direction. Faye's affect was flat, yet there was

something of music in the way she spoke, a harmonic that underlined her words.

"You killed Hartwain," said Dominic.

"No," said Faye. "The artifact does not require death. We endeavor not to kill. Hartwain is only resting."

"You stole her power," said Dominic.

"Yes," replied Faye. She held forth the artifact. "You recall what I said when we last met? The illustrati are — to a one — concerned with their fame, thirsty for more of it and intent on propagating their own image as far and wide as possible. The most powerful men and women have to be concerned with how they are viewed by the people they rule."

"So you change the concentration of power," said Dominic. "The illustrati will be you and your people now, not men like Kendrick and women like Hartwain."

"You do not grasp what the artifact does," said Faye. "There is a link between a person and the idea of that person. We change that link, pulling the handle of power and the domain with it. Do you understand the distinction?"

"No," said Dominic. "If you stole Kendrick's domain — and I have to think that's the most reasonable conclusion to draw from the fact that your wounds aren't bleeding — then it's clear you don't need the subject alive. You've stolen the power, but the only difference is that you'll be propagating someone else's legend instead of your own."

"And if I exchanged a linkage with another?" asked Faye. "We would be inspired towards cooperation rather than

pursuing selfish strategies. Or beyond that, if I had no idea which stories propelled my own fame.”

Dominic frowned. “It wouldn’t matter. You wouldn’t be able to spread someone else’s stories in order to accumulate your power, but ... you could still use your status as illustrati to spread stories about yourself. One domain would fade with time while the other would rise, until eventually you were nothing but an ordinary illustrati again.”

“Unless my link belonged to another,” said Faye. “Someone I did not know. You can imagine a group of illustrati who are arranged not as single points of light, but as a web of dependency, can you not? You can imagine how things might be between you and Welexi if there was an added ignorance? Dominic, you know that the illustrati are vain, self-aggrandizing people, competent only insofar as they can hold onto their power. This doesn’t have to be the case. We can forge a new system of governance. It is imperative that we do so, if we are to bring the world through these troubled times.”

Dominic saw pleading in her eyes. She didn’t want to kill him, though if she did hold three domains and the fame of at least three different people, he had little doubt that she would be capable of ending him. Her voice would raise high enough to split his eardrums, her large black cat would leap on him from behind, and it would take only a single touch for her to end his life. It would be like fighting the Blood Bard all over again, with the dangers now real and multiplied. There was nothing to say that her domains stopped at three; she might have taken power from any

number of the illustrati that had disappeared from the Iron Kingdom in the past weeks.

"You've accumulated a significant amount of power for yourself," said Dominic. "For one who wants to see power less concentrated, you're doing a pretty poor job of it."

"I agree," said Faye. "Necessity compels us in this matter."

"Hartwain wasn't a threat," said Dominic. He looked to the still form on the chaise. "She wasn't going to fight against whatever reforms you're in the middle of planning."

"Of course she was," said Faye. "You've known the woman a day, if that. She was fearsome in her time, more than capable of killing in the same casual way that marks the illustrati. If you escaped the trap we laid for you, I have to imagine that more than one person died. How many of those men and women who fell do you believe truly deserved it?"

The answer was that almost none of them had any real fault, but Dominic didn't say that. The conspiracy couldn't run so deep as to include dozens of men. This thought had occurred to Dominic while they were making their way down the tower. Vidre had been more ferocious than casual in the way she murdered the men she came across, but there was little compassion or empathy from her until they came across the illustrati of air, someone she knew on a personal level.

"What do you want from me?" asked Dominic.

"Want?" asked Faye. "I am more concerned with what I can reasonably expect, given our shaky understanding with one another. I expect that you will join up with your traveling companions again, perhaps in the near future. You will go with them as they try to unravel this attempt at a new system that the world might operate under. Perhaps you will tell them about this encounter, or voice your concerns about the shape that the illustrati impose on society. But in any case, if you all survive long enough eventually a time will come when you will make a stand. Not because of anything that I can offer you, but of your own recognition that it must be done."

"You're asking me to do something you think I would do anyway," said Dominic.

"It is the only reason that you and I don't need to come to blows," said Faye. "You're fortunate that I was sent to call on Hartwain, rather than one of the others; they would simply have attacked without waiting for conversation. There would be no hope of you leaving here alive."

"Which I suppose I should now do," said Dominic.

"Remember the rule of three, Dominic," said Faye with a solemn voice. "A man and a woman, apparent enemies, meet twice for conversation. The third time cannot end like the first two did. If we see each other again, it will either be as allies or enemies, with the gray washed out by black or white."

Dominic had no response to that.



Dominic tried not to feel the eyes on his back as he left Hartwain's manor. He still needed to find the others, if that was even possible in a city so large as Parance. While he walked, he mulled over what Faye had said. The Iron King must surely be dead, if this cabal had infiltrated the highest levels of the leadership within the country. The Iron King had been one of the most powerful men in the world, not only one of the greatest illustrati, but the ruler of one of the mightiest countries. He had also been a monster, the terrifying sort of monster that shaped the world around him to be a better place for monsters. Gaelwyn had been shaped by the Iron King, as had countless others. Faye thought it was the shape of power that led to such things, but Dominic wasn't so sure. He had no good counter-example to look at, no one who lived up to the heroic ideals. When he'd been a minor player in Corta's gang, he'd sometimes looked up at the statue of Gennaro in the center of Nuncio Plaza. There were stories about the man that were now hundreds of years old, of a statesman and a protector. Something had changed in Dominic's thinking. He had always thought that the legends were exaggerations, makeup caked around a homely face, but now he doubted that there was any core of truth to it at all.

He walked down the streets, moving more or less at random. It was possible that Faye would try to follow him to Welexi, though Dominic had no idea how he might find Welexi. He made a few surreptitious glances behind him as he walked. He thought he'd imagined a large-bellied man with a cloak and hood, but after three turns

he was certain that he was being tracked. Dominic wore simple clothes, with none of the markings of his domain. If someone was following him, they'd likely been doing so since Hartwain's. Dominic cursed silently to himself. It was midday. The streets of Parance held a fair number of people. Speed was one of Dominic's few advantages, but he knew from long experience in Gennaro that sprinting in broad daylight would draw the wrong sort of attention. It would be difficult to become anonymous again, especially if the man following him started an earnest pursuit.

Dominic was about to duck down an alleyway when he saw a glint of light coming from the man's hand. He paused for a fraction of a moment before realizing that it was a glass dagger reflecting sunlight. The hooded man with a potbelly was now clear for what she was; not just a disguise Vidre was wearing, but one that he'd been meant to recognize. It wasn't quite the same as the one she'd been wearing before, but the shape of it was similar. Dominic gave her a brief nod before moving into the alleyway. If she'd been following him since Hartwain's, she would have questions. He hoped that she would accept the answers.

"Is Hartwain dead?" asked Vidre. The left side of her face was red and swollen, enough that her eye was nearly shut. She spared nothing for pleasantries.

"She's no longer an illustrati," said Dominic.

"Close enough then," Vidre replied. "I don't think anyone else was following you; I had to make sure though. Our enemy has rained down a flurry of blows. Hartwain wasn't the only one."

"You survived the fall," said Dominic.

"Yes," said Vidre. "The sooner I can find Gaelwyn, the better. There's too much blood pooling in my boots." She paused. "I have some ideas on where we might find our companions. Come on, let's go."

"They won't go to Hartwain's?" asked Dominic.

"They would have arrived before us," said Vidre. "I knew you would go there, but didn't think you'd be stupid enough to go inside. There could have been someone dangerous inside."

Dominic could have explained things. He could have relayed the conversation he'd had with Faye, which would have meant explaining that she'd come to his room when they were still in Meriwall. He might have tried to talk with Vidre about the structures of power that underpinned the world. There was something in her eyes that stopped him. She was angry and injured, ready to kill whoever stepped in her path. Dominic held his tongue; there would be time later. He might even be able to sway Vidre, if not Welexi. That would remove the need to fight and kill.

"I was lucky," said Dominic. "Come on, let's go find the others."

16. Smoke and Mirrors

Vidre fell.

Glass twirled in the air around her, spreading as it fell with her. It seemed to move backwards, because it was falling more slowly than she was. The moment stretched out in front of her, a half second where she was surrounded by her domain and empty air. Death lay below her, coming more quickly with the tightly spaced beats of her heart. She shattered her armor, fracturing it along intuitive lines. The pieces broke off and tumbled away from her, dozens of pounds of glass that had formed a protective shell around her cracking like an egg.

She could aim to hit the street headfirst. If she closed her eyes she wouldn't be able to see the inevitability of the crash. She would crack her skull or snap her neck, possibly both, but either way it would be a swift and merciful death. It would be possible to die, quickly and simply, instead of the experience of pain and the fight that would surely come after it. The thought passed through her mind quickly, just long enough for three floors of the Ministry of Legends to pass her by. She would remember it later, with a small amount of suppressed longing.

Vidre had learned the art of falling at a small temple in Luchistan, in the far east. It had been early in her career aboard the Zenith, before Gaelwyn had saved Welexi's life and come aboard, but after the Peddler's War. Their tour of the far east was more to offer a cleansing of the palate

than anything else. Vidre had gone to the temple alone, in part because she and Welexi had gotten in a fight that both would afterward pretend hadn't happened. Vidre had thought that the Luchistani monks would have something clever and wise for her, which was always how it had gone in the stories, but instead their style of martial arts was almost entirely concerned with how to take an impact against the ground.

It was nearly worthless for an illustrati. Fights were about which domain you had and how much power you could bring to bear with it. Heavy armor was the norm, as were long weapons with a fair amount of reach. There were a number of domains that allowed for an attempt at suffocation through various means as well, which meant distance was preferred. The only domains that favored grappling were the bodily domains, more to find or create a gap in the armor than anything else. Even then, being able to properly take a fall didn't matter to someone like Vidre. She was simply too durable for a throw to do any damage. She had sparred with the monks all the same, learning as much of their techniques as a week would allow, but that was more for the sake of being able to tell the story later. The monks focused on rolling, turning the moment of impact into sideways movement, but this only worked if the fall had an angle to it. It wasn't until her final day at the temple that a wizened old man gave her careful instructions on how to survive a straight drop. She'd thought it useless but learned it anyway; it probably saved her life.

Vidre spread herself out, with her forearms in front of her and her feet angled downward. The idea was to take the hit from the ground in as many places as possible, so that no one location would be taking the brunt of the impact. All this was accomplished in the last half of the fall, but had been planned from the moment that Welexi had made his own graceful exit from the Ministry of Legends. At the last moment, Vidre turned her head to the side, then slammed into the ground.

She came to with a throbbing headache, not too many seconds after she'd made impact. There was a moment of disorientation and pain, until the pain had sharpened into something visceral, leaving the sense of confusion behind. Vidre got to her feet with an involuntary groan. She had gotten lucky; despite the pain and blood streaming from her, nothing seemed to be broken. Her hearing was less than it had been at the start of the day, thanks to the grenade and a number of pistol shots, but it was clear that the people around her were screaming; pieces of glass as sharp as razors were raining from the sky.

Vidre reached down to pick up a piece of glass with shaking fingers. She began to form it into a dagger with a familiar manipulation of her domain; she would remake her armor as she went. When she told this story later, her landing would be flawless, with one leg splayed out to the side and her hand just barely touching the pavement of the street. In the story she would catch her glass daggers from the air as they fell.

Vidre looked around briefly, trying to see the best direction to run in. She winced when she saw a man clutching a bleeding woman. Vidre had been thoughtful in shattering her armor; she had made the pieces sharp. Vidre had known there might be civilians below, but she'd done it anyway, the better to inflict casualties that would need to be dealt with. The stories she would tell of this moment would leave out the pain and suffering of those people who had only been caught in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Vidre took off at a sprint, trying her best to ignore the pains in her body and the unease in her mind.



They made their way through the city, moving as quickly as they could while staying inconspicuous. It was a sunny day, not quite right for a hood, but Vidre's swollen red face would have drawn more stares than the unseasonable hood did. Dominic extended the shadows that her hood cast, further obscuring her face from view. This did little to hide her limp, or the hint of glass beneath her clothing. If they were stopped by any guards, Dominic was certain that she would kill them. Even with the beating she'd taken, she was too beautiful to pass as anything but an *illustrati*. She had not been built for subtlety.

"Where did you find your clothing?" asked Dominic.

"Not the time for idle conversation," said Vidre. She licked a small amount of blood from her lips.

"I was chased by the *parapetti* in Gennaro quite a few times," said Dominic. "I learned the art of blending in. If

you look around us, you'll see a fair number of people engaged in idle conversation. Even if you didn't, the guards will be less likely to try speaking with us if they thought they'd be interrupting." He kept his voice low enough for a relatively private conversation. The sounds of the city would drown them out.

"They wouldn't be so foolish as that," said Vidre.

"Yes they would," said Dominic. "They wouldn't even realize the impulse. At any rate, it's not as if speaking to me is going to make it more likely that we're found out."

Vidre glanced toward Dominic. "Parance and I have a long history," she replied. "There are difficulties in forging the sorts of relationships that will last a long stretch of absence, but I made a disproportionate number of them here. Part of that is owed to the Peddler's War, and the long stretch of time we spent in the Iron Kingdom. Once I'd killed my pursuers, I had options in front of me."

"You came to Hartwain's looking for me," said Dominic. He tried to keep his voice light. Anyone glancing at them might mark the hooded figure as odd, but Dominic's casual air would deflect attention.

"I came to Hartwain's because too many of the people I'd known had been attacked," said Vidre. "Today was the day they made their grand move. It's virtually certain they thought our presence necessitated it. If their trap had worked, they would have to explain to everyone why they'd killed us. If they hadn't sprung a trap, there was a risk we would uncover something. They used what element of surprise they had now, while they still could." Vidre pursed

her lips from the shadows of the hood. "So to answer your question, I went to Merrith's house. She was an illustrati of gold; she was an hour dead when I got there, along with her husband and two of their servants."

"I'm sorry," said Dominic.

"I said it was a lasting relationship," said Vidre. "Not a lasting friendship."

They walked in silence for a few steps, with Vidre leading.

"Where are we going?" asked Dominic.

"Hopefully to the place that the Sunhawk will assume we'd meet," said Vidre. There was something cutting about the way she used his title. "We met during the Peddler's War, in a small courtyard just south of the Elnor. It's not a story that we've told anyone, so no one would think of it as a meeting place. Everywhere else is the home of an illustrati; if Hartwain and Merrith are any indication, the illustrati in this city aren't safe. Those that aren't being slaughtered are traitors or pawns." Her eyes rested on Dominic for a moment. "Hopefully Welexi thinks of the same place I do, or I don't know how we're going to find him."

"He'll be easy to notice," said Dominic. "A tall, bald man with dark skin would stick out even if Welexi weren't famous."

"Assuming they're both still alive, he'll send Gaelwyn," said Vidre. She swayed slightly as she stepped forward.

"Are you going to be okay?" asked Dominic.

"I told you," said Vidre. "There's blood pooling in my boots."

"It's going to look suspicious if I have to carry you," said Dominic. He tried to keep his voice light and cheery, with the same nonchalance she was showing him, but he didn't know what he would do without Vidre. In the short term, he would be lost and alone in a city that was actively hostile to him. In the long term, his career as an illustrati would be jeopardy. That was without considering the fact that she was a friend, of sorts. There was a small romantic attraction buried beneath the stories they'd been telling and the displays they'd been putting on for the public.

"I'll be fine," said Vidre. "Not feeling up for my side of a conversation, I'm afraid."

"That's okay," said Dominic. "I can do the talking."



Dominic stole for the first time when he was nine years old. His father had taken him to market, in part so there would be an extra set of hands to carry back the fruits they used for the specialty breads. Dominic had absentmindedly grabbed a plum while the adults were talking. This wasn't too uncommon in the bakery. His father had called them baker's treats, though the fruit given to Dominic and his siblings was often slightly spoiled. When Dominic realized that he shouldn't have taken the plum from the fruitmonger's stall, he quickly stuffed it into his pocket before anyone could notice, just in time for his father to look at him.

Dominic had thought his father had seen him steal the plum. The whole walk back, Dominic was waiting for the moment of rebuke. His father didn't have much of a temper, but the few times Dominic had seen it, it had left him shaken, even when it was directed at his brothers or sisters. The admonishment never came. When they were done unpacking the fruits, Dominic went to the room above the bakery that he shared with his brothers and cautiously took the plum from his pocket. He ate it quickly, while there was no one to catch him, devouring the sour, slightly unripe flesh of the plum as quickly as he could. When all that was left was the pit, Dominic opened the window and hurled it over the tiled roof of their next door neighbor. His hands were sticky with plum juice, so he wiped them on the side of his brother's bed, and with that, all signs of the crime had vanished.

After a day had passed, fear gave way to relief and happiness. He was given his baker's treats just like his brothers and sisters were. There was no lasting consequence from the theft. Not even the fruitmonger seemed to have noticed a single plum was missing. The next time Dominic went to the market with his father, they were given a warm greeting before the haggling over prices, with no one seeming to have noticed what Dominic had taken for himself. Dominic found himself volunteering for trips to the market often, primarily to think about the best way to steal another piece of fruit, or a confection from the candy stall.

He was caught for the first time when he was twelve years old. He had some small amount of free time in his

day, between his duties at the bakery and the schooling that his mother provided. Mostly he was alone, or with his sister Anna, who followed him around like a shadow. Dominic hadn't found a tutor in the criminal arts, nor did he know where you might find someone like that, but he'd been inventing his own rules and methods. He'd stolen that first plum through distraction, so this became the pillar of his budding school of thought. He enjoyed spending time with his little sister, both because she worshiped him, and because she was useful at turning away the attention of a shopkeeper.

While Anna asked the confectioner about all sorts of inane questions about what sorts of ingredients were in his chocolates, Dominic picked up some of the small candies. He would pick up two of them at once, take a moment to look at them, then put one back while palming the other. It was something that he'd practiced at home, with small rocks, enough that he'd thought it was nearly seamless. After the candy was safely in his pocket, Dominic looked towards the confectioner, who was still wrapped up in speaking to Anna. Dominic helped his sister pay for a treat — another thing he thought would eliminate suspicion — then walked out of the store. He was grabbed by the shirt just as he stepped into the street.

The confectioner yelled at him, a storm of curse words that quickly left Anna crying. Dominic first tried to deny that he'd taken anything, but the confectioner reached into Dominic's pocket to pull out the stolen candy. People were

watching them, but Dominic couldn't do anything; the man was twice his height, with a painfully firm grip.

"Third time this week!" yelled the candy maker. "Third time a child comes in to steal from me! Where are your parents that let you roam this city?"

"I'm an orphan," said Dominic, trying to think of a way out of this.

The confectioner gripped Dominic around the throat. "Liar," he said. "I can take you to the parapetti and have them sort you out or you can tell me where your father is."

Dominic relented and gave directions to the bakery where they made their home. He had thought that would be the end of it, that he would have some time to figure something out before his father was informed, but that was not to be. The confectioner closed up his shop, holding tight to Dominic the entire time. Dominic had been frog-marched down the streets and back home, where the confectioner had explained things to Dominic's father. A beating ensued, one that left Dominic sore for a week after. His father had roared about the respect of the community, the irresponsibility of bringing Anna into it, the reprehensibly immoral behavior, on and on until he'd finally worn himself out. The punishments had been piled high.

It wasn't the end of theft for Dominic, but it was the beginning of the end of his relationship with his father.



They arrived at the courtyard with only a single close call. A small group of guards had gone marching past them in double time. One of the guards had turned to look at them, slowing slightly, but Dominic had pretended to laugh at a joke, which was enough for the guard to continue on with his group. It had put Dominic even more on edge than they'd been before; their survival hinged on small situations like that, not all of which he would be able to see coming. He wanted to turn his head to watch every person they passed, looking to see whether they were being followed, or whether someone was going to fetch the guard. That paranoia would only attract attention though, so Dominic kept himself engrossed in telling stories to Vidre. These were small things, anecdotes about his mother's love and his father's wrath, play-by-plays of the rooftop races, and stories of daring capers with his friends as they committed their minor crimes. Vidre kept her eyes moving, not seeming to listen to him, and Dominic tried not to feel slighted by that.

The courtyard was a small one, with several stone benches to sit down on and a lonely tree in the middle of it straining up towards the light. It was nearly deserted, save for a small man with closely-cropped red hair and simple clothing. He looked at them for a moment before giving them a nod and looking around. When he'd made sure the coast was clear, the muscles beneath his face shifted until he looked like Gaelwyn. He let the disguise drop for only a moment before changing his face again. There was enough to give him away, if you were intimately familiar with the

man. His eyes stayed the same. Everything else was different though.

"Claire isn't feeling well," said Dominic. "Do you mind if we rest for a bit before moving on?"

Gaelwyn nodded once before taking Vidre's arm and helping her to sit down. Relief flooded onto her face as Gaelwyn kept his hand lightly touching her forearm. Dominic tried not to recoil back when the skin of Vidre's face contorted as the muscles shifted beneath it. Gaelwyn held a hand out toward Dominic, who took it with only a slight amount of hesitation.

Lingering soreness from the fall and the chase vanished in an instant. Dominic felt a surge of energy in his legs, as though he were ready for another run across the city; for all he knew, he now was. The changes to his face felt like someone was prodding at his cheeks from the inside, pushing outward in ways that were uncomfortable. When Gaelwyn was finished, Dominic's face felt like someone had made him put on a mask that didn't quite fit. He tried his best to ignore it, but the feeling wasn't quite right with what his mind had known.

"I've heard that Welexi is on the run," said Gaelwyn. He glanced to the buildings that surrounded them, each with windows into the open air the courtyard provided. Many of the windows were open. If anyone was actively eavesdropping on them, it was too late to try to conceal their identities, but there was no sense in saying things out loud into so much silence.

"I heard that too," said Vidre. "Though I can't imagine the city would be friendly to him, or the others he was traveling with."

"I imagine he still has friends," said Gaelwyn. "Come on, we should get going." He looked at Vidre's face. "Keep the hood up."



"Oh la, well it is so nice to meet someone new!" cried the woman when they entered. Dominic had been given her name, Charnel, and her domain, skin, but he knew nothing else about her. She looked young, but the domain of skin could accomplish that with ease. Her dress was light yellow, with small flowers of silk stitched onto it. This added to her light and airy appearance. Her house matched her in many ways; the windows let in as much light as possible and the woods were all light colors instead of dark. She was wealthy, as most illustrati were, so the place was filled with the curlicues and gold leaf that Dominic had come to expect.

"Oh my, the Queen of Glass, but I almost didn't recognize you beneath that hood," said Charnel. She swept forward with her dress trailing behind her. "Such a pity to hide your beauty with the ministrations of the Red Angel." She held a dainty hand in front of her. "You have a fabulous bone structure none the less. It would be my utmost pleasure to give you what healing our good doctor could not."

Vidre took the offered hand. Dominic watched the cuts stitch themselves back together, as though the skin had never been touched at all.

"You insist on keeping that scar?" asked Charnel. "I know it's an affectation, but oh la, I find it so dreadful."

"Are we safe here?" asked Vidre. "Merrith and her husband are dead, Hartwain has lost her domain."

Welexi unfolded from the chaise he was sitting on. "Together we are safe. There is no force in the world that can stand against us."

Vidre took off the hooded cloak and began shaping her armor around her, growing in more glass where it was needed. "I take that to mean that we're not secure here. Gaelwyn, can you change my face back to what it was?"

"Why?" asked Gaelwyn. "We might have to leave on short notice."

"We might be attacked here," said Vidre. "In case you're killed, I don't want to be stuck with such homeliness." She watched him with piercing eyes.

Gaelwyn moved forward and began to undo the changes he'd wrought. "It was the easiest disguise," he said. "There are only so many changes that I can make without changing the skin or the underlying bone."

"It doesn't matter," said Vidre, though she had been the one to insist on being changed back. "We need to plot our next move."

"Castle Launtine," said Welexi. "It's the seat of the Iron King's power."

"He's dead," said Vidre. "None of this makes sense if he's alive."

"All the same," said Welexi. "Our enemy has been pretending that the Iron King is alive. In order to do that, they would need full control of Castle Launtine, if only to prevent their ruse from being discovered. Charnel has led me to believe that directives are still issued from the castle, even if the day-to-day running of the Iron Kingdom is done from within the ministries."

"You still want to cut off the head," said Dominic. "But what if there's no head to cut off?"

"Explain," said Vidre.

"I mean ... it's probably not just one person. It could be many. Some of them are within this city as we speak, they're the ones who attacked the illustrati." He paused. Now would be the time to speak out and explain what Faye had said. "Are we going to kill all of them?"

"Every collective has a leader," said Welexi. "Every group has a vital member. There is something inherent to human nature that causes this. You saw even as the Parliament of Torland was forming, they were fighting with each other for the positions of power they'd built. We will find them. There will be a reckoning."

"And then what?" asked Dominic. "If the Iron King really is dead, who will rule once you've killed everyone in this conspiracy?"

"We're not in the business of crowning kings, Lightscour," said Welexi. He had a sour look on his face. Dominic knew the man well enough to have some guess

at his thoughts; Welexi had said that there would be a reckoning and that grand proclamation was supposed to be the end of the conversation. That was how it would be in a story. "Even if a number of the Iron King's bastards have been killed, some must still remain. There are protocols for dealing with this sort of thing." He said it with a wave of the hand.

"Being realistic though," said Dominic. "Protocol won't select the best ruler for this kingdom. And if we were to install a tyrant on the throne, or someone easily deposed by the next conspiracy after this one, what good does that do for the story?"

"It's not always about the story," said Welexi. "It's about doing what is good and letting the story follow on its own."

"But that's what I'm saying," protested Dominic. "Is killing all these people really good, given what we'd be leaving in our wake?"

"We can stay behind to rebuild," said Vidre.

"It's a possibility," said Welexi.

Dominic had nothing to say in return. He had a horrible, sinking feeling that they were following the path of a story, rather than the path of good. Faye's people were far from innocent, but neither were Vidre and Welexi. Together they had killed a dozen people today, with only a weak excuse of self-defense. Vidre seemed to kill whenever that was the most efficient way to get to her goals. Welexi was the same, but less forthright about it. Both had fought on the side of the Iron Kingdom at the same time that Gaelwyn was doing

his terrible experiments at the Iron King's behest. Gaelwyn was famous then; they had to have known.

"I won't be coming with, I'm afraid," said Charnel. "Oh la, I would love to come with, to see the grandeur and the adventure of a castle assault, but you must know that skin has few applications in the martial arts. Besides that, of course I have my services to think of. In these times there will be many who need mending, you understand. If we are to have new blood at the top, there will be many elevated in their own ways, whether by fame or money. They'll want my services."

"You're not safe here," said Vidre. "They have some capacity to steal your fame from you, along with your domain."

"I won't be safe there either," said Charnel. "I think you can agree with that. At least here I have not been harassed. Perhaps I'll take a vacation to the country for a few weeks until things settle down. I have an estate two days ride away, did you know?"

"Very well," said Welexi. "We will wish you luck in your journey."

"A present for the young illustrati," said Charnel. "Before the four of you take off to save the world." She stepped toward Dominic with a smile. "What changes would you like for your skin?" she asked with a sweet smile.

"My skin?" asked Dominic. "I think I'm fine with it."

"Oh, well you're far too young to have crow's feet, that's for certain, but there are other things that the domain of skin can do. It's not just for looking youthful, you know.

Were you aware that the domain of skin is the only one of the bodily domains that encompasses a sensory organ?"

"That's not quite true," said Gaelwyn. Vidre and Welexi had moved away to speak on travel preparations, but Gaelwyn had stayed to watch this exchange. "Bones and flesh have nerves in them. It's part of why breaking a bone is so painful."

"Oh la!" said Charnel. "The boy knows what I mean. We touch with our fingertips. We feel the wind on our face. I can deaden the nerves or enhance them." She winked. "Or I can toughen your skin up, enough that your flesh would be protected from all manner of dangerous implements."

"Don't do that," said Gaelwyn. "I can't repair skin, it'll leave you with painful wounds that heal slowly."

"Do whatever you think is best," said Dominic. "I'd prefer something ... subtle."



They left Parance under the cover of darkness. Charnel had nothing that was suitable for camping, but she did have a wide variety of clothing for them to take, some of it borrowed from her servants. Dominic had left his expensive purple outfit sitting in an alley somewhere in the monstrous grid of the city, so he was down to simple workman's clothing. As soon as they were past the last row of houses, he began to conjure his armor of shadow into place. He'd taken some reinforcement of his skin, as well as some deadening of his nerves, which made him feel slightly out of sorts. Vidre and Welexi must have taken

such enhancements ages ago, along with enhancements to strengthen their bones. It helped to explain some of their nonchalance when it came to pain. Charnel didn't remove pain entirely — Dominic had prodded at the meat of his leg to make sure — but the sensation was far less extreme than it had been. He had been made more muscular too. With Gaelwyn and Charnel working together, his skin could stretch to accommodate more extreme changes of the flesh. When he looked at himself in the mirror, it was difficult to recognize the man that he'd been before.

Getting horses would have been difficult, so they went on foot instead. Once they were on the road out of the city, they began to run, moving with the strength only an illustrati could bring to bear. Dominic found the pace they were keeping somewhat slow, so he sprang ahead, scouting out the plentiful shadows. It was easier to tug on the shadows when it was nighttime; his domain was in abundance here.

They stopped after an hour of running, in order to cool down and drink from flagons of water. They were going as fast as a horse at a gallop, which they would only be able to sustain for as long as it took to get to Castle Launtine, and then only with periodic refreshing of their muscles from Gaelwyn. If they'd had an illustrati of blood as well, Dominic had thought they might be able to run forever, but Gaelwyn had said the body had many processes that were little understood. Dominic hadn't pressed the point; he didn't want to know what lines of experimentation had shown about the limits of the domain of flesh.

"Did Hartwain say what form the artifact took?" asked Welexi. "We know precious little about it."

"It's about the length of my forearm," said Dominic. "With a hexagonal hole near the top. It has the same insistence on the mind as other artifacts."

"We need to know whether it's aimed like a pistol or needs skin contact," said Vidre. "Did she say?"

"No," said Dominic. So far he'd avoided lying to them, but he knew he couldn't hold back much longer. "They have double illustrati. Illustrati with two domains. Or maybe more."

Vidre and Welexi exchanged a glance while Gaelwyn's eyes went wide.

"If you could merge the bodily domains into a single person, or even just the major ones, the possibilities available would be nearly endless." He looked down at his hand. "It's possible, with skin, flesh, and bone to regrow fingers, or to make new ones, but the level of technical knowledge required means that there are limits on what can be done by even a specialized team of illustrati. The communication alone is burdensome. But if you could feel flesh and bone at the same time, you might be able to alter them in perfect coordination —"

"If they truly have such a device, it must be destroyed," said Welexi. "It was bad enough when I believed that it could only make exchanges."

"You should have told us about this sooner," said Vidre. "If we'd been attacked —"

"We were not," said Welexi. "It doesn't matter, at any rate. We know now to treat every illustrati we face as though they might display a second or third domain at a moment's notice."

"There's a strong possibility that we'll die in this assault," said Vidre. "This began back with Wealdwood and Cerulean Bane attacking us. They'd been tracking us for months. That means the conspiracy had a full year to collect powers from whomever they might like, all under the authority of the Iron King. We don't know what we're walking into here."

Welexi smiled. "That's what makes it so heroic."

They continued on through the rest of the night, traveling in darkness. There were scattered clouds that obscured the moonlight, which made it difficult to see on the road. They ran in silence with long, bounding strides that did little to tire them, breaking only occasionally. They would have outpaced a galloping horse sent from the city, but over the course of four hours they didn't encounter another soul on the road. It was nearly dawn when Castle Launtine came into view. They turned off into the woods, to a place far enough from the road that they wouldn't be seen, then began to make camp. Vidre shaped her glass into a convincing impression of a gray rock, large enough that they could crawl inside it.

"We sleep here until midday," said Welexi. "We'll take shifts."

"How are we getting into the castle?" asked Dominic.

"Oh," said Vidre. "I think you know we have a flair for the dramatic."



Castle Launtine was located on a tall, rocky hill, with a small village spread out some distance from it. Vidre, Welexi, Gaelwyn, and Dominic stood a mile away, on top of a similar rocky hill, separated by a mile of open air. They had made a few concessions to visibility. Vidre's armor was frosted glass now, reflecting no sunlight, while Welexi was projecting little light. The castle itself was a tall building, eight stories that added to the considerable height of the hill. Cannons stuck out from the lower walls, bristling forward at angles in order to cover the most ground. The stone was worked and smooth, with no obvious handholds. There was a winding path that led up to the castle, with a thick iron gate thirty feet tall barring the way.

"What are we doing up here?" asked Dominic. He'd held his tongue up until this point, but now curiosity was burning at him.

"You see those cannons?" asked Vidre.

"Yes," said Dominic slowly.

"Castle Launtine is one of the most secure fortresses in the world," said Vidre. She took off her glass breastplate and began to shape it, stretching it out into a disk. "Now, you might think about bringing in an illustrati of stone to come in from underneath, burrowing a tunnel to leave an entryway, or just toppling the structure from beneath in order to kill everyone inside. You'd pretty quickly find that

there's several solid feet of iron stopping you. You'd then probably bring an illustrati of iron in, but as soon as he moved aside the metal, he'd get a heap of sand down on top of his head. There are layers upon layers of traps that prevent that sort of thing."

"The Iron King's defenses around the castle were considerably weakened by the fact that he liked to brag about them to everyone who visited," said Gaelwyn.

"Well, certainly," said Vidre. She kept making the disk larger, until it was nearly as tall as she was. Dominic was worried that it would be visible from the castle in the way that it reflected the light, but he said nothing. "And of course, the castle is vulnerable to someone flying in from above, but there's only one man with that power and in either case that's quite difficult to defend against. A lone man going into a well-organized, well-defended castle alone is also probably a suicide mission."

"I am not quite so heroic," said Welexi.

"What are you making?" Dominic asked.

"Spyglasses are one of the trinkets I make," said Vidre. She gave Dominic a feral smile. "This is only a larger application of the same principles." She kept up the expansion, making a disk — a lens — so large that she had to make a brace of glass on which to rotate it. "Hellishly difficult, of course. Try drawing a perfect arc with a pen and it would be easy enough to point out the imperfections even with the naked eye. We need something far more precise than that."

"You mentioned this when we were trapped," said Dominic. "You're going to ... what, cook the guards up on

the parapets?" If Dominic looked carefully, he could almost make out the small shapes up on the walls.

"No, we're going to explode their powder stores," said Welexi. He cracked his knuckles and watched as the lens began to take shape. "We've been within the walls of Castle Launtine often enough to know its layout." He crooked a finger forward. "I never supposed we'd have to do something like this, but the powder stores are just beyond that wall. We only need a lens built precisely enough to focus all the light I produce into a single point, which we'll angle straight through that window there."

"The lens focuses light on a point in space," said Vidre as she worked the glass. "We only need to make certain that the point is precisely positioned on a wall a mile away from us. Easy." She stood back to look at her work. "I think we're good to go. Dominic, if you could cover us in shadow, I would appreciate not going into combat with burnt skin."

"Wait," said Dominic. "We're doing this now?"

"It will take some time to find our range," said Vidre. "When we tell the story, it will work perfectly the first time, but in reality, it will take a half hour, maybe more. Shadows, if you please."

Dominic cloaked them all in shadow, save for Welexi. Welexi produced light from his hands, directing it towards the lens. Dominic hadn't seen anything like this before, but it was clear why it wasn't too useful; it was brighter than a hooded lantern, but the effect was mostly the same. Through the lens though, the light was angled toward a distant spot. Dominic saw no change in the castle, but he

didn't have the spyglass that Vidre was using to examine their work.

"I wish we could have done this at nighttime," she said. "It would be easier to examine our work. Unfortunately, much easier to see from a distance when you're lighting up the night."

It took another twenty minutes of minor adjustments, until finally Vidre could see that the lens was focusing on the right spot. Dominic had thought that Welexi was producing a lot of light before, but now that the weapon was properly set up, the illustrati of light began pushing the full weight of his domain through him. It was all that Dominic could do to angle the shadows, but even then it was as though they were standing in strong daylight. Vidre kept her spyglass pointed at the castle.

"We're spotted," she said. "Looks like they're raising the alarm."

"Let them," said Welexi.

The base of the castle exploded outward as the gunpowder ignited, sending chunks of rock tumbling through the air. Dominic saw the walls of the castle lurch, sending men he could barely see tumbling down to the ground below. Dust, smoke, and fire rose in the distance, obscuring the castle. The sound came afterward, like a pistol shot writ large. The trees in the valley below swayed backwards. Dominic couldn't take his eyes from the scene.

"Come on," said Vidre. "We just spent the element of surprise."

17. The King's Courtyard

Gaelwyn often wondered what he would be without Welexi. His life had changed the day he'd found the world's greatest hero laying broken beneath an olive tree. The story was different every time Welexi told it, which had bothered Gaelwyn at first. In the Sovento States it was an orange tree, fully in bloom but not yet ripe with fruit. When the story was told in Maskoy, the tree became a fig tree, with fruits spoiling on the ground. Far to the south in Malwin, Welexi had claimed to be bleeding freely, staining the ground rust-red, but to the east in Palao the wounds were bloodless. It had taken Gaelwyn a long time to see what Welexi was doing; the stories were translations, not just conversions from one language to another, but from one culture to another. The fig tree was a symbol of peace in Maskoy. The people of Malwin would understand the blood-stained ground to be the epitome of martyrdom. Welexi was not lying; he was crafting an impression more real than truth.

In the stories, that single moment had marked Gaelwyn's transition from horrible monster to humble doctor. Gaelwyn had never felt it, not in the moment and not at any point afterward. Welexi was the only one who believed that Gaelwyn had a seed of goodness in him at all, let alone that this seed still had the ability to grow. Gaelwyn had saved Welexi's life and continued on through the strength of Welexi's belief. The books that contained Gaelwyn's life's work had been burned save for a few copies held by those who knew the value of them. His hospital had been razed

to the ground and his name had been smeared through the mud. Welexi offered a narrow path that might yet be walked, so Gaelwyn walked it.

They sat together in the darkness, leaning up against the gray glass boulder that Vidre had made. Vidre and Dominic slept within, using spare clothing to cushion their heads. There was no fire to keep them warm. Welexi was uncharacteristically dark as well, with no armor to keep him protected and no spear of light in hand. Castle Launtine loomed in the distance. Tomorrow they would make their assault. It wouldn't do for someone to go investigating a fire in the woods; Welexi's light would be even more suspicious. Dawn was coming; it wouldn't be long until it would provide them with light and warmth.

"You worry about me," said Welexi. His voice was barely above a whisper, both so that the other two wouldn't wake and so no distant travelers would have a chance of hearing.

"It's bad enough when you're attacked," said Gaelwyn. "It's bad enough knowing that you're out there fighting, that you might sustain any number of wounds I cannot fix. The anticipation of it ... I don't enjoy it."

"I had a close call with Zerstor," said Welexi. "I won't come so close to death's gateway again."

"You'll be fighting illustrati," said Gaelwyn. "Death can come quickly."

"You've seen the hits I can take," said Welexi. "You've seen my skill at avoiding the worst attacks in the first place."

"Yes," said Gaelwyn. "But you've never fought a man with two domains before."

Welexi glanced toward the glass shell with its gray, frosted glass, where Vidre and Dominic slept side by side. "Our information comes third hand," he said slowly. "Vidre isn't certain that we can trust it."

Gaelwyn's eyes widened. He had already been speaking at a whisper, but now he leaned forward. "What does that mean?"

"Many things," said Welexi. "If Dominic is telling the truth, he was given information by way of Hartwain. Our enemy is clever enough to have used her against us. It is well possible that they could use their leverage to coerce whatever story they wanted. More seriously, it is possible that Dominic has been compromised."

"How?" asked Gaelwyn. "We've been with him for weeks."

"That is less clear," said Welexi. He gazed at the sleeping form of Dominic. Gaelwyn felt an urge to reach out and touch him, just to confirm by the beating of his heart that he was asleep. "Vidre has her suspicions, which are so far difficult to distinguish from sheer paranoia. You heard the way that Dominic spoke back to me. How he's questioned our actions. Vidre watched him walk from Hartwain's house as though he were completely unconcerned with the possibility of ambush." Welexi shrugged. "He and Vidre have something of a complicated relationship; it may simply be that it has soured. That would not be a first for Vidre."

"We should hold off on the attack," said Gaelwyn. "Castle Launtine can wait until we know more. Until we can be sure of where loyalties are."

"No," said Welexi. "Yesterday's attacks were a grand play for power. Resources were spread thin to accomplish what they did. Castle Launtine should be poorly defended right now. We ran swiftly to get here; it is unlikely that reinforcements from Parance will arrive before we're ready for the assault. If they have even half the capabilities we suspect, they grow more powerful with every passing week." He stretched his arms. "Vidre and I should be able to take care of what's there. Dominic will help us; this will be a test of his courage, his will, his prowess, and his loyalty."

"I only wish I could do more to help," said Gaelwyn. He folded his hands in his lap and felt the flesh of his body. Everything was working properly of course. He checked his muscles every few minutes, making small adjustments with every movement. His body was the height of efficiency, but his domain could propel it further when he was paying attention.

"You could fight," said Welexi.

The sentence hung in the air, coiling around Gaelwyn like a snake.

"When Wealdwood forced his way aboard our ship in the middle of the night, coming to kill me, you disabled him," said Welexi. "You placed your hand upon his armored chest and twisted his insides just so. You did not hurt him, only stopped him from taking my life."

"You're asking me to break a vow I made," said Gaelwyn.

"I'm not asking," said Welexi. "I'm only stating a truth. You could fight alongside us. You would not have to kill, you could only disable as you did with Wealdwood. In

doing so, you would increase our chances of survival significantly. A vow only binds a man if he wills it; the vows we make to ourselves are always the most tenuous, the most easily undone. If you decide that you will not fight beside me tomorrow, I will accept that you have honored a promise to yourself. I will think no less of you because you have put that commitment above and beyond my survival. But I know what I would prefer."

"I'm not a fighter," said Gaelwyn. "I don't have any of the formal training that you or Vidre have."

"You have as much as Dominic does," said Welexi. "You have a body that any man would be envious of, even other illustrati of flesh. You have enhancement across all the physical domains, bones made thick and strong by the Bone Warden and skin made both tough and pliant by Charnel. You are not a fighter, but that does not preclude you from fighting. The only question is whether you will be beside me when we rush the castle."

Gaelwyn was silent. The sun had risen, casting light on them. He could see the dark skin of Welexi's face, a countenance that was noble and kind even in the worst of times. His thoughts turned again to the man that he would be without Welexi. If Welexi died, there would be simple, practical consequences. The vast network of bards and storytellers would collapse, both from a lack of central focus and a lack of funds. Gaelwyn would be barred from a number of kingdoms that had only allowed him in because the Sunhawk had given a firm declaration of trust. There would be no one to defend Gaelwyn from someone trying

to make their name. But the biggest impact would be that Gaelwyn would lose his only true friend. Welexi wasn't showing it, but the fact that he was asking showed that he was nervous about the outcome.

"Think on it," said Welexi. "I'm going to wake Vidre up so she can have a shift as guard. I would suggest you get some sleep, whatever it is you choose."

Once Vidre had stretched herself out and sat down just beside her makeshift tent, Gaelwyn laid down beside Welexi. Welexi was unconscious after only a moment had passed, one of the benefits of long experience in a number of wars. Gaelwyn was more slow to go to sleep. His head was too full of thoughts. If he waited until Welexi was in mortal danger, it might be too late. Even if he waited until just before the assault it might be too late. It was better to make the decision as early as possible.

Gaelwyn turned his focus inward, feeling the muscles beneath his skin. He began to think of how he would want to change, if he were going to fight. Some of it was theory, dreamed up long ago as an exercise in thought, tested only minimally to confirm that his thinking was sound. He began to alter his shape, just to imagine the fight better, going up against men with spears and swords, thick armor and illustrati powers. By the time he had finished his refinements, Gaelwyn's mind had been made up.



Vidre raced forward as the rubble fell, sprinting her way down the hillside and across the open valley to Castle

Launtine. Her daggers were firmly locked into position on her thighs, giving her free hands to bat away the larger pieces of stone that fell from the air. The sound of the explosion was still echoing off the walls of the valley. If she pushed herself, Vidre could cover a mile in a single minute. The men and women who guarded Castle Launtine would still be trying to get their bearings by the time she got there. She spared a single quick glance behind her to make sure that Dominic was following. Whatever his other failings, he was sprinting along a few paces behind her, with Gaelwyn trailing after. There was a good chance that Dominic was going to die in the coming battle. A full minute of running across the valley towards the smoking castle was too much time to think on such things. Instead, Vidre put her focus forward.

An iron gate barred the way to the winding path that led up to the castle proper. Vidre approached it at speed, watching the guards running around as they tried to figure out what was going on. Anyone paying the slightest bit of attention would have seen the light Welexi had generated on the hill, which had a clear cause and effect with the explosion at the castle. These men wouldn't have drilled for something like this. Even if they had, there was little that they could do.

An ordinary man with no standing wasn't quite helpless against an illustrati. Vidre had sustained injuries in the past, some of them even as fresh as the day before. A two-handed sword or mace swung with full strength could potentially break a bone. A freshly sharpened sword could

cut through skin, even if it wasn't likely to bite too deeply into flesh. There was at least some element of danger from the common man, especially if he was properly trained. The guards on the ground showed some bravery at least; they leveled their pikes at her instead of turning to run.

Vidre used the full force of her weight to slam into the first guard she came across, narrowly dodging the sharp edge of the pike. She cracked his ribcage with a shoulder check, which helped to slow her down. Her daggers were in her hands in an instant. She continued forward, advancing on the next man. The guards wore breastplates and helmets, but their faces and necks were both exposed. Altogether there were half a dozen men on the ground, with another half dozen standing at the top of the gate or somewhere within it. The men had pikes, lowered so the head was pointing straight at her; it was easy enough to shove those aside, using enough force to send the weapon spinning and put its wielder off-balance. The trick to a fight like this was to keep awareness, so that at the same time she was stabbing upward into the soft spot at the underside of the jaw, she could also make sure that she would know if anyone was approaching her from behind. Her armor was thick enough to deflect or absorb any attack a pike could manage, but it was good practice all the same.

Vidre had given three of them mortal wounds by the time Dominic arrived. He moved forward to attack one of the men with pikes, striking hard enough with his sword of shadow to put a dent in the steel armor. Vidre paid only a small amount of attention to his part of the battle; he would

serve as a distraction more than anything else. He could help to flank the illustrati that they were sure to meet, but he wasn't their primary offensive weapon.

Vidre moved on to the next man, already impatient for Welexi to do his part.



Calligae had set out toward Castle Launtine at first light.

The events of the previous day had rattled him, though he elected not to show it, even though he was alone on the road. He had been near the Ministry when the alarm had gone up; he'd rushed there as was his duty, taking the stairs three at a time and passing by younger men. There was a chance for glory here, but Calligae only gave brief thought to that. The truth was, he had crafted enough of an enduring legend for himself that he would retain his standing for the rest of his life, even if he disappeared. He wasn't a young man anymore, trying to grab every scrap of renown that he could.

When he saw that it was Vidre in the hallway, he'd first thought that she had simply arrived before him. There was blood on her daggers though, accompanied by a manic look in her eyes. He'd thought he would get an explanation at least, but Vidre had never been one to monologue. He'd done what he could to drive her back, hoping that this wouldn't be a fight to the death. It had been the upstart who had gone after Vidre like he was being guided by the hand of fate. There were too many new illustrati in Parance these days, young, hungry men and women who had carved

away their own piece of the public imagination. Perhaps it was only his age, but Calligae felt there was something different in the character of them.

He had followed the illustrati of shadow out the window, trying his best to glide on the air or at least cushion his landing. He tended to think of other things while people were telling stories; he had no idea who the young man was, only that he was almost certainly going to be easier prey than Vidre was. Backed into a corner, Vidre would lash out with her knives, slicing cleanly through armor and flesh alike. The two had split their paths, which gave Calligae an opportunity to chose between them. If he'd been a younger man, he would have chased Vidre, thinking only of the story he could tell, even if that was the wrong choice.

He'd lost the young man, though not for lack of effort. When Calligae had made his way back to the Ministry of Legends, he'd gotten a number of shocks. The Minister of Legends lay dead, with his throat slit in his own office. Welexi had flown out a window. There were thirty dead at least, most of them Ministry soldiers, with no less than six illustrati among that number. The casualties were expected to rise as people succumbed to their wounds. Taken as a whole it was nearly unbelievable. For Vidre to take a turn towards villainy was almost expected. It often happened when an illustrati felt themselves beginning to fade. A hero falling from grace always got people talking, just as they would talk about a villain being redeemed. Vidre had enough unpleasantness lurking in her past that a fall could be anticipated. Welexi though, that was something else.

Calligae looked at the illustrati around him. He was right that they were young, but it was more than that. They carried themselves differently. They spoke of their kingdom with a zealotry that Calligae did not remember from his own youth. He'd noticed the changes that had been happening, but had dismissed his observations as being part of the way that old eyes looked at the young. It was more than simply that though. Many of the old faces had disappeared entirely, but he couldn't recall the elaborate funerals or going away parties that illustrati demanded. Calligae hadn't been paying enough attention to the world around him.

The Iron King would have answers, he was sure of it. The trip to Castle Launtine would provide some insights, one way or another, even if it was only by way of a polite rejection.

He was three miles away when he heard the thunderclap of an explosion.



Dominic's first strike hit the soldier's armor. Dominic was mildly surprised that there was no parry to it; he had grown accustomed to sparring with Vidre and Welexi, who could easily turn away almost any attack. A pike wasn't a parrying weapon, but Dominic had never really trained against it. He pulled back and swung his sword again, looking briefly into the soldier's wide eyes. This blow hit the man's neck with Dominic's full strength behind it, cutting halfway through before striking bone. The man toppled to the side,

taking Dominic's sword of shadow with him. Dominic summoned a fresh one into his hand. When he turned to look for the next man, he saw that Vidre was killing the last of the guards. Not all were dead — some were on the ground, bleeding or crying out in pain — but they had been taken out.

Dominic saw the spray of dirt near his feet at the same moment he heard the gunshot. It had come from above, courtesy of a musket. The top of the gate had a handful of cannons, but the soldiers up there all had their muskets out. One of them took aim at Vidre, sighting his musket down at her and lighting the fuse. He was knocked backward as a spear of light stabbed through his chest; Welexi landed on top of the gate just afterward, fully clad in his armor of light from head to toe, covering his face and hands as well, so that no part of the man could be seen or struck.

"Come on," said Vidre. "They didn't have time to lock everything up." She opened a door in the side of the gate, separate from the large portcullis that was meant for teams of horses. The door was iron, thick enough to take cannon fire, but it hadn't been locked. Vidre was moving down the path by the time Dominic started after her. She didn't look back towards him, nor did she glance at Welexi when he landed beside her.

They moved up the hill together, moving quickly. Every second that passed was another second for their enemy to regroup. Some number of them had surely died when the powder store exploded, but the castle itself had a thick iron frame. While there were now chunks of stone scattered

on the ground, Dominic could see that the castle was still standing, at least when the smoke drifted away enough for him to see it. The day was eerily silent; Dominic had expected a flood of men to come rushing down from the castle to fight them, but beyond a few shouts he'd heard near the beginning and the screams of the men they'd killed at the gate, there was nothing.

Dominic wanted to run away. Killing that soldier had made him feel sick, a sensation only increased by the knowledge that he would have to do it again before the day was out. He'd watched Vidre and Welexi work together to kill from a distance, murdering men they only assumed were responsible for the assassinations. Attacking Castle Launtine smacked of story logic. Yet here Dominic was, trailing just behind as they rushed up the switchback path. If they arrived at the castle and found it empty, or filled only with functionaries and bureaucrats, what would they do then? Or worse, if the Iron King was not truly dead but only insensate, and every action they'd seen had been taken on his behalf? Dominic felt certain that no matter what they found, justice via bloodshed was what would follow.

Welexi strode forward with his spear in hand. He had a commanding presence that was only heightened by the blood on his armor. When Dominic watched him, all the objections began to wash away; how could a man with chin held so high and back kept so straight be anything but right? Then Dominic would remember the moments of petulance and childishness. He remembered what Vidre had said, about Welexi having her do the dirty work so he

wouldn't have to feel the taint of it. It felt as though the glory of the man should fade, as though, once the flaws of his character had been revealed, there should be something in his appearance that belied the undercurrent. Yet there was not. Welexi was firm and tall, the very picture of a hero.



The winding path up to Castle Launtine stopped at a large courtyard. Vidre had been to the castle a number of times before, and the courtyard had always been one of her favorite places. It was filled with a variety of plants from around the Iron Kingdom, artfully arranged so that a person could take a walking tour through the botany of the kingdom. Castle Launtine lay at the heart of the Iron Kingdom. While it had once been a purely defensive structure, the Iron King's rule had seen it transformed into an enormous home, both a symbol of his everlasting power and the diplomatic heart of the country, ministries aside. The thick oak doors of the castle were normally opened wide, the better to take shipments of iron which the king produced on a daily basis while holding meetings or dictating to his assistants. The major defensive features of the castle faced downhill, the expected angle of attack. While the central doors from the courtyard could be barred, the castle still had its windows. That was how Vidre planned to get in.

When she rounded the final corner though, the castle doors were standing wide open. Her first instinct told her that this was a blatant trap, but then she saw the people.

They were bleeding and hobbling out the front doors, or laying down in the manicured grass. It had only been a handful of minutes since the powder store had exploded, but in that time the courtyard had started to be turned into a makeshift triage center. Vidre had expected soldiers ready and waiting, *illustrati* armed and armored to the teeth with any number of domains, but there was nothing.

Vidre scanned the faces, unwilling to move forward. They were spotted quickly, but the reaction wasn't what she had expected either; no one was running away or screaming, they were only standing and watching. More people were coming from inside the castle as she watched.

"They weren't ready for us," said Dominic. He kept his voice low. "They're not combatants."

Vidre felt sickness rising up in her. They had blown the gunpowder store thinking that they might be able to kill a good number of people within the castle. It had all the gunpowder that the castle needed to fill dozens of cannons over a lengthy siege. If they had done nothing more than kill civilians, or soldiers who had done nothing wrong aside from choosing a safe posting ...

When the first *illustrati* leaped down from the battlements to land in the courtyard, Vidre breathed a sigh of relief. She was armored in glass from head to toe, but didn't move in it anywhere near as smoothly as Vidre did. To Vidre, the glass could cling like silk, molding itself to her skin when it didn't need to be hard. This other woman had clearly spent time crafting her pieces of armor, quite inexpertly. Other *illustrati* followed behind her, taking the

thirty foot drop with ease. When six had dropped down, Vidre thought perhaps it would be a difficult battle. When another four followed, the odds looked a little more bleak.

There were limits on how powerful the conspiracy could possibly be. The number of illustrati within the Iron Kingdom was finite. Up until yesterday, they'd been operating in secrecy, keeping both the masses and the illustrati unaware of their existence. If they were culling from within the Iron Kingdom, how many illustrati could they really have robbed of their power in the last year? Dozens, easily, but only from among the lower ranks. Taking one of the true legends, rather than the village champions, would have caused a stir.

When another six illustrati came through the thick double doors that led into the castle, Vidre smiled. Sixteen against three was even worse odds than before, but her nightmare from last night had been that she would be facing down a single man with ten times her strength and access to every domain. She'd been spared that, at least, if they were dividing power among so many people.

Beside her, Gaelwyn began to take off his shirt. It was unusual for him to follow so closely into battle, where he would be a liability more than an asset. He revealed hard, bulging muscles that Vidre could sometimes forget belonged to the small, unassuming man. He had small red welts just beneath his collar bone that Vidre had never seen before. When his shirt fell to the ground, Vidre saw long red ropes fall into his hands. They were lengths of raw muscle, with no skin covering them. They attached at his wrist,

protruding from a cut in the skin. In form they reminded Vidre vaguely of tentacles or tongues. The sight was sickening, but it meant that after such a long time, Gaelwyn meant to fight.

"We need to attack now, before they can get into formation," said Vidre. The people in the courtyard were still standing around, mostly looking shocked or confused. Welexi gave a brief nod, which was all that Vidre needed in order to start moving forward.

"Hold!" shouted one of the illustrati. He was wrapped in copper armor, more functional than aesthetically pleasing. "You come to attack us without any attempt at parlay?"

"You lost the right to speak with us the first time you attacked," said Vidre. She didn't slow down. "The second attempt ensured that you would be hunted down, and the third —" she broke into a sprint "— ensured you'd die slowly!" The words rolled off her tongue easily. Her glass helm slammed down into place, covering the last inch of her body. Vidre leapt through the air, singling out a man with no faceplate. He tried to turn and move, but she hadn't focused on him until the last moment. He reached up with bare hands, likely an illustrati of one of the bodily domains trying to find purchase. He wasn't quick enough to block the blow, only to knock it off course. Vidre's dagger slashed his face, cutting through one eye across his nose. He screamed and lost focus, which was enough to leave him undefended for the second attack. Vidre was hit hard in her back, shattering the large piece of glass there before she could confirm the kill.

She flipped over and lashed out with a lazy swing; the illustrati had converged on her, almost half of them coming to the defense of the man she'd just killed. The one who'd hit her so hard was a large man with a great maul. Vidre did her best to repair the cracks while preparing to roll out of the way of his strike, only to find her arms and legs had been grabbed. She kicked and cursed, growing out shards to slice uselessly at gauntlets. Her back was in agony from the hit. The large man swung his maul up into the air, ready to bring it down for another hit, but before he could, a spear of light erupted from the front of his chest.

Welexi had left his face exposed, which allowed Vidre to see the same calm dispassion that the Sunhawk normally carried into battle. He had a spear in either hand; he spun them around lazily before darting forward to drive the people holding Vidre back. Vidre scrambled to her feet, feeling a sharp pain in her back, but she could still move. The illustrati they were fighting weren't rank amateurs, but they weren't at the peak of standing, nor were they confident, trained fighters. There were simply more of them. As the moments passed and the pain in Vidre's back began to grow, the illustrati spread out around them. Her attempts at intimidation and the murder of two of their compatriots hadn't broken them, but it was only a matter of time. The fight would be won long before they'd dropped down to even odds.

Dominic had entered the fray only belatedly; he was fighting two illustrati of his own and doing a poor job of it. Vidre rushed to defend him, but there was a small moment

of hesitation. Dominic wasn't telling her the full truth of what had happened at Hartwain's. She'd felt it when she'd seen him leave her manor. She'd felt it even more strongly when they'd met back up afterward. She had become sure of it when he'd waited until quite late to share vital information. Something was off about Dominic, enough that she'd been keeping her eye on him for quite some time. She went to go save his life all the same.



Dominic held his sword in front of him, trying to keep his eyes on the two illustrati coming towards him. They split off from each other, moving to flank him. Welexi rushed past, going to Vidre's aid, but that left Dominic alone. His sword wavered in front of him, switching back and forth between the two men. Dominic tried to remember all the rules that Vidre had drilled into him over the weeks, knowing that it probably wasn't going to be enough. The smart thing to do would be to run away. Dominic held a defensive stance instead, hoping that he would be equal to these opponents. Their domains weren't obvious; both wore full plate armor and held long swords, but they had none of the markings of their domain that Dominic had come to expect from illustrati. None of the useful materials then, probably not the metallic domains, and keeping in mind that each of them might have more than one —

The one on the left attacked with a long, sweeping strike that Dominic easily dodged. The other came in low, swinging for Dominic's feet. He took the blow on his armor,

feeling the sting of it. Dominic backed up, trying to keep the two men from flanking him completely. He pulled the shadows around him, plunging himself into total darkness, but from the movements of the two men, this wasn't enough to give them pause. Both their heads seemed to track where Dominic moved, at least so far as he could see from the way the shadows moved. Dominic dropped the shadows back down soon after, hoping that Vidre or Welexi would see.

Dominic had made his armor as strong as possible and wrapped it around himself so that it was sealed against the prying hands of someone using the bodily domains. He'd done training exercises with Vidre that would help him to survive without air for a few breaths, but he had little confidence in his ability to fight while doing that. He kept backing up as the illustrati approached him. Both moved forward again, attacking at once. Dominic parried one attack, which brought electric blue sparks from the sword, but the other attack slipped through, striking him in the armor. Vidre had once said that most battles between armored enemies came down to who wore down more quickly rather than hard strikes. If that were true, fighting against two men would doom Dominic to a slow death.

Both men attacked again; they'd managed to flank him, which left him waving his sword around trying to defend against both of them and taking strong hits to his armor. The armor made it hurt less than it might have, but it was hardly an absolute defense. Each strike brought pain

with it, enough that he knew he'd be bruised all over if he survived the day.

The one to Dominic's right was kicked aside by a blur of sharp glass. Dominic turned his attention to the other, who had fully electrified his sword. Dominic had been warned that a solid strike of lightning could cause muscles to spasm and tense, but he'd felt no effects from it thus far. Shadow seemed to stop the effect entirely.

Vidre came to Dominic's side. Her daggers were dripping with blood. She hissed slightly, then moved forward, taking a blow that shattered the glass of her bracer before quickly reforming. The man's full helm had small holes to allow him to breathe. Vidre slammed her dagger against it, then held her hand there as he tried to push her off. Dominic moved forward and grabbed the man's sword hand, twisting it around and pinning it behind the man's back. Vidre stepped away after only a few seconds, satisfied with her work. She swept the illustrati's leg from beneath him, with the dagger still stuck in his helm. Dominic watched for a moment. The illustrati hadn't been killed; he was struggling, trying to free himself from the helm, but glass had fused shut the hinges and clasps that would let him escape.

"He won't last long," said Vidre. She turned toward where Welexi was fighting a desperate battle against six men and women. Vidre started forward, then stopped short. Gaelwyn was on the move and she seemed intent on watching him.

The ropes in Gaelwyn's hands were flesh. He swung one above his head, letting several yards of red muscle extend

to their fullest. When he reached the melee, he slipped the tentacle forward. It struck one of the illustrati on the back; he fell down instantly, dropping his weapon. The second man went down as quickly as the first. The third ducked beneath the length of muscle, slicing it with his sword, but he was struck in the helm by something pink and fleshy that had come from Gaelwyn's chest. Dominic watched in shock. Gaelwyn was famous enough not to be limited in the same way that other illustrati of flesh were. He didn't need to touch anyone skin to skin, he could reach straight past their armor. Gaelwyn had added onto the range his physical touch allowed.

The fight was over. Dominic stripped the shadows back from around his face. He breathed in air that tasted too much of metal in long, ragged gasps. Vidre was doing much the same, but she was using her energy to move forward, to where Welexi stood with his hand on Gaelwyn's shoulder. He was smiling at the doctor, speaking soft words of encouragement.

"We need to keep moving," she said. "I count eleven bodies, that means five in retreat."

"It might have been prudent to parlay," said Welexi.

"And waste the element of surprise? And lose the element of terror as well?" asked Vidre. She shook her head. "I have no regrets."

"There is more to do here," said Welexi. "Artifacts to find and leaders to question." He turned to Vidre. "Try not to kill the last person who knows what we wanted to find out. The man who wore copper had the domain of fire as well as his

metal. We're close to them. They have the much-vaunted ability they're said to have."

"That doesn't make sense," said Vidre. Her eyes scanned the battlements of the castle as well as the window as she tried to catch her breath. She was holding her back with one hand. "A single man with all their combined powers would have been more of a threat. I'm grateful they split their power in separate bodies, but ... are they restricted to only two to a person? I'm sure some of those men had only a single domain."

"They don't want to concentrate power," said Dominic. "They don't want a monolithic figure in charge."

Vidre stared at him. She seemed ready to say something, then turned away. "Perhaps you're right. Come on, let's go. No sense giving them too much time to set traps."

18. The Rule of Three

Dominic tried not to watch the lengths of flesh slither back into Gaelwyn's wrists. Dominic could see a faint impression of coiled flesh within Gaelwyn's skin, as though the rope of flesh was coiled around the meat of his forearm. When Gaelwyn was finished, the wounds at his wrists bled slightly.

"It needs refinement," said Gaelwyn when he caught Dominic's glance.

"Do we need to worry about them getting back up?" asked Vidre. She looked down at the bodies.

"No," replied Gaelwyn. His voice was hard.

They continued forward, into the interior of Castle Launtine, before Dominic could ask any questions. Gaelwyn had touched those men and women with his domain. Had he cut the muscles loose from the bones, like he'd done with Wealdwood? Or had he killed them? Dominic wanted to believe that Gaelwyn wouldn't go from pacifism to murder in a single leap, but it wasn't as though Gaelwyn had never killed before.

To Dominic's surprise, the first room they came into was a large, cavernous throne room. The throne itself was several feet off the floor, with a series of low steps leading up to it. It was built of braided metals interlaced with other materials, including wood, glass, and rock. There were shapes sculpted into the sides, showing the domain animals and giving representation to the more ephemeral domains. The

Iron King had once sat upon the throne. It was enormous, sized for someone eight feet tall then built even higher than that. Dominic couldn't take his eyes off it. The others didn't even seem to notice it.

"We need to track them down," said Vidre. "Gaelwyn, you probably remember the castle better than I do. Where would the king have been kept for a supposed convalescence?"

"There were grand chambers on the fourth floor," said Gaelwyn. "If we'd had more time, we might have asked, but in lieu of that, the grand chambers are where we should go."

"Do we think they'll still be there?" asked Dominic. "They know that this is an attack. They retreated."

"The illustrati are immaterial," said Welexi. "The artifact is the prize. Beyond that, we need confirmation that the Iron King is dead, or proof of malfeasance. Even if the remainder of the conspiracy has fled like rats from a sinking ship, they won't have time to destroy all the evidence of their existence. There will be secrets to uncover in their personal effects. Letters signed in the Iron King's name. We'll find out who gives the orders, at the very least. We might be able to unravel the whole of it."

Dominic wondered whether they would find any Harbinger artifacts here. Faye had been holding one, back in the wreckage of Hartwain's manor, but it seemed unlikely that she had made her way to Castle Launtine since then. She hadn't said whether it was a single artifact or multiple. She hadn't told him how it worked. The unmitigated power

of the artifact frightened Dominic; as much as he thought Faye's people might have a point, the potential for some villain to become powerful beyond imagining was immense. Welexi had said that they would destroy it — that they must destroy it — and on that Dominic could agree.

"We need to move slowly," said Vidre. "There are going to be choke points. Places where they could set an ambush."

"With the four of us working together, there's little to fear," said Welexi.

"If they can combine their power into a single person, that person could beat us," said Vidre. "Domain immunity for glass, light, shadow, and flesh would leave us fighting bare-knuckled against someone who wasn't under any such constraints."

"Domain immunity doesn't apply to flesh," said Gaelwyn. "That is, there is an immunity present, but the mechanism of attack is almost always domain alteration or domain kinesis, which are opposed by an equal measure of applied power from an illustrati rather than any innate protection."

"In any case," said Welexi. "Lightscour believes that they have philosophical opposition to such tactics." He nodded in Dominic's direction.

"It's only a guess," said Dominic quickly.

Vidre frowned. She didn't look at Dominic. "If he's right, we have nothing to worry about. If their artifact only provides for giving a second domain but not a third, we'll be perfectly fine. We can't plan on that being the case though.

We need to move as though they're immensely powerful and prepared to ambush us."

"Very well," said Welexi with a low bow. "Lead on."



The castle wasn't built along the same lines as the Ministry of Legends was. The Ministry building had mostly identical floors, laid out through elaborate designs which had gone through the thickets and warrens of its bureaucracy. Castle Launtine predated the age of cannons. It might once have been a simple thing, but it had been created over generations, through a series of architects and construction methods. They took the servants' corridors, the small paths that maids and butlers took to stay out of the way of their master. Vidre said nothing about it, but she seemed to know her way around. They trekked up tight spiral staircases with worn down steps between periods of rushing down the hallways. Twice they had to turn back because part of a wall had collapsed in, or the floor was missing, but Vidre didn't seem too concerned with this. The king's bedroom had been quite far from the gunpowder room. The poles of iron laced through the rock ensured that the whole thing wouldn't come crashing down.

They came out into a hallway sized for a giant. A man in plain clothing was touching the handle of a door. There was a momentary pause before he turned to look at them. In his hand was a Harbinger artifact, its presence written on the mind as soon as it was visible. It was the same as the one Dominic had seen Faye holding. The man bolted;

Welexi threw a spear after him, straight and true. When the spear touched the man's back, Dominic was prepared to see blood and viscera as the man toppled to the ground. Instead the spear passed through harmlessly; the man continued running.

Vidre chased after him, running at a dead sprint. She had daggers drawn and ready. One of these she threw in front of her, spinning it so hard that it appeared as a blurred disk. This struck the man in the shoulder, instantly staining his shirt with a blossom of blood, but he continued on and rounded a corner.

"What happened?" asked Dominic. He stood in the hallway with Welexi and Gaelwyn, looking at the spot where the man had been. "Your spear didn't work."

"Domain immunity," said Welexi. "You've never fought someone with your own domain before, but I'll tell you now that it's rarely a pleasant experience."

"Should we be chasing after him? Or her?" asked Dominic. "It could be a trap." He was ready to follow, despite the sick feeling that was growing in his stomach with every moment they spent in the castle.

Vidre came trotting back only moments later though, with the artifact held in her hand.

"You shouldn't touch it," said Welexi.

"He was touching it," said Vidre. She looked down and turned the artifact around.

"It might still be a trap," said Dominic.

"We won't do anything with it," said Vidre. "But we do need to carry it with us." She tossed it to Gaelwyn, who fumbled when he caught it. "Come on, the Iron King's bedroom was through there."

They stepped through the large doors and entered a bedroom larger than Dominic had ever seen. Everything in it was sized for a man of immense proportions. It felt slightly grotesque to Dominic. The four-poster bed in the center held a large figure sculpted of iron, which they approached cautiously, weapons drawn.

It was Gaelwyn who went to the figure first. "It's the Iron King," said Gaelwyn. He touched the face. "Not a trace of flesh. The likeness is perfect. He only rarely removed his helmet; whoever made this knew him with some intimacy." He ran his fingers along the face. "It's too accurate to have been cast. It was made by an illustrati of iron." He frowned. "Dusty."

"What's the point?" asked Vidre. "If they're pretending that he's not dead, why do something like this? Obviously no one would be allowed in this room anyway. It wouldn't convince anyone. That's if there were still people in this castle who didn't know the truth, which I doubt." She frowned. "We might be looking at his corpse?"

"Try to restrain the next person we find instead of killing them," said Welexi. "We might get answers yet."

"The Iron King had a study he kept for his private contemplations," said Gaelwyn. He looked down at the artifact in his hands. "We might find some papers there."

They walked slowly, keeping their guard up. Vidre seemed ready to run at a moment's notice; she kept her helm sealed at all times, breathing through the flutes of glass. Dominic covered himself in armor of shadow, though experience had shown him that it wasn't so good at taking a hit as Vidre's was. He kept his sword in front of him, ready to contribute what he could.

They reached another room with a large door. Vidre kicked it down with a single blow. She fell into a fighting stance just afterward, ready to deal with whoever came running out. Yet the room had only a single occupant behind a desk that was too large for him. He didn't seem surprised by the sudden entry.



He was an older man. Dominic recognized him; it was the same man that had negotiated with the Flower Queen over several long, boring hours. He had gone by Chester Welling then. Now he was dressed in a clerk's outfit. His sleeves were rolled back. A blocky ring sat on one finger, a Harbinger artifact displayed to the world. He had a wry grin that faded when he saw what Gaelwyn was holding.

"Vidre, don't kill him until we have some answers," said Welexi.

"I'll do my best," said Vidre.

"I had hoped we'd be fast enough," said the man. He seemed unconcerned with the intrusion. "A pity we weren't."

"Who are you really?" asked Welexi. "Not Chester Welling, clearly."

"Names are immaterial," said the old man. Vidre's glass daggers were in front of her, ready and waiting for him to make a move. "Yet they're so important to the illustrati. Very well, if you wish to know a dead man's name, I am Lothaire Corrant. I already know all your names, naturally."

"What happened to the Iron King?" asked Welexi. "We came to his bed and found only a statue."

"It's something of a mystery to us as well," said Lothaire. "He knew he was dying. As much as a decade ago he knew it. There are illnesses and injuries that even an illustrati —"

"He's stalling," said Vidre.

"No, my dear Queen of Blades, I am saying what I know. If I'm taking my time, it's only because I don't expect to live much longer than it takes for this conversation to reach its conclusion." Lothaire spread his hands wide with palms up. "You have me at your mercy."

Welexi dismissed the spear from his hand. "I believe him. If he acts against us, it will be with his wits, nothing more."

Dominic felt his heart beat faster. He'd done nothing wrong, but he hadn't yet told them about his conversations with Faye. He looked at Lothaire, trying to get some sense of what the man's game was. Vidre's nightmare seemed to be of a single man with all of the domains at his disposal, but Dominic didn't think that Lothaire was that sort of man. If he had even a fraction of Charnel's power, why would he still have wrinkled skin? The treacherous part of Dominic's

brain answered that Lothaire only wanted to appear weak, but it was hard to believe that it was a bluff.

"As I was saying," continued Lothaire. "There are illnesses and diseases that even the king's illustrati were incapable of curing. I am given to understand that they opened him up with scalpels, trying to find the root of the recurring sicknesses that their powers were keeping at bay. With an illustrati of blood gripping his head and providing him life, they could safely muck about with his innards, opening him wide to look at the places where tumors and polyps kept forming. The Bone Warden was brought in, but she could find nothing wrong in his bones."

"What were the symptoms?" asked Gaelwyn. "How did the sickness present itself?"

"He asked for you," said Lothaire. "He sent letters in secret, trying to get you back, despite the exile he had imposed on you. From the look on your face I suppose that you never got them?"

"He lies," said Vidre.

Lothaire had eyes for only Gaelwyn. "Or perhaps you've seen enough of what people think of you that you have someone else sift through whatever letters come your way," said Lothaire. "You travel constantly. If someone sends a letter, your bards will forward it to the next expected port of call, where other bards will hold onto it in anticipation of your arrival. But you never speak with the bards, that's something that Vidre and Welexi do, is it not?"

"You won't drive a wedge between us so easily," said Welexi. "You haven't answered my question either."

"What do I care about the Iron King anyway?" asked Gaelwyn. "Who was he to me? After what he took from me I owed him nothing."

"Do I have leave to address the question?" asked Lothaire, turning to Welexi. "Or do you wish to silence me in this as well?" Dominic could guess what Lothaire was going to say. Even if Gaelwyn didn't care about the Iron King, he would care about the respect and acknowledgment. The Iron King could have offered Gaelwyn a new hospital, new printings of the books he'd written, all manner of things. When Dominic looked at Gaelwyn, he could see that Gaelwyn understood this too.

Welexi narrowed his eyes. "Tell us what happened to the Iron King."

"He was dying," said Lothaire. "Yet he was the most powerful illustrati the world had ever known. He had incredible resources at his disposal. As Laith had done before him, the Iron King tried to find a way around it. He sent archaeological teams all across his country and beyond its borders in an effort to learn more about the Harbingers. He diverted resources in order to bring in more illustrati of flesh and blood, hoping that one of them could be crafted into a prodigy that would cure him once and for all. He brought forth scholars to try to delve into the mysteries of his domain. It's that last I believe killed him. The animal illustrati can take on minor changes from their domain when they have enough standing and engage in the proper exercise of will. The best guess is that the Iron King tried to become like iron."

Dominic glanced toward Welexi. The Iron King had tried to become living iron, just as Welexi could become living light.

"When?" asked Vidre.

"He was found in his current state sixteen months ago," said Lothaire.

"You've been running the Iron Kingdom for that long," said Vidre.

"Longer," said Lothaire. "We were his aides and advisers. And who is to be the new king? That's why you've blown a hole in this castle and killed so many people, isn't it? Prove the Iron King dead so that a new king can take his place?"

"Once the corruption has been rooted out, a new seed may be planted in clean soil," said Welexi.

"Rooted out?" asked Lothaire. He gave a humorless laugh. "Oh, did you think that's what you had done?"

"We have the artifact," said Welexi.

"Fruit borne of an expedition to the Highlands," said Lothaire. "Yet it is less of a melon and more of a grape; there were many fruits which came from that particular vine. We found thirty in total, among other things." Lothaire tapped his ring against the table. "All that were in Castle Launtine have been scattered to the winds. I have no idea where my compatriots have taken them, but the corruption you believe you've rooted out has spread so far and wide that it is for practical purposes impervious to defeat."

Vidre swore.

"What is your plan?" asked Welexi. "What is it that you are aiming to do?"

"The elimination of the illustrati," said Lothaire. He said it without so much as raising an eyebrow at the audacity of it.

"Impossible," said Welexi.

"By now you know what the artifact does," said Lothaire. "You know that it's perfectly possible. The question is whether we can accomplish our goals given this most recent setback. I must admit the prospect looks a bit grim at the moment, especially when you have one of the artifacts in your possession, but there are many men and women much younger than I am, strong in their convictions and not so willing to go toward death."

"How is it activated?" asked Welexi. "How does it accomplish the transfer?"

Lothaire hesitated for the first time since they had come into the room. "If I elect not to answer that question, what happens then? You turn aside while Vidre does her best to torture the information out of me? Or you simply try to work it out by using it on someone expendable? I must admit to some curiosity. How much of a fraud is the Sunhawk? How much of the true core of himself is he going to reveal in his quest for power?"

"I will not allow Vidre to torture you," said Welexi. "We will not kill you in cold blood. Yet you must understand that your time as our prisoner will be much more pleasant if you cooperate in all ways, not only those you find pleasing."

"You suggest torture of a different sort," said Lothaire. "A dark cell with thin gruel."

"How do we use it?" asked Welexi.

"Ah, so you would use it," said Lothaire. "The Sunhawk reveals himself. In that case, I think I'll keep my silence."

"Then you've outlived your usefulness," said Vidre.

"No," said Welexi. "There is other information we must extract from him. Even if he doesn't know where his conspirators have gone, he knows names and descriptions."

"I know much more than that," said Lothaire. "Were you aware that Vidre agreed to kill Gaelwyn?"

"Lies," said Vidre. Her daggers were still held in front of her. She seemed ready to leap across the desk and kill the man. Dominic realized that he had begun to assume that the man was their helpless prisoner, but they had no real evidence that the man hadn't used the artifact to make himself an illustrati. Welexi had dismissed his spear of light, but Vidre was still as tense as she'd been the moment they'd entered the room.

"It was part of her agreement with the Blood Bard," said Lothaire. He smiled at Gaelwyn. "She never liked you. You were politically inconvenient even before the trial that left you an exile of yet another country."

"No," said Welexi. "I trust Vidre more than I trust you. Now, I'm afraid we're going to have to bind you."

"Has Welexi told you about your father?" Lothaire asked Vidre.

A tendril of flesh shot out from just beneath Gaelwyn's collarbone to strike Lothaire in the chest. He went limp instantly.

"My father?" asked Vidre. She turned toward Welexi. She hadn't lowered her daggers, though she didn't quite go so far as to point them at him. "Everyone knows my father sold me for forty drams. Welexi, do you have any idea what he was talking about?"

"If I knew anything about your father, I would have told you," said Welexi. "We're all a little upset right now. That's what he wanted. There are more important tasks than turning over his words. We need to know what there is to do with those pieces of information which are salient to the future of the Iron Kingdom."

Vidre let her daggers soften until they slipped back into the glass of her armor. She removed her helmet as well, revealing hair that was damp with sweat. "We can't trust anything he said."

"No, of course not," said Welexi. "The papers might let us know the truth though." He looked around the room, which was filled with bookshelves, interrupted occasionally by a large painting. Two doors led out to a small balcony. The old man still sat slumped in his chair, though he did seem to be breathing. "It is curious to me that he said nothing about Dominic."

"How so?" asked Dominic. His heart leapt at the words.

"He was attempting to drive wedges between us," said Welexi. "Obviously the man was present in Torland with us. I might even venture to say he was responsible for much

of what happened there. He likely had spies or sympathizers. There are any number of ways he might have learned what he might use against us — what lies he might be able to tell in order to set our minds racing.”

“This isn’t the time for this,” said Vidre.

“The time for what?” asked Dominic. He could feel the anxiety rising inside him.

“When you spoke with Hartwain,” said Welexi. “Following the attack on her home. What exactly did she say to you?”

Dominic was silent. “I should have told you sooner,” he finally said. All their eyes were on him. “I was approached by one of their number. It was a woman called Faye. She spoke with me once in Torland, then a second time yesterday.”

“What leverage does she have against you?” asked Vidre.

“I — nothing,” said Dominic. “She had the better of me both times. I don’t believe I could have beaten her in single combat. All she wanted to do was talk.”

“Yet you didn’t tell us until just now,” said Vidre. “You didn’t say anything after leaving Hartwain’s. You lied to me.” Her hands were clenched tight around her daggers. Dominic recalled his rescue from Corta; Vidre had been angry then, but most of what she said was for the crowd. Now there was no element of performance in the furrow of her brow and the redness of her cheeks.

“This would be the third time you have lied to us,” said Welexi. “The very first day we met you, you lied and

said that you were not a thief. Vidre saved you from that. In Meriwall you conspired with the Blood Bard. Do you expect that after the third time I would be so kind as I was before? You may only abuse our trust and charity a limited number of times."

"He didn't actually do anything," said Vidre. She softened slightly. "If he'd tried to stab us in the back that might have been one thing, but he took a shift on watch last night. That would have been the time for him to try something, if he was going to."

"And how do we know he did not?" asked Welexi. "We have encountered resistance here, but less than I would have expected."

Vidre had no reply to that.

"There was never a right time to tell you," said Dominic.

"They tried to kill the rest of us, yet let you live," said Welexi. "Your objections last night make a great deal more sense, as does your escape from the Ministry." He twitched his lips. "Gaelwyn, subdue young Lightscour. Leave him capable of speech."

Gaelwyn hesitated, then threw one of his ropes of flesh forward. Dominic had a sword in his hand in an instant and sliced in front of him. His sword cut through the first tentacle but he didn't have the speed to stop the second. Wet flesh touched his armor for only a brief second. His muscles seized up and he pitched backward, landing painfully on the ground. Gaelwyn moved quickly, touching Dominic briefly in order to finish his work.

"Please," said Dominic. His head was all he could seem to move. He could feel his arms and legs, but no longer move them. "I did nothing." He directed his attention to Gaelwyn. "I did nothing!"

"You take your opportunities where you can find them," said Gaelwyn. "You pretended to defend me when all you were looking for was a scrap of glory. I'm sorry it's come to this, but ... you brought it upon yourself."

"We need to talk about this," said Vidre.

"What's there to talk about?" asked Welexi. "You agree that Dominic has betrayed us. It's a fitting conclusion to his time as apprentice. A time-honored trope, is it not, the young and impetuous student trying to displace his master? His story ends here. We can send letters to the bards to keep them updated and eventually the story of young Lightscour will fade, as it was always supposed to."

"You can't keep me as prisoner," said Dominic. "I haven't done anything to deserve that." He pulled at his useless muscles, trying to find some way that he could move. He still had his domain, but there was little that he could do with it. Darkness wouldn't allow him to move. He might project a blade from his armor in an attempt to cut Gaelwyn, but he had no illusions about being able to kill. Besides that, he would still be left motionless on the floor, with the only person capable of restoring him injured or dead. The more he fought, the worse this would go for him; they were three of the strongest illustrati in the world.

"Perhaps nothing so severe as locking you away in a prison cell," said Welexi. He stood tall and imposing, look-

ing down at Dominic with piercing eyes. He held his hands together behind his back. "However, you have a significant amount of raw power we can't have falling into the wrong hands, not in this new era when one man might steal standing from another." Gaelwyn had set the artifact on the ground before coming over to Dominic. Welexi picked it up and strode forward.

"Even if you can find a way to take his power from him," said Vidre. She had moved to the balcony that projected off the room and opened the door to look out onto the valley. Dominic could see little but smoke and dust. "That doesn't serve the story. Lightscour as an over-eager apprentice willing to use you as a ladder to climb higher? That has the proper beats of a story. If necessity compels us to take his power, so be it, but it will read to others as cruel or callous. The betrayal will lack weight unless they believe there was some true bond between the two of you. If the bond were true, you wouldn't strip him of his power like that."

"You said you would destroy the artifact," said Dominic. "You said it was too dangerous."

"I said we should not let it fall into the wrong hands," said Welexi. He placed the artifact on Dominic's chest. "Let me know when you feel any different."

Dominic didn't have any choice but to lay there, motionless, while Welexi set about trying to activate the artifact. Dominic was sweating, the only reaction he could muster. His brain kept scrambling for something he might say to Vidre or Gaelwyn, but nothing came to mind. He was closest to Vidre, but while she seemed unhappy with what

was being done to him, she had stopped trying to speak in his defense. There was still a faint glow of anger about her. She stood at the balcony with the windows open, looking outward instead of watching what Welexi was doing.

When Welexi slipped Dominic's hand inside the artifact, it sounded a single loud tone. Dominic's shadow armor disappeared in an instant, dropping him down so that his back was touching the cool stone floor. A feeling of sickness came slowly fading in. He remembered his first few days of fame, when it felt like he had been sick his whole life and only then, with the fame of a city behind him, known health. All the strength and vitality that had been contained within him for the past month emptied out like a cup with a hole in the bottom.

"Fascinating," said Welexi. He held the artifact high, looking it over. There was no visible change in it. Without any seeming forethought, Welexi stuck his own hand in the mouth of the artifact. It emitted a tone again, this one lower and longer. When he pulled his hand out, he had a smile upon his face. "The character of it is different," he said. "Defined by absence. I had thought of them as opposites, even knowing that they were not quite that." Welexi held out his hand. A sword of shadow sprang to life in it, ornate and fully formed. He set the artifact upon the ground and conjured a spear of light in his other hand.

"You have them both," said Vidre. She was staring at Welexi. "You went ahead and took it."

"Spoils of war," said Welexi.

"This was no war," replied Vidre. Her glass daggers were nowhere to be seen, but real anger was visible on her face.

"Of course it was," said Welexi. His tone was firm and solid, nearly unquestionable. If there had been any wonder in Welexi's expression when he had used the artifact, now it was gone, replaced by conviction. "I was shocked when Dominic attacked me, aghast at not only the depth of his betrayal, but the ferocity with which he defended this secret master." He gestured toward the sleeping Lothaire. "We fought a pitched battle throughout the castle. I couldn't bring myself to hurt the boy that I had come to think of as the son I never had." He paused. "Isn't that how you remember it?" Welexi asked with honest curiosity. Dominic couldn't tell whether it was a masterful performance or whether Welexi had simply created his own version of events that he instantly believed. The world felt sick and wrong, twisted around itself in an unnatural way.

"Of course," replied Vidre. She straightened her back and stood tall, with the bearing of a soldier. "I would have helped, but my relationship with Dominic was of a different nature. I'd grown too close to him. And Gaelwyn is a pacifist. He would never lay a hand on anyone." If Welexi spoke with such authority that it was difficult to question him, Vidre replied with pure cynicism and mockery.

"Just so," replied Welexi, not seeming to hear her tone. "It is a shame that Dominic escaped. If I hadn't taught him my technique, if he hadn't used it so recklessly, then perhaps he wouldn't have ended up like he did. It was so utterly regrettable." Welexi held out his hand and formed a creature of

shadow, similar to the ones that he had made in the theater. It was nearly as tall as Dominic; the more Dominic looked at it, the more he saw his own image there. The figure of shadow suddenly held a sword; he thrust it toward Welexi, who easily parried it away. "I fear I've created a shadow that will haunt me. Lightscour had become a villain like the one he was so famous for killing. Perhaps Dominic was infected with something of Zerstor, something black and foul. Now the ghost no longer has a physical form." Welexi swung his spear around, but the construct of shadow dodged to the side. They fought a mock battle, slowly at first but building in speed, a performance that was more beautiful than a true fight would be.

Welexi waved a hand, dismissing the construct of shadow. All eyes were on him. He didn't so much as look at Dominic as he moved to stand over Dominic's prone body. Welexi held his spear up with the point down, positioning it over Dominic. Dominic flinched back, trying to move, but his muscles were still betraying him.

"Wait," said Vidre. "Let me do it."

"Do what?" asked Welexi, spear still positioned over Dominic's heart.

"You know what Dominic was to me," said Vidre. "Give me a moment to grieve."

"I'm afraid there is much to be done yet this day," said Welexi. He frowned slightly.

"All the same," replied Vidre.

"I'll be here to comfort you, should you need it," replied Welexi. "You may take a moment to do what you believe needs to be done."

Dominic would have spoken, but his tongue had gone numb in his mouth. Gaelwyn still had his hand upon Dominic's shoulder, resting it there. Dominic couldn't speak unless Gaelwyn willed it. He could barely force air into his lungs. There was nothing that he could say in his defense, no way that he could stop whatever fate had been set in motion. Vidre leaned down and grabbed Dominic by his collar, pulling him to his feet until she had him held above her. He dangled in the air with his head lolled to the side.

"I'm sorry" said Vidre. "I'm sorry I couldn't be the sort of person you'd be able to trust." She carried him with her, taking him to the balcony where she'd been looking out over the valley. "I wish that it wouldn't have come to this. I wish that we could have both been different." She sat him on the balustrades, still holding onto him by his collar with a single hand. Dominic watched her with tears streaming down his eyes. Beyond her, Welexi was looking away, pretending that he could not see or hear. Gaelwyn's face was impassive, free of any emotion.

Vidre stabbed Dominic three times in the stomach then kicked him off the side of Castle Launtine.

19. The Childish Bride

There were times when her father hit her. He wasn't a cruel man, just given to fits of anger. Ros didn't remember a time before her mother had passed, but she often imagined that her father had been different then. It was always the small things that would set him off. There was a floorboard in their cottage that squeaked whenever someone stepped on it. Ros' father would snarl at it momentarily every time that happened, like a dog with its hackles raised. He'd go back to whatever he'd been doing soon afterward, seeming to forget all about the squeaky floorboard. His fits of anger came quickly, but they faded just as fast. When he struck her, it was always in those moments of brightly burning rage. He had gripped her by the throat once, raising her up until she was kicking her feet at him. She'd been able to watch as he seemed to realize what he was doing. Her father had set her back down on the floor and locked himself in his bedroom. He hadn't apologized, but he made poached pears for her, which was her favorite. She pretended that it made up for the bruise that ringed her neck for a full week.

It had been months since her father's last truly bad fit, that time brought on by the fact that Ros had burned chicken she'd been trying to roast. Things were better now. Ros kept telling herself that, while at the same time trying to avoid the small things she'd come to learn would bring his temper to a boil. She knew where to step so as not to make noise when she moved around the house. She knew when

to ply her father with a bottle of cheap wine and when to slyly keep it from him. She could sense those times when he was more prone to anger and make herself scarce. She could bow her head and act meek when she had done something wrong, trying to make herself look small and vulnerable so that his anger wouldn't overtake his sense. At nine-and-a-half years old, Ros thought that she and her father were finally getting along.

Her father didn't trust her to go to the market on her own, but when they went together she was given a considerable amount of leeway. Her father would greet people with a warm smile, embracing them with open arms and engaging in long conversations on boring adult topics. As soon as he was occupied, Ros would go wandering the various stalls, taking in the colors of the fruits and vegetables, smelling freshly baked bread, and keeping an eye out for illustrati. There was an illustrati of birds who often swept through the markets. The woman had a dozen chickadees lining her shoulders, singing songs as she walked. Ros thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

Ros found the woman, Aviare, in the first fifteen minutes. The illustrati was walking past the market stalls, as she usually did, occasionally stopping to ask a question of one of the vendors or touch a finely made piece of merchandise. Even at a young age, Ros understood this to be something that was expected of the local illustrati. Today was somewhat unusual in that Aviare was taking her walk with a tall man in fine white clothing. They were carrying on

an animated conversation; naturally, Ros slipped closer to listen in.

"I've heard that the kingdom of Lethant has an eligible princess," said Aviare.

"They say that birds take on the character of whatever they eat," said the man. He had an angular face that Ros recognized from the coins. She felt a thrill go through her when she realized that he must be the king. Her father hated the king, but her father hated lots of people. "The strawberries are in season as of late. Do you think that perhaps you might be able to feed some quail on fruits? Strawberry quail with a honey glaze, I think that sounds delightful, don't you?"

"I will see what I can do," said Aviare. "I'll speak with your chef about what sorts of flavors might pair well with that; a quail can't live on strawberries alone, not for terribly long at any rate. Just as a man cannot live on a diet of books, yes? There is a primal need for companionship."

"I have companions," complained the king. "And I have interests other than books, it's just that the real world pales in comparison to the stories. None of the illustrati I know hold a candle to the greats of old. I often think we're in the waning days of the world. It fills me with such melancholy."

"I was speaking of female companionship," said Aviare.

"Well, I have you, don't I?" the king asked brightly.

"I'm not speaking of mere friendship," said Aviare. Her mouth twisted into a strained smile. "I'm speaking of marriage."

"I'm not daft," said the king. "I simply don't wish to discuss it. A man must be allowed to mourn one wife before he goes seeking out the next."

"It's been four years," began Aviare. But at that moment the king went stiff, whatever interest he'd had in the conversation erased completely. His eyes were on Ros. She had been following along behind, listening in on their conversation, but they had slowed down and she had gotten too close.

"Well hello," said the king. He turned to Aviare, though his eyes didn't leave Ros. "Look at this little angel."

When he approached her, Ros tried to run. She was stopped by a firm hand around her upper arm from a man who she only belatedly realized must have been one of the king's men.

"I long for the innocence of childhood," said the king. He crouched down so that he was on Ros' level. "Days of wandering without a care in the world. Do you know who I am girl?"

"The king," said Ros. Her arm was still being held tight.

"Such a pretty voice," said the king.

"We shouldn't dally," said Aviare.

"No," said the king. There was something foreign in his eyes. "No, I suppose that we shouldn't."

That might have been the end of it, in some other world. It would only be a chance encounter with royalty, the sort of thing that Ros might have told her friends about later on. She would learn enough to know that the king's advisers

would have tried to talk him out of bringing her into the castle. She would also come to know the king well enough to know that he couldn't be dissuaded from his flights of fancy. Her father was given a small sum of money for her, a bride price that amounted to a purchase. In the stories they would tell later it was forty drams, but in truth Vidre never learned what price she fetched. Two weeks after they'd briefly met in the market, Ros was engaged to the King of Geswein. He adored her in a way that caused no small amount of uneasiness. The only part of her that didn't meet with his approval was her name; once her domain was known, the bards picked something more appropriate. She was called Vidre, a corruption of the Merrkian word for glass. No one used her given name after that, to the point where she sometimes forgot what she'd once been called.

She never saw her father again.



Vidre had just finished a dinner party that was more bearable than most. Her husband had taken ill earlier in the day, which meant that she didn't have to worry about what it was going through his mind. He had been both distant and jealous, which amounted to word coming to her through her ladies-in-waiting that certain men were no longer to be seated next to her during meals. A courtier had been sent away on a trip to the colonies as well, which had apparently happened because he had smiled at Vidre when the king was around to see it. The king's absence at the party was more than welcome. Vidre could demure when dessert

came without worrying about what the king might say afterward. She could speak with whomever she liked, with the only worry being that someone would talk about it later.

She was laying in her bed, thinking about chocolates, when the king's adviser came storming into her room.

"Are you a virgin?" he asked.

"What an exceptionally rude and —" Vidre began. She was still in her blue and purple dress, waiting on the maids to come and help her out of it.

"Was the marriage ever consummated?" asked the adviser. "We know that you share separate rooms."

"You may leave right now," said Vidre. "If you do so, I will be kind when I report this incident to my husband. I am willing to ascribe this to a sickness rather than some fault of your character, should you respect the sanctity of my room and depart at once."

"The king is dead," said the adviser.

"Dead?" asked Vidre. "But I saw him this morning." She felt faint but tried to keep her head about her. The corset she was wearing didn't help matters.

"He suffered the stroke of God's hand," said the adviser. "Queen Vidre, you are now sovereign ruler of this kingdom, but I must know whether you are a virgin or not. They have been rumors one way or another from the day the marriage was announced. Was the marriage consummated? Or failing that, did you seek the comforts of a man outside the marriage?"

"I..." Vidre paused, trying to fight down years of training in proper etiquette. "We did," she lied. "Only twice. He didn't favor it."

"Do not mention that," said the adviser with a shake of his head. "They will ask for an inspection of your maidenhood, to ensure that you are telling the truth, there's little chance that we can get around suffering that indignity." He paused slightly. "Is there some man who has caught your eye in recent weeks, some man who might get you with child so that a bastard —"

"That is quite enough," said Vidre. "I have tolerated your improper questions as long as I was able, but if my husband is truly dead then I am, as you say, the sovereign queen. I am certain that there are things which must be done, but I will not submit to any such examination, nor will I entertain the notion of, of, laying with a man out of wedlock and so soon after the death of my beloved husband."

"You foolish girl," said the adviser. His face had fallen. "They are coming to oust you. You need every scrap of legitimacy that you can gather up, no matter the cost in dignity and lies. A sixteen-year-old girl sitting on the throne would be bad enough if there were a regency council in place, bad enough if you were queen by blood instead of marriage, bad enough if you had a child by the king, bad enough if anyone liked you, bad enough if these were times of peace and plenty without enemies arrayed all around you — but I must tell you that you have precious few advantages to grasp onto here."

"Very well," said Vidre. She adjusted her dress; it seemed as though it would be some time before she was allowed to take it off. "If the situation is dire, we will meet it head on. My beloved husband lays dead. Let us prepare to continue the royal line."

Vidre fought hard for her kingdom. She endured an endless series of meetings, trying not to despair at the mess the king had left behind. There were debts that couldn't be paid and would have to be put off somehow. There were alliances that would need to be honored despite the sorry state of Geswein's military. The state of her maidenhead was inspected by a physician, a humiliation far greater than she had supposed it would be. Yet it wasn't enough; two weeks after the king's funeral, Vidre found herself spirited away in the middle of the night, no longer the queen, only queen-in-exile.



Vidre stood in the cool air of Abalon, letting the breeze touch her naked skin. One of the vaunted Hundred Nobles lay in his bed, watching her. He had told her over and over how beautiful she was, as many of them did. Perhaps he had thought that was the most significant thing about her. Few of the nobles seemed to care that she was queen-in-exile of a large kingdom. Few seemed to care that the stories of her youth and her recent departure had made her one of the most powerful illustrati in the region. Vidre was stronger than the man she'd slept with, even though he was a minor illustrati himself. She could have pinned him to the

bed and had her way with him, rather than the other way around. Either way, the pleasure was fleeting. It was the familiar rhythm of hunter and hunted that she enjoyed; the act of coitus was almost secondary to that, though it was always easier to remember that after the fact.

"What are you going to do when you're done in Abalon?" asked the man. His name was Calrus, but Vidre had already decided that she would pretend to have forgotten it.

"Done in Abalon?" she asked. She didn't look to where he was laying, only stared out the open window.

"You're burning bridges left and right," he replied. "Not an uncommon strategy when an illustrati is looking to move on in the near future. People remember a burnt bridge. Especially if the bridge was beautiful."

"That's a terrible metaphor," said Vidre. "Unless you're saying that the relationships I've ruined were what was beautiful and I'm nothing but an arsonist."

"You're a beautiful arsonist," said Calrus. "But so much more than that. Did you know, when I met you I hadn't expected so many layers to you? They'd said you were a creature of appetites. A hungry bear foraging around in the woods."

"A beautiful bear?" asked Vidre with half a smile that Calrus wouldn't be able to see.

"But you're not bear," said Calrus. "You're quite austere. You take small bites at the dinner table. You refuse both mead and cake. Mead I could understand, if you were with child —"

"Is that the rumor these days?" asked Vidre.

"It has been floated," said Calrus. "A young woman with wanton urges and a distaste for lambskin will not long remain so slender."

"It's not lambskin," said Vidre. "It's lamb intestine. If anyone should ask, let them know that I am perfectly unencumbered."

The truth was that she had been expecting a pregnancy for months. It wasn't exactly that she wanted a child, but she had some vague sense that it would give her a purpose that was sorely lacking. Vidre was dependent on the kindness of the nobility for the time being; she floated from one house to another as her hosts extracted stories and gossip from her. Her hopes of getting her kingdom back had evaporated within her first month in Abalon. She was rudderless. A child might have changed that and given her something worth fighting for. As it was, there was no grand purpose in her life, no challenge set before her. For all her so-called wanton urges, no child had been forthcoming, and Vidre had begun to suspect that she would never be a mother.

"So back to my original question," said Calrus. "What are you going to do when you leave Abalon?"

Vidre's life had first been dominated by her father and then by her husband. Now she was as free as she would ever be. "I don't know," she replied. "I think I might make a name for myself."

Calrus had laughed, as though it had been a joke.



Welexi had gone insane, or perhaps he had been insane all along. Vidre had liked it better when the search for the Harbinger artifacts was only a flight of fancy, a framing device for their travels. Secret, forbidden knowledge was a perfectly fine thing to pin a story on, so long as it was like the Numifex, an object whose purpose didn't really matter except to give motivation to the story's characters. Now Welexi had found his Numifex; he was cradling it in his hands like a proud father holding his newborn child. Dominic was the first to have his power taken, whether it was justified or not. He was almost certainly not going to be the last.

Vidre had thought about the best way to fight Welexi. That was only natural; they were sparring partners often enough. His spear would pass right through her glass armor, which meant that she would have to fight from a distance, something that her domain had never lent itself to. Armor of light was weaker than steel, but it would be impossible to rip off and have no chinks in which to sink her daggers. It wasn't hopeless — no fight was ever hopeless — but it would be very difficult. Vidre would have bet against herself, if the dead could collect winnings. She'd thought all that before Welexi had acquired the domain of shadow. On top of that, Gaelwyn would almost certainly intervene. That was an entirely different matter, one she'd given quite a bit more thought to; it wasn't quite so hopeless, if she could make her armor so thick that she could barely move in it. Regardless, this was not the time nor place.

Vidre had seen Calligae coming up the path right when Welexi had begun talking about power falling into the wrong hands. She'd held her tongue. If Welexi had come up behind her and seen the same wandering figure, she would have given him a nonchalant remark about what the plan was, feigning boredom. Until then, she would have to hope that Calligae would turn back, or if he continued on, that he would be wise enough to ask them questions before trying to start a fight. Calligae was a decent man and the domain of air was one that lacked in offensive potential. Vidre would try to fight defensively against him if it came to that. If he didn't listen to their explanations, they would have to kill him. Calligae tended towards reason though.

But when Welexi took Dominic's power, as though it were nothing, Vidre began to feel a cold trickle of fear. Welexi had brushed off Lothaire's insinuations. He often did that when unpleasant subjects reared their head. How much loyalty did Welexi really have to her though? Lothaire's final words hung in her head. Has Welexi told you about your father? Vidre hadn't seen her father in twenty years. Gaelwyn had acted instantly to silence Lothaire the moment the subject had come up. Everything else that Lothaire had said was true in one way or another.

"Spoils of war," said Welexi.

"This was no war," replied Vidre. She listened to his justifications, trying not to feel queasy. The artifact had been frightening in the abstract before. Now it provoked something more. It was one thing to hear Dominic say that Hartwain had been stripped of her power and another

to see the same thing happen so easily to Dominic. Vidre watched the supernatural confidence with which Welexi held the artifact. She couldn't imagine being so foolhardy as to stick her hand inside its maw after seeing Dominic's shadow armor pop like a bubble. When Welexi was done speaking, Vidre answered in kind, giving voice to her part of the pattern that Welexi had started. It was easy and natural to frame Dominic as the young apprentice seeking to surpass his master, no matter what the cost.

When Welexi moved to kill Dominic, it was too much.

"Wait," she said, before a plan had even formed. "Let me do it."

If she could have gotten Welexi and Gaelwyn to leave the room, to give them privacy, perhaps there might have been something that Vidre could have done. She might have simply been able to say that she had killed him while leaving him in some other place that she could retrieve him from later. Without a skilled illustrati of flesh to knit his muscles back together, Dominic would never walk again, but there were other illustrati, if Vidre could find a way to move him. Welexi was having none of it though.

"Give me a moment to grieve," said Vidre.

"I'm afraid there is much to be done yet this day," said Welexi. He frowned slightly. It was the sort of frown that she had seen many times before. It was the frown that Welexi gave when the story had started to take a turn he did not like.

"All the same," replied Vidre.

"I'll be here to comfort you, should you need it," replied Welexi. "You make take a moment to do what you believe needs to be done."

There had been nothing for it but to throw Dominic off the balcony. It was a drop of more than a hundred feet, not quite the incredible drop they'd done from the Ministry of Legends the day before, but not something that an ordinary man could expect to survive. Calligae was down below, but not expecting to have to catch a falling man. What she was about to do was almost certainly the murder of a man who was, if not an innocent, then at least someone she'd confided in. Dominic had known her, past the surfaces and facets she presented to the world. They might have become true friends, given time.

Vidre blunted her daggers before the moment of impact, leaving the tip just sharp enough to cut into the flesh of the abdomen. In all her years of traveling, she'd never had cause to pretend to stab someone. It was almost like pulling a punch, something that she'd never been terribly good at. She made three quick cuts, enough to bleed and look suitably brutal, then kicked Dominic in the chest, sending him sailing over the edge. She turned away before she could see the result.

She had never been religious when she was a young girl. After her early marriage, she had learned the words and rituals, but her tutors were far more concerned with making sure that everything was correct and proper than instilling in her any sense of respect for gods. Later, when she had traveled the world, she saw too many religions preaching

too many things; at the center of almost all of them was some monolithic figure who had claimed to speak with — or in some cases, be a physical manifestation of — a god. Praying was just a way of expressing hope; it didn't actually do anything. Yet after Vidre had sent Dominic over the edge, she said a small prayer all the same.



Calligae watched Vidre carefully. She must have seen him, but she gave no shout of recognition. She had been in Parance the day before, assaulting the Ministry of Legends. Now she was at Castle Launtine, shortly after a large explosion had blown a hole in the side of it, leaving bedchambers open to the air and rubble down below. A fair number of the dead men at the iron gate were surely her work. Calligae had no intention of fighting her a second time, especially not if Welexi was with her. He had fought alongside them in the Peddler's War, enough to see that they were killers. He stopped where he was, waiting to see what was going to happen next. If she dropped down to him, he would have to leave his horse behind. He was fairly certain that with the wind at his back, he would be able to outrun her.

When she propped a body up on the balcony, Calligae dismounted. The form was vaguely recognizable as the boy he'd chased the day before. His head lolled to the side; he was limp. Vidre was speaking to him, saying something indistinct even with Calligae's efforts to still the wind. When she kicked the boy off the balcony, she gave a brief glance

toward Calligae, watching him for an almost imperceptible second. The boy fell. Calligae raced for him.

His control of the domain of air extended three feet from his body. He ran at a sprint, working the air around him, thinning the air in front of him and pushing a wind at his back. When he reached the rough stone a hundred feet below Castle Launtine, he launched himself upward, using the wind to propel him higher. At the apex of the jump he pushed himself toward the stone with a gust of air, then kicked off from it with a second jump. His timing wasn't quite right, but he managed to snag the boy's limp arm in mid-air. They were both falling. Calligae pulled the boy in closer, generating the most powerful upward wind he could all the while. They still landed on the ground with a hard thud, but nothing an illustrati couldn't shrug off.

Calligae sat up and shook his head. He hadn't done a stunt like that in — well, not since the day before, when he'd taken a running leap from the twenty-fifth floor of the Ministry of Legends. Before that, it had been years. He looked over at the boy and noticed blood on his stomach. A brief check showed that the wounds were only superficial. That only raised more questions.

"Are you alright?" asked Calligae. "I get the sense that you and I have things to talk about."

"Mmmmmrnn," said the boy.

Calligae looked closer. He had worried for a moment that the boy was paralyzed, or that he'd been made insensate through a hit on the head, but the eyes were alert and the head at least was moving. When he saw the muscles

beneath the skin moving without changing the position of the arms, Calligae felt a slight sickness in his stomach. That could only be Gaelwyn's work.

"Can you speak at all?" asked Calligae. "Or was that taken from you as well?"

"Ehh hhoo," said the boy.

"Come on then," said Calligae. He got to his feet and brushed the dust from his robes. "Vidre had you at her mercy and chose to give you a superficial wound. It's a message I'll need to decipher." He picked the boy's limp body up from the ground, making sure to cradle the head like he would a child. Riding two to a horse wasn't ideal, especially not with one of them unable to respond to the horse, but Calligae had taken the sick and injured off the battlefield often enough that he had some practice. It wouldn't be fast, but he hoped that he didn't need to be. It was the work of a few minutes to get the boy situated. Calligae sat behind him, with his arms folded around the boy's waist. Throughout this, Calligae glanced up at the balcony where Vidre had been, but there was nothing to see there.

"Eh weh eh geh," said the boy. His jaw moved, but his tongue was unsteady in his mouth in the same way that head seemed to not want to stay upright upon his neck.

"I can't understand you," said Calligae. "We'll get you to someone who can fix you. I'm not sure that I owe Vidre that much, if this is indeed what she intended, but it seems as though the Iron Kingdom is no longer the safe place I had imagined it to be."



Dominic had never imagined he would understand the expression “impotent rage” so well as he now did. His tongue could move, but only slightly. He could shape his lips and move his eyes. Nothing else was working. He sat on the horse, held in place by strong hands, not knowing where they were going. He had lost more power than most people could dream of ever having. Everywhere he saw a shadow he was reminded of that; when he closed his eyes, the darkness didn’t help him forget. It would have been a travesty if he had been reduced down to the level of a mortal man, but it was far worse than that. Perhaps some day Dominic would run again, but for now he was trapped within his own body, unable to speak or move of his own volition. He briefly wished that Vidre had killed him until thinking better of it. He now wished that he had fled on his own, racing away before he could face the moment of truth. Or better, that he had thrown his lot in with Faye from the start and slit Welexi’s throat in the middle of the night when he was supposed to be keeping watch. A part of him shied away from the imagined violence, but the anger was bubbling up in him with nowhere to go. It might have been easier to accept what had happened to him if so much of it hadn’t been his fault.

Calligae brought them to a stop for a midday lunch. Dominic didn’t recognize the roads they were traveling down, but he was certain that they weren’t returning to Parance. While the horse grazed at a nearby pasture, Calli-

gae propped Dominic up on a rock and trickled water into Dominic's mouth from a water skin.

"I didn't plan on having to leave the Iron Kingdom today," said Calligae. "Long habit taught me to bring more food than I expected to need, which I hope you're grateful for." He smiled slightly. "Now, I have a few questions for you."

"Hrrr ah," said Dominic. His tongue could only make marginal movement, not enough to speak any words.

"I'll restrict it to yes and no," said Calligae. "You can manage at least that, can't you?"

"Ehh," said Dominic. It came out as a low moan.

Calligae asked his questions quickly, keeping them simple. Some of it was merely to confirm what he'd already said he suspected. "Ehh," it was Gaelwyn who had left Dominic in such a state. "Ohhh," Dominic had no access to the domain of shadow. "Ehh," the Iron King was dead. Dominic gave an emphatic "ehh" when Calligae asked whether Welexi had given Gaelwyn his orders. Dominic was frustrated by the process; there was so much more that he wanted to say, things that needed explanation, not just about the depth of the betrayal he'd suffered but the artifact that Welexi had used and the conspiracy that Lothaire had headed.

Calligae checked Dominic's stomach, where Vidre had left her wounds. If Calligae was right, it was an odd way of saying that she didn't want to kill him. He'd seen no tenderness in her eyes when she stabbed him. He tried to think of why she might have wanted to save him. He wondered

whether she actually cared, or if this was only part of some plot. Perhaps she was hoping that he could be fixed, made whole again and turned useful. Whatever closeness there had been between them was obviously destroyed now. Dominic didn't know whether they'd ever see each other again.

"Huhur," said Dominic. He didn't know what he was trying to express. Making noises with his mouth was only a way of giving form to his emotions. He would have screamed at the world, if he thought he could manage it.

"Not the best of times for you," said Calligae. "Not the best of times for the Iron Kingdom either, if I have my guess."

"Huhhh," said Dominic.

"Welexi is at the heart of it," said Calligae. He dug into his pack and pulled out some meat and cheese, which he ate as he spoke. "I'm fairly certain of that. Vidre handed you to me, a bit ungently, but I don't imagine that she had many options. I could have watched you fall to your death. She had to have known that what she was doing was desperate. If I hadn't been there, do you think she would have leaped with you? But with no way to cushion the fall, you might not have survived. I've heard of that happening before. An illustrati caught a man falling from fifty feet, but his neck still snapped on impact." Calligae sighed. "Where was I?"

Dominic looked at the old man. "Ehh," he said.

"Right," nodded Calligae. "Welexi is at the center of it. Vidre was acting under some constraints. Of the rest of the members of your merry band, that leaves Gaelwyn. He's

always been Welexi's lapdog, though I mean no offense by it. I had always wondered whether Welexi would take a turn towards villain. It happens often, among illustrati of particularly high standing. Waning glory pushes men towards unsavory acts. They know gossip and scandal can sustain them where good deeds did not." He furrowed his eyebrows. "Yet I don't think that's the case for Welexi. There were always rumors about him, but that must be expected whenever there is someone widely renowned. When he began to call Gaelwyn friend, those rumors redoubled. You're young enough that perhaps you never knew it to be any different. I'll be interested to see what conversation we might have when we get you fixed?"

"Eh uhr uh huuh?" asked Dominic. He hoped the inflection would get his point across.

Calligae gave a soft smile. "You and I are going to pay a visit to the Bone Warden."



What was Gaelwyn without Welexi?

He was asking himself that question again. Ropes of muscle were coiled within his arms, in a way that wasn't natural to any creature that he'd ever touched. There were things that nature had never dreamed of. The construct beneath his collarbone was more conventional, as these things went, modeled on the long tongue of a frog and anchored to the bone so that a quick, hard twitch would send the muscle unrolling itself at a high speed, cracking forward like a whip. It was woefully imperfect, based on

a design he'd thought up years ago but never tested, but it was enough to get the job done. Gaelwyn had looked at proper tentacles before, those which could provide for independent movement without skeletal support. They were far more complicated though; muscles could only contract or relax, which meant that different muscle groups would have to work against each other. Because he couldn't create new nerves from whole cloth, Gaelwyn would have to rely entirely on his domain sense in order to control the tentacles and take sensory information from them. Worse, domain intuition was failing him; tentacles were instinctual to a squid but these new creations required thought. What he'd ended up making was laughably simple, even if it had proven effective. Given time, he could improve them significantly.

Gaelwyn didn't know if he wanted to become a better fighter.

He had watched dispassionately as Vidre stabbed Dominic in the stomach and kicked him in the chest. It was a curiously cruel way to kill the boy. A slit across the throat with one of those startlingly sharp glass daggers would have been cleaner. The loss of blood would have left Dominic unconscious almost before he hit the ground. The stomach though, that was a longer, lingering death, even if she'd cut through to the renal artery. Gaelwyn took it for symbolic; he had little doubt that Vidre didn't want Dominic to die, but when Vidre did unpleasant things she liked to make them as unpleasant as possible. She was a sow wallowing in the muck, immersing herself in it because

that might allow her to believe that she was there by her own choice.

Lothaire had said that Vidre was going to kill him. He had little doubt that this was true. They had never quite gotten along. If Welexi weren't there as a common bond, they might have amicably parted ways many years ago. Unfortunately, the fact that they were constantly in each other's presence had turned what was perhaps a mild dislike into a lasting undercurrent of enmity. If Lothaire was telling the truth, then Vidre was going to be a problem.

Gaelwyn wondered whether Welexi had figured that out yet, or whether some action would need to be taken on his behalf.

20. The Bone Warden

Vidre should have just watched. She had turned away before knowing whether Calligae would act, before knowing whether Dominic would be saved. She had even said a prayer. It was nothing more than an ill-timed bout of maudlin sentimentality. She would learn what had happened later anyway, once she went looking for his corpse. It would have been better to watch, to remove any doubt and allow her to focus on other things. She tried to take her mind off of Dominic's unknown fate and watch Welexi instead.

Welexi intended to keep Castle Launtine. Their assault had driven all of the staff away, not to mention the dozen illustrati they'd killed and the score of guards they'd put to the sword. The central question was now who had the legitimate right to rule the Iron Kingdom. The Ministries were located in Parance, but power had always been held by the Iron King himself at Castle Launtine. That had been true for as long as most people had been alive. Keeping the castle meant keeping a claim on legitimacy. To do that effectively meant calling back the common people who had been driven away.

"It puts us at risk," said Vidre. "We'll have to be wary of assassins in the night for as long as we stay here. We have no money to pay guards. Even if we had the money to pay guards, we would have no way to ensure that they were loyal to us."

"We'll plunder the Iron King's personal vault," said Welexi. "If I recall correctly, it was some distance from the powder room and should be intact."

"On whose authority?" asked Vidre. "It might be one thing if we were backing a particular bastard for the Iron King's throne. We're free agents, working on behalf of the idea that there should be a king or queen instead of whatever they were trying to put in his place." She gestured to Lothaire's unmoving body. He was unconscious and drooling slightly, with the Harbinger ring still on his finger.

"We already assaulted this castle in the name of the divine right of rule," said Welexi. "Taking money is nothing in comparison to that."

"Then who are we handing power to?" asked Vidre.

"The rightful ruler," said Welexi. "There are papers to look through here; I believe that the Iron King kept careful track of his bastards. It is well possible that if this conspiracy did not destroy the evidence entirely, we might find concrete evidence of who is meant to sit the throne."

"Do you understand we're up against the Ministry of Legends?" asked Vidre. "We need to get the story straight. We need to be backing a real, actual person instead of a nebulous principle. We need it today, tomorrow at the latest, because whoever gets moving first has the advantage. I'm sure our names are already smeared thanks to the attack at the Ministry."

"I will look through the papers then," said Welexi. "Begin thinking about what we might tell the bards."

It was going to be more complicated than that, of course. Vidre made her way back to the Iron King's bed chambers, both to give herself time to think and so that she could be away from Welexi for a while. Of the two of them, Welexi was better at framing his actions; it was something that he did without any seeming thought, twisting around what had happened so that it was presented in the best possible light. It was one of the reasons that he was revered the world around as a hero. He also acted heroically, Vidre had never denied that, but it was his gift for presentation that had put him so far ahead of everyone else. Someone — one of Vidre's early lovers, whose bed she'd shared when she'd first come aboard the Zenith — had called it a pathology of presentation. The phrasing had always stuck with her. The concept of a story was like a sickness to the man.

Presentation wouldn't be enough. They would need to build up lies, both about what they had done and what had happened. They needed to be acting on the authority of their chosen heir from the moment that they were assaulted in the Ministry of Legends, not after the fact. It needed to be a story which would survive scrutiny.

Vidre got to work, happy to have something to occupy her.



The sound of the chimes was slowly driving Vidre mad. The artifact had two tones, one it gave off when a link was taken and a second it gave when the link was given. The first was slightly lower than the second. When they'd begun

the day, Vidre had taken some amusement from trying to figure out which notes they were hitting. She'd had music lessons as part of her extensive tutoring, as music was the sort of thing that any noblewoman was supposed to have a passing interest in, if not a complete mastery. Vidre had a pleasant singing voice that she rarely used. She hummed along with the artifact as it made its tone, trying to narrow down the exact pitch. After she was satisfied with that, the sounds of the artifact continued on, wearing at her nerves.

They'd pulled in the commoners from the village that sat below Castle Launtine. Many of them had worked at the castle prior to the change in ownership and now wished to return; all claimed ignorance of what had been going on. Welexi had flown down into the village and gave a rousing speech, proclaiming that the Iron King had died some weeks ago and that the Sunhawk had personally worked against a cabal of people intent on usurping the royal line. All that was true enough. Vidre had expected that the response would be anemic, even with the announcement of increased pay, but the people had come all the same.

Loyalty was an issue. There was a very real possibility that one of the illustrati that fled would try to come back to the castle, especially if they heard that workers were being taken on. There was no way to lay claim to the castle without guards and servants though, so Welexi had proposed a solution.

The commoners came into the large dining room beside the throne room one by one. Each was made to place their hand into the artifact, which gave off its low tone. Then

the artifact was placed on the hand of Welexi, Gaelwyn, or Vidre, giving off its second, higher tone. This was repeated for every person they meant to hire on. It wouldn't stop anyone from sneaking in, nor would it stop an assassin with a mundane blade, but it at least ensured that no illustrati were secretly working for them. They would have to sleep with their doors latched firmly shut, always planning on someone trying to slit their throats in their sleep, but that was a necessary cost of their new position.

"How many more?" asked Vidre as she withdrew her hand from the artifact. She rubbed her wrist, though there was no sensation involved. The young man she'd taken the link from looked uneasy as he left the room. The young man had no standing, so the link would do little, but he would ever after be deprived of even the chance of becoming an illustrati.

"A dozen," said Welexi. "Are you so eager to depart?"

"I should have left yesterday," said Vidre. "We still have no clue what's going on in Parance. Better that I set the record straight sooner rather than later."

"You'll be safe on your own?" asked Welexi. He seemed worried on her behalf, but that was part of the character he played.

"I'll be fine," said Vidre. "It's only scouting for now, with perhaps a few visits to whatever allies we might still have. My experience in going unnoticed is considerable." She had demurred when Gaelwyn had offered to change her face, saying that she wanted some proof of her identity in case she needed to leverage it. In truth, she wanted to

keep Gaelwyn's hands as far from her as possible. She had never enjoyed the sensation of his alterations. Recent developments had amplified her distrust of him, for all that they were still working together.

They had taken Lothaire's ring from him. Welexi had immediately put it on, defying all sense of caution, then declared that it didn't seem to have any effect. He still wore it though, perhaps for the same reason that Lothaire had; it was mightily impressive just for the effect it had on the mind, a nagging insistence that came whenever it was in view. They had put the artifact on Lothaire's hand after that, in order to deprive him of whatever powers he had, but it hadn't made its tone. Welexi had concluded that Lothaire didn't have a domain — that his link had already been taken from him. Vidre had immediately seen that this was a power in its own right, a way for the old man to mark himself as serving the cause above all else.

Lothaire had still not woken up. Gaelwyn had said there was some difficulty with the process. He had spewed medical terminology when Vidre inquired further, enough to let Vidre know that he was lying to her. Lothaire hadn't woken up because Gaelwyn didn't want Lothaire to wake up. The reason was obvious enough; Lothaire knew things he shouldn't have, enough to drive further wedges between them. The only reason to keep him alive was that he might let slip some useful information, but he was dangerous when he was talking. Lothaire knew something about Vidre's father, something that Gaelwyn had thought would substantially change her attitude. Vidre had always

thought that if someone was keeping a secret because they thought you would be angry if you knew it, that was reason enough to be angry, but she found herself not pushing too hard. It was a weakness that she recognized in herself, but not one that she was eager to correct.

Six Weeks Later

Dominic was miserable. His anger and despair had faded as the weeks went by, leaving only a pit of anticipation that had turned into a sour knot. He hadn't moved of his own volition in six weeks. He hadn't spoken in six weeks, though he and Calligae had gotten quite good at communication. Calligae liked to talk, both about the life that he'd led and the stories that he'd heard over the years. The conversation never strayed toward names familiar to Dominic, which he imagined must have been by design. Calligae was a friend to Vidre and Welexi, but he never mentioned them, not even in passing. The topic hadn't been broached since the day that Calligae had caught Dominic.

"I'll be happy not to have to be your caretaker," said Calligae. He had booked passage for them aboard a ship, paying with a promise and a demonstration of his power. Calligae could whip up winds around him, strong enough that he could prevent a small ship from being becalmed. The crew had taken the old illustrati for a good omen; they thought that Dominic was an invalid, which wasn't far from

the truth. Calligae did everything for him. Providing food and water was the least it. Whenever Dominic had to go to the bathroom, Calligae had to pull down his pants and position him over a chamberpot. In the beginning it had been utter humiliation; now it was simply an unpleasant part of the rhythm of the day.

Dominic wasn't above deck when they sailed into port. He was only brought up once the ship had docked, which meant that he missed the grand view. Calligae had told him it was nothing special; where Torland was an island nation dominated by a large mountain with Laith's visage carved into the side of it, Xeo was flat and rocky, barely fit for human life and incapable of leaving anyone in a state of awe.

Calligae hired a litter which took them to the palace. He seemed cheery enough, though he was spending the last of his money. Dominic hadn't thought about money during his entire time with Vidre and Welexi. He hadn't needed to. Even before then, he'd gotten so much money from the races that it was almost meaningless, so long as he wasn't being too extravagant. Now Calligae was paying mostly with his reputation and expending what little resources he had in order to get them to someone who might actually help. Calligae looked out the window of the litter that carried them with a faint smile on his face. Dominic couldn't help but recall the trip he'd taken with Welexi, back when this had all started. It left an unpleasant feeling in his gut.

When they arrived at the palace, Calligae pulled Dominic out and carried him over his shoulder.

"Less dignified than you might have hoped," said Calligae. "But I suspect the Bone Warden will take some amusement from it."

Dominic was given a backwards view of the palace as Calligae navigated his way forward, though it was mostly of the palace floors, which were smooth but unpolished gray stone broken up with threadbare carpets. The sound of footsteps echoed through the halls. Eventually they came to a room much smaller than Dominic had expected, where a set of cushioned chairs had been arranged. Calligae set Dominic down in one of them, putting him face-to-face with the Bone Warden herself.

She was a tall, spindly woman, with a face lined with wrinkles and two great horns coming up from her forehead. For an illustrati as powerful as she was supposed to be, that was an affectation. She surely had the resources to find someone like Charnel to rejuvenate the skin and pull it tight. Yet she had chosen this appearance for herself. She was a crone, in much the same way that Hartwain was, a woman who had taken age and run with it. Her hair was as white as the bone of her horns. Her eyes were sharp though. She was watching Dominic, though he had little to offer her except for a meager attempt at facial expressions.

"It's been too long," said Calligae. "I often find myself wishing that you lived closer to the core of the civilized world."

"What's happened to this young man?" asked the Bone Warden.

"Has the legend of Lightscour reached you?" asked Calligae. "Most famous as the slayer of Zerstor, some months back, but involved in some business within Torland. He was instrumental in bringing an end to Torland's internal strife, as I understand it."

"Uhh huuuh," offered Dominic, if only to show that he was aware of what was happening.

"I only rarely listen to the stories," said the Bone Warden. She arched her eyebrows. "They're so often false that they approach meaninglessness. He can't speak?"

"He needs the attentions of an illustrati of flesh," said Calligae. "I was hoping that you might provide such a thing. He has information as well; there is a story which he has not been able to communicate with only his grunts and groans."

"An important story, for you to have brought him this far?" asked the Bone Warden. "Very well," she said, without waiting for an answer. "I shall see what I can do about repairing his tongue."

"And the rest of him," said Calligae. "The boy has value beyond what knowledge is locked within his head."

The Bone Warden sniffed. "I assume it was Gaelwyn that left him in this state?"

"That's what I gather," said Calligae. "The boy has lost the use of his tongue and though I've gathered a good amount of experience in interpreting him on the way over, communication has been spotty."

Dominic said nothing. He only looked at the Bone Warden with hard eyes. He had been worried in the beginning that Calligae would simply leave him to die. He imagined that's what most people would have done, if given such a burden. Perhaps a lesser man would have taken him to Parance and turned him in for whatever reward was on offer; after all, he was a wanted man there, in a manner of speaking. Yet Calligae had rightly divined that something greater was at stake. The fate of the Iron Kingdom — or whatever name it would go by now that the Iron King no longer ruled — hung in the balance. With it hung the fate of every nation that the Iron Kingdom bordered. That was without even taking into account the conspiracy that had replaced the Iron King and installed a new parliament in Torland, or the artifact that had the power to reshape the system of the world, if given a chance.

The Bone Warden wasn't one for pleasantries. She sent a servant off to fetch her physician, then sat in silence. When Calligae spoke, she deflected him, turning his questions down. He did not try terribly hard. Dominic, having no other options, sat there silently as well while they waited. A small woman came into the room some moments later, looking nervous.

"Lolly, fix this man," said the Bone Warden.

The woman reached forward with slender fingers, touching Dominic gently. She closed her eyes and pursed her lips. "Whose work is this?" she asked. "An illustrati did this."

"Gaelwyn Mottram," said the Bone Warden. "Fix his tongue first."

Lolly swore silently to herself. Her ministrations were nothing like Gaelwyn's. They were barely perceptible. After a few moments, Lolly reached her fingers into Dominic's mouth without asking him, to physically touch the flesh of his tongue there. The change happened slowly. Dominic tried not to move or gag. Eventually Lolly removed her fingers from Dominic's tongue, wiping his spit on her tunic. "Try to speak?" she asked. She kept a hand rested on his the bare flesh of his wrist and closed her eyes to concentrate.

"Calligae," said Dominic. "Thank you."

"I would say that it was my pleasure, but we both know that's not true," said Calligae.

"Tell us what it is that you know," said the Bone Warden.

Dominic had gone six weeks without speaking. He did his best to make up for lost time.



The Bone Warden sat for a long time once Dominic was finished. Food had been brought in halfway through; Dominic ate small bites of hard cheese and smoked fish during brief pauses. Lolly had repaired his arms before she left, but nothing else. Dominic had started his story wanting to skip ahead to what had happened at the end, but the Bone Warden insisted that he start from the beginning. He had taken weeks to get to Xeo; delaying further wasn't going to change anything. Calligae had taken to interrupting early on, asking for clarifying details, but the Bone Warden had given him a disapproving frown that kept him quiet. When Dominic was finished, there was only silence.

"You are an inexpert storyteller," the Bone Warden eventually said. "You have told a story which does little to raise my opinion of you. For those reasons, I think it is safe to believe that most of what you are saying is the truth."

Dominic sighed with relief.

"I'd guessed at most of it," said Calligae. "Not the exact nature of the artifact, but a fair amount." He shook his head and turned to the Bone Warden. "What's to be done about it?"

"The news is six weeks late," replied the Bone Warden. "A fast ship might make the trip back to Parance in a third that time, which means that whoever I sent would be operating on instructions made with information two months out of date. It isn't entirely uncommon for me to give my agents wide latitude, but I've found the more latitude given, the greater the resources that need to be committed."

"So there are no repercussions?" asked Dominic. "Welexi is allowed to steal my fame from me and just ... continue on as though nothing has happened?"

"I care nothing for your fame," said the Bone Warden. She steepled her fingers. "The transgression is alarming, but many illustrati have done alarming things before. In this case we have no precedent for the sin he has committed in taking your domain and standing from you. I am not certain that I agree with you when you say that he will do it again, though Welexi and I have spoken together only infrequently, given that I have no need of his services nor interest in advancing his story. No, Dominic, the two things that interest me are this artifact, the one which it is claimed

there are dozens of, and this coup that seems to have no respect for national borders.”

Dominic’s face fell. The Bone Warden would act, but it wouldn’t be against Welexi. She would only serve her own interests. Dominic shouldn’t have expected anything more. His dreams, in the rare moments that they extended beyond being able to walk and talk, involved him leading the charge back to the Iron Kingdom, somehow disarming Welexi and then taking back what was rightfully his. It was a fantasy, but fantasy had been what he had needed for that long period he’d spent trapped in his body.

“Whatever you decide,” said Dominic. “I’d like to be part of it.”

The Bone Warden eyed him. “Do you understand how easily a mortal man can be struck down in a battle between the highest illustrati?”

“I was a mortal man when I killed Zerstor,” said Dominic. “Just before that, I saw him dispatch trained guards. I understand the risks.”

“Vidre saved your life,” said Calligae. “I would hate to think that the care I gave you was all for nothing.”

“I don’t plan on dying,” said Dominic. “I don’t plan on a headstrong rush into danger either. I’m not invincible, I’ve been made aware of that in the most brutal fashion that I could have imagined. But I need to see this through.” He turned to the Bone Warden. “If it’s the conspiracy you want, then I’m a useful tool. They’ll speak with me, especially because of what I can tell them about Welexi. More than that, if Welexi has been claiming that I’m dead, I can prove

that he was lying. And I might be able to talk Vidre out of working for him, if she still is."

"I believe you to be overselling yourself," said the Bone Warden. "Yet the core of the argument, the one laid bare when the pulpy flesh of eager sentimentality is stripped away ... well, it would cost me little to send you as well, if I were to send anyone. The only expense would be in the provisions that you would consume."

"I took quite the effort bringing this young man to you," said Calligae. "I think it likely that he has more worth than just his story." He glanced to Dominic. "I don't mean to tell you your business, but if what you're after is revenge, it's not all it's cracked up to be."

"Not revenge," said Dominic. "Just ... a sense of completion."

"I will consider my options," said the Bone Warden. "The two of you are dismissed. I will have Lolly complete the repairs to your body, to the best of her ability."



Dominic laid back on a bed with Lolly in a chair next to him. She had pulled off his shirt and rolled up his pants, the better to touch and prod his flesh. What Gaelwyn had done in a matter of seconds took her much longer. She had far less standing than Gaelwyn did, not to mention that she was almost certainly not a world-renowned expert in the human body. She didn't seem too much older than Dominic was.

"How did you become an illustrati?" asked Dominic while she massaged his calf.

"I was born into it," said Lolly. "The Bone Warden is my great-grandmother. Try lifting your leg?"

Dominic did as she asked. The muscle pulled to the right, which Lolly greeted with a frown. "Is it alright if we speak?" asked Dominic. "I would have thought after hours of talking I would be ready for a break, but that doesn't seem to be the case. I think once you're done with my legs, I'm going to run until I collapse. I want to feel the wind on my face again ... I was a runner. I don't know whether you've heard the stories about me, but before I was an illustrati, that's what I did."

"I had heard you were a thief," said Lolly. She smiled when she said it. Dominic winced, though there was no recrimination in her voice.

"I was that too," said Dominic. He sighed. Lolly had him move his leg again, trying to make sure that the muscles were properly anchored. "Do you like being an illustrati?"

"To be honest, I don't really think about it," replied Lolly. "I'm not one of those titanic figures who goes off to war facing down dozens of armed men. I'm not even terribly good at fighting, though I do have some training." She wiggled the fingers on her free hand. "Grappling, naturally. It's difficult for me to work when I'm not directly touching flesh though, so even a layer of fabric could probably stop my assault. But to circle back to your question, I suppose it's better to be an illustrati than not, even if only a minor one." She hesitated slightly. "Which is not to say that your

condition is, ah. You know. Lift your leg again?" She was blushing slightly.

"Do you ever wonder about the system of the world?" asked Dominic as he lifted his leg.

"In what sense?" asked Lolly.

"Just ... kings and queens. The illustrati and the nobility. People paying each other with coins stamped with the face of whoever is currently at the top of the heap." It was hard for Dominic to express what he was thinking, despite all the time he'd had nothing to do but think. "Whenever I see the marble hallways and gilded flourishes that decorate what should have been a simple table, I think about how much it must have cost. How much energy do the illustrati pour into being known? How much of their time does it consume?"

"This is nothing that hasn't been said before," said Lolly. "Not only that, it's been said before by older and wiser people who were far more learned than either of us."

"I know," said Dominic. "But was this something that they solved? Or did they just talk in circles?" But it was more than that. The scholars of the past didn't have an artifact that could change the structure of society.

"They talked in circles, obviously," said Lolly. "Otherwise we wouldn't have the world we do now. Okay, I think you're good to go. The Red Angel was kind to you. He was very precise. It made things a lot easier."

"I don't think it was kindness," said Dominic. "I think that's just how he is."

"Either way," said Lolly. "Everything should be in working order now. Try walking around for a bit, touch your nose, and stretch yourself out."

Dominic did as she asked, trying his best to twist and turn in order to stretch his muscles. It felt wonderful to move around and scratch at itches. More than anything, he wanted to go running, to pump his legs and let loose, but a small part of him knew that it would feel hollow after the speeds he'd been able to attain as an illustrati. It was hard to complain about being restored to wholeness though.

"I think it would be possible to find you a place here at Xeo," said Lolly. "If you don't have a trade, you're still young enough for an apprenticeship. You might be able to put all the stories behind you. There's no real need to worry about the system of the world."

"Thank you," said Dominic. "But I think I have to see this through."



Dominic walked with the Bone Warden down a set of narrow halls. She'd come to his room in the morning, just after a servant had woken him up. She hadn't said where they were going; Dominic kept his questions to himself.

"I do not trust easily," the Bone Warden said when they reached a thick oak door near the bowels of the palace. The air was damp and smelled of wet dust. "In my opinion, no one should trust easily. I believe much of your story, at least those parts which seem most important, but that belief does not extend to you as a person."

"I understand," said Dominic.

"Are you aware of how I built my reputation?" asked the Bone Warden. Her horns had shrunk down from the last time he'd seen her, the better to accommodate the small doorways.

"You keep prisoners," said Dominic.

"Keeping illustrati confined is difficult," said the Bone Warden. "In most cases, it involves building thicker and more sturdy boxes. Pile up stone and iron, enough that a motivated individual with an absurd amount of strength can't break through, then close it off entirely such that there is nothing more than a small hole for food and water to be put in and excrement to be removed. On the whole, this is horrifically expensive, especially when you take into consideration that oftentimes a prisoner must be kept alive and healthy for political reasons, as when the prisoner in question is a member of the royal line being held for ransom." She stared at Dominic for a moment. "I take it you have already heard of my solution to the problem?"

"Make the body itself the prisoner," said Dominic. "The same thing Gaelwyn did to me."

The Bone Warden opened the door in front of them, then strode down forward. Dominic followed after her. There were a number of doors in this hallway; the Bone Warden went to one of these and opened it up. It didn't appear to be locked.

"Christopher, this is the illustrati formerly known as Lightscur," said the Bone Warden. "You are to keep your

mouth shut in his presence and do nothing more than serve as an object lesson."

The man's bones were twisted into curls. He had been reading a book, though he put this down to look at Dominic. The bones of his arms looped in and around each other, limiting his movements. His legs were similarly bent and bowed. Dominic didn't imagine that the man could walk terribly well, if at all. There would be no need for a lock on his door.

"My methods are better than Gaelwyn's," said the Bone Warden. "They are much more refined. In my youth, I was a traveling jailer. People all around the Calypso needed my services, so I would go wherever I was wanted. I could provide a lock to which I was the only key."

"Only if there wasn't another illustrati of bone," said Dominic. He kept looking at the man's arm, at a place where the bone spiraled like a corkscrew.

"I killed Oso, Ivory, and Asgwm in the space of a single month," said the Bone Warden. "The Iron King was eleven years old, his grand stadiums not yet built. The world was a different place back then. I doubt that my scheme would have worked so well today, but back then it made me a particularly valuable woman, even after the rumors began to swirl about what I had done. I made myself part of how illustrati dealt with each other. Once an illustrati was jailed by me, both my client and my prisoner had an incentive to keep me alive, because only I could undo what had been done. I dined with the king of Lerabor while his son was

held captive, his twisted bones keeping him docile despite his years of training and brutish strength."

She was saying this in order to impress her strength and savagery upon him, Dominic had no doubts about that.

"As time passed, there came to be other illustrati of bone," continued the Bone Warden. "These were younger, weaker than the ones I'd killed. I knew that my tiny empire couldn't last, not if it required me to kill the competition. So instead, I became a landlord of people. Every time I heard of an illustrati of bone, I would pick up my skirts and make haste towards them, hoping to make a deal. I did not trust those men and women, I only trusted that they would act on the incentives that I provided to them. It was, after all, better for us to work as one, like a guild which shuts out all competition in order to drive up its prices. I was the Bone Warden; they became my acolytes. We would negotiate for our services as one. It gave these bony fingers a great deal of reach."

"I'm not thinking of betraying you," said Dominic.

"You are thinking of using me," said the Bone Warden. "Just as I am thinking of using you. I want us to be clear on the incentives on offer. Play your part and everything will be fine. If you abuse my kindness towards you ..." she gestured to the man with twisted bones. "From your story I am given to understand that you are bad with both contracts and honesty. It is my hope that perhaps you have gained some wisdom since those days."

"I have," said Dominic. "Just tell me what you want from me and I will do my best to comply."

"I will be sending a small number of illustrati with a wide degree of latitude," said the Bone Warden. "You will act as bait, not just for the conspiracy but for Vidre and Welexi as well, if need be."

"Consider it done," said Dominic.

"No matter what you find has happened in your absence?" asked the Bone Warden.

Dominic gave a firm nod.

21. Revolutions

It was all falling apart.

There was a flaw in the artifact which they had run into early on. When someone with a link placed their hand inside it, the artifact would draw that link out, taking the domain and standing with it, an ephemeral connection to the stories and interest of the masses. Once the artifact contained the link, it would be dispensed to whoever reached inside it next. The problem was that it was indiscriminate in what it gave and took; a person with two links would have both taken. Lothaire had confided in Faye that this would be trouble. He had talked at great length about how rules would invariably determine results, even before he had birthed the group that was now calling themselves the Al-lunio — the Reshapers. Lothaire thought that simple rules were the heart of society. Understanding what emerged from those rules was the difficult part.

Lothaire had been full of stories. Before he was one of the secret leaders of the Iron Kingdom, he had been a scholar and an adviser to the king. In Quishto, to the far east, a supposedly wise king had wanted to stop people from stealing. He'd made a law that if you stole something, you would have your hands cut off before being trussed up like a pig and left to die in the hot sun. The king thought that would solve things, because no one would be so foolish as to risk the punishment. Instead, the criminals became more violent. If a guard was chasing after them, they would at-

tack with sharp knives, because they knew that the penalty for theft was just as bad as for killing a guard. That wasn't to say that this aggression was successful all the time, but a few guards were seriously injured, and some died. After some weeks had passed, the guards didn't chase after the thieves anymore, or they ran at a jog instead of a sprint. That made it easier for thieves to steal without facing any consequences. All of this might have been predicted in advance, if you thought about what the rules were setting up.

Lothaire had loved games. He would bring out a wooden board with a grid marked on it to play games with new sets of rules. He didn't play himself. He would explain the setup to members of the Allunio and watch them as they explored what those rules meant in terms of strategy. Sometimes the rules resulted in what Lothaire called a disordered game. One particular setup was eventually solved such that the white player could always win by following a specific pattern of moves which would result in black's defeat. The metaphor was a powerful one, all the more so because Lothaire rarely stated it outright. If the rules had been set up improperly, the outcome might be undesirable, even if there was nothing wrong with the rules on first blush. When Faye wanted a happy memory, she would think back to those days, of playing games while Lothaire's wise eyes looked on, listening to him hold forth on some subject of great importance.

Of course, laws and games were only the most obvious systems of rules. Lothaire believed that rules governed the world, in one form or another. Man needed food and water

every day, which meant that cities grew in places with arable land and a source of fresh water. If you looked at a map of the Iron Kingdom, stripped of all information except the topological, Lothaire thought you would be able to make a good guess at how the population would be distributed, so long as you knew the rules of fluid movement and human biology. If humans could be untethered from the need for food and water, cities would naturally move to some other place which would be predicated on some other aspect of how humans function. Society was built on rules.

The artifact had rules. Lothaire had predicted those rules would have bad results. The artifact would allow power to consolidate more than it ever had under the reign of the illustrati. In fact, because of the rules which governed the artifact, this hypothesized disorder was what Lothaire had called the default state of society. Once there were multi-strati, they would be able to take the artifact with them in order to steal from weaker illustrati. The powerful would grow more powerful, using power to gain more power, until eventually power would be concentrated in the hands of either a single individual or a small cabal which was capable of resisting the urge to devour itself like a pack of ravenous wolves. There had been an argument for burying the artifacts where they'd been found, a strong argument made among Lothaire and the others, lasting for days. Yet for all that Lothaire had believed it was the rules that gave rise to the nature of the world, he also believed that man was fully capable of creating new rules, those with the capability of enduring just as long as any of the rules of

nature. The artifacts would allow them to forge a new path. Society was already in a state of disorder; there seemed to be no other way to change it.

Faye could imagine someone looking in on the meeting of the Allunio in Parance and being just as baffled as someone in Quishto watching a seemingly apathetic guard strolling after a thief.

"It should be mine," said Boniface. The artifact sat on the table in the center of the room. Boniface had taken to wearing the armor of his domains, steel and copper braided together. There were feathers woven into it, black and white ones hanging down from the pauldrons, and a rolling steam of cold air where he walked. Faye could remember when Boniface had been simply dressed, when his curly black hair hid a round, pleasant face. Now there was something mean about him.

"I brought it here," said Gauthier. "I should have just taken it then and there, if I had imagined there were any question of where it would go."

There were five of them now. Two months before they had been three score. They were concentrated in Parance, where once they had been spread out across the nations of the Calypso. The Iron Kingdom was suffering as a result of the civil war, but there was little that could be done about that. Most of the illustrati had fled to distant lands, or to hidden places where they might lay low until the war was over. Others had gone to Castle Launtine, to join Welexi's side.

"We should find someone to give it to," said Faye. "We all have too much power."

The others stared at her as though she were mad.

"Who would you find?" asked Boniface. He was holding his tongue; normally every other word was a curse. The incredulity on his face spoke volumes on its own. "We are beset by traitors. The Ministries only care about ensuring their own survival, no matter what they might say. You've seen the increasingly anemic response of Legends. You've heard the issues that we've had with Trade. People are angry with us for poaching the illustrati they depended on, even though what's really happened is that those illustrati have been driven away by the conflict. We have allies of convenience, people tentatively betting on our success, putting forward only enough that when the dust is settled, they can claim they were stalwart in their support — or if we fail, they might claim that they only did what they had to out of fear and coercion. You would give this power to one of them."

"We have become too few," said Faye. "We had said that we would take no more than the power of two men each."

"Who was the first to violate that?" asked Cherise. She had beautiful hair now, with sculpted, arched eyebrows. The vanity was unbecoming on her, in the same way that Faye had always found the vanity of the illustrati unpleasant.

"It was necessary in Torland," said Faye.

"It is necessary now," said Gauthier. "I know you have your hesitance, but if there were anyone we could trust with

the power we would already have drawn them into our inner circle.”

Faye had no response. She felt hollow inside. Lothaire would have known what to say. He would have given a grand, eloquent speech about how they needed to not lose sight of their goals. She could imagine the speech that he would give, but she knew that if it passed her lips it would come out sounding as hollow as she felt, just as it had been the few times she’d tried to paint a scene she could see vividly in her mind.

Even if they won, what would they be? Multistrati replacing illustrati was no improvement. Lothaire had seen that path clearly laid out, engraved into reality by the rules themselves. His mistake had been to think that he was more clever than the rules.



Vidre watched the manor where the Allunio were meeting. She had slipped into a disused attic after following one of the illustrati — multistrati, they called themselves now. They were on the third floor, with the curtains drawn, but Vidre would be able to watch and learn their numbers. There couldn’t be many left, but these would be the survivors, those who she and Welexi hadn’t been able to pick off. Charging in now would give her the element of surprise, but if there were more than two it would be a difficult battle.

Vidre had spent too much time in her armor. She would have stripped down to nothing if she felt like she had the

luxury. She smelled offensive and her hair was greasy. What she needed was a hot bath with copious amounts of soap, but she didn't consider anywhere in Parance to be safe enough for that. All their allies had been extracted to Castle Launtine. Everyone else of importance had fled to the countryside, hiding until the dust of the civil war had cleared. There were perhaps a dozen illustrati left in Parance, fewer than there had been at any time in the last hundred years. Some historian would probably make note of that.

Vidre stretched and looked down at the artifact beside her. The thing still frightened her, even though she'd been carrying this one around for days on end. They had eight in their possession now, though that was more than they would ever need. Welexi held the others back at Castle Launtine, while Vidre kept this one with her.

She had drained three of the Allunio so far. The cumulative standing had made her faster and stronger than she had ever been before, even if her individual control of the new domains was weak. Glass was still what she favored, for reasons she told herself went beyond sentimentality. She'd had a lifetime of experience shaping glass, making it do her bidding, and thinking up new ways that she could use it. If she ever had some downtime, she would have to think seriously about whether daggers of glass still made sense. From the perspective of a bard, a single theme was ideal, but it was possible that she could change her costume to incorporate some of her new aspects. Crafting stories seemed far away now, as it often did when she was at war.

There was a slight chill in the air that bothered her for a moment before she realized that she no longer needed to worry about cold. Heat was the strongest of the new domains she had taken. All it took was a mere thought for her to warm up. She hadn't had time to converse with the multistrati she'd taken it from, so Vidre had no clue who it had originally belonged to. More likely than not, it had been one of the illustrati who worked the forges of the Iron Kingdom, or heated water to boiling for the steam engines. Without knowing whose it had been, Vidre had no way to keep the legend going; the power would fade with time. It already seemed weaker than it had been a few days before. If the legend had been built artificially by the Ministry of Legends, it would erode quickly. For now though, it kept her pleasantly warm.

It was nice to imagine that this adventure in the Iron Kingdom would fade away as well, just another story among the many that littered her past. That seemed improbable. The artifact was too powerful. It might have been one thing if Welexi intended to collect every copy of it and throw them in the ocean, but he had displayed only a single-minded fascination with what the Harbingers had created. It was trouble. Perhaps more trouble than the civil war.

The wait was interminable. She wished that she had picked up the domain of sound so that she might be able to hear through the windows and find out what they were saying. The idea of a truce had been floating around Castle Launtine the last time Vidre had been there, but Welexi

was firmly against it. He saw the detente in Torland as a resounding failure that couldn't be allowed to happen again. Without being able to listen in on their conversations, Vidre had no way of knowing whether the Allunio might be amenable to a truce in return, and she didn't want to push back against Welexi.

She perked up slightly when she saw someone approaching the manor. He had darker skin than was usual in the Iron Kingdom, but he would have passed a cursory look from the guards — those that were still at their posts, at any rate. He was wearing peasant's clothing, with dark, curly hair that was cropped close to his skull. It wasn't until he turned to the side that she recognized him as Dominic.



Their small party had landed on the coast to the north, anchoring the yacht out to sea before taking a small boat to shore. The yacht itself was sailing away by the time they had their boat flipped over on the sand; Tellula, one of the three illustrati that the Bone Warden had sent with him, took a half hour to cover it with a thick layer of rock.

"What if something happens to you?" Dominic asked her. "How will we return?"

"We have resources," replied Finola. Her domain was ink. She had tattooed herself from wrists to throat, though she now had leather armor on that covered most of it. Neither of these women had shown a particular desire to talk to him, in part because they were something approaching family. The man didn't seem to talk at all.

They had ventured south to Parance, moving slowly and stopping often, especially to converse with the locals. They heard stories as they went, though Dominic didn't credit most of them. Quill was the new king of the Iron Kingdom, an illustrati of ink who would usher in a new era of peace through diplomacy, wielding the pen just as his father had wielded the sword. It was an overwrought narrative that Dominic thought was likely to be Welexi's work. There was another story about the day the Minister of Legends had been killed, mostly involving the innocents that had lost their lives as a result of the frantic escape. The Minister of Legends himself was given short shrift in the story as it was relayed, but Dominic couldn't tell if that was how the conspiracy wanted it or if that was just how it had been filtered by the common folk. It made sense that they would care less about an important man; it was difficult to imagine yourself as a hand of the king but easy to imagine walking past one of those tall buildings and being sliced open by falling glass. The conspiracy had a name now — the Allunio, the Reshapers, an unimaginative callback to some of the oldest stories about the making of the world.

The worst thing Dominic listened to was the story of how Lightscour had betrayed Welexi.

"They stood on top of Castle Launtine," said the innkeeper. "They'd just found out the Iron King was dead, having routed those Allunio bastards right quick, tearing through them together, a team, like Darchere and Lummi, light and shadow playing across that grand courtyard. Together there was nothing that could stop them, but they

couldn't put the Iron King back together, could they? So they went up to the top of the castle together and stood there on the ramparts, looking out on the kingdom and trying to figure out their next move. Only, Lightscour knew that it was now or never. His ego had been growing the whole time they'd been traveling companions. He'd coveted Welexi's fame from the start. He stepped back, just a touch, and drove his blade forward to stab Welexi. It was cowardice, hubris, and betrayal all rolled into one. For all that he thought he was cock of the walk, his aim wasn't true. He slid that sword of inky black shadow straight through Welexi, but did no more than pierce a lung."

The innkeeper was watching the stony faces in front of him and smiling like they were egging him on. "They fought with swords clashing, back and forth across the parapets. Welexi could have killed him in an instant, even with only one working lung, but the boy was like a son to him. Welexi never had children, he was always traveling and too much of a gentleman to leave any bastards behind. Lightscour was supposed to be the Sunhawk's legacy, his rightful heir, if only he could have waited. They fought for a half hour with neither landing a decisive hit, the Sunhawk because he didn't want to and Lightscour because he couldn't. Finally the Queen of Blades comes up to see what's going on and begs them to stop fighting. Once she saw how it was going, she started begging for Lightscour's life, openly weeping for the first time in years." He grinned at Dominic. "Of all the men she'd had, it was a boy not

much older than you that broke through the hard mask she'd made for herself."

"In the end it came down to exhaustion. Lightscour couldn't score a hit. His sword work became sloppy. He spent more energy than Welexi did, until eventually Welexi knocked him to the ground and put the tip of that spear of light right at the traitor's throat. 'Surrender,' he said. 'We might still repair things between us.' But the street rat they'd picked up in Gennaro was too hot-blooded for that, too consumed with the image of himself. He turned to his domain and beckoned it forward, until the shadow touched his very soul. He gave himself over to it, until his physical body began to melt away. When Welexi saw what was happening he tried to blast it away with light, but by then it was too late and the transformation was complete. They say he's still out there, a man made of shadow, ready to exact his misguided revenge."



The Bone Warden had spies in the Iron Kingdom. Dominic shouldn't have been surprised.

They met their contact in a small cottage outside Parance, one hidden away in a copse of trees. The woman inside had the same dark hair and pale skin of Finola and Tellula. Dominic had no trouble imagining that this woman was another of the Bone Warden's many descendants. She didn't seem happy to see them.

"I'm not surprised that she sent someone," said the woman. No one had given Dominic the courtesy of an

introduction. "What I want to know is what aim she had in mind."

"No aim," said Finola. "We're here to advance her interests in whatever way we see fit. She suspected that events might have progressed at a fast clip, fast enough that discretion would be required. We need information."

"It's hard to say," replied the woman. "The Iron King was killed by Welexi, or Welexi found the Iron King just as the Allunio murdered him, or the Iron King had been dead for years, or ... well, the stories get wilder and less credible from there. Perhaps there never was an Iron King, or he's in hiding, or some other such thing. Welexi has gone insane, or revealed an insanity that was there all along, or perhaps Gaelwyn has descended back into his vile experiments, or Vidre is taking every man she can find to bed, or none of that and it's all lies spread around to discredit them. The Allunio have some artifact that allows them to steal the domain of anyone they touch, or maybe it's Vidre who has one, or they both do, or it's all a story that got spun out of control and the Allunio only have some secret techniques they bought from Maskoy. There are too many people telling too many stories to make much sense of it. I've been in the city enough to give some credit to the possibility that there's something involving the Harbingers."

"What is the disposition of the ministries?" asked Dominic.

The woman stared at him. "You're not a relative." She looked to Tellula. "And he's not hired muscle?"

"This is the man once known as Lightscour," said Tellula. "Dominic de Luca, this is Etain."

"The ministries are in holding," said Etain, as though Dominic's legend were meaningless. "Everyone is waiting to see who will win, whether they admit it or not. From what I can gather, the Allunio had been using the Iron King's authority, whether he was already dead or not, but with Welexi saying that the Iron King is no more, that lever's got nothing supporting it anymore. Parance moved on the Iron King's authority. Now it's ground to a halt. It's terrible for trade; people began to starve a week after the news broke, because no one wanted to ship food into the city when there wasn't a guarantee that they'd get paid."

"We need one of the Harbinger artifacts for great-grandmother, at least for a start," said Finola. "The conspiracy has one. How do we get it?"

"You're in luck," said Etain. "One of my informants gave me the location of their hideout just yesterday."

"Dominic," said Finola. "This is your part in the plan. You know someone in the Allunio. We'll try diplomacy first. Talk to them, find out their aims, and find out where we can get an artifact."

"I know a single person," said Dominic. "We have no guarantee that she's still alive. I don't know whether they'll give me a warm reception if some terrible fate has befallen her."

"This is your part in the plan," repeated Finola.

"I know," replied Dominic. "Tell me where to go."



Parance was different. The streets were empty and the posters that had hung on the walls were now mostly torn down. There was a smell that accompanied the emptiness, a lingering, rotting stench that hung over the city. Dominic couldn't account for the smell; by the account that Etain had given, most people had fled the city to seek refuge elsewhere. The fights had been between illustrati, two or more people with incredible power battling it out but all the same, small in number. There were few signs of these battles, only a charred wall or shattered cobblestones. For the most part, the city looked the same as it had before, only devoid of people. Dominic felt eyes watching him as he walked though. The city was less deserted than it looked.

The Bone Warden's people were following him. They had escorted him to the edge of the city then sent him on his way, but he wasn't under the delusion that he was anything but bait. They planned to use him to get inside Faye's organization, or to force Vidre to make an appearance, possibly both if they could manage it. He was expendable. They'd never treated him as anything but that.

The manor he'd been told to go to had the same haunted feeling that the city did. The curtains were drawn on all the windows and the wrought iron gates were halfway open. Several of the windows were broken as well. If the illustrati had fled or been killed, this house had probably belonged to one of them. If the commoners had been looting, this was one of the first places that would have been hit. If not for the very faint sound of voices drifting through the

shattered windows, Dominic might have thought that the manor was abandoned. He steeled himself for a confrontation, knowing that he couldn't possibly win any physical contest against illustrati, then knocked on the door.

It was Faye who answered.

"Our third meeting," she said with a sigh. "Do come in."

She seemed to have aged years in the space of two months. She still held that same self-assurance that she'd had in both their prior meetings, but if she was not broken then she was at least bent. There were bags beneath her eyes and she walked with a slight stoop. She wore a tight dress that showed signs of reinforcement. It was halfway to being armor.

Dominic stepped inside, where Faye appraised him.

"They're telling stories about you," said Faye. "We have no way of knowing whether it's a deception. I thought that perhaps you had tried to make your move against Welexi and been killed, but the others thought it more likely that the whole story was a lie concocted to raise your standing to ever greater heights. A rooftop battle, master against apprentice, while the love interest looks on? It was too picturesque to be true, we all agreed on that. We just couldn't agree on who had created the story."

"Welexi stole my power," said Dominic. He considered for a moment before saying more. "They have the artifact. One of them, if Lothaire was telling the truth about there being multiple." Faye seemed to flinch at the name.

"You've come at a fortuitous time," said Faye. She started down the hallway, then paused for a moment. "If you're

lying to me, or mean to betray me, know that I have more power now than when we last met."

Dominic nodded.

When they came into the sitting room, he was met with cold stares. There were four people arrayed around a table, with a Harbinger artifact sitting in the middle. Their bodies were all turned towards it, even as they watched Dominic. Their clothing was almost typical for illustrati, though the make of it was less fine than Dominic had come to expect. It was common for the illustrati to be clad in their domains; here, multiple domains were represented. Faye was the only one among them that could pass for a normal citizen of the Iron Kingdom.

"This is Lightscour," said Faye. "He will be the one taking that power."

"Hell if he will," said a man with feathered armor.

"Welexi's protege?" asked a woman with arched eyebrows.

"It needs to stay within the group," said another woman.

"We are nothing if we concentrate our power!" shouted Faye. Her voice was enhanced, just as Corta's had been, loud enough to bring everyone else up short. "We would be no better than the people we're fighting against! We might as well go join them if this is the path we've chosen to take!" The room was deathly silent after her outburst. It was so quiet that it had to be the effect of her domain. Faye slowly let sound bleed back into the room, so that Dominic could hear his own heart beating again. "Am I the only one who remembers why we started this? The iniquity of the

illustrati, the problems in the balance of power? Is it I alone who still thinks of Lothaire?"

"You've built up a story in your head about him," said the man in feathered armor. "You listened in on conversations and saw some spark of naivete that you thought mirrored your own, back when this was innocent fun."

"You don't know me so well as that, Boniface," said Faye through clenched teeth.

"Perhaps," he replied. "Lothaire knew you though. He told me to beware your idealism. There's a power in those who truly believe, he said, but that's no argument against practicality." He lunged forward, toward the artifact on the table.

The other man moved forward at the same time, swinging a fist with a grimace on his face. One of the women, the one with arched eyebrows, moved forward to grab at the artifact as the men grappled each other, but she was kicked to the side by one of the other women. They moved quickly, with the speed of illustrati, using force that would have broken Dominic's bones if he tried to get between them. The thought crossed his mind as he watched them fight amongst themselves, but Faye laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. Her face had fallen; she made no attempt to stop the melee.

The fight didn't stop until the artifact began emitting its low tones, four of them in all. Dominic had only heard it do one at once, but from the triumphant way that the illustrati pulled his hand from it, he could guess at what it meant; four links, taken all in one fell swoop. The man had a feral,

triumphant look in his eyes, the kind that Dominic remembered seeing on Vidre's face when her dagger was dripping red with blood.

"Well that's settled," he hissed.



"We are ruined," said Faye. They stood at the entryway of the manor. She held the spent artifact in her hand. Her face was hollow. "We have failed. You came to us too late, but I don't think it would have been any different if you had arrived earlier. If the pressure on us had been less overwhelming, if you had succeeded in killing Welexi —"

"I never tried," said Dominic.

"Oh," replied Faye. She closed her eyes.

"What comes next?" asked Dominic.

"After ruin?" asked Faye. "I have no earthly idea. Mere survival, I suppose, if we can figure out what that entails." She pursed her lips with her eyes still closed. "You should go."

"I came here to help," said Dominic. "To see what could be done."

"There's no help needed," said Faye. She finally opened her eyes. They were limned with tears.

"The Bone Warden sent me," Dominic confessed. This brought no reaction. "She has an interest in the artifacts. If we could get the artifacts into the right hands, people who wield power softly instead of monsters like the Iron King, maybe we can mitigate the effects of them being unleashed.

If we want to change how the world works, it might still be possible, even if the Allunio have failed."

Faye shook her head. "You'll forgive me if I don't trust a woman like that to wield power justly." She sighed, long and low. "I'm surprised you're still talking as though changing the world might be possible, after what we saw in there. Perhaps it's because you didn't know those people like I did, didn't hear the same high-minded speeches, or see the enthusiasm they once had. We were going to be the successors to the old ways. We talked about the line that would be drawn in the history books, how they would separate the old era from the new. Perhaps it's better that you were never part of it." She shook her head. "You should go."

"There's a cottage to the north," said Dominic. "Follow the Miller's Way, it'll be hidden in a copse. If you want to talk to the Bone Warden's people, you might find an alliance there."

"I didn't say we were ruined lightly," said Faye. "We cannot recover. In truth, we were doomed from the start, unable to recover from the moment we began. Go."

Dominic went.

He had expected the Bone Warden's people to leap out of hiding and grill him on what he had discussed the moment he was clear of the manor, but the city was silent and still, just as it had been. He tried to put an argument into order, one that would convince them that something needed to be done about Welexi, but it was looking like his former mentor was only a few days from securing the Iron Kingdom.

The Bone Warden seemed unlikely to contest the result; just as the Iron Kingdom's ministries were, she would sit back and wait for a winner to be declared, playing defensively until then. Dominic heard a sound from behind him and turned, ready to explain, but instead of Tellula or Finola, or even their silent partner, Dominic found himself facing a woman armored in glass from head to toe.

"You're quite inconsiderate," said Vidre. "I saved your life and you came walking right back toward danger."

Dominic stared at her. She seemed taller than he remembered, though perhaps it was the armor. The shards of glass were sharper, each edge reflecting sunlight. She was no less beautiful for the time that had passed, even if she had been slaughtering dozens of people in the meantime, as the stories suggested. Her voice was casual, overly so, as though this were just a matter of happenstance. That had always been a sign of anger.

"You're still working with him," said Dominic.

"Yes," replied Vidre. "And who is it that you're working with?"

"You were always the cloak and dagger to his shining breastplate and gleaming sword," said Dominic. "But if he's not the paragon of heroism, why stay with him? What binds you so closely? In the beginning I thought it was about convenience, that maybe you were just increasing your fame, but ... is that all there is to you? You stay with him so that you can share the cost of bards? So that you can remain one of the most powerful women in the world?"

Vidre calmly pulled a glass dagger from her armor. "Tell me who you're working with."

"Calligae took me to the Bone Warden. I sailed back here on one of her ships, with a few of her people," said Dominic. "And if you're here, then there's no point in pretending I didn't meet with the Allunio. I don't know that either of them would want me telling you, but I'm tired of lying to people. Vidre, the Allunio aren't bad people. Or at least, I don't think they started out that way. They just wanted a world where rulers couldn't live in a narcotic stupor, where kings couldn't buy young girls to marry —"

"This is where I say they tried to assassinate me and you say that we're not so different given all the people I've killed," said Vidre with clenched teeth. "We've cast our lots. This is pointless. How many of the Allunio were in that house?"

"You saved my life because you knew that Welexi was in the wrong," said Dominic.

"I'm losing my patience," said Vidre. "How many? What domains?"

"There's no audience here," said Dominic. "It's just you and me."

"Better men than you have tried to redeem me," said Vidre. Her voice had a hard edge to it. "Better men have thought they saw a broken bird that needed mending, or a whore they could somehow purify, or tried to convince me of the one true path to salvation."

"That's not what I'm trying to do," said Dominic. He felt for the patience he'd been forced to cultivate while he was

paralyzed. "You're not pleased with this life. You're not pleased with Welexi. I'm not even saying that you need to change, just that we can talk to each other as friends. There's no need for posturing, not with me. I already know who you are."

"You betrayed us," said Vidre. The dagger hadn't left her hand. "The enemy came to you and you said nothing."

"I know," said Dominic. "I'm sorry."

Vidre hesitated. Dominic imagined that she was going to say that an apology wasn't enough. "I'm sorry too."

"Then we can find somewhere to sit and talk?" asked Dominic.

"No," said Vidre. "I've got a war to win. After that, I need to talk with Welexi. Maybe afterward, I'll try to find you." She turned away and ran, fast enough that calling after her would have been pointless.



Faye sat at the entrance of the manor, holding one of the artifacts in her hand and only half listening to the ongoing discussion in the other room. They were fighting again, but with words instead of fists. Gauthier had won the battle for the artifact and now he was stronger than any of them. He was going to make a play for a position of leadership over the five of them. It was possible that was what he was doing now. Faye couldn't bring herself to care. The inner circle would contract sometime in the next few days, following some question of loyalty or personal dispute that escalated

quickly towards violence. Five would become four. It was predictable, readily visible in her mind's eye. They were finished. She had told Dominic that all that remained was survival. She wasn't sure that she had the will for that. Lothaire would have told her to keep going, to keep her goals in mind and move forward with deliberation, but her goals had been shattered before her eyes. Most likely they had been shattered weeks before and she was only now realizing it.

There was a knock on the door. Faye turned to her first domain, the domain of sound, and listened closely. She expected it to be Dominic, but the rhythm of the heart was different, not to mention positioned lower. She hadn't been paying enough attention, hadn't thought to listen for footsteps. There was no sound of armor, but that meant nothing when the person wasn't moving. It was as Boniface had said; they had no allies, not anymore. Faye placed her hand on the doorknob, ready to speak with whoever it was. She wasn't in any condition to fight, not with such a deep pit of apathy and despair.

She had only opened the door partway when a gauntleted fist came crashing forward. If it had been properly aimed, she would have died then and there. Instead she was showered with splinters and pushed down to the ground. The bits of wood stung at her skin. It took a dazed moment for her to realize that they were burning.

It was Vidre. She paused only momentarily, long enough for Faye to see that the glass armor was glowing bright orange with waves of heat rolling off of it. Vidre didn't have

her famed daggers in her hand, just molten glass in the form of long claws.

Faye screamed, pouring all the power of her domain behind it. Vidre staggered, but only for a brief second before moving forward. Faye's bodily domains were useless against molten glass from head to toe; there was no way to grapple, no way to force her fingers through to flesh. All she had was sound, but Vidre didn't seem to care about that. Her ears were fully covered, permitting no sound to enter, so the only option would be for Faye to amplify her screams so that Vidre's heart would burst, even beneath the layers of armor.

Faye never got the chance. A long claw of molten glass sank itself into her stomach. There was a plume of acrid smoke as her organs were boiled. The reinforcing steel in her armor was doing nothing for her; the glass had slipped between the ribs of steel and now it was burning ribs of bone. Vidre's face couldn't be seen behind the hot glass helm she wore.

There was a noise as a bolt of lightning stuck Vidre squarely in the chest. She shrugged it off as though she were immune, then revealed shortly afterward that she was, as her own lightning began to course and swirl around her molten glass armor. She withdrew her claw from Faye's midsection and darted towards the others. Faye couldn't move to look. She could only hear the screams of agony, screams that she would have echoed if her diaphragm and lungs weren't punctured clean through.

It was Kendrick Eversong that saved her from passing out. His story was still going strong in Torland, even after two months had passed. Access to the domain of blood meant there was no need for her to die from blood loss, no need to endure the dizziness of her blood pressure failing her. She tried to stand up, to move, even through the pain. It took quick, sloppy repairs with the domain of flesh for her to be able to move at all. Vidre was fighting the others in the next room over. That they were still fighting meant that Vidre was winning. At four against one, they should have been able to kill her, but she had domains of her own, standing stacked on top of standing, just as they did. Any one of the Allunio that had fallen in the last eight weeks might have added their strength to hers.

The molten claw had dug deep into Faye. It had touched her spine. She couldn't move her legs. She had the domain of flesh though, a poor mimic of Gaelwyn's, but capable of miracles all the same. She didn't need a spine, so long as she had that domain. She could stand with only that, no need for nerves at all. Her legs kicked helplessly the first time she tried, but then with a push against the wall she was able to lurch to her feet. When she did, hot liquid spilled from inside her and onto the ground, coating the front of her dress. She nearly threw up, but there was no time for that, even with the smell of her own boiled intestines in the air. She spared half a thought toward trying to help the fight, but a single glance showed that Cherise's head was laying in the hallway, beautiful hair coiled around the burnt stump

of her neck. Even if Faye offered her meager assistance, they would not win.

Faye staggered to the door, stopping only long enough to pick up the artifact before heading out into Parance.



They did Dominic the courtesy of pretending that they hadn't followed him. He was sure that they had heard his entire conversation with Vidre. Tellula asked him for his report nonetheless. Perhaps they thought he was stupid enough to try to lie to them. He repeated his conversations back to them, as faithfully as he could.

"It's good there's to be a victor," said Finola.

"Perhaps," replied Tellula. "It depends on who ends up ruling here."

"You can't trust Welexi," said Dominic. "How many domains do you think he's claimed for himself? How much has his standing grown by now?"

"We're not in the habit of murdering people for crimes they might have committed," said Tellula. "You're also not in a position to make demands."

"It's not a demand," said Dominic. "I'm only giving advice."

"Somewhat less advice would be appreciated," said Finola.

"They're positioning Quill for king," said Etain. "I don't like that. I don't think our dear great-grandmother would

either. He's an idiot, palatable to the masses but not much more."

"We were never heavy hitters," said Finola. "The four of us combined probably wouldn't have stood a chance against Welexi even before whatever the Harbinger artifacts have done to him."

"He has my domain," said Dominic. "Likely others."

"A civil war is the opportune time to make our own man king," said Finola. "But I doubt that we have the power to accomplish it. We might be able to talk Welexi around, if he'd listen to reason."

"Quill will have lost his power," said Tellula. "That's why he disappeared. My guess would be he's a stopgap. Someone to keep attention elsewhere. He might treat with us. The new king will be much better off if he's got the Bone Warden's backing." She looked to the silent man they'd brought with him, the one Dominic had heard perhaps three words from in the entire time they'd been traveling. "All the Iron King had were bastards. Easy enough to claim someone convenient was a bastard, isn't it?"

There was a knock on the door, the sound of scraped knuckles. The Bone Warden's people moved into position, ready for a fight, but when the door slid open they stared in shock.

"I am dying," said Faye. Her hair was wild and matted. One hand clung to her stomach, where viscera had leaked out. The other held a Harbinger artifact, its existence pressing on the mind and announcing itself to anyone whose eyes landed upon it. Her voice sounded strange; she wasn't

using her mouth to speak. "I come with an offer for the Bone Warden." She stumbled forward, into an empty chair that one of the women had been sitting in. "A trade," she said. "I give this artifact in return for Dominic's freedom from whatever scheme he's wrapped up in. Dominic, I give you my powers in exchange for bringing order to this world."

"She's the walking dead," said Tellula. Her mouth was agape. "She's keeping herself together with her domains alone, the moment she stops to sleep ..."

"Do you accept?" asked Faye.

"Yes," said Dominic.

The Bone Warden's people exchanged glances.

"I would ask you to leave," said Faye, making the noise appear from thin air. She wasn't breathing; it was possible that she'd permanently lost that ability. Her piercing eyes were on Tellula. "So that you would have no chance to steal from Dominic before I make him more powerful than you. Know that even now I could slaughter you all. Try to steal from me directly and the noise I make will be more than enough to kill you."

"Not without killing him too," said Tellula.

"So be it," replied Faye. The sounds came into the air from around her. "I am in pain. I am dying. I could prolong it by a day, two at most."

The Bone Warden's people shared a look again.

"Deal," said Tellula. "We will take our leave until the transfer is complete. Dominic, you are released from your bond to us, but this development will need to be discussed."

They filed out of the small cottage without another word. Faye watched Dominic the entire time, holding the Harbinger artifact close to her. When they had closed the door behind her, Faye leaned forward, watching Dominic closely.

"I don't know that I can bring order to the world," said Dominic. "Better people than me have tried."

"I need to believe I have a legacy," said Faye. "That my life was not a complete waste. Take this power. Go into hiding, become a despot, die in horrible agony when you next cross paths with Welexi, do anything you please. Just lie to me. Tell me in my last moments that I am doing a good thing."

"Okay," said Dominic. "I'll bring order to the world. Or at least I'll try."

Faye laid the artifact on the table and slid her hand inside it. By the time it was done beeping five times, Faye was dead. Dominic took her hand from the artifact and replaced it with his own. The surge of power was instant, a feeling of not just health and vitality, not just speed and strength, but a fullness of the senses as well. He could feel his blood thumping in his veins. He could feel every fiber of his muscles. His hearing changed completely, so that every sound was clear and distinct, from the smallest creak of the cottage to the sounds of his own body. He was more powerful than he'd been as Lightscour. He wished that he had asked Faye more questions, gotten some details about the people whose legends now provided him with strength.

The door to the cottage swung open slowly. Tellula and Finola looked in at Dominic.

"The artifact is yours," said Dominic. "Take it to the Bone Warden."

"And you?" asked Tellula. "Where should we tell her you're off to?"

"Castle Launtine," said Dominic. He looked at Faye. "To try to make the world a better place."

22. Impressions

The first bath had been tinted with dried blood and dirt. It was an ugly color, the hue of battle, watered down. Vidre had scrubbed with pumice until she was clean and pink. She would have gone until her skin was raw, but mere pumice was no longer enough to abrade it. She sometimes thought back on wounds of old, ones she was too powerful to suffer from anymore. Falling from the Ministry of Legends would no longer be cause for alarm.

The second bath was one of soaps and oils, boiling water that could no longer burn her flesh, and a real attempt at relaxation. The oils were from the vast stock of the Iron King, brought in from distant lands and hoarded in great quantities. It brought Vidre back to earlier, better times, when it had seemed like the Zenith would sail the world forever, stopping at every port of importance to forge new legends and spread the old ones. The smell of jasmine was one she would always associate with Erbos. She was romanticizing those times, but after a harsh battle she always felt some need to see the world in a better light.

She hadn't escaped the fight unscathed. She was still deaf in one ear and the other ear made everything sound like it was underwater. Her hearing would return, but worse than before, as it had too many times in the past. Older illustrati had spoken of a constant sound of ringing or a dull roar of thunder that became their unwelcome companion. The other wounds had been dealt with by Gaelwyn. He had

returned the chunk of meat that had been taken from her calf, complete with skin to cover the wound. He hadn't had the domain of skin the last time she'd been back. She didn't ask about it.

There were many things that Vidre didn't ask about these days.

Welexi came into the room where she was taking her bath and cleared his throat loudly. There was a folding screen between them, a token piece of modesty left over from the Iron King's time. An ancient memory came floating up, unbidden. Vidre had been twenty years old and freshly inducted as an illustrati on the Zenith. She had tried to seduce Welexi, first through flirtation and then, in a moment of bold stupidity, by shrugging off her clothes in his cabin. That moment was now so embarrassing that it was still capable of making her stomach do a flip. Welexi had thought she was only trying to increase her own standing by adding him as a conquest, which was precisely true. It was a wonder that they had been able to move past that.

"I am sorry that I was not there to greet you upon your return," said Welexi. He sounded stiff and oddly formal, even for him.

"It doesn't matter," said Vidre.

"Gaelwyn tells me that you fought the remainder of the Allunio, five against one," said Welexi. "He believes it to be a suicidal gesture."

"He worries too much," said Vidre.

"Did you transfer from those you fought?" asked Welexi. He never called it draining, though everyone else did. It was

always a transfer, meant to call to mind an orderly handing over of power from one person to another.

"Two of them," said Vidre. "Of the domains I can feel, I have ..." She closed her eyes. "Steel, copper, gold, sand, rust, heat, cold, fire, birds, horses, insects, skin, hair, vines, wood, light, lightning, and glass. Lightning I have twice now. It's more powerful for it."

"Excellent," said Welexi. For the first time some real emotion crept into his voice, an oozing satisfaction that Vidre found maddening. "Eventually we will find a way to return those links to their rightful owners."

Vidre didn't challenge that narrative. The Iron Kingdom was in complete disarray. They had rescued a number of men and women from captivity, including the nominal king Quill, but most of the drained illustrati must simply have been killed. There wouldn't often be a person to return the link to, if they even had a way to separate out the links, which they did not. Vidre couldn't decide whether returning the powers was something Welexi said to assuage his own guilt or a piece of fiction he intended to sell the world on.

"I have some good news," said Welexi. "It is overshadowed by your own good news of course, the end of the Allunio will bring a conclusion to the civil war and no doubt be cause for celebration throughout the Iron Kingdom, yet I feel that I must chime in with my own success."

Vidre laid her head against the porcelain of the bathtub and said nothing. If Welexi wanted to talk, he would get

no encouragement from her, no witty repartee or leading questions.

"Quill has not taken to the throne," said Welexi. "The loss of his domain hit him hard and his imprisonment did not agree with him. He never had any desire to rule." He went silent behind the screen that divided them.

"We had said that we were going to find a replacement," said Vidre, damning herself for responding. "Someone who wanted the job. Once the war was over."

"I have found him," said Welexi. "It took time to pore over the books, to untangle the bookkeeping of earlier eras. In his later years the records became immaculate, but I was looking in those years before the reforms had been enacted. Eventually I found the document that I had been seeking, the one which confirmed a nagging suspicion. All of the pieces of the puzzle clicked into place."

Vidre wanted to scream at him. She had just survived a difficult battle. She had been using her daggers with extreme prejudice for the last few months. This was not a time for him to be delivering a story to her, no matter how well-crafted he might think it was. Instead, she asked the question that Welexi clearly wanted her to ask. "And what puzzle is that?"

"Sometimes the solution comes from small details," said Welexi. "The puzzle isn't even clear until the solution is nearly in sight. In this case? A child who was taken into the custody of the kingdom at a young age and brought to the attention of the king — but perhaps it was the king who cultivated the boy in the first place? And why

would he have done that? The boy turned into a brilliant man. He was given more freedom than almost everyone in the kingdom. Yet there were more questions. Why, on his deathbed, would the king have spent so many resources in trying to track down yet another physician, where so many had failed before?"

Vidre wanted to slam her head against the bathtub, but she would have only succeeded in breaking it. "Gaelwyn," she said.

"The Iron King sowed his seed widely," said Welexi. "He would have been old when Gaelwyn was born, but not implausibly so. The Iron King was known to make trips to the Highlands on a regular basis, sometimes without much in the way of fanfare. He would have had the power and the authority to pull a woman into his chambers and have his way with her. It wouldn't have mattered whether she was married. And then, once the child was born, the Iron King would keep an eye on the boy. He would ensure that the boy was selected for presentation at one of the stadiums, so that his domain could be known. He would ensure that the boy was sent to get an education, so that his mind could be shaped and his future controlled. It explains the resources that were devoted Gaelwyn's way when he was running his hospital, the latitude that he was given. It explains why so many letters came from the Iron King while he was dying. The Iron King knew that Gaelwyn was brilliant. He knew that of all his bastards, there was one who was both intelligent and humble, one who would do what it took."

Vidre resumed her silence. It was all lies, even if those lies came naturally to Welexi's lips. She idly wondered how good the forgery of the documents was. Would they withstand inspection? They didn't need to, not really, not with all of their enemies dead. Welexi's command would become law. Gaelwyn would take the throne and behind him would sit the Sunhawk, pulling all the strings that needed to be pulled. If there were any way that Welexi could have claimed the throne for himself, Vidre was certain he would have taken it.

"I look forward to your support in these coming weeks," said Welexi. "I've spoken with Quill already; the transition of power will be seamless."

"This will mean war with Torland," said Vidre. She moved her hand back and forth in the water, feeling the currents. "The parliament we installed there put Gaelwyn on trial. They won't accept him as king."

"They're too busy consolidating power," said Welexi.

"What better way to unite than a ready-made enemy?" asked Vidre.

"Gaelwyn is the rightful ruler of the Iron Kingdom," said Welexi. He sounded slightly confused, as though he couldn't understand her objection and was slightly put-out by it. That was one of his methods of manipulation that Vidre had once thought was base childishness.

"As you say," said Vidre. She was too tired to argue, too emotionally drained to point out every reason this was a bad idea.

"This is the dawn of a new era," said Welexi. "We will pull the Iron Kingdom to its feet and institute a new, just rule that corrects for all of the Iron King's excesses. The story of rebellion is concluded; a new story must rise to take its place."

Vidre made no response. Welexi gave a polite cough from behind the screen that separated them, but certainly even he would be able to realize that she didn't want to speak with him. It took some time for him to move away. Once he was gone, she climbed from the bathtub and dressed herself in clean clothes, slowly and mechanically, then began forming the lump of glass she'd removed into armor again. There was still work left to do. She needed to go wait for Dominic.



It would come down to violence. Dominic recognized that. There were other salient questions, like whether he could somehow bring Vidre to his side, or whether he would be able to face Welexi down somewhere that Gaelwyn wouldn't be able to render aid. At its heart though, the problem was Welexi. There was no other solution than a violent one. There would be no way of talking Welexi down.

That left the question of how. If they had been of equal standing, with evenly matched domains, Dominic would still have been soundly beaten in any fair fight that he could imagine. Welexi had made his name as a combatant. He had mastered every possible technique. Dominic had a month of training in swordsmanship. He was rusty now,

two months out of practice, which meant there would be no contest when he faced down what might have been the greatest spear fighter in the world. Dominic had no way of knowing whether Welexi had more than just light and shadow. That was something he would have to figure out before trying to get into Castle Launtine.

It wouldn't be even remotely heroic, but Dominic could try to slit Welexi's throat in the middle of the night. Sound was one of the five domains he'd taken from Faye, which would allow him to move silently around the castle and cover the noise of picking whatever locks were on the doors. Welexi had to sleep sometime. The thought of killing the man in cold blood didn't sit right with Dominic, but it offered odds that were far better than trying a straightforward fight. Perhaps he could even find one of the artifacts and use it to steal his own power back from Welexi. That was a secondary goal, but one that Dominic would try for if it was feasible.

He tried to exercise his new domains as much as possible. The fifth one was weak, likely taken from someone whose fame had begun to wane, or had never fully developed. Dominic had almost laughed when he'd realized what it was: light. He could make simple constructs, but it was slow work and the details were difficult. Sound and blood were the most powerful of the two that he had received, but blood seemed as though it wasn't going to be useful, given that there was little chance he would be able to make skin contact with Welexi. Still, Dominic practiced with both blood and flesh, making alterations to his own body and

undoing them again. He tried to keep his experimentation to places that weren't vital, just in case he did something which couldn't easily be undone. Steel, blood, flesh, sound, and light, there had to be some way to use those.

Sound was the most distinct of the domains. It allowed for keen hearing and a differentiation of sounds, so that he could tune his hearing to different places or listen for different things. He could amplify the sounds around him and reduce them to almost nothing. He tried the amplified shout that he'd heard from Corta and found it to be loud enough to shake the trees around him. It would be a powerful attack, but that hadn't saved Faye. He had no idea how she had managed to speak without the use of her voice, but he imagined that this was a matter of practice. Dominic tried, but he could only make sounds that had no relation to words. He finally made a single word by stringing sounds together, but that took far too much preparation and concentration.

A plan was beginning to form in Dominic's mind, of silently stalking into the castle with the domain of sound to keep his footsteps from being heard. All thoughts of that were driven from his mind when he heard a human heartbeat coming from behind a small group of rocks some twenty feet away from him. Dominic's own heart began to beat faster. He was still miles from Castle Launtine, too far for there to be patrols, but the person in question was only barely moving.

"Hello?" asked Dominic. He was ready to run at the first sign of trouble.

"Dominic," said a familiar female voice. Vidre stepped out from around the outcropping. "You really are a fool, you know that?"

"I know," said Dominic. "But something has to be done."

"The Bone Warden's people aren't with you?" she asked.

"They didn't want to upset the balance of power," said Dominic. "I think they'll probably stick around for long enough to establish ties to the new regime."

"Typical of the Bone Warden," said Vidre.

"Are you going to stop me?" asked Dominic.

"Welexi thinks you're dead," answered Vidre. "More specifically, he thinks that I killed you. You can imagine that I would have some problems if you showed up unannounced."

"No one else is going to do anything about Welexi," said Dominic. "I don't know how many of the rumors are true, but ... some of them are. He was going to kill me, like it was nothing. He's hiding secrets. Not just from the world, but from you as well."

"So you want to kill him for it," said Vidre. "You're taking something small and personal and turning it into an international affair. You really want to go up against the most powerful man in the world? Over pride? Over revenge?"

"Yes," said Dominic. He felt the urge to deny it, to explain that his aims were somehow noble, but he'd been thinking about slipping into Welexi's room and slitting his throat only moments before. He was confident that a world Welexi stood on top of was worse for it, but he doubted he would

feel so strongly if there were no personal connection. If they had parted amicably, Dominic might have said that Welexi was unfit to hold his position of power, but no more unfit than any number of other rulers.

"Fair enough," said Vidre. "And your plan?"

"I was still working on that," said Dominic. "If I could get into his room in the middle of the night, act while he was defenseless, then maybe —"

"Let me tell you how I sleep," Vidre interrupted with a wave of her hand. "I seal my door shut with every single domain available to me. I make a seal of glass around the door, then a second seal of copper and gold. I suppose I have steel now too, so I'll be adding that to the barriers. I do the same for the windows, leaving only enough of a gap that I can still breathe. It is, in most other respects, a tomb. If I'm feeling especially paranoid, I deploy caltrops across the floor of the room, razor sharp so that they would slice straight through all but the thickest leather."

"You're a multistrati," said Dominic. He had known that, but it was another thing to hear it come from her so casually.

"Yes," said Vidre. "Welexi is too."

"And so am I," said Dominic. Vidre showed no sign of surprise. "There has to be a way. If I can use the domain of sound to keep him from hearing, it won't matter how indelicate I am in getting to him. He won't know I'm there until he's dying."

"You speak as though I'm going to let you by," said Vidre. "As though I'll stand to the side and let you do whatever

you'd like to a man I've worked side by side with, day in and day out, for nine years."

"I asked you whether you were going to let me by. You decided to play games with words," said Dominic. "You already declined to kill me once, when Welexi gave you a direct order. I don't think you're going to kill me now."

"It wasn't a direct order," said Vidre. Her voice softened slightly. "He was going to take matters into his own hands, I'll give him that, but when I stepped forward he was happy to have me do it. Welexi would never give a direct order for me to dirty his hands."

"He kept you around because you knew when to act without him having to say anything," said Dominic. He disliked thinking of this line of conversation as manipulation, but it was, in a sense, even if he was trying to get her to do something that was in her own interests. "It made you the perfect cover for him. He could admonish you later, even though you'd done exactly what he wanted you to do. A better man would have been partner to the lies that needed to be told. He would have accepted his part in it instead of pretending to be a paragon."

Vidre said nothing.

"Let me by," said Dominic. He tried his best to sound confident.

"Let you by?" asked Vidre. "So that you can march to Castle Launtine and make your best attempt at killing Welexi?" She shook her head. "Do you think I'm so much of a hypocrite that I would allow you to dirty your hands while pretending that my own were clean? It's what I

would do, if I were Welexi. I would make a show of pleading with you, telling you not to do it but hoping that you would. I wouldn't stop you, of course. Then, if you managed to strike the killing blow, I would have speeches and stories prepared, ones that might agree with your goal but not your method. That's how I would do it, if what I cared about most was perpetuating a myth of myself as a good person. I could do all that without even doing anything that someone would mark as wrong. I could do it without ever seeming duplicitous." She sighed. "Do you know, I still don't know how much he thinks about these things? There's a part of me that believes he's cold and calculating behind the mask of himself. But sometimes it seems that's truly who he is, a man who is fooling himself as much as he's fooling the world, bound by the part he's playing."

Dominic stood his ground. The meaning of Vidre's words wasn't clear to him; there was discontent, but he wasn't sure whether it was discontent that he could use. He didn't even know whether he should be trying to use Vidre. She was a friend. She'd saved his life a few times and he'd never really gotten the chance to return the favor.

"If I let you by," said Vidre. "It would be like driving the dagger into his back myself. The only difference being that my thrust would be weak and half-hearted, no offense. If I'm deciding I would rather see Welexi cast down, it would be better to do it properly."

"Are you saying you'll help me?" asked Dominic.

"Yes," said Vidre. "Now, let's build a better plan."



Lothaire was awakened from his slumber with a touch, as he always was. The Red Angel stared at him with dispassionate eyes. This too was as it usually went.

"I'm going to be king," said Gaelwyn Mottram. "Welexi has arranged it."

Lothaire stretched himself out. "How long was I out that time?" he asked.

"Five days," replied Gaelwyn.

"I need something to eat," replied Lothaire. He clutched at his stomach, which was clenched in pain.

"I give your body fat and muscle to feed itself from," said Gaelwyn. "If I gave you food there would be the issue of waste to deal with. You make a better prisoner when my upkeep is minimal."

"I'm in pain," said Lothaire. "A man isn't meant to not eat."

"I don't hold with what is meant or not meant," said Gaelwyn. "You're the one who called me a monster, as so many have before. You should know I care nothing for your pain."

"Why have you wakened me?" asked Lothaire. "I've told you all that I could about the Allunio. Before my capture I ensured that I would be useless when taken." This was always how Lothaire opened their talks. He had been brought out of his unnatural slumber by Gaelwyn twice early on, both times for questioning, both times with Welexi present, but the third time had seen Gaelwyn by himself. Every time after, the physician had been all alone, not

seeking any information, but instead looking for someone to speak with in confidentiality. Lothaire asked the same question every time though. He was pretending that they were adversaries so that he could soften as their conversation went on. That was better than pretending at familiarity from the start. It was part of the rapport he was trying to build with Gaelwyn, though he couldn't tell whether it was working.

"I'm going to be king," said Gaelwyn. He ran his fingers through his hair. "He didn't ask me. He only presented me with the story of how my mother was raped by the Iron King and my father was a cuckold. How I had risen to my station through nepotism instead of merit. From anyone else it would have been an insult of the highest order."

"Not from the Sunhawk though," said Lothaire. He shook his head, grateful that Gaelwyn had offered him some mobility this time. He tried to ignore his aches and pains. "He who can do no wrong."

"We could have plotted it together," said Gaelwyn. "If we were trying to usurp the kingdom, all he would have had to do was to say it and I would have gone along with it. If we had sat down together and talked it over, decided to change my origin story ... that's the way that he is."

"If that happened to me, I think I would come to the conclusion that I wasn't trusted," said Lothaire.

"No," said Gaelwyn. "Welexi allows me to touch him. Welexi gave me Charnel's link, along with others."

"Did he steal it from her?" asked Lothaire. Gaelwyn gave no response. "Do you know whether he stole it from her?"

Again, Gaelwyn was silent. "Or did he appear to you one day with an artifact, claiming some story of how the power within it came into his possession?"

"It was hers," said Gaelwyn. "Who else could it have been from? She had left the castle only the day before. Did he think I wouldn't make the connection? Or did he think that I wouldn't question him?"

"Yet there is some part of you which believes that perhaps his story is true," said Lothaire. "You are almost willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, as you always are." It was a crack, one which Lothaire might be able to drive a wedge into.

"I killed for him," said Gaelwyn. "Because he asked me to."

"You killed my friends," said Lothaire. "My disciples." He couldn't quite keep the bitterness from his voice, even though he was meant to be slowly warming to Gaelwyn, building a rapport between the two of them.

"Before that," said Gaelwyn. "You knew, somehow. About the assassinations. You spoke to Wealdwood about them."

Lothaire nodded. It had only been conjecture, something that was halfway toward being a lie. The Iron Kingdom had spies in many places, spies which he'd inherited, but the stories they'd told were always incomplete. If Gaelwyn was going to tell the truth, it was unlikely that Lothaire would ever speak to another human again, but he had given up the chance at living long before now.

"All I had to do was introduce a flaw," said Gaelwyn. "I had worked on enough people with ailments to know what to do. I had decades of study behind me, mostly in the art of healing and the science of the human body. So many people with my domain understood breaking a person, tearing them apart, but that was easy in comparison to maintenance. Killing was beneath me. But I did it anyway."

"Who?" breathed Lothaire.

"Rivals," said Gaelwyn. "Not villains, not those who had pushed themselves to the extremes of wanton violence, just those who he could get me close to. Names that are lost to history now. Legends that faded away after an ignoble end." Gaelwyn went silent and laid his head against the cold stone wall of the dungeon cell. "Afterward, he would be so pleased with me. Smiling, like I had paid him back double for every ounce of faith he'd shown in me. Yet we never spoke of it. He would mourn these people, these friends. And eventually ... I wanted to be a better person. So I stopped. And again, we never spoke of it, I was left to read his moods and wonder."

Lothaire leaned forward. "You still can be a better person. With or without Welexi."

"Who would believe it?" asked Gaelwyn. "Would you?"

Lothaire opened his mouth to speak, but the words wouldn't come. He had never abhorred lies; they were useful things. Telling a credible lie here, however, was beyond his ability.

"No," said Gaelwyn. "I wouldn't believe it either. I made an effort, but it was doomed to fail."

"I can help you," said Lothaire, trying his best to sound old and wise, as he'd done with his students. "If Welexi isn't the foundation on which to build your house, so be it, but all rocks are not —"

"You're only a sounding board," said Gaelwyn. "You know that you will never see the light of day again. You will never see any face but mine." He looked at Lothaire with cold eyes. "The last of the Allunio died yesterday. All your plans have crumbled. The next time I wake you, don't try to convince me of your superiority."

Lothaire opened his mouth to respond, but Gaelwyn's touch was already upon him.



"Ambush isn't going to work," said Vidre. "We don't know which domains he has. We don't know how strong those domains might be." They sat together in the forest, having found a place far from the road. Dominic was practicing his skill with sound by deadening their voices. In theory, it would be impossible for anyone to hear them. It was more paranoid than the situation warranted, given that Dominic would be able to hear everyone approach and these woods weren't crawling with patrols in the first place. "Even if you were able to break into his room, past any precautions that he has, he's going to have both the resilience provided by the highest standing the world has ever seen, and domain immunities stacked on top of each other. If you went for his throat with a blade of glass, it might be you'd find that he's immune to glass. Same for any of the common metals."

"I could have a knife forged," said Dominic. "One made of platinum, or something more exotic. Besides, we don't need to slit his throat. All we need to do is slip his hand into the artifact."

"I'm telling you, it's not going to work," said Vidre. "Attacking in the middle of the night is the obvious thing that anyone would try. He'll have laid defenses in place. Worse, he's a light sleeper. That comes from decades on the battlefield. He knows he's vulnerable while he's sleeping, just like I do."

"That will be our fallback plan then," said Dominic. "You have a different suggestion?"

"The artifact," said Vidre. "Until you slip your hand inside, you don't know whether it's going to give or take. We don't need to break into his room, past whatever traps and warnings he has in place, we only need to trick him into giving when he means to take."

"How?" asked Dominic. "All your same arguments apply. He knows the rules that the artifact operates under, just as you and I do. If you handed him an artifact ... would he just put his hand into it without question?"

"No," said Vidre. "That's why we're going to have to make him believe that there's no doubt."

"We need a story that will convince him," replied Dominic. "He told me when we first met that thinking in stories was an occupational hazard. That's where he's weak. If we can get him in a public place, with hundreds of people around who will all be ready to spread their own version of the story, he'll have to act like people expect him

to act. We just have to manipulate it so that the pull of the story is too strong for him to resist."

"We also need to manipulate the artifact," said Vidre. She reached behind her back with one arm, pulling at a place where the plates of glass were more bulky. She pulled out one of the Harbinger artifacts, with its hexagonal hole and dull gray exterior. Aside from the pressure that it put on the mind, there was nothing that truly spoke of its power.

"You have one," said Dominic.

"We have almost twenty of them," said Vidre. "I was going to use this one to drain your traveling companions, if it came down to that."

"Or to drain me?" asked Dominic. "If I wasn't able to convince you?"

Vidre shrugged. "The thought crossed my mind, once I realized you had gotten power from somewhere." She paused. "It was the woman I gutted, wasn't it?"

"Faye," said Dominic.

"Really?" asked Vidre. "The same woman who spoke to you in Torland? I had no idea."

"She's part of why I have to do this," said Dominic. "Why I have to live up to the potential of the illustrati."

"Yet you said that you barely knew this woman," said Vidre. Her eyes narrowed slightly.

"I didn't know her," said Dominic. "She was asking the right questions though, even if I don't think she had all the answers."

"Questions like who to assassinate?" asked Vidre. "Whose throats to slit in order to obtain power?"

Dominic shrugged. "I can't defend them. I'm not going to try."

"Have you thought about what's going to happen after we murder Welexi?" asked Vidre.

"We don't necessarily have to murder him," said Dominic. "Just stop him."

"It's entirely possible that a new civil war follows from this," she replied. "Even if you're justified in thinking that he's not fit to rule. That's especially true given the turmoil this kingdom has been through of late. Is it worth it?"

"Welexi is hungry for power," said Dominic. "He's hungry for attention. When the constitution of Torland was being written, he wanted to inject himself into that affair, even though he had nothing to add. It's that impulse that's going to be terrible for this kingdom. The Iron King didn't seem to care about his people that much, not on the level of individuals, but I think the only thing that Welexi truly cares about is himself. It was much easier for me to see that once he tossed me aside. If he's in control of the kingdom, that means he'll be able to accelerate his bid for power. The artifact allows for a king to take from all his subjects, doesn't it?"

"I want to go in with a clear objective," said Vidre. "That's all."

"I do too," said Dominic. "So. We have an artifact. I think I can mimic the sounds that it makes, given a bit of time to practice." He focused on the domain of sound and let

a single, solid tone into the air. It was more difficult than merely amplifying a sound that was already there, but he thought it was passable.

"We'll have to craft a story," said Vidre. "Something that Welexi will latch onto. He made this story about the two of you having a battle on the top of the castle. We'll connect to something like that, make the story a continuation." She sighed. "He talks about it like it actually happened. Listening to him tell it, I almost believe him. He never breaks character, not even in private. We could never have an honest discussion."

"I've heard it," said Dominic. "All we need to do, if we want to maneuver him into position, is find the right continuation of that story."



The crowning of a new king was always an extravagant affair, even when a country wasn't in turmoil. The people needed to be shown that the king was still in control of the country and still fit to rule them. The Iron Kingdom had appointed governors rather than dukes, but they still had to meet the new king and be made to believe that there was a need to toe the line. This was all the more important when the former king had not left a clear line of succession behind, or when there had been a brief war between two factions competing for the throne.

Vidre oversaw the arrangements. It had been years since Welexi had organized anything; she was the one who paid attention to the ledgers. The skill of double-entry book-

keeping was virtually unknown among the illustrati, but it was the only way that the system of bards could actually work. There were accounts held in the banks of two dozen countries, across twelve separate systems of currency, with news traveling at the speed of sail. Compared to that nightmare of coordination, the coronation was child's play. As usual, the work went unnoticed.

She tested Welexi's defenses in the middle of the night, to see whether the easy path might still be open to them. She came to his door and slammed against it with an armored fist, hard enough to confirm that there were inches of metal behind it. If the door itself were merely reinforced, she might have been able to break it from its hinges with that strike, but there was no such luck.

Welexi threw the door aside seven seconds later, fully armored and holding a spear of light in his hand that illuminated the hallway around him. There was something fierce in the cast of his face, one she had only rarely seen on him. It was a curl of his lip, a tightening of the brow, as though he were about to crush some insect beneath his heel. The look was gone in an instant, from the very moment he recognized her.

"I've been poisoned," spat Vidre through clenched teeth. She staggered against the doorway and closed her eyes. She was ready with elaboration, but Welexi simply picked her up and threw her over his shoulder to take her down the hallway to the room that the Iron King had once occupied. Gaelwyn was still waking up when Vidre took his place in

the massive bed. He tended to her with bleary eyes and a slack jaw.

"Nothing that will kill you," said Gaelwyn. "I can put you out —"

"No," said Vidre. "We need to be more careful with what we eat," she said. Her stomach clenched and she writhed in pain. The poison wasn't a lie; she had consumed a dose of mistletoe oil, enough that Gaelwyn would find something wrong, but an illness she could recover from within the day. "Even if the Allunio are gone ..." she trailed off, more because the poison was working its way through her system than because she wanted them to imagine the threats.

"That story is supposed to be over," said Welexi with a frown. He turned to Gaelwyn. "We will take precautions. I suppose a coda is acceptable at the coronation. It would be the opportunity to strike, if there are elements within these castle walls aligned against us. The feast following the coronation will have to be watched closely."

"I'll handle it," said Vidre. She moaned again as her guts twisted, trying not to play it up too much. Gaelwyn still had his hand on her armor. He would be able to feel every twitch of her muscles, every contraction of her skin. "When will I be back on my feet?"

"I don't know," said Gaelwyn. "It depends on what you were dosed with." He narrowed his eyes. "I worry that this is a trial run of some sort. Perhaps ... it's not too late to cancel."

"No," said Welexi. "You are the rightful ruler."

Vidre caught the look shared between them; Gaelwyn had never been one to confide in her, especially not after Lothaire had done his talking. It didn't take a savant to understand that Gaelwyn had his own reservations.



Welexi insisted on two large chairs for the coronation. The first was naturally for Gaelwyn. The second was for a new position to be created within the Iron Kingdom, the role of First Minister. In the days when the Iron King had occupied the throne, all of the various Ministries reported directly to him, with the ministers charged with carrying out his demands. The First Minister would serve as an intermediary step, a position appointed by the king to coordinate the ministers. To hear Welexi tell it, the Iron Kingdom had long suffered from one man at the top relying too heavily on his advisers, trying to engage personally in every matter of business. That the new First Minister would effectively usurp power from the king himself and serve as an adviser with unprecedented power went largely without comment. There was never any real question about whom Gaelwyn would appoint.

Vidre was to sit in the audience. She had done the largest part of the work in bringing the civil war to a conclusion. She had done most of the killing, when killing was what was called for. If Welexi had his way, the bards would sing a different song. It wouldn't be the first time that Welexi had done something like that, though he was often hampered by the fact that he had given control of the purse strings

over to Vidre early in their career. Things like that helped ease whatever misgivings she had about the plan she and Dominic had worked out.

There were two hundred people packed into the courtyard. Most of them had ridden quickly to get to Castle Launtine in time. The castle itself was filled beyond the capacity of its many bedrooms, spilling out into the town below for those too unimportant to rate a room. Vidre had dealt with all of it, from the announcement that had gone out to every remaining illustrati in the Iron Kingdom to the lilacs that adorned the chairs they were using. At every turn there was some new crisis to solve or someone trying to gain her attention so that they might increase their own fame by some token amount.

"I miss it," said Quill, during a brief moment Vidre had to herself. "Being an illustrati."

"You might gain your power back some day," said Vidre. "Not every theft was accounted for. We might find the person who received yours and gain it back for you."

There had been a time when Quill had a thickness to him, a ready smile and a twinkle in his eyes. They had found him in a dungeon, emaciated and sunken-eyed. Weeks of good eating and Gaelwyn's ministrations hadn't managed to return him to full health. Vidre had been in enough wars to know that sometimes people simply broke. "That wasn't credible even when I was king," he replied. "Tell me. We used to be friends once. Was I always to be a useful idiot? Someone to hold the throne while you three prepared to take it?"

Vidre had no reply for him. There were other, more important things to do. Yet she wondered whether he was right. Welexi had tried to spin a story about how Gaelwyn had been destined for the throne all along. If he were writing the tale, it would have been obvious from the start, with minor details threaded in early on. He had done the same with Dominic's supposed betrayal, warping every small detail until it seemed inevitable. How long ago had Welexi formed his plans? Was he driving the story or was the story driving him? The answer to those questions was far from a matter of idle curiosity. In a few short hours, Dominic would lay his life on the line under the belief that Welexi would follow the path that the story demanded.



It happened shortly after the ceremonial crown of the Iron Kingdom was transferred to Gaelwyn's head.

"Welexi!" screamed a loud voice that echoed across the courtyard. Dominic hadn't amplified his voice with the domain of sound; that was one of the ones he would need to keep back. Every head turned towards him. The murmurs started rolling through the gathered crowd soon afterward.

Dominic wore armor of steel, with a thick steel sword held in front of him. He'd spent the days before the coronation training with it, enough that he could pull off something that looked appropriately theatrical. He and Vidre had agreed it would be more compelling and thematically appropriate if he had shadow at his disposal, but that simply wasn't an option. They'd discussed whether he

should perhaps go without armor at all, but decided that would stretch the bounds of plausibility too far. Dominic attacking Welexi was already reckless and foolhardy. Doing it without a visible domain would have appeared suicidal and belied the fact that he had a trick up his sleeve. In his other hand he held the Harbinger artifact that Vidre had given him.

"Lightscour," said Welexi, from the coronation's second throne. He stood up with his armor of light gleaming and held out his hand to produce a spear of light. Welexi turned to Gaelwyn. "One moment, your majesty, while I deal with this." The aside was loud enough for all assembled to hear.

"You're a viper," said Dominic. "A venomous creature that has everyone convinced that he's a hero. Have you ever done anything truly heroic in your life? Something not motivated by the need to better yourself at the expense of those around you?"

Welexi walked forward with the spear held in his hand. "You use steel these days?" he asked. "My apprentice has learned new tricks, it seems. You always were a thief. It was my fault for thinking that I could better you at my own expense."

Dominic had stopped walking. He'd forgotten how imposing Welexi could be. Around him, people were moving away, only far enough that they wouldn't be caught in the fight. They stayed to watch, of course. If Dominic had learned anything, it was that people liked to watch illustrated fight, even if it came at a detriment to their own survival.

"I killed Zerstor," said Dominic. "You couldn't stand the idea of someone else taking that accomplishment from you, that was the only reason I ever found a place on your boat. You had to find some way of taking that accomplishment for yourself. That's all I ever was to you."

"It takes a cynical mind to see the world like that," said Welexi. He came to a stop some ten feet from Dominic. "You imagine that man could only be motivated by self-interest. It says more about you than it does about man. You were always naive, despite my best efforts. I take it you've come here to kill me?" He nodded to the artifact in Dominic's hand. "You wish to take my power from me, as the Allunio did to so many in this kingdom?"

It was going well, all things considered. They were talking, not fighting, which meant that Welexi was still playing for the crowd. He was wearing and wielding light, not presenting other domains. Dominic wasn't quite ready to breathe a sigh of relief, but this was more or less as he and Vidre had hoped for. There was no need to beat a hasty retreat.

"I mean to expose you," said Dominic. He held up the artifact. "I mean to drain your essence and take back what's rightfully mine."

"Last time we fought, I was intent on letting you live," said Welexi. "That was a bit of foolishness I won't repeat this time."

Around them, the crowd thrummed with murmurs. The play was going as planned. No one was interfering in the duel. Gaelwyn was still seated on the coronation throne,

with Vidre standing beside him. That was her primary role; to keep him from entering the battle. Once Welexi was engaged in the fight, Gaelwyn wouldn't steal the limelight, but there had been a chance that he would act decisively of his own accord. All that was left was the fight itself and the ruse that followed.

"Let us see whether the months have improved your ability with a sword," said Welexi. He spun his spear of light around, tucking it beneath his arm so that it was held rigid in front of him. The point was so sharp it seemed to fade into nothingness. Dominic put his sword up to guard, knowing that was futile against a spear that could pass straight through metal. He began shedding his armor, curling the metal away from him in order to give greater mobility. It was a show of his power, proof that he was an illustrati, but it was also part of the plan; he needed to be ready to display the wounds he would receive.

They moved with shifting footwork in a way that was familiar from Dominic's training. Welexi was exercising caution in the fight, either because he expected some trick to be coming or because he wanted to drag the fight out for as long as was dramatically appropriate. Dominic lunged forward, trying to strike with his sword, but Welexi spun away instead of using the opportunity to strike.

"Do you honestly think that you can beat me?" asked Welexi.

"I beat Zerstor with less," snarled Dominic. He'd practiced that snarl with Vidre a few days before. It provoked a scowl from Welexi, along with a test of Dominic's defenses

with a thrust of the spear of light. Dominic moved back, slightly off his balance, but again Welexi didn't take the bait. Instead, he held back, seeming unconcerned with pressing the advantage.

"You had so much promise," said Welexi. "So much potential. Did I go wrong with you somewhere, or were you simply rotten from the start? Should I have known that our first fight together, side by side, would presage the last? Should I have guessed you would one day stare me down with so much hurt and anger in your eyes?"

Dominic attacked again, swinging hard with his sword and putting every ounce of power he could into it. Welexi ducked beneath it, moving faster than Dominic had thought possible, then moved forward to counterattack. His spear slid cleanly into Dominic's torso, straight for his beating heart.

Dominic had practiced for this. He used the domain of flesh to rend a hole in himself, tearing his own heart apart, then let the blood flow freely. The domain of light prevented the spear itself from harming him, but to anyone watching it would have the appearance of a grievous, mortal blow. Dominic dropped the artifact to the ground beside him and screamed in real pain. This was the most dangerous part of the entire plan, the moment when Welexi might refuse his prize, when he might make a second strike through the head in order to ensure the kill, when any number of things might go wrong which would force Vidre to drive her dagger through Gaelwyn's skull and then join

in an unwinnable fight. They had planned for that, if things didn't go the right way.

Welexi moved forward quickly, picking the artifact up from the ground. He slipped it onto Dominic's hand. But the artifact was full, not empty, containing only a single link from a peasant far from Castle Launtine, so the only work that Dominic had to do was to silence the sounds it made and produce others in the air. The tones were different, the one for taking higher and shorter. Dominic had poured his own power into the artifact and then out again over the past few days, practicing until he could mask the sound for giving with the sound for taking, making sure that the moment was instant, that the artifact took its power all at once, that there were as few ways for this to fail as possible. This was another dangerous moment, one where Welexi might see through the ruse, but Dominic's half-lidded eyes saw a satisfied smile play across Welexi's lips. Dominic's role was then, for the time being, to lay on the ground and bleed. He knitted his wounds back together, leaving on the surface of the wound presenting damage to the world.

"He was reckless," said Welexi to the watching crowd. "I was mistaken in rewarding him for that. I took the risk for courage and conviction. I took it for justice. Yet as all men, his nature was his undoing. Make no mistake, for the story of Dominic de Luca, the man I named Lightscour, is a tragedy which only now finds its conclusion."

Dominic was on his feet from the moment he heard the first tone of the artifact. Welexi had a serene look on his face that was only just breaking. Dominic had a sword of

light formed in his hand as Welexi began to open his eyes; by the time the artifact emitted the second tone, Dominic was thrusting forward. The sword of light went through Welexi's neck and out the back, spraying blood onto the courtyard that joined Dominic's own. Dominic grabbed the artifact from Welexi's hand as he fell, in time for the third tone to sound. Dominic stood there, breathing heavily, knitting his flesh together while holding the artifact in his hand. Welexi gurgled blood from the flagstones of the courtyard. Dominic had done it. The plan had gone off perfectly. The artifact continued its tones, marking every link that Welexi had taken.

Gaelwyn began to scream from the throne as he stared at the scene, but Vidre was beside him with her glass dagger in hand. She drove it into his brain with enough force to flip him sideways; he was dead before he hit the ground.

The courtyard erupted in chaos shortly afterward.

23. The Way Forward

Vidre had felt a gnawing pit in her stomach when Dominic made his entrance. The plan was balanced on a knife's edge. If Welexi didn't take the bait, the other options were grim. If Welexi took the bait and moved in with full killing intent, in complete disregard of narrative instincts honed by a lifetime as illustrati, then Dominic would almost certainly die. She was counting on knowing Welexi well enough to predict him, but the truth was that she was ignorant of the inner workings of his mind. Most likely not even Gaelwyn knew who Welexi truly was.

When Welexi began striding forward to meet Dominic, Vidre moved to Gaelwyn with her daggers drawn. There was a brief moment of fear in his eyes, but she turned her back to him and put herself between him and the fight.

"How is he alive?" hissed Gaelwyn as Dominic and Welexi traded their barbs.

"I couldn't go through with it," replied Vidre. She swore beneath her breath. Most people were watching the fight, but there were still eyes on Gaelwyn. "Didn't think he'd be dumb enough to come back."

They watched together. The dialog was passable, but whatever the outcome the bards would have some work turning it into an enduring legend. Welexi moved with confidence. He was using only light, his signature domain, the one he'd spent a lifetime with. It had been unlikely that

he would use anything else, but that was one of the risk points. They spoke with each other, taking their time.

"Welexi's playing with him," said Gaelwyn. He sucked his teeth. "He should kill him and be done with it."

Vidre moved to Gaelwyn's side. "Project strength," she said. "Welexi is defending you, pretend that it's because you ordered it. Chin high. The battle won't be a contest." Vidre lowered her daggers and stood next to Gaelwyn as though she was simply part of his entourage, not defending him at all. "If Dominic charges us, be ready to take him down."

"Not you?" asked Gaelwyn. His wide eyes were watching Welexi move.

"You're king," said Vidre. "You need to cement your place."

Her glass dagger was held tightly in her hand. She'd thought about how to kill Gaelwyn many times before. A single strike to the head was the only real way to do it. If it came down to an actual fight, he would press his hand against her armor and strike at the flesh beneath it with his domain. They'd tested his striking limit while out at sea and come up with three inches as the maximum he was capable of. Vidre had tested wearing four-inches of glass armor the next night. It was bulky but serviceable. It was also entirely unusable in the current situation. Gaelwyn would see what she was doing and strike before she was done. Vidre had no real option but to stand tense and ready, waiting for either some crucial misstep in the primary plan, for Gaelwyn to connect the dots, or for everything to go off without a hitch.

Vidre's heart was pounding hard when she saw Dominic take the spear of light to the chest and fall over with a seemingly mortal wound. They had practiced it meticulously, until Dominic could sell it. She'd put even odds on Welexi making a thrust for the heart, since it would provide a natural bookend to the spear that Dominic had put through Zerstor's heart, but it was possible Welexi would try something else. She and Dominic had practiced faking hits to the arms and legs, but if Welexi deviated too far from the script they'd prepared, the whole thing was likely to unravel. Welexi was faithful to the narrative though.

Gaelwyn was triumphant. He had been taking joy in Welexi's triumphs, though they were usually achievements of a less violent nature. He seemed to suspect nothing. Vidre waited, biding her time. Welexi needed to take the bait. He picked the Harbinger artifact up from the ground and slipped it onto Dominic's hand for just long enough that it made the sound, one perfectly shaped by Dominic. Welexi lofted the artifact into the air. A sharp pang of anxiety ran through her.

Her nightmare was that Welexi would say, "And here we have a fitting gift for the new king," whether because he thought that matched the narrative better, or because he'd cottoned on to the plan. Things would also become difficult if he waited now, setting the artifact aside for later. They had good contingencies for that though; Vidre would simply stay by Welexi's side until he used the artifact, while Dominic would commit to playing dead for long enough that his body could be stashed somewhere out of view. Yet

by some miracle their plan threaded one last needle. Welexi made to take the power for himself.

Dominic was on his feet from the first tone of the artifact, moving quickly. Vidre stepped back as he moved, so that she was just out of Gaelwyn's view. There were many places that one person could stab another through the skull, but not all of them were immediately fatal. Vidre had seen men walking around with six inches of steel sticking straight into their brain, sometimes slurring their speech or acting like drunkards but still alive. Such a thing couldn't be allowed to happen with Gaelwyn, not with his power. Vidre made her move just as he began a tormented howl. She worried he would sense the movement and duck out of the way, or that his clothing would explode outward to reveal a mass of red tentacles. While Gaelwyn had killed thousands in his hospital, torturing prisoners to death in the name of progress, he had no formal or informal training in combat. Vidre's dagger drove straight into his skull, just below the ear, with smooth efficiency. When he hit the ground, she was ready for a second strike, one that would ensure his death. If there hadn't been people watching, she would have stabbed him in the head a half dozen times just to make sure there would be no complication.

The first screams started shortly afterward, along with the movement of the masses of people. The illustrati in the audience were arming themselves. Some of them must have started from the moment that Dominic made himself known, because Vidre saw full suits of metal that even

the more powerful illustrati couldn't make in a matter of seconds.

"There was a revolution!" shouted Dominic. His voice cut through all other sound, bringing everything to a silence. The artifact in his hand was still counting off its tones, giving a list of everyone whose link Welexi had taken. Dominic was letting that sound through, but no other. Some people had stopped to look at him, a few of them armed. "When the Iron King died, the Allunio slipped into his place, not just to rule in his stead, but to change the very working of the world. When Welexi learned of this, he launched a revolution of his own, one that would ostensibly restore the Iron Kingdom to the old way. Yet it was plain to anyone who looked that Gaelwyn was not the Iron King's son. It was plain to see that Welexi only craved power for himself."

The artifact kept making its sound into the enforced silence of the courtyard. That was a nice bit of showmanship. Dominic could have silenced it, but it underscored the point, that each of those was the sound of someone's domain being taken from them. It was an exaggeration, of course, since most of the links Welexi had held belonged to commoners from the village below, but to those who could understand what was being signified, it would be powerful.

"We will have a third revolution," said Dominic with his amplified voice, just as the crowd began to stir again. "The Allunio were driven by ideals that could never withstand the pressures of the real world. Welexi was driven by lust, both for power and attention, thinking only of himself. The Iron Kingdom must now take a third path. It must rebuild."

There were murmurs in the crowd now, murmurs that Dominic was letting through. When people realized they could talk again, the murmurs grew to full arguments. Some had left already, fleeing the moment Dominic had won, but more of them had stayed. A sizable fraction were creeping slowly around Dominic now, not with any seeming intent to fight and kill him, but merely as a precaution. Dominic slipped his hand into the artifact so deftly that few people would have caught it, but it made no noise; there was no sense in Dominic revealing himself to be a hypocrite so early. Vidre felt a small pang at seeing Welexi's power slip from her grasp, but they had already agreed that it would go to Dominic, if only because otherwise they'd have to defend the artifact from everyone who wanted to steal it.

"We're going to write a constitution," Vidre shouted to the crowd. Dominic was watching her, focusing on her words and helping her be heard, but not quite snuffing out the conversations around them. "We want to ensure that the kingdom can continue. If you want to have a say in what we decide, we will converse on the matter in the throne room. You are otherwise free to leave." Vidre laid eyes on every person of importance she could see. Welexi would simply have turned and walked back into the castle without looking behind him to see who would follow, but Vidre had been witness to more than enough dramatics for one day.

"What's important is that the Iron Kingdom remains intact," said the Minister of Agriculture. She was not much past twenty years old, a successor to the successor of the man that originally occupied the position. Her hair had

been done up with bits of wheat decorating her braid. She was young, ambitious, and exactly the sort of person who would seize on the opportunity.

"The Whore of Abalon has no rightful claim to the throne," said a tall man in purple clothing with white trim. He was a duke, whose duchy lay to the north, bordering the Highlands. The Iron King's rule had not been kind to the nobility; those who remained in control of their lands were tough and lean. But the duke wasn't attacking, which was something.

"I am the Queen of Geswein," said Vidre. "I have no interest in joining the two countries in personal union. I have no interest in ruling. Yet after a hard-fought war, along with the need to put down an old friend who had gone mad, I find that I cannot leave this kingdom to its own devices. Dominic and I will oversee the writing of the constitution. We will lend whatever aid is needed in negotiating what is best for the country. But we will not stay, nor will we try to take any power for ourselves."

"She's right that the Iron Kingdom needs unity," said the Minister of Legends. If he thought poorly of Vidre for slitting his predecessor's throat, or for the damage they'd done to the Ministry of Legends some two months prior, he didn't show it. "The Highlands threaten revolt, Torland must certainly see our weakness, and the gears of trade have stopped turning." He nodded to another man, the Minister of Trade, who nodded gravely. "Lightscour is right as well. We must hammer out a new path."

The duke who had spoken up shifted slightly. "We will have to reach some accommodations," he said. "Those of us with land and resources will wish compensation, or a say in the direction this kingdom will take."

That decided it, more or less. There was no one to lead an opposition, no one with a vested interest in sowing chaos. They would split into factions when it came time to write a governing document, and they would squabble about treaties and tariffs, veto powers and quorums, but unless the process of negotiation fell through, they would have a country at the end of it.



"I thought they would be more upset about Welexi dying," said Dominic. He sat with Vidre on the roof of Castle Launtine, where the legend said he'd tried to betray Welexi. He had sat there experimenting with his new powers, looking out at the horizon with eyes that seemed to see everything now. Welexi had taken a large amount of power for himself; now it was Dominic's. There was so much of it that he almost didn't know what to do with it. Vidre had come up after a few hours of overseeing negotiation to sit next to him.

"The commoners will hate you," said Vidre. "Even if we managed to get out ahead of it with the right story, one that showed Welexi as an absolute villain, many of them would refuse to believe it. You would still be the villain in their eyes, and he would still be the hero. Some of them will hate you for the rest of your life." She let out a sigh. "But those

people down there, they're possessed of some basic savvy. I'm not sure you realize how brutally we fought the Allunio ... how brutally I fought them. The Iron Kingdom has been deprived of too many illustrati now, but anyone with an ounce of sense sees that there's room for new flowers to blossom."

"The artifacts are going to be a problem," said Dominic. "Maybe it would have been possible for people to move in after a purge, in the old days, but now? It's going to end with one person holding all the power."

"Maybe," said Vidre. "I think I've done enough for one day though. We can wait a bit before we start worrying about a tyrant taking all the power for himself. Speaking of which, how is Welexi's collection treating you?"

"It's odd," said Dominic. "There are so many senses available it seems like my head shouldn't be able to contain them all. But the wind on my cheeks, the light of the stars, the feel of the flagstones beneath me, sounds and shadows, metals and insects in the air ... I feel like I could run a million miles. Maybe later tonight I'll cut loose and test the limits of what I can do."

"Be careful," said Vidre. "You're still no good with a sword."

"I know," said Dominic.

The air was still and silent around them, but if Dominic pushed the domain of sound, he could hear people talking far below them, both conversations wafting up from the bedrooms and what sounded like revelry from one of the

storerooms that had contained the Iron King's supply of wine.

"I need to go see the Zenith," said Vidre. "Last I checked it was held in port, but that was a month ago. I wouldn't blame the crew if they'd taken the ship for their own, but if they haven't, I need to see about getting them paid again, however we're going to manage that." She paused. Dominic could hear her swallow. The sun was setting, but he could see her face in crystal clarity, with every emotion that was etched there. "I mean, however I'm going to manage that."

They hadn't talked that much about what was going to come after this gambit. Vidre had kept saying there was a good chance that both of them would be dead. They needed to spend their time planning and practicing, trying to figure out what they would do if Welexi didn't behave as they'd expected him too, trying to work on the proper wording of what Dominic would say. What would happen after had been sketched, not painted, with none of the details that a true plan needed. They were in uncharted waters now.

"I'm going back to Gennaro," said Dominic. "At least for long enough to see my friends and family. The links are going to make me a target for anyone who has an artifact. I don't know that I want to put my sister in harm's way by being around her for long. I can't really pick up where I left off either, even if I wanted to."

She could have offered him passage aboard the Zenith. He could have asked her. The silence stretched on though.

"I have a favor to ask," said Vidre. "Before you go."

"Yeah?" asked Dominic.

"There's a man I need brought back to life," said Vidre.



They stared at the body of Lothaire, watching him breathe. He was in a small cell, laid out on the mattress in a position that was clearly posed. His hands were folded together over his chest and his feet were together and pointed straight at the ceiling.

"Gaelwyn put him out," said Vidre. "Afterward, he claimed that something had gone wrong. He said he wasn't able to bring Lothaire back out of it. The deception involved a lot of terminology that I didn't listen too closely to. It was obvious that he was lying and that Welexi was complicit in it, even if he didn't outright order it. You have the domain of flesh, I need him revived so that I can get the answers to a few pressing questions."

Dominic touched the body. He could feel the domains of flesh and blood, the former as relaxed fibers and sheets of fat, the latter as a constantly-moving fluid moving from the heart to the extremities and back. The body wasn't healthy, that much was clear just from looking at the man, but there was something wrong with the muscles as well, something that Dominic's domain intuition didn't quite tell him how to fix.

"What did Gaelwyn do?" asked Dominic.

"Something to do with blood," said Vidre. "If blood pressure drops, people pass out, but it's not the drop in blood pressure that actually causes it, it's something somewhere in the neck. He told me once, but I listened less than I

should have. There's a ... a nerve, something that tells the body blood pressure is low."

Dominic closed his eyes and tried to feel the domains again. The neck had too many muscles in it. He tried to use the domain of flesh to feel his own neck, so that he could compare it with Lothaire's, but that didn't help much either. "How did Gaelwyn even figure this out in the first place?" asked Dominic.

"Vivisecting hundreds of people," said Vidre. "Not something you could learn on short notice. I'm sure that there's a book somewhere that describes exactly what to do to which muscle group in order to alter a very specific nerve in some particular way."

"What do you need from him?" asked Dominic. He looked down at Lothaire, who was breathing shallowly. The man was old, seemingly untouched by the healing that illustrati could provide. It was hard to imagine him as the leader of the Allunio.

"He knows things," said Vidre. She touched a piece of her armor, where a bulb of glass parted for her. She pulled out a ring that immediately announced itself in the mind. It was a Harbinger artifact, one taken from Welexi's body when they'd carried him into the castle. "The artifacts are a problem. Lothaire is the one who uncovered them, or at least knows their provenance. If there are more ... what the artifact does is very specific, but if the Harbingers could do one thing, we need to allow for the possibility that they can do others. If Lothaire knows, we need to know too."

"He said something about your father," said Dominic.

"I don't care about my father," said Vidre. "I might have been able to forgive everything else, but he sold me, like ... like I was something he owned and no longer wanted. I don't care what happened to him. I don't care what triumph or tragedy Welexi was covering up."

Dominic focused on Lothaire's body and the shape of its muscles. Something somewhere in the neck was being squeezed. Dominic first tried relaxing all the muscles there, then when that had no apparent effect, he started shrinking the muscles. They seemed to melt beneath his touch. Lothaire stirred and opened his eyes.

"You're not Gaelwyn," he said slowly. He tried to move for a moment, then paused. "I can't move my neck."

"Sorry," said Dominic. "I'll try to fix it, but there are too many complicated things there that I don't understand. I can't promise I wouldn't pinch another nerve. But for now, we need answers."

"What does the ring do?" asked Vidre. She held it up to his view.

"I need food," said Lothaire. "The Red Angel told me that the body begins to cannibalize itself after long enough without food. He found no problem in simply adding more flesh to my bones rather than going through the work of feeding me."

"Later," said Vidre. "Answer my question."

"It's a question I've been asked before," said Lothaire. "I take it something has happened to Welexi then? Am I seeing the moment before a betrayal or the moment after?"

"After," said Vidre. "Tell me what the ring does."

"When I told him that I didn't know, Welexi didn't believe me," said Lothaire. "I doubt you will either."

Dominic worked at repairing Lothaire's body. It wasn't inconceivable that Vidre would want him alive at the end of their conversation.

"Where was it found?" asked Vidre.

"A cave," said Lothaire. "More of a subterranean structure, in truth." He licked his lips. "If not food, then water?"

"I can do that," said Dominic. Water was one of his stronger domains; he conjured a single drop onto his palm, then expanded it until it filled his palm. With his other hand, he touched a piece of metal on his armor and formed it into a cup. He slipped the water into the cup and handed it to Lothaire.

"How many do you have?" asked Lothaire as he took the cup. His hands were trembling.

"I don't know," said Dominic.

"Where was this cave?" asked Vidre. "What else was in it?"

"Harbinger things," answered Lothaire after taking a long drink of water. "Everything we touched was branded by them, its identity delivered to the mind directly. Nothing else though. The cylinders were the only ones with any obvious effect. We tested everything else, but there was never any change, whether it be good or bad."

"I'd have to see it all myself," said Vidre.

"We need to negotiate," said Lothaire. "What can I give you that would ensure my life? The location of the cave, certainly. I already told Welexi as much as I knew about the locations, identities, and movements of my compatriots. That matter seems to have resolved itself."

"You sent assassins after us," said Vidre. "After me."

"I knew that Welexi would come, sooner rather than later," said Lothaire. "I feared him. Perhaps you wouldn't have done the same in my shoes. Perhaps you would have acted with a decade of training and accomplished your goals. We were thinkers and dreamers, not the sort of people who were trained in death. I do write some beautiful agreements though. I doubt you'd accept the offer, but if Welexi is dead, you might need someone to ensure the continuity of this kingdom."

"It's taken care of," said Vidre. "Even if it weren't, you're right that I would reject your help."

"Very well," said Lothaire. "Is there anything else you'd like to know before you kill me?" He seemed calm, despite the words.

"Can I ask a question, for my own curiosity?" asked Dominic.

Vidre nodded.

"You were in Gennaro, the day that Zerstor attacked," said Dominic. "Wealdwood described you coming to him. I don't understand why you were there."

"It was always about more than the Iron Kingdom," said Lothaire. "We wanted to change the world. The Zenith

was in Gennaro to spread legends and manage finances. We were there to see how much it would take to turn the Sovento States. Those plans are stillborn now, it seems. Perhaps if I'm allowed to go free, I'll write a book on what went wrong."

"I can save you the trouble," said Vidre. "Weakness was part of your ideology. If you'd stacked domains into a single person, you could have torn through any opposition with ease. You doomed yourself to failure from the start. You should have picked some better way of thinking, something equally seductive that would hamper you less."

"Do you think it was for show?" asked Lothaire. "Do you think I chose the difficult path because I was trying to arrange a pleasant scene? I am not an illustrati. As one of the king's advisers, I had only enough fame to know my domain, nothing more. I never dealt in narratives, never spent effort on pursuing appearances. We chose not to make one man into a titan because we thought that path would lead to ruin."

"And now it all lays in ruin anyway," said Vidre. "If you don't win, then your ideals don't have much meaning to anyone."

Lothaire had no response to that.

"I have one more question," said Dominic. "What happened to Vidre's father?" Vidre shot him a dark look, but Dominic only shrugged. She could pretend as much as she wanted, but he didn't see what she had to gain from presenting disinterest.

"Your father became an illustrati," Lothaire said to Vidre. "He took his own power from the stories about you. There were only scraps to go on, but in Geswein they invented tales about him."

"I don't care," said Vidre. Her face was perfectly blank, so much that it had to have been a mask she was presenting.

"He parlayed that into greater fame, under an assumed name," said Lothaire. "He called himself Ursi. He wore a bear's pelt. He was a villain, but a minor one, useful enough that no one was in any great hurry to put him down. He spoke of you to no one except his closest friends and then only when drunk. He got better, as the years passed. You might call it a redemption arc, but I believe it was true redemption. He was never terribly pleasant, but he became a hero in his own right, if a minor one. Four years ago, he made it known that he was trying to track down the Zenith. That was the last that anyone heard of him."

"And that's it?" asked Vidre. "That's the entirety of what you know?"

"The rest is conjecture," said Lothaire. "If Welexi is dead, you would have to ask Gaelwyn, but if he's dead as well, which I imagine is the case, then I don't know who would know the truth. It's possible that your father happened upon them before he happened upon you, or that he went to them so that they could soften the introduction. All I have are guesses. Welexi was your father figure, it's no real surprise that he would want that position uncontested."

"He wasn't a father figure," said Vidre.

Lothaire shrugged. "Then I don't know. I was trying to drive in whatever wedges I could find and Gaelwyn thought I was about to strike a nerve. Would you truly not care if your father was killed while trying to reconcile with you?"

"No," said Vidre. She stood up and adjusted her glass armor. "I think I've heard enough from you though. Dominic, you can do what you please with the man." She stalked out of the room without another word.



Dominic tapped Vidre on the shoulder from behind.

"I'm fine," she said. She could cry about it later, if she really had to. Her father had taken himself out of her life early on. He hadn't deserved to see her again. There was no reason to think that a reunion would have gone well anyway. There was no proof he was really dead, or that Welexi had done it, just the hearsay of a deceiver. It shouldn't have hit her so hard.

"I know you're fine," said Dominic. He shifted. "Listen, I was thinking that perhaps we could stay together, at least for a time. I need passage back to Gennaro and you have a ship in port. I know you like to keep moving, perhaps you could chart us a course that would take you by there."

"We don't typically revisit a city so soon," said Vidre. She had her hands on the glass daggers at her side. She changed their shape, so that they would be better for slipping between the gap in a suit of armor, then again so they would give her reach, then broad and thick so they would

resist chipping or breaking. Glass was normally comforting to the touch. "Usually it's two years, maybe more."

"All the same," said Dominic. "I'm in no rush to return home. It might be good if my friends and family had some time to absorb the news first."

"You don't have to stay with me," said Vidre. She let out a sigh. "I'm fine. I said that I was fine. I've been through worse."

Dominic shrugged. "I'd like to go home, but I'm not too picky about when. It just seemed more efficient this way." He was looking at her with kind, gentle, understanding eyes.

Vidre was ready to accuse him of putting up a facade, but if that's what he was doing, what would have to be said of her? Had she actually said that she'd been through worse? She'd been traveling with Welexi for nearly her entire adult life. She'd killed the closest thing to family that she had left. Her future hadn't been this uncertain in a very long time. What good would it do to pretend that she didn't want a companion? Dominic was perhaps the only person in the world who might understand her.

"Alright," said Vidre. "We'll be here another day, then we'll go to Bordes and see whether the ship is still there. There are more pressing stops than Gennaro though, I have to warn you. It might be some time before we say our goodbyes."

"That's fine," said Dominic. "I was thinking that some time at sea might be good for learning more etiquette."

"Better that we work on combat," said Vidre. "There are troubled times ahead of us. We have a substantial fraction of the artifacts locked away, but there are more, including the one you gave to the Bone Warden. If the wrong person tries to do the wrong things ..." She trailed off. The problem seemed insurmountable. The world was simply going to change; there was nothing that they could do about it, except perhaps by trying to stop the worst of it.

"We'll have to be ready," said Dominic.

"Yes," replied Vidre. "We will."

Appendix: On the Nature of the Domains

In *Meditations*, the earliest work of its kind, Lyander first divides the domains into two groups: material and immaterial. At first this might seem wise, in the ways of the old masters, but the problems are immediate, even at that first division. If we believe that there is a domain of fire, as Lyander did, where do we imagine that Lyander would have placed it? There are arguments to be made either way, none of them definitive. There is a little-known tract issued forth by Lyander which attempts to clarify the definitions he makes, to draw lines in the sand so that none could argue, but of course this weakens his system immensely, which is the reason that printings of *Meditations* so rarely include that tract. Lyander concludes that fire is immaterial, while notably stating that rust is clearly material. Alchemists now know that both are part of the same process, which would seem to invalidate his reasoning.

Other, more modern systems are fraught with their own difficulties. It has of late become fashionable to use Herrus' system, which divides the domains into elemental, organic, bodily, ephemeral, manufactured, metallic, and animistic, with derived elemental sometimes included as an eighth grouping or bodily folded into organic to arrive at six groups (of special significance to the people of the Southern Plains). Herrus contends that this system of groupings is descriptive; he has placed them such that like domains are next to each other. Variants on his arrangement move

the pieces around, but they only serve to make clear the fact that the groupings are arbitrary. Given the failures of Lyander and others, we have moved from believing that we might find a True Structure to accepting that there is a Convenient Structure which is useful despite not being wholly correct.

Here I will attempt something different; an examination of the domains as they exist, along with a hypothesis as to their nature, one which we might arrive at through the strength of analysis alone

Domains

To start, we must define what we mean by a domain. In the broadest sense, a domain is:

1. A set of abilities a person possesses, which increase with fame.
2. A set of things on which those abilities may act

Lyander's classification of abilities has fared much better than his attempted classification of domains, and though we might quibble, I do not believe there is one better. I will endeavor to be exhaustive here; the more learned among my readers may wish to skip ahead, for I believe I say nothing that offers sufficiently new illumination of this subject.

domain genesis: the ability to create more of a domain

Things get tricky right from the start. When referring to the material domains, it is clear what we mean when we say “more”; two pounds of iron is more than one pound of iron. Yet there are what we might call process domains, which are usually split between ephemeral and elemental. What does it mean when we say “more” sound? Sound is composed of waves, so we might say that in that case, domain genesis is the creation of a sound. Yet what of fire? We know that fire is a process, a reaction which occurs. In that case we sometimes say that domain genesis is merely the *beginning* of a process.

There are two other prominent exceptions in addition to this duality of process domains and material domains; heat and cold. These together form a third group, which we might refer to as the state domains. What does it mean to create more heat? It means only to change the state of an object. But we have just said above that a domain is the set of things upon which those abilities act! If the domain of heat can affect the property of any object, what does that mean? I hope to one day have a better answer, but as yet I have none.

Genesis follows several rules, though whether those rules illuminate something important about the nature of the domains is as yet unclear.

- It is easier to create a material which is simple rather than complex. Creating a pound of flesh is much slower than creating a pound of stone.
- Speed appears to depend largely on mass, rather than volume. A pound of gold and a pound of copper are

equally complex, but would take the same amount of time.

- It is far easier to create from an existing source. An illustrati of water fully immersed in his domain will be able to create a gallon of water much faster than one stuck in a desert. For this reason it is common for illustrati to be locked away without access to their domain, where possible, and for *that* reason it is common for illustrati to hide small slivers of their domain about their person.
- A powerful enough illustrati can make more of their domain from nothing. It is unclear whether this is simply a function of raw power, as Bellsthwill suggests, or whether there this is a function of there being unavoidable contaminants in supposedly sterile environments which we cannot yet detect.
- The animal domains have thus far proven incapable of domain genesis.

domain kinesis: the ability to move a domain

At first blush this ability is simple. The apple is often used as a stand-in when teaching about the domains, so we imagine the illustrati moving that apple using an unseen force which responds to their will. When we speak of range extension, we can imagine an illustrati touching one apple, then causing a second apple which the first is touching to move.

Apples were chosen because there is an orchard close to the Kellos Summit where many of the early scholars had the first discussions of what we might imagine about the do-

mains. However, as I hope I have said clearly enough above, there are non-trivial differences between the domains. The physical aspects of being able to move a piece of iron do not properly map to some of the other domains.

There is an interesting study to be made in the domain of heat. Heat was always a troublesome domain for those who had it, because while it was fearsome in its own right if let loose, the process of cooling back down was quite slow. Heat did not, of course, harm the illustrati, but it made a large number of things very difficult for them, mostly in regards to interacting with anything made of a flammable material or even another person. A hundred years ago, Calor the Bold, the third man to carry that name, came to understand how to move heat.

He began by looking at how this phenomenon called heat behaved, much in the way that I now look at the phenomenon of the domains. He noted that when a hot object is placed next to a cold one, the hot object transfers its heat. This is a rather facile observation, but he asked a question that must have been asked relatively few times before. If movement was one of the domain abilities and the property of heat could move, why was the domain of heat as experienced incapable of that movements? The answer was that it *was* possible, though this movement is far different from the others. Calor provided descriptions of how to properly conceptualize this technique, which is now used by illustrati of heat the world over.

Domain kinesis is likely the mechanism by which a few domains are capable of creating the so-called “solid

ephemerals"; because kinesis is an unseen force which acts on the domain, it might be that the solid ephemeral merely acts as a vessel through which to apply that unseen force.

domain alteration: the ability to change a domain

Alteration is one of the less understood of the abilities. It is also one which varies widely from domain to domain. The key piece of understanding that brings unity to this ability is that most domains do not have a singular focus. There will be more to say on this later, but a domain can encompass many different things; the domain of stone includes onyx and marble, for example. Domain alteration is then the changing a domain material into another domain material that is nevertheless within the same domain. Curiously, some of the domains appear to be entirely singular and thus have no access to domain alteration.

domain immunity: the passive ability to prevent personal injury from a domain

It has often been remarked that without immunity, many of the domains would be useless. The ability to light anything on fire with a touch would quickly result in serious burns; being able to scream loudly would quickly make a person deaf. It has been suggested by those who favor a Creator that this is a matter of necessary protection, but I think that this is unlikely. Domain immunity applies to every domain, even those which hold no natural danger to their users. An illustration of iron cannot be pierced or cut

by iron, but we can hardly say that he would be useless without this ability.

As with most abilities, this one scales with standing. Someone with negligible standing will have no protections, while a middling illustrati would take a reduced hit; a sharpened dagger of glass might bite into the skin as though it was blunt rather than sharp, for example. Because of this, illustrati must be careful, especially the minor illustrati. An illustrati typically cannot push his domain so far that he will hurt himself, but it is well possible for an illustrati of flame to start a fire which grows beyond the protections conferred to him.

The homeostasis provided by domain immunity is not complete, nor is it uniform among the domains. Illustrati of water are able to breathe beneath the waves, but an illustrati of wood with a branch shoved down his throat would not. Immunity protects against most attacks which might be made with a weapon of that domain. When the phenomenon is closely observed in controlled conditions, as was done by Pynthos, it appears to follow naturally from the other abilities. We might think of a sword stabbing into the belly of an illustrati of iron as undergoing a subconscious version of domain kinesis. This notably continues to function even in situations where the illustrati is not aware of the threat, as well as when the illustrati is simply unconscious, and indeed even when the illustrati has been rendered insensate through methods such as lobotomy.

domain intuition: the ability to understand a domain

Of all the abilities, domain intuition is the most philosophically troubling. It would very much appear that there is something different within the minds of the illustrati which allows them to use their abilities in full. I have seen illustrati of water make sinuous whips without any apparent thought given to the matter. I have heard tales of illustrati making a sword of shadow with no training or formal education. We have examples of annealed and quenched metals from long before those techniques were in common use.

The intuitions are as varied as the domains themselves. Illustrati of steel have been able to forge far better weapons than even the greatest of blacksmiths, not just because of their control of the material, but through an intuition about what makes a metal hold its sharpness. Illustrati of flesh are able to fix complicated flesh wounds without having to know or even understand how the individual muscle fibers connect to each other. Intuition offers information which is sometimes unknown to humanity, which offers us a window into what might be possible as we expand the scope of true understanding.

Yet we must also look to cases like Calor's, where a capability was *uncovered* through experimentation and knowledge. I have said that an illustrati of iron is more capable than the greatest blacksmith, but if an illustrati of iron learns smithing he can become more capable than his compatriot who remains ignorant. Why are certain things intuitive to illustrati and while others are not? We do not

know, and I am not so satisfied by any of the explanations on offer that I feel the need to reprint them here.

domain sense: the ability to sense a domain

Domain sense takes many different forms. While ophthalmocception (the visual sense) is the most common, I have found numerous examples of extension into the other senses as well. Of particular note is proprioception, which seems nearly as common as ophthalmocception; an illustrati touching a material of their domain can often feel it as an extension of the self. I have done tests with a willing subject, a young woman with the domain of copper named Quiver, whose only condition was that I mention her by name in any publication which featured the research we performed together. She was able to accurately describe several different images stamped onto copper plates with only a finger touching the material.

A better understanding of domain sense might regretably be had from the foul experiments of the Iron Kingdom. It was commonly known that the visual sense did not strictly depend upon the eyes, given that illustrati maintained their sense even with their eyes closed. The experiment done by the misbegotten surgeons of the Iron Kingdom was to progressively blind an illustrati in increasingly damaging ways in order to find when the domain sense would be lost. Even after the entirety of the eyeball was destroyed, domain sense verifiably remained. It was not until the optic nerve was destroyed that ophthalmocception was verifiably destroyed. What this result might

mean is anyone's guess, though more ethical modes of experimentation which specifically investigate the nervous system seem promising.

domain form: the ability to take on aspects of the domain

I have so far been silent on the animal domains, but they must now be given their due. Domain form has thus far been shown to exist only within the animal domains, though it has long been predicted that it is somehow possible for other domains as well, in the same way that Calor proved heat capable of movement through diligent study. Domain form is characterized by a shift in physiology, usually subtle, towards being similar to an animal in question. This process is directed by the illustrati, usually so that the changes are cosmetic in nature. The benefits of this transition tend to be minor and depend almost entirely on the domain. More radical changes are often accompanied by changes in diet. I have heard it said that there are changes in cognition as well, though verifiable evidence for this is lacking. As always, we must be wary of motivated misinformation.

It is important to note that domain prostheses is something different entirely. An illustrati might forge an arm of gold to replace one which he has lost, but while he might, through practice, be able to move this arm as though it were one of flesh and blood, this is simply a combination of domain sense and domain kinesis, not an example of domain form. Domain form has an element of transformation to it which prosthesis lacks.

Internal Sensations

Based on the interviews I have conducted, the illustrati themselves do not feel much of a distinction between these classifications of their abilities. That is to say, an illustrati of iron of course understands that there is a difference between moving a piece of iron and changing the shape of that piece of iron, but to him these “feel” as though they are quite similar actions rather than being modal. It is therefore difficult to claim that any classification of abilities is legitimately useful; it might be that with a better understanding of the mechanisms involved, we would come to the realization that they are all part of a singular whole, which appears to be how the illustrati perceive it.

One central question that has appeared through the ages has been whether the domains are singular or faceted. If Able and Beth are both illustrati of water with equal amounts of standing, will they necessarily have access to all of the same abilities? Or might it be the case that Able would be capable of some things which Beth is not? I believe that this confusion to be incidentally created by the illustrati as part of their strategies in the pursuit of standing; every interview I have conducted and every trustworthy primary source I have read has indicated that all illustrati of a given domain are equal in their abilities. Oh, some might have trained themselves more in some specific discipline, or they might know some trick which they arrive at through either training or deep knowledge, but I have found no evidence that these aberrant behaviors could not

in principle be obtained by others. The seeming differences between illustrati seem to stem mostly from their need to appear distinct in order to raise their standing.

A Theory On The Makeup of the Domains

The question we must now come to, having described the domains, is the central question of *why some things are domains and others are not*.

The first prong of my theory is simply a variant on Lyander's formulation. Where he said that the domains are all vital to humanity, I will instead say that all of the domains are *compelling* to humanity. There are ten animal domains. Of those, six (feline, canine, avian, piscene, equine, and ruminants) are either domesticated animals or, in the case of fish, a nearly universal source of food. Lyander believed wholeheartedly in a Creator, and beyond that, a Creator which held humans to be paramount, so he viewed the domains through that lens. Yet there are domains which fit poorly with Lyander's idea of vitality, such as the domain of lava, which has not once been vital to humanity no matter what Lyander's supporters say.

When we look across all the domains, we can see that each of them is compelling to the human race in one way or another. There is nowhere that this is more clear than in the metallic domains. Tin and brass are both domains, though brass is an alloy of tin and zinc, and zinc is not a domain. Why? There have been many answers to this question, but

with the discovery of zinc in its pure, irreducible form, I believe we must raise an eyebrow at those who claim that the domains are somehow basic to the world.

There is another word I might use instead of compelling: famous. The domains themselves have their own variety of standing which is distinct from the notion of standing as applied to humans. The only question which remains is the question of how this "domain standing" might function.

So far as we can tell, the distribution of the domains is in exact proportion to the number of domains. In every instance we can find where a random sampling of the population was available, we saw no domains which were more likely than others. If our sampling is not random, such as a sampling of illustrati rather than the general public, we find much more of the "useful" domains, those which offer superior manufacturing, superior combat ability, or have some other aspect which creates the virtuous cycle of utility increasing fame and fame increasing utility.

Yet this still leaves us with some of the perennial questions about the domains. We might easily imagine that brass has passed some threshold of human interest which zinc has not, but why are the divisions where they are? Why is there not a domain for simply "metal" instead of the variety of metallic domains we see? Why not simply a domain of "animals"? We know that domains can include many things which are sufficiently similar. On that point, why is there a domain for "stone" instead of a dozen stone domains, which might include volcanic rocks, sandstone, limestone, and so on? Why is the domain of wood not split

into birch, oak, and so on? Why are there distinct domains for so many animals, yet for humans there is instead a number of bodily domains which do not fully encapsulate the entirety of the raw materials which make up a human?

Let me explain the second prong of the notoriety magnitude theory of domains by way of a set of observations and a set of predictions.

Whether the domains are static or variable is, unfortunately, a matter of historical record. Sadly, written records are rife with unreliable legends which the illustrati understandably propagate in order to increase their own standing. We must treat any historical reports of new domains as extremely suspect. As just one example, a shaman named Al-Shira from the Patrean islands claimed to have the domain of life, which allowed him to kill with a touch and bring the dead back to the realm of the living. His repeated excuses for why he could not bring the Patrean queen back to life led to him being executed by the Patrean king. I have seen more credulous historical scholars accept this account as being true, but singular instances of domains do not fit within any extant framework, nor do we have any rigorously studied examples. We cannot trust individual accounts, but I believe we *can* trust broader trends.

Steel has been known for all of recorded history, from back until the times of the first post-Harbinger civilizations. In many cultures, however, there was a strong implication that steel was something which only illustrati could make; in Garrund, steel is still called *simo sidero*, which roughly translates to *fame iron*. It would appear that there was a

period of time during which steel was exclusively (or at least primarily) produced by illustrati, up until roughly five hundred years ago, until better bloomeries and crucibles brought steel production into the realm of the mundane. At that point, steel moved from being a tool of the elite to something much more common. It is then that I believe we see a fairly clear split. The century before then, there is no note made of illustrati of iron being unable to create steel. A century after, this distinction is common. I believe what happened is that iron and steel were once the same domain and following the proliferation of steel, the domains were split in two.

The theory does not rest on any specific piece of evidence though; there are many examples we might give. Though we have long thought of cats as being a staple animal domain, there is no evidence for anyone having held the domain of cats prior to six hundred years ago, at roughly the time they were imported to the civilized world and began their madcap proliferation. I have heard it remarked that *of course* someone could not have a domain if none of the domain animal was present, but I find that theory to be dubious given a few historical examples of illustrati who never exhibited control over any domain. Furthermore, we would expect that if the feline domain only depended upon the presence of felines, we might find some illustrati among the natives who were noted for their command of said animals. Though their records are woefully incomplete and subject to much the same unfortunate pressures as our

own, neither I nor my colleagues in occidental studies have uncovered anything of the sort.

Yet it would be easy enough for even a rigorous scholar to pick and choose the pieces of our fragmentary, unreliable history in order to make a compelling argument for any one particular theory. Instead I shall endeavor to do something much more difficult and far more reliable as an indicator of my correctness; I shall make a prediction. There are three predictions which my magnitude theory of domains might make. The first is that a domain might split in two, as I believe iron and steel did at some point in the past. There are no domains which I think are particularly ripe for this, whether because the domain contains two concepts which are distinct from each other, or because there is some ongoing shift in perception. The second is that two domains might collapse into a single one, or a domain might evaporate entirely. There is little historical evidence for this ever having happened, so I cannot speculate on whether it might happen again. Lastly, a domain might form from whole cloth. This, I believe, is the most likely scenario, so here I will stake my reputation. We know that the world is changing. We are in an era of unprecedented progress. There is one element to this progress which I believe is ripe to become a domain of the illustrati; gunpowder.

Gunpower has already changed the face of war. A well-aimed pistol can threaten all but the most powerful of illustrati, and I have heard of none for whom it would not result in injury, even if that injury is minor. All across the civilized world, the gun is becoming a symbol in its own

right, transformed from a tool into an icon. For this reason I predict that the next change we will see to our map of the domains will be the addition of gunpowder.

Conclusion

Where I have held close to the established schools of thought, I hope that I have provided a useful overview for those with only passing familiarity with our study. Where I have made novel arguments, I hope that I have proven persuasive. Yet if there were one thing I should hope that the reader will take away from this tract, it is that we can only approach the subject of the illustrati to the extent we have reliable knowledge with which to do so. Too many of my colleagues have based their thoughts on stories which have no foundation in reality; the same mindfulness of ways and means which now marks so many fields of human endeavor must thrust its way into the last bastion of legend and superstition.

Appendix: On the Nature of Standing

It is now widely known that fame and infamy correlate to extraordinary abilities, but this knowledge was not always so firm and entrenched, especially among uncivilized people. The Djamila believed that their *fadi* were granted their powers through spirits. When someone started to become stronger or faster, they would say that a spirit had inhabited them in order to lend them strength or lead them down a dark path. The existence of domain abilities lent some credence to this conceptualization, because the Djamila would conceive of a man wielding fire as being possessed by a fire spirit. I have heard even educated people ridicule the Djamila for these beliefs, but I don't find their reasoning so implausible. If we started from a position of ignorance, we might come up with something similar.

The primary difference between the spiritual theory of power and the fame theory of power is in the predictive power that they allow. The Djamila had explanations for every fluctuation in power, just as we do. If a leader's power began to wax, they would say that the spirit had set its roots into him. If a musician's power were waning, they would say that he and the spirit were out of harmony. Someone from Gennaro would instead explain these changes as resulting from a change in standing, which to most people seems as natural and comfortable as the explanation of the Djamilian must have seemed to him. Yet our hypothetical musician who finds himself with waning power would

behave much differently depending on which of these two theories he believed; he would either commune with the spirits, or try to bring relevance to himself. One course of action would be correct and the other would not. That is the essential importance of determining the truth behind theory. There are many explanations for natural phenomenon — I do not mean to pick on the Djamila — but only one explanation has the distinction of being correct.

The intent of this tract is to drill down into that nebulous concept of standing, which most people equate to fame and infamy. While the difference between the Djamilian “spirit theory” and the more modern “fame theory” is large, when looked at up close the “fame theory” must be broken down into a multitude of smaller, often competing theories, each with their own differences, which we must look at through a similarly lens. Though these differences are not so large as those between the theory of spirits and the theory of fame, they are of utmost importance for any illustrati seeking to maximize their own abilities.

What is standing?

“Standing” is a shorthand. In the modern day it is imagined as a pure number, one which goes higher or lower. Higher standing means more in the way of abilities, while lower standing means less. The original conception of standing as laid out in *Elevations of the Illustrati* had standing as a system of **absolute** rank, such that every person in the world might

be given their own unique number and no individual could advance unless it was at the expense of another. If we could agree that there was one man who was the most famous in the world, then perhaps it wasn't so absurd to think that this distinction was, itself, meaningful. The idea of rank is entirely without scientific backing though; *Elevations* suffered greatly from the culture in which it was written, where systems of ranking were vital to the concept of castes.

The modern conceptualization of standing is best captured by the scholar Jamesh, who likened it to water. Every person has their own cup, and these cups can be filled equally or disproportionately. "Standing" is then something immaterial which someone can have more or less of. Jamesh was silent on the matter of what "water" truly was in this analogy, with no answers as to whether it could be created or destroyed, or merely redistributed. Given some of his other scholarship, this sparsity of thought is unsurprising. Still, it is the foundation from which modern theories all spring.

I have heard it suggested from some lay people — neither scholars nor illustrati — that standing could simply be expressed as "the number of people who know your name". This is wrong for trivially obvious reasons. First and foremost, there are illustrati who operate under pseudonyms, and while standing is notoriously difficult to track, there are a handful of illustrati who operate under *multiple* pseudonyms, and whose given names are entirely unknown. If they suffer for this, it is not apparent in their abilities. Molkowai, in particular, uses a different pseudonym on

each continent, and despite that is considered one of the most powerful illustrati in the world. The simplest explanation is that names matter very little.

Another popular theory is that standing is, in some respects, a measure of deeds and their impacts. The obvious problem with this is, naturally, that attention and knowledge do appear to increase standing. The modified form of the theory (which predates modern fame theory) is that standing is a result of collective psychic beliefs about deeds and their impacts. This is a rather different claim, but also wrong; there are illustrati who have a demonstrably large amount of standing despite doing nothing, and through history there have been a number of illustrati whose deeds have been revealed as pure fabrications — and in point of fact, such revelations typically cause standing to increase, at least in the short term, rather than evaporate entirely. The most egregious example is probably that of the illustrati Austius, who falsely claimed to have reached a new continent, and was disproven five years later, which only caused his standing to increase.

If “impact theory” holds that illustrati gain their powers through concrete actions, and “perceived impact theory” holds that illustrati gain their powers through what’s perceived to be true, then what are we left with when both these appear to be false? We might excise the ‘impact’ portion of perceived impact theory altogether, leaving us with perception alone, a concise thesis of which might be, “illustrati gain their powers through being perceived”. This matches somewhat to the tendency of the more successful

illustrati to wander about, stopping for days or weeks in various ports of call as they continue on their circuit, but as stated before, we cannot take the illustrati for definitive masters, nor can we take the established way of doing things as the best way.

If “perception theory” were true though, what would it mean and what would it imply? First, it seems obvious that we must take “perception” in the broadest possible sense, including stories told secondhand, since there are illustrati who never leave their city of birth and nevertheless accrue enormous power, indicative of very high standing (Xolo, Peritus, and Gelgar would be the best examples). Second, it’s clear that “perception” might only be a proxy. If it were true that perception and perception alone mattered, then when songs were no longer sung and stories were no longer told, an illustrati’s power would fade completely. Though this is a difficult thing to investigate (as are all powers of the illustrati), that does not appear to be the case in a few examples; attempts have been made to curtail the legends of problematic illustrati, and while these attempts often backfire, in a few cases they have appeared successful. Even in those successful instances, the illustrati appears to retain some amount of power, even if it is diminished.

This brings us then to the next evolution of “perception theory”, which is shorthand as “thought theory”. While it’s often called “fame theory” by the laymen, that’s actually a subset of “thought theory”, though it is the most widely accepted one. According to the scholar Kinsheew, in his seminal work titled simply *Meme*, we might consider that

illustrati gain their power through the amount and strength that people think of them. This maps most closely to our observations of how illustrati gain their power, and most of the more popular theories that fall under “thought theory”, including Kinschew’s own, make additional assumptions that are without sufficient evidence or experimental data to confirm.

Competing and Expanded Theories

- Kinschew’s “meme” theory coins a term, “meme”, used by him to refer to any concept which “lives” inside the head of a person. These “memes” can be transmitted from person to person, growing and mutating along the way, and subject to competition with each other, for a person only has time for so many thoughts, and only room for so many memories. Kinschew then constructs a metric that he calls “memetic strength”, which appears to be a proxy for emotional and intellectual strength and frequency of thought. None of this has been verified through experimentation, nor is it possible to do so through currently available means. Nevertheless, “meme theory” is the most popular theory amongst academia.
- Once an old standby, “narrative theory” has been adapted to “thought theory”, thought the extent to which this is a fresh coat of paint thrown on a rotting ship is up for debate. Narrative theory holds that the power of narrative to capture thoughts is instrumental in the

function of standing, to the degree that it's the primary concern. People are, naturally, capable of thinking about things without an established narrative, but all of the most prominent illustrati have narratives, and even those illustrati whose fame comes from some other source develop a narrative over time, one which demonstrably increases their standing. The biggest problem with this theory, aside from the obviously lack of experimental results, is that it requires a very generous definition of "narrative", to the extent that a simple plain fact about a person or bare biography becomes regarded as narrative. For my tastes, it requires too much stretching of definitions, or in some cases, awkward redefinitions.

- "Role theory" is a sister to narrative theory, one which posits that conforming to a role is one of the more important things for an illustrati. While not typically posited as the primary driver of standing these days, role theory is often tied into other theories. It does appear to be true that conforming to an established role pays dividends for the illustrati, but there are many reasons for this, and many cases in which defiance of a role pays back equally good standing. Per narrative theory, the prominence of roles relates to their part in crafting compelling narrative. Per meme theory, a role (or defiance of one) allows the meme of an illustrati to take a store of existing memetic power from that role.
- "Emotional theory" sometimes stands by itself, and sometimes lives alongside or as an aspect of the others. Per "raw" emotional theory, it is emotion, as opposed to

rational thought, which drives standing, with stronger or more complex emotion (depending on who you ask) granting more in the way of standing. The integrations into the other theories are obvious; “better” narratives produce more emotion, while more emotion results in more thought, increasing “memetic strength”. Again, there are difficulties inherent in saying anything for certain about whether this is true, or to what extent.

It would suffice to say that none of these theories can be fully confirmed or definitively disconfirmed, especially given the tendency of their proponents to make a tactical retreat from their position and say that it may be only “one part” of the whole, or that there might be “mitigating factors”.

Whence Identity?

One last issue of note is the question of how standing gets “bound” to individuals, especially in the corner cases.

Traditionally, an illustrati goes by either their given name or an assumed one, embarks on quests and collects deeds, and sees their powers gradually increase, which generally maps to what we mean by standing. This, however, is the naive case, and more complicated cases are immediately obvious if we use that as our starting point.

- Illustrati demonstrably *do* gain standing from multiple aliases, pseudonyms, and identities.

- Illustrati demonstrably *do not* gain standing from taking on the alias, pseudonym, or identity of an existing illustrati.
- Illustrati demonstrably *do not* gain standing simply for being part of a famous group, through they *do* gain standing for being a known, acknowledged, or thought of member of that group.
- Illustrati demonstrably *do* gain standing from other people acting in their stead under the same alias, pseudonym, or identity.

By examining the specifics, we come to the conclusion that there is a moment when identity, in the abstract, “binds” to a person. The most clear example of this is the case of a persona invented by a small group working together, where the created identity will most often bind to the person who first publically appears as the persona, whether or not they were the first to privately inhabit the character.

Once so bound, there does not appear to be any mechanism by which the link between identity and person can be unbound, thus making identity fraud a somewhat rare and niche occurrence among the illustrati. In some cases though, it’s greatly desired that a mentor be able to pass on his fame to his student or child, in which case the usual method is to append a numeral to the name and share a similar costume, but with full acknowledgment that this is not the same person. In those cases, the identity does not actually move to the second person, but they are able to use the existing identity in order to bolster a second one.

But why should any of this be the case?

Here, in my opinion, is where “meme” theory has real explanatory power. We can conceptualize each identity as a distinct “meme”, and while these individual memes as they exist in the minds of individual people might differ in details, we can think of each identity in the ideal, and use Kinschew’s concept of “memetic divergence” in order to conceptualize the distance that a multitude of different ideas might have from each other. Because one illustrati can apparently benefit from multiple identities, it need not matter too much if the illustrati is viewed in distinctly different ways by different groups (as the case where an illustrati is a hero to one region and villain to another), as this can be explained through the same process: multiple memes can bind to a single illustrati.

Of course, actually testing any of this would be fraught with difficulties, and while I can say “explanatory power” all that I want, that’s my own personal opinion, rather than verified fact.